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**Developing communities of practice in school-university partnerships**

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**Abstract**

The study underpinning this paper developed from a review of current practice with regard to partnership in a Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education Programme in England. Typical partnership activity between the university and partnership schools centred round the needs of the trainee teacher, however the aim of the study was to re-envisage this through the development of a collaborative partnership model focused on developing school-university research-based practice. Teacher professional knowledge was married with the expertise of university staff to facilitate systematic school-based enquiry. This paper reports on a qualitative study involving four university participants and seven participants from primary schools who were involved in the school-based enquiry project. Analysed through the lens of the concept of a “Community of Practice” (CoP), the findings illustrate the practice, relationship and role changes that occurred. In the discussion, the main factors that contributed to the development of this particular CoP are considered: both their strengths and limitations.

**Key words**

Partnership; Initial Teacher Education; Communities of Practice.

**Introduction**

The range of activities by which schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England are typically connected centre around three key areas: initial teacher education (ITE), continuing professional development and consultancy and research (Baumfield and Butterworth, 2007). This paper focuses on an initiative in a university in the North West of England aimed at focussing on the latter activity. The paper draws on data gathered from focus groups with school-based mentors and university-based tutors to respond to the question: How do CoPs (Communities of Practice) develop in school-university partnerships when the central focus of activity is not ITE?

**Background to School-University Partnership**

Partnership between schools and universities has been a requirement in ITE in England since 1992 (DfE, 1992) when the government established that it had to be brokered through formal and equitable partnerships between individual HEIs and individual schools. Prior to 1992, Furlong et al. (1996) identified that HEIs were the dominant partner and had substantial autonomy. However, this relationship changed following the DfE circular 9/92, which placed schools very much at the heart of ITE and saw the concept of ‘partnership’ a core principle of ITE in England. Three common models of partnership were identified by Furlong et al (2000) as: complementary, collaborative, and HEI-led. Collaborative practice saw teachers as having an equally legitimate but different body of professional knowledge from those in HE. Current discourse in relation to ITE partnerships in England has seen a shift to the (undefined) concept of school-led ITE. This is echoed internationally, where there has been a move towards more flexible, school-based routes of ITE (Tatto and Furlong 2015). This has increased the diversity of teacher educators, ranging from those employed by HEIs, to those who are employed by schools (Zeichner, 2010) leading those who value partnership to argue for deeper or new relationships (Zeichner 2014). Baumfield and Butterworth (2007) note that whilst there is a focus on ITE in school-university partnerships, there is less of a focus on the research dimension. Yet

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partnerships that seek a closer link between research-based knowledge and practice can be mutually beneficial and are important for bridging the theory-practice gap (McIntyre, 2005).

With this in mind, we sought to draw on the theoretical framework of 'communities of practice' (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and Wenger's components of social learning (1998) to develop a genuinely collaborative partnership model. We were interested in investigating if and how CoPs develop in a school-university partnership premised on school-based research.

### **Theoretical framework**

Wenger states that CoPs: 'are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (2011:1) where participants are active '...in the practice of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities.' (Wenger, 1998: 4) Members of a CoP have a shared understanding of this practice and are not just a 'club of friends'. This shared interest, competence or expertise is called a 'domain' and distinguishes the members from other individuals outside the CoP (Wenger, 2011).

Wenger's (1998) model consists of four interdependent components: Community, Meaning, Practice and Identity. 'Community', according to Wenger, is a way of talking about the social configurations in which enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and participation is recognisable as competence. Wenger ascribes three dimensions to this:

1. mutual engagement – engaged diversity, doing things together, relationships, social complexity, community, maintenance
2. a joint enterprise – negotiated enterprise, mutual accountability, interpretations, rhythms, local response
3. a shared repertoire - stories, styles, artefacts, tools, actions, discourses, historical events, concepts

'Meaning' is a way of talking about our (changing) ability, individually and collectively to experience our life and the world as meaningful. "Meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world." (Wenger, 1998:47) 'Practice' implies 'doing', and Wenger notes that 'doing' in a historical and social context gives structure and meaning to what we do. 'In this sense practice is always social practice...communities of practices are places where we can develop, negotiate and share our own theories and ways of understanding the world.' (Wenger, 1998:47-48) 'Identity' is a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming.

There are a number of critics of CoPs and Roberts (2006), for example, notes how status, organisational hierarchy and social dynamics in CoPs could impact on the social learning within communities by introducing a susceptibility to domination, deference and contractual obligations. Kerno (2008: 75) endorses this perspective and likewise Hanson-Smith (2006) asserts that power imbalances could affect the inclusion or exclusion of members. Literature also suggests that the concept of 'trust' is a potential limiting factor as CoPs involve sharing of knowledge, skills and ideas; without 'trust' this could be problematic (Roberts, 2006; Wathne, Roos and von Krogh, 1996).

The predispositions of members of a CoP could impact on their ability to be open to different possible meanings and thus their ability to develop new knowledge. This may include reluctance to change due to strong alignment with previous held knowledge (Roberts, 2006). And a further limiting and challenging factor associated with CoPs is time due to the personal and institutional investment required by all parties (Keay, May and O'Mahony, 2014).

Despite the potential issues with Cops, we still felt that the application of Wenger's theory was a potentially valuable lens through which to view the complex nature of our partnership and to develop our understanding of the nuances of our collaborative work. This is because our research provides a further opportunity to examine the value of Wenger's work in partnership collaborations. It provides the opportunity to explore the way in which partnership is structured and organised and may, therefore, have an impact on the forms of participation and learning available to individuals.

### **Research design**

A case study approach was chosen for its appropriateness in exploring the development of CoPs in a school-university partnership. Creswell (2013, 296) notes the importance of a theoretical case study, whereby a theoretical perspective provides an overall orienting lens that shapes the types of questions asked and informs how data are collected and analysed. The research underpinning this paper is premised on such a case study, whose theoretical lens is that of 'CoPs'. As with all case studies, caution should be taken in drawing any generalisation of outcomes (Yin, 2003). However, we feel that useful implications could be noted for populations in similar contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

All school-based mentor and university-based tutor participants involved in a school-based enquiry project were invited to participate, and 8 of the 13 school-based participants and 2 of the 4 university-based participants agreed to be involved. They participated on a voluntary basis and in line with BERA (British Education Research Association) (2011) ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained by an institutional ethics committee. The two groups of participants were each invited to a 45-minute focus group conducted at the end of the project. A focus group was selected for this study as a focus group involves several participants and is often described as a more naturalistic research approach than in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2004). The emphasis on the questioning of a particular topic suited our design and allowed for a basis of interaction within a group and the joint construction of meaning.

Analysis of the data was undertaken through adopting a practical iterative framework for qualitative data (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). In its purest form this is led by an inductive approach that seeks patterns, themes, and categories of analysis, which were not imposed on the data in advance. However, in reality, patterns and themes can be shaped by the researcher's 'subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings.' (ibid: p. 1) In the context of this paper, the researcher's theoretical framework of CoP guided the analysis.

### **Context of the university and school partnership**

The University works in partnership with clusters of Primary Schools located throughout the North-West of England to deliver its Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme. Their key role is the training of pre-service teachers via school-based experiences. The collaborative nature of the cluster model is exemplified at a number of levels including: joint selection of applicants, sourcing of training placements, training and assessing of the pre-service teachers and often the subsequent employment of trainees.

Whilst we believe that our model of partnership is collaborative in nature, we began to conclude that it was very one-dimensional, focussed solely on working with schools to secure school-based placements and ensure trainees' entitlements were met. Reflecting on this, and considering that partnerships have the potential to foster innovation and emancipation (Baumfield and Butterworth, 2007), we undertook an initiative with one cluster. The cluster was invited to select members of staff to work alongside university academic tutors to develop teachers' skills in conducting and disseminating a systematic enquiry into an aspect of their practice. Thirteen school-based participants, representing seven primary schools attended sessions at the university over a period of eight months. The agenda for the taught sessions was initially determined by the university-based

staff. The first session was very structured, aimed at developing school-based participants' understanding of an approach to enquiry. However, as the project evolved, the university-based sessions became geared to the requirements of the group, with content being negotiated as each session was underway. The following section presents data gathered from the focus groups conducted with the school-based-participants and university-participants involved in the initiative (using pseudonyms).

### **Findings**

Data are presented thematically using Wenger's social components of learning as discussed earlier.

#### *Community*

Community as an aspect of Wenger's social component of learning refers to: mutual engagement; joint enterprise and shared repertoire. When talking about their mutual engagement with the group, the school-based-participants broadly discussed 'wider' and 'smaller' group activity. Wider community manifested itself in school-based-participants sharing both their joint enterprise (the project) and shared repertoires (non-project, but school-based) related work with each other during the university sessions. They enjoyed participating and in particular welcomed the opportunity to share ideas in a social context to find out about each other's situations and projects; seeing the world of teaching through a different lens:

Lydia: 'I'm really enjoying listening to other people and finding out just as much about what they're doing'

Anna: 'You just live in your own bubble don't you, and it's been quite interesting to be exposed to the fact that there's other people doing similar things.'

The school-based-participants discussed the size of the wider group: 'If there were more, it would be interesting to hear their ideas, but I'd miss quite hearing all of the detail actually that you would miss with too many people.' (Julie) And Lydia agreed stating that she felt that the size of the group was important to allow for conversations to take place openly and in a trustworthy context. Others noted that the diversity within the group was important, yet they had sufficient time and space as a group to listen to and respond to each other. As Lydia stated: 'I would hate it if there were lots of us and we all sat around a table and just said "yeah, we've done this", "we've done that", or "we've got nothing to add because we've done that as well!" Whereas we have all brought something different to the group and been able to look at each other's work and talk about it amongst the group.'

In addition to this wider group activity, school-based-participants valued working in smaller paired activities to provide on-going mutual support. Strong relationships were forged premised on mutual trust, with school-based-participants supporting each other. A particular example was cited by Julie, who felt that the paired work allowed for candid discussion and reflection and the development, in this context, of developing research skills:

I kept saying to Di "you're asking really leading questions [when Di was interviewing children] ... you basically told that child what to say", and she was like "Goodness! Did I?!" yeah... there was a bit of stumbling in the dark about how to do the research, but we learnt from each other.

Roxanne, however, was working without a project partner and whilst she stated that she 'didn't mind' she noted that: 'Actually, I would have preferred to have had someone in school to have that motivating chat with. I don't mind generating ideas on my own, but it's really nice to chat at these events [university sessions], it's lovely, but I think two is better than one.' In addition, as trusting

relationships emerged, opportunities within the group to develop smaller community activity saw colleagues inviting each other to their respective schools to observe practice and exchange ideas. The notion of wider and smaller group activity was also evident in the university-participant data. Maggie and Mary stated that the wider group activity had served to facilitate discussions that had had an impact on each participant's projects; ideas were shared and shaped. A different dimension that was raised by Mary and Maggie was the small group development between the university-participants and their nominated schools. Mary noted that she had grown to know her participants' projects and their schools very well because of the trusting and professional relationships that had been built:

I think the extra time one-to-one has helped ...the times when I've sat with the teachers working with them on it...has changed how we work together professionally- there is growing trust between us all.

In addition, Mary and Maggie both noted that working as a team of four university-participants developed a sense of community. This arose through the university team working collaboratively in a social context, with shared workload and expectations. The following excerpt illustrates this:

Maggie: 'It's been good to work as part of a university team, because we don't have time to do that.'

Mary: 'I agree... the collaborative nature of it, I think together that's been really, really helpful.'

### *Meaning*

A number of common themes emerged from the data in relation to 'meaning', namely the notions of:

- 'obligation'- the project was not wholly meaningful to participants as they had no choice in participation
- 'choice' – the project was meaningful because individuals could choose subject matter of interest to them
- 'ownership' – being involved allowed participants to shape the project and personal and professional development

With regard to obligation, as was noted earlier, schools within a given cluster were invited to nominate members of staff to be involved in the project. Six schools nominated pairs, and one school nominated a sole member of staff. Notably, headteachers selected the attendees from their school, and whilst they were not 'compelled' to be involved, all bar two school-based-participants, who were the senior teachers from a given school, stated that they had felt 'obliged' to be involved, for example: 'We didn't get a choice really...you're not going to say 'no', so you do it' (Anna). The impact of this was that for the majority of participants there was lack of clarity about what the project involved and how meaningful it could be for them. The power was firmly in the hands of the headteachers. For example, Sue noted that: 'All we had at school was "would anyone like to do some research with the university?" and it was, "yeah, why not?"'

Evidence from the data highlights that the notion of 'choice' was positive in terms of engaging the participants. It allowed participants freedom to engage in investigating a topic of personal and professional interest. Consequently, six of the schools undertook projects that had not been pre-determined. Lydia, for example, stated: 'Looking at mobility at our school and migration...the international arrivals...EAL is such a big issue for us. We wanted to pull something together to find out what's working and what's not.'

One pair of school-based-participants arrived with a pre-determined focus of enquiry in relation to the teaching of mathematics. They had not only been given the subject matter to investigate by their headteacher, but arrived with assumptions about their potential findings in advance of collecting or analysing data. At the outset, both were uncomfortable about the lack of subject choice, whilst at the same time, convinced that 'it wouldn't work' (Anna). However, they took ownership of the project as it evolved:

It's got more interesting as it's gone along...We (Anna and her colleague) have made this project suit us more and it's something new and we are trying to do something and use evidence and run with it'

(Anna).

The concept of 'ownership' resonated with the university-participants (Maggie and Mary) from two perspectives. In the first instance, they referred to the importance of the school based staff undertaking a project that was not only pertinent to them, but that they could shape themselves. For instance, Maggie stated: 'It was about us supporting partnership schools to think about material they were already doing, thinking a bit more about what was going on in their own schools. Gathering information that they felt was important and useful and using this to shape their practice and inform practice.'

Mary and Maggie also took the view that the project had been meaningful for them as practitioners both in terms of developing professional and trusting relationships with partners and in developing skills themselves. For example, Mary stated that being involved had opened up a new and different way of working with schools with whom she had already forged working relationships, and that this was an opportunity to: 'use our skills and expertise in a different way with partnership schools... it was actually a useful match of our skills and something they wanted to develop, alongside teacher training.' And she also stated that through being involved in the project she felt that she could begin to shape the research dimension of her own role at the university in a meaningful way: 'I felt I would learn a lot from my colleagues here who have more experience of research at a higher level and I felt I could link that with practice as well, with the schools and the partners and for me it was developmental as well.'

### *Practice*

With regard to practice, the data fell in to two broad themes:

- School leadership practice- participants' involvement, and potential development and understanding of their role in the project, and of enquiring into an aspect of their 'world' was facilitated (or not) by school leadership
- Time and space - participants' involvement, and potential development and understanding of their role in the project, and of enquiring into an aspect of their 'world' was facilitated (or not) by the capacity to attend sessions and have 'space' for discussion

School-based-participants noted that they had been encouraged to be involved in the project by their headteachers and that their attendance was linked to performance management. The following excerpt from the focus group illustrates this:

Anna: 'We have to set performance management targets at the beginning of the year and I know that this is on it...It's not about if it's a success or not, but we have to complete it, but it's about evidence I guess.'

Lydia: 'Yes, mine's a performance management target.'

Notably, whilst being involved was a performance management target for school-based-participants, the headteachers had been keen for them to participate to develop research practice in the school. Maggie commented that the commitment from school leadership was fundamental: ‘...because the project started with seeking permission, interest and expressions of interest for the heads that was key. The management behind it was important – they were happy to release staff.’ For some of the school-based-participants, being involved in action research and developing pupil case studies was already a leadership expectation, but it was anticipated that the projects could develop this further.

At our school we have always done action research...It’s part of your appraisal that you do some form of action research, so when we were told that our action research was linked with the uni, it felt a bit more special and a bit more exciting to being linked to the university and developing skills

(Julie).

Whilst the school-based-participants were released to attend university-based sessions, time and space were notable aspects of the theme of ‘Practice’. In the first instance, a Friday was not always the most suitable day for attendance at the university-based sessions. For example, Lydia stated: ‘It is often difficult on a Friday because of health and safety issues that happen [in school] before the weekend.’ Secondly, whilst school-based-participants were released to attend the university session, additional meetings were often problematic. Julie, for example, commented: ‘School are happy for us to have time out to come, but it’s difficult for them to find time for Di and I together.’ Similarly, Lydia stated: ‘...time for me and Mark [her project partner] to discuss this has been an issue for us because we’re just so busy.’ Nevertheless, the ‘space’ the project afforded school-based-participants to engage in an enquiry away from school was welcomed:

Roxanne: ‘It’s really wonderful to have these great, professional, high quality discussions – I don’t really get that in school, I’m busy rushing around talking about child protection, or whatever, so to just come here and have this pure space, I’m really enjoying it!’

This view was endorsed by the university-participants who recognised the value that school-based-participants placed on attending sessions despite the challenges presented by time commitment:

I think it’s very hard for them to fit it in...they almost considered coming to university a break...not a break in that they didn’t have to work, but a break in engaging in some cerebral activity.

### *Identity*

‘Identity’, Wenger notes, is a way of talking about how learning changes who we are.

The identities of both teacher and university-participants were re-imaged during the project and for some, were also challenged. A key finding was the emergence of a researcher identity. The school-based-participants saw themselves as ‘researchers’ through engaging with the project. For example Julie stated:

We have been having exchanges with each other [Julie and Di] about how to be a researcher...there’s a sense that we are doing something different...that our role is a bit different.

The school-based-participants also described incidents where they were ‘doing the research’ (Lydia) and ‘interviewing children for the research’ (Julie) during the focus group. However; the school-based-



participants experienced some challenges with this new dimension to their role. Firstly, whilst they felt it was important to them personally, this role-shift was not always seen as such by their colleagues:

You're kind of aware that you're taking kids out of a lesson to interview them – we've had to try and squeeze them in to break times...parents were coming in to collect the kids, and at school you're not seen as being a researcher. People were coming up to me and asking me stuff as the class teacher like "these letters need to go out" ... I'm in the middle of doing an interview

(Julie).

Tensions arose for the school-based-participants in reconciling their role as a teacher and a researcher. 'I'm loving the research!' (Julie) and yet she later stated: 'We're there because we love being class teachers and we love our classes, and I know there's a sense with Di that it's "yeah, you will release me to do it" ... but I don't want to be released, I want to be with my class' (Julie).

Teachers had to absent themselves from the classroom to gather data, attend sessions at the university and to meet with the university tutors periodically and this social aspect of the project presented challenges in terms of staffing for their classes, and in some instances the 'need to re-teach' (Anna) because of lack of confidence in the stand-in teacher.

From the university-participant perspective, there was sense that they were perceived differently in school, and this was deemed to be positive:

We've worked with these schools in lots of ways, but it was very good to work with them through a research portal...instead of someone observing teaching, or someone who is trying to have a meeting to get placements for trainees

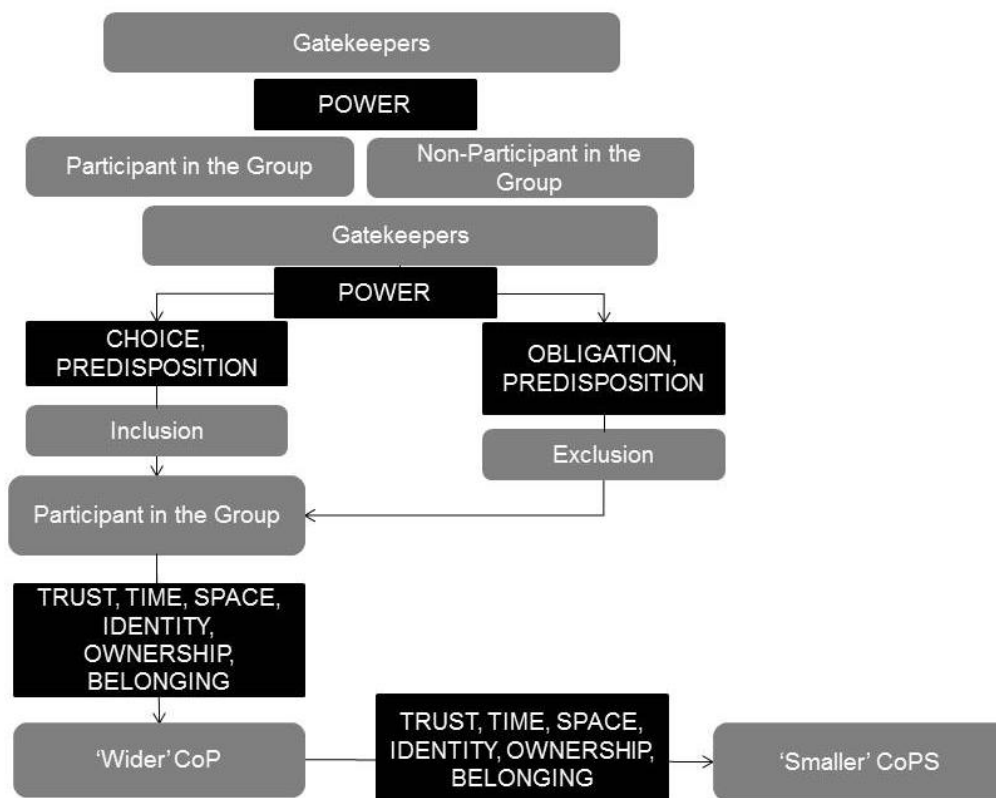
(Mary).

And, as Maggie noted: 'There's quite a gap between educational research and what goes on in schools. I think it was working together as a working team with schools we're already working with and moving from practical support of a trainee to being actually seen as a support for school thinking.'

This collaboration also served to remind university-participants of the diversity of practice and demands on teachers: 'It's been a reminder, I think, of the amount of work they do in their jobs and the context they're trying to research in and what the barriers in the school context are to do this kind of research. It's probably heightened my awareness of those aspects- that they are doing this on top of their existing work' (Mary).

## Discussion

In seeking to develop this model of partnership, CoPs of teacher- and university-participants emerged. Our analysis of participants' accounts of their experiences supports the literature in the field that asserts that CoPs are groups of people who have a common concern or passion, and that they are not merely a 'club of friends'. At the outset of the project there was arguably no 'CoP, rather there was a group of practitioners seeking to work together in a new way. Roberts (2006) notes that CoPs cannot merely be formed, but rather they evolve over time. Evidence from this study supports this assertion. Figure 1 illustrates the development of the CoPs that emerged from this study, and seeks to model how dimensions associated with limitations impacted on the development of the CoP, whilst noting also the key determining factors that also had impact.



**Figure 1.** A model of the development of communities of practice in a school university partnership.

The model highlights that at the beginning of the study, participants were not engaged in a CoP, and initially this was a result of how the project commenced. As noted earlier, university colleagues and headteachers from a cluster decided to re-imagine the way in which they worked together. Whilst this was perceived as advantageous from the perspectives of university and headteacher colleagues, these were inevitably the gatekeepers to the group and its activity and as such held power (Hanson-Smith, 2006). This power aspect presented both advantages and disadvantages to working as part of the group. As was articulated earlier, the headteachers selected those who were to be involved in the project and were therefore key to deciding who would or would not be participating. This power dynamic further manifested itself in how school-participants engaged in the group in the early stages. For example, the data noted that such participants felt obliged to be involved in the study and for many, participation was linked to performance management. Some participants were also given little or no choice over subject matter whilst others had free reign. This disparity served to have limitations at the beginning with regard to the development of a CoP. There was arguably little or no shared domain (Wenger, 1998, Roberts 2006). Some participants were unclear why they were in attendance, what was expected of them, and for some there was frustration with regard to lack of autonomy. The sense of obligation, coupled for some with predispositions, served to impact on their initial engagement and there was little common ground. As can be seen in figure 1, the participants were engaged in group activity and at this stage not a CoP. However, over time, evidence from the data suggests that CoPs began to emerge. This supports Roberts’ (2006) notion that CoPs cannot simply be formed, but that they need to evolve. It takes time and on-going interactions for them to develop.

Participants’ accounts of their experiences highlight how, through the development of trust, relationships began to emerge. Participants were increasingly able to share their experiences with each other in a safe environment. They listened to each other, provided support and advice, and talked increasingly with a shared domain (Wenger, 1998) - the domain of practitioner enquiry. Whilst these trusting relationships and shared domain served to impact on the development of a wider CoP,

evidence from the data also demonstrates that in this case, the sense of a common researcher identity shaped engagement with the group. Notably, a key aspect in relation to the development of the CoP was a sense of ownership. As noted earlier, not all participants at the outset had an autonomous sense of purpose. However, over time, and through facilitating space for discussion amongst participants, paired enquiry projects were shaped and re-shaped with increased ownership and predispositions were challenged (Roberts, 2006). With regard to the development of the wider CoP, a sense of belonging emerged and learning and interacting together became the main foci of the CoP whereby experiences and expertise could be shared (Wenger, 2011). Attendees were committed to the project, as was noted earlier and the school-based-participants felt 'special' and 'excited' to be involved, and expressed concerns at the potential widening of the group, stating that they felt part of a group that could work effectively together. There were signs of commitment to the CoP and changes in teachers' sense of ownership and identity within and beyond their own professional worlds.

Through devising a genuine collaborative model of partnership as advocated by Furlong et.al (2000), there was evidence that over time, the collaborative experience of working in partnership with schools to develop a systematic approach to school-based enquiry confirmed the central importance of university-participants positioning themselves as learners too. It prompted collaborative knowledge-building, built on mutual reciprocity, with school and university partners working alongside each other to develop interconnecting CoPs. Knowledge sharing became a key feature of both the wider and smaller CoPs, and saw participants sharing knowledge and expertise beyond the topics of enquiry.

### **Conclusion**

The small-scale, qualitative project reported in this paper confirms the complexity of the development of CoPs, whilst also highlighting that for CoPs to grow, develop and flourish, school-university partnerships need to encourage and embrace the potential of shared working. As such, our view of 'partnership' is that of working in a truly collaborative way, as a community, with trusting relationships premised on mutual benefits, reciprocity and, as noted by Baumfield and Butterworth (2007), a genuine coalition of interest.

A key aspect of the development of school-university CoPs is the need to release staff from both contexts to allow for time and space to be afforded such that trusting relationships can evolve. Time and space are fundamental elements. Evidence from this study also suggests that power can exert both advantageous and challenging elements to the development of CoPs, but that through engaging in a CoP, trust and growing ownership can see identities being shaped and expertise being cross-fertilised across settings. The key to developing school-university partnerships may lie in seeking opportunities for developing genuine models of collaboration where research-engaged teachers, university staff and trainee teachers are obliged to commit to a spirit of shared learning. Re-imagining the typical model of partnership as a CoP or CoPs has, we feel, the capacity to support all of these partners in enhancing their own experiences as well as contributing to the development of theoretical and pedagogical practices in and across settings.

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