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Researching innovative partnerships in education: Working and learning with our partners

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An essential component of preservice teacher education programs at Victoria University is Project Partnerships. With the advent of the Applied Curriculum Project, preservice teachers are supporting school student learning as a result of their work in school based professional learning team projects. The School of Education at Victoria University (Melbourne, Australia) initiated a two year research project in 2006/2007 with over 45 schools and other educational sites. The Researching Innovative Partnerships in Education (RIPE) project aimed to identify the features of Project Partnerships which contributed to the learning of school students, preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators. More specifically, the RIPE research offered a set of collaborative research investigations in which teams of preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators planned, implemented and evaluated innovative extensions of Project Partnerships. The intended outcome of the research was to establish the conditions for strengthened partnership-based teacher education. This paper outlines the collaborative practitioner research methodology that was used in each participating school. It provides a summary of initial outcomes of the research, a case description of one RIPE project and future plans for additional data analysis and publication.

Key Words: Partnerships, Teacher Education

Context of the study

The School of Education at Victoria University (Melbourne, Australia) initiated a 2 year project in 2006 with over 45 schools and other educational sites. The Researching Innovative Partnerships in Education (RIPE) project supported schools and sites in participating in collaborative practitioner research in Project Partnerships. Researching Innovative Partnerships in Education (RIPE) was funded by the School of Education and supported small groups of teachers, in collaboration with preservice teachers and university colleagues, to review, design and implement local developments in teacher education which were of significance for schools and their students.

Project Partnerships is the distinctive approach to teacher education practice instituted by the School of Education at Victoria University. Currently, Project Partnerships supports the placement of around 1500 preservice service teachers in the Bachelor of Education (B Ed) and the Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education (GDSE). Project Partnerships is the basis for a preservice teacher's developing practice within the B Ed and GDSE programs in the School of Education at Victoria University (VU). Project Partnerships is the basis of study in the core education and curriculum subjects at each year level of the B Ed and GDSE. Preservice teachers usually work in schools and education sites for an extended period over the year of one day per week and block periods (1-6 weeks depending on the year level of the program).

Project Partnerships are school-university partnerships designed to enhance the learning of school students and preservice teachers. They provide opportunities for curriculum inquiry, curriculum development and teaching practice for preservice teachers. Strong partnerships enable preservice teachers to express responsibility for school students and their learning while working with mentor teachers on a curriculum project or initiative. Project Partnerships provide extended opportunities for preservice teachers to develop practice in and understanding of teaching in their major general studies. This is done when teams of preservice teachers work collaboratively in schools on long-term, school-based curriculum initiatives that directly support the learning of school students. School teams include preservice teachers, mentor teachers, the school partnership coordinator and a university colleague. Partnership projects are discussed, negotiated and developed at the school with the participation of all team members. Investigating and documenting what effective Project Partnerships look like was therefore a central aim of the RIPE research.

The Applied Curriculum project (ACP) is a key feature of Project Partnerships. ACPs continue to support preservice teacher learning through working with teams of professionals in educational settings. The ACP is a year long project that targets particular needs identified by the school/site staff and/or principal/coordinator. School student learning is also enhanced when preservice teachers, in negotiation with mentor teachers, teach in designated classrooms or educational programs. The over-riding intent here for both the mentor and preservice teacher is to encourage and facilitate inclusive pedagogies for all types of learners. Tracing the nature of successful ACP projects is also an essential part of the RIPE agenda. Tapping into those characteristics that make ACP

projects sustainable and meaningful to all educational stakeholders was also important data to emerge from the project.

Cherednichenko and Kruger (2005, p. 2), outline a clear VU stance to preservice teacher education programs. They note three underlying frameworks that distinguish pedagogical practices in the School of Education. They are:

- Education as practice-theory
- Social justice as the ethical reference point and as a result
- A commitment to support the work of teachers in schools characterised by socio-economic disadvantage and cultural diversity. Since 1991, that relationship has been a ‘partnership’.

It is these three frameworks that underpin the RIPE research.

Project Partnerships at Victoria University therefore adopts an ecological posture; teaching and learning within the SoE involves all stakeholders in the creation, implementation and sustainability of authentic partnerships. Cherednichenko and Kruger (2005, p. 6) argue that “the answer to the question ‘what is authentic in teacher education?’ needs to be the collective agreement of the participants in teacher education: of preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators”. Only when there is collaboration between all participants, where there is a concerted effort to validate and respect a range of experiences involved in teaching and learning, can there be a shift in teacher education which overcomes existing debilitating constraints.

The Western Melbourne Roundtable, for example, was one of 16 roundtables established in 1994 under the umbrella of the federal Innovative Links Project. Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger & O’Rourke (2001) described how teams of teachers in five schools were funded to participate in the project which was founded on a commitment to school – university partnerships, professional development and innovation based on reflective practice and school identified issues. Each team worked in partnership with academic colleagues from Victoria University.

As a result of those initial Innovative Links project experiences, Collaborative Practitioner Research (CPR) methodology has proved to be an enabling strategy for teacher researchers and university researchers to work respectfully together in the analysis of data and in the proposition of research findings. In the more than ten years of Project Partnerships, small scale research of this kind has been of critical importance in the development of partnership-based teacher education at Victoria University. The School of Education has found that the active participation of practitioners in researching their own practices is essential in understanding how teaching affects learning in teacher education. Such collaborative practitioner inquiry has been successful in researching the teaching and learning practices of classrooms (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, Sachs 1999).

Aims/Objectives

The RIPE project aimed to identify the features of Project Partnerships which contributed to the learning of: school students, preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators. More specifically, the RIPE research offered a set of collaborative research investigations in which teams of preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators planned, implemented and evaluated innovative extensions of Project Partnerships. The intended outcome of the research was to establish the conditions for strengthened partnership-based teacher education.

Project Participation

Once the RIPE team at VU had received Ethics approval to conduct the research, letters were mailed to all schools that had a history of participation in working with VU in Project Partnerships. The letter was an invitation to teams of school/site colleagues to explore new approaches to school/site participation in preservice teacher and teacher education. Schools were invited to submit an Expression of Interest that described their existing exemplary Project Partnerships work and any proposals for future development. The application of a Collaborative Practitioner Research (CPR) approach to support the planning, implementation and evaluation of innovative PP practice was clearly stated in the invitation. Interested schools were required to propose a project (to be known as a RIPE Applied Curriculum Project (ACP) that:

- was developed by a team of teachers that was congruent with their school's curriculum and pedagogy priorities,
- directly supported student learning,
- engaged at least four VU preservice teachers working in the school/site
- facilitated a process of negotiation involving the school executive, the team of teachers and the School of Education at VU,
- engaged preservice teachers in sharing the responsibility for school students and their learning with mentors
- provided specific time for school colleagues (Mentors and School Partnership Coordinator), preservice teachers and university colleague to participate in regular professional conversations about the project and associated work,
- could be constituted as a Collaborative Practitioner Research project and thus would provide opportunities for publication of findings by teams of school teachers, preservice teachers, and teacher educators,
- involved the development of a school budget/action plan to be negotiated with VU, and
- would facilitate the production of a report to a research-focused Roundtable, comprising of all participating schools and the School of Education, for the generation of collective findings and their dissemination throughout Project Partnerships partners.

A university teacher educator/research colleague (URC) was appointed to each participating school/site team. Their key roles were to act as a liaison between the university and the school; facilitate the identification of the essential elements of PP that

support the learning of students, preservice teachers, teachers and university lecturers; clarify expectations of the RIPE Research project and the associated budget. Each successful school applicant was allocated \$3000 per year for two years of the project. Guidelines regarding the application of this funding focused primarily the facilitation of the project (e.g., purchase of relevant resources and the provision of teacher release time).

Methods

The following range of qualitative research procedures (termed by the School of Education as collaborative practitioner research) was employed by Project Partnership teams:

Case writing – practitioner descriptions of practice (Wassermann 1993)

Members of each RIPE school team were encouraged to develop cases that documented and supported analysis of their research journeys at both the individual and whole RIPE team level. Shulman (1992) described cases as case writing or case reports that are first hand accounts written by practitioners such as teachers who are reporting their practical experiences. “The case writer is the final arbiter about how the case is to be constructed and what it should finally contain (Wassermann 1993, p.198). The aim in the RIPE research was to describe the context, the players, the incidents and the author’s responses and actions. As Wassermann suggests: “When you are choosing what to write about... the bottom line... is your consuming interest in the event, your feeling that you want to write it up (1993, p.197)”.

Interviews, minutes of meetings, participant observation

Maintaining minutes of RIPE meetings and special events were seen as additional sources of data that could be used in both summative and formative evaluation of the projects. Interviews were used in some RIPE projects to gain additional understanding of RIPE participants’ feelings and experiences. Seidman (1991, p.4), wrote, “Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. . . . [It] allows us to put behavior in context and provide access to understanding their action”.

Research meetings

RIPE research meetings were conducted regularly to facilitate the project. The focus and nature of these meetings varied: some, for example involved case writing that prompted practitioner inquiry and interpretation of practice; others involved RIPE participants (i.e. preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators) inquiring into the nature of school student learning and others involved them in inquiring into the nature of their own learning (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, Sachs 1997).

The outcomes of the local research projects formed the content for Project Roundtable research meetings (December 2006 and October 2007) which aimed to generate overall research findings (November 2007). Teachers, preservice teachers and teacher educators from each RIPE project participated in these Roundtables. They were invited to analyze and summarize their RIPE experiences based on the following RIPE research questions:

- What are the key elements of innovative partnerships?

- What have we learned?
- What insights does your school have about innovative partnerships?
- What evidence / data do you have?
- What types of partnership arrangements were used/developed?
- What were the impacts on learning (for students, preservice teachers, teachers and university colleagues)?
- What was the role of the URC/Teacher educator?
- What was required to “get the RIPE project going”?
- What needs to happen in VU/SoE to facilitate successful partnerships?

Outcomes

The following provides an initial summary of Roundtable participants’ comments concerning RIPE outcomes. There was general consensus that the RIPE projects provided opportunities for preservice teachers to develop positive ongoing relationships with the school students. One mentor commented:

A year in the one classroom enables strong student-teacher relationships to develop. My preservice teacher learned to respond with growing ease and confidence to the children as individuals. She took an interest in them and enjoyed following their progress. She learned to be herself and to work as a professional person within this (Mentor Case, October, 2007)

The preservice teachers were able to introduce a range of new skills, experiences and perspectives to the schools. They also brought a sense of enthusiasm and freshness to the school that often led to “opportunities to see learning and student engagement through new eyes” (Mentor Case, June, 2007). A number of the teachers highlighted the fact that the RIPE funding (\$3000/per year) provided important opportunities to purchase resources for the RIPE projects. Funding was also used to provide teacher release time. This provided teacher members of the PLTs time to engage with preservice teachers and URCs and “consciously reflect on practice and experience, especially from teachers’ perspectives” (Mentor Case, June, 2007). Many of the PLTs used the RIPE funding to enable preservice teachers to participate in a number of relevant professional development activities with their RIPE teacher colleagues. One PLT leader commented:

We provided professional development from internal and external sources to all classroom teachers and preservice teachers (Mentor/PLT Team Leader Case, October 2007)

Opportunities to conduct collegial exchanges that involved professional discourse with RIPE participants in both sharing and reflecting together was identified as an important component of the RIPE experience

Being with the same teacher for the entire year allows a useful, mutually beneficial working relationship to develop. I watched my preservice teacher relax and consequently feel able to see my class as also hers while she was here. With regular discussions on class management and discipline measures, she gradually began to practice techniques, learning to use them with more

confidence. Over time, she started to use her initiative in practicing management skills, not only in her own lessons, but also at times when I was otherwise occupied eg. with a student or classroom visitor.

The research component of RIPE created opportunities for teachers, preservice teachers and university research colleagues to engage in collaborative research. For the preservice teachers in particular, the participation in and the application of real life action research was a great learning experience. One preservice teacher commented: “We’ve learned how to do research together” (Preservice Teacher, Oct, 2007). A mentor teacher reflected on the research focus and process in her school:

Early in the year a meeting was held with all the preservice teachers and the likes and dislikes of boys were brainstormed and lists made. This information became very important in planning the activities and lesson plans for the preservice teachers. The lists were consulted when Integrated Studies activities were being planned in the afternoons. In the classroom, lessons were planned using strategies to assist the learning of boys. Surveys were conducted by the preservice teachers to see what the boys like to read and suggestions were put forward to the school about literature resources needed to motivate and engage boys in their education (Mentor Case, Sep, 2006).

A number of the RIPE projects focused on the application of ICT (e.g., Kahootz and PowerPoint) in classrooms. There was a particular emphasis on increasing the engagement levels of students through ICT. One PLT highlighted the fact that “there was a significant feeling of disengagement from this group (Grade 5 students). Responses across the school indicated the need for significant development of Information Technology and Communication (ICT)” as a strategy to more effectively meet the needs of these students (Mentor comment, Roundtable Meeting, Oct, 2007).

There was general consensus that the RIPE projects increased the profile of teaching and learning in the schools. They also reinforced the relationships between VU School of Education, the preservice teachers, the mentor teachers and students in the schools. The opportunities for preservice teachers to participate in high quality mentoring programs and become members of a broader learning community were also identified as positive outcomes of their RIPE participation.

The mentor teacher of my grade 4/5 class was excellent; she gave us a lot of freedom. She would set the tasks of which we were going to teach....She was warming and welcoming and would comment on any situations that could be improved (Preservice teacher Case. Sep, 2006)

There were challenges faced by RIPE teams including the difficulty of only having the preservice teachers in schools one day a week; finding sufficient time to get everyone together to properly reflect and collaborate; the lack of continuity of preservice teachers in each school and the fact that RIPE participation created significant extra workloads that were sometimes unrecognized. Other challenges involved working with suitable ACP school mentors who were able to support preservice teacher teams in their research

projects. Yet despite these challenges, the RIPE projects enabled the construction of new knowledge around what constituted effective Project Partnerships.

The RIPE project at Fawkner Secondary College is a case in practice and provides an example of the collaborative efforts of preservice teachers, teachers and university staff in supporting student multiliteracies development. In February 2006, the University Research Colleague met with the School Partnership coordinator (SPC), to discuss the possibility of placing preservice teachers at the school to focus on an Applied Curriculum Project (ACP) that could provide individual literacy support for some selected Fawkner students. Four preservice teachers, appointed to the school joined a small professional learning team (PLT) of teachers, the assistant principal and the university research colleague. The school had identified individual literacy support for selected Year 7 students as a school priority. The preservice teacher team conducted initial discussions to determine how they might enhance student literacy levels for selected students.

During the initial discussions, the suggestion to pilot a multiliteracies project was put to the school's PLT. It was agreed that the preservice teacher team would support four selected students in Year 7 who exhibited low levels of literacy. Dr Maureen O'Rourke (Ed Partnerships) was invited to present an overview of how a multiliteracies approach could enhance the literacy skills of secondary school students. She suggested they visit the Centre for Digital Story Telling site: <http://www.storycenter.org/> as it provided some relevant information and ideas to support storyboard development. Based on her presentation, the preservice team elected to employ a digital 'storyboarding' approach with the selected students (O'Rourke 2005). One of the key elements to this approach was to focus on what the students could do instead of what they could not do. Additional aims of the pilot study were to:

- improve literacy skills of the participating students;
- identify and highlight their strengths;
- increase the levels of student engagement;
- enhance their levels of motivation and self esteem;
- develop skills in using Photostory 3 (incorporating voice, text, pictures, movies and music); and
- develop narrative and editing skills.

During the remainder of 2006 and 2007, teams of preservice teachers worked with individual students in developing a range of multiliteracy skills while developing their photostories. Based on the evaluation of the 2006 preservice teacher team, the 2007 team focused on a 'train the trainer' model in which they each worked with a Year 10 student. Once the Year 10 students had completed their photostories, they were given the task of working with 2 Year 7 students each (with support from their preservice teachers) to complete additional photostories. Despite the preservice teachers facing some challenges during the year (e.g., negotiating withdrawal of the students from their regular classes and limitations with their time at the school), they were particularly satisfied with the outcomes of the project. Most of the Fawkner students also expressed satisfaction with their work. Further evaluation of the program is taking place, but initial observations and comments by the students indicated that they had strong commitment to the project. The personalized nature of the photostory work and the application of information and

communication technologies were significant factors in maintaining their engagement throughout the project.

The analysis of the RIPE data and its publication is continuing. RIPE researchers are currently using a qualitative approach to identify additional themes within the data that provide insights into the research questions above. In future publications, details about what has been learned in innovative partnerships concerning communication, relationships, attributes/capabilities of preservice teachers, collaborative practitioner research, enhancing school student learning and roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders will be shared. It is envisaged that the learning outcomes of this research will be provided not only VU, but other universities and schools with insights into establishing and maintaining the conditions for strengthened and innovative school-university teacher education partnerships

Victoria University is committed to strengthening its preservice teacher education programs. The RIPE research has highlighted the need to develop creative and authentic collaborative partnerships with schools that will enable preservice teachers, teachers, principals and teacher educators to work together to enhance school student learning.

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