An examination of the enablers and inhibitors surrounding the establishment of a school university partnership: The Grays Point Project

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Collaboration between academics, staff and students is promoted as a way to foster professional relationships, foster change and develop common understanding across both the school and university contexts. In a time when education is under frequent criticism it is necessary to break down the barriers between the two contexts and work together collegially. It is within this climate that a small team of academics from the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong and teachers from Grays Point Public School (a southern suburb of Sydney) have launched a collaborative research project. As we begin this professional journey we have begun to identify the specific roles and responsibilities for each party. We recognise that personnel from both the school and the university contexts have tremendous knowledge they are able to share. As we embark on this partnership, it is our aim to weave value-added, mutually beneficial and collaborative relationships into our on-going professional interactions. However, this partnership has not come easily. In our articulation of our journey as we establish this professional relationship, we are able to identify a number of enablers and inhibitors that have impacted upon the experience.

Introduction

There is no question of the busy and often chaotic nature of both the primary school and university environments. The two 'teams' of professionals work within shared visions, beliefs and values as they strive to best support the learning of their students. However, it can be difficult for both these 'teams' to sustain momentum and continue to move forward. There are many shared understandings between pre-service teacher educators and classroom practitioners with each able to offer significant insight into the other. It is necessary to explore ways that these two contexts, working towards the same goals, can support, motivate and mentor each other through collaborative partnerships.

Carpenter and Russell (2002) identify that partnerships between school and university contexts has potential for both schools and pre-service teacher education faculties to engage in renewal and professional learning. They suggest that this professional learning will result through collaboration between the two institutions. However, Bullough, Birrell, Young, and Clark (1999) and Teitel (1994) cited in Carpenter and Russell (2002) warn that some partnerships are conceived in a hasty and haphazard manner. Carpenter and Russell (2002) state that sustainable partnerships require careful consideration and thoughtful research if they are to be effective and efficient in the long-term.

Well-thought out and planned collaborations can enhance professional learning as the teams pool knowledge to support shared understandings. Professional dialogue between pre-service teacher educators and classroom practitioners is necessary for mutual professional learning. Darling-Hammond (1997) acknowledges that such discussion and collaboration provides avenues for professionals to articulate their thinking as they communicate ideas to each other. Working within such partnerships enables team members to capitalise on differences as they talk and demonstrate their ways to shared understandings. Time for talk and collective action amongst participants supports the process of cooperative learning.

Partnerships between school and university contexts are often conceived as a way to bring about change; typically this change is focused on developing pedagogical understandings. The process of

bringing about educational change is indeed a complex process. Hoban (2002) identifies the "…multidimensionality and problematic nature of educational change" and the implications it presents for "…thinking about the nature of teaching, teacher learning and the change process" (p. 40). Collaboration between academics, staff and students is promoted as a way to foster professional relationships, foster change and develop common understandings across both the school and university contexts. In a time when education is under frequent criticism it is necessary to break down the barriers between the two contexts and work together collegially. This paper will report on our initial experiences of establishing a school/university partnership. We will focus specifically on how we have set-up our partnership together with the associated challenges we have faced will also be shared.

University and school partnerships

Schools and universities are both charged with the responsibility of preparing young people for their future careers and place in society. Historically, universities have issued broad directives to schools on how students should be prepared and in some cases universities have even specified the content of instruction (Cremin, 1989). These directives have often been viewed with cynicism from those in the school setting as this form of information dissemination from the 'ivory tower' is often considered out of step with the realities of the classroom (Noguera, 1998).

Sanford and Hopper (2001) report that with the new millennium teachers need new skills and understandings in order to successfully educate their 21st century students. Vinson (2001) in the Public Inquiry into Teacher Education in NSW stated that collaboration between universities and schools could harness university resources as a form of Professional Learning for the teaching profession. It is perhaps an obvious conclusion that the two contexts should form collegial working relationships. Yet often the literature surrounding these joint ventures is littered with examples of school/university partnerships that have failed. However, for some time it has been argued that faculties of education and schools should work closely together because collaboration is beneficial for both parties (for example, Fullan, 1996).

In teacher education faculties one of the most common partnership arrangements with schools is sought for the enhancement of preservice teacher preparation. In Australia the Wiltshire Report (1994) recommended an increase in the collaboration between teacher education faculties and schools in the area of teaching practice. Carpenter and Russell (2002) state that calls were made for a university/school partnership model that developed a community of learning. Such a model involves the school and university as equal partners through utilizing a university/school collaborative partnership.

Rakow and Robinson (1997) provide the following analogy for the creation of school/university partnerships:

> Developing collaboration between public schools and universities is like building a house. The foundation must be well laid, level, and firmly seated before construction begins above. If materials are shoddy or constructed of poor quality, the structure will not be able to withstand storms. Each beam needs to be capable of carrying its weight, and it is the combined strength of all the pieces that gives the structure its integrity. But even the best-constructed house, if not maintained, will soon fall into disrepair (p. 69).

From these words it becomes obvious that for any school/university partnership to flourish each partner needs to acknowledge each other's strengths and like any human relationship both parties must be seen to be working at its maintenance. There is an imperative need for clear articulation of association roles and responsibilities across the two contexts. Noguera (1998) asserts that there is often resistance to collaborations with universities because too often the teaching staff in the schools has felt disrespected and exploited.

In any school/university partnership it must be remembered that schools and universities while having similar goals, have different interests and priorities. In the current climate of Higher Education in Australia academics are under increasing pressure to undertake research and produce accredited publications. Never before has the adage 'publish or perish' been so significant in the psyche of academia. Yet this is perhaps the most significant area where school and university personnel have differing priorities. Noguera (1998) proposed that:

> Schools may not immediately see the need or the value of research, unless it is directly related to something that they are concerned about… Such research can seem irrelevant to schools that are grappling with practical concerns such as how to manage schools with large numbers of children, or how to deliver high level of instruction to children from a variety of backgrounds. When the interest of a university-based researcher does not coincide with the interests of the school, there may seem to be no basis for collaboration. …Clearly when the research interests of the university coincide more directly with the interests of the school, much more promising relationships are possible. (p.3)

With the lessons from Noguera (1998) in connection with the understanding that the realities of life in both educational settings make change "… a time consuming affair" (Fullan, 1982, p.69) in mind, the school/university partnership that has developed between the University of Wollongong and Grays Point Public School has in fact evolved after long discussions surrounding the benefits of this collaboration for the various stakeholders.

To understand the complex process of establishing and working within this collaborative project, the four broad phases in bringing about change as identified within the literature (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Fullan, 1996) are used to frame this partnership. These phases are defined as:

1. Initiation of the project
2. Implementation of the project
3. Institutionalisation of the project
4. Outcomes of the project

As this paper is concerned with reporting on the enablers and inhibitors of establishing and beginning a school/university partnership, the emphasis of it will focus on the first phase, followed by a brief discussion of phase two: implementation of the project.

Phase 1: Initiation of the project

Stoll and Fink (1996, p.44) draw on the work of Miles (1986) and Fullan (1991) to describe "three Rs" that impact upon the initiation of any change process. The first of these is "*relevance*". This refers specifically to how important the initiative is deemed to be "…in terms of need, quality, practicality, clarity and complexity" by those who are to be involved within the project. The "*readiness*" of these people to be involved within this initiative impacts upon its effectiveness. Further, the availability of "*resources*" and support, including time, also play important roles. These aspects all needed to be considered in the planning of the project to ensure that these "three Rs" were in place at this initial stage.

Identification of a 'relevant' project focus

With the emergence of computers and the Internet, Patterson, Shaver-Wetzel and Wright (2002) report that many schools need help integrating technology into the classroom. As a team we identified that a school/university partnership could be a useful approach to help reach this goal and hence this is the project that our research team finds itself situated in our school/university partnership. Twenty years ago Grays Point Public School was involved in the St George Writing Project (Turbill, 1982, 1983) and once again this school is looking at improving children's writing outcomes. In 2006, however, the writing has evolved from "marks on the page" to marks on a screen as the school/university

partnership undertakes a project whereby students in Stage 3 (Year 5) each have a laptop computer to work with.

Projects in schools begin with ideas. These ideas often take seed when receptive teachers identify a relevant idea within their school context. This project with the working title 'From Marks on a Page to Characters on a Screen' began as such an idea. The idea to acquire laptops at Grays Point Public School started innocuously in April 2004 when a school executive member left a small newspaper clipping that briefly described a project in Canada that was testing the effect of greater use of notebook technology on student writing outcomes. The Wireless Writing Program (WWP), from Peace River North, District 60, British Columbia stated that the students involved had shown significantly improved writing, attendance and attitudinal outcomes in just one year.

> As an educator, I had been searching for more effective ways of integrating technology into our curriculum and this seemed to be the way. I knew the use of ICT in teaching and learning was going to grow and is 'destined to become a larger part of the educational experience of children in the years to come' (Kalantzis, 2004, p.22).

However, in order for the Grays Point idea to attract significant funding and support from the school's governing body, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) and the School Council the principal knew that he needed to establish a working relationship with an academic partner. The principal identified that such a relationship would give the project credibility within the wider community.

In 2004 Grays Point Public School started to take preservice teachers from the Knowledge Building Community (KBC) Program (Kiggins, 2002; Kiggins, Cambourne & Ferry, 2005). The KBC program is an alternative primary preparation model offered to a small cohort of students in the Faculty of Education each year. Just as the Wiltshire Report (1994) stated that school and universities should be working together for the betterment of preservice teacher education so too does the KBC program have as one of its underlying tenets a strong emphasis on school and university collaboration. It was therefore at one of the weekly school liaison visits in 2004 that the first discussion surrounding the possibility of the two institutions working together in a research partnership was raised. This initial relationship between the two settings became crucial in establishing trust between the parties as the project began to take form.

Stemming from the idea from the teacher, with the support of the principal a project focus began to emerge. The incorporation of laptop computers within the classroom environment was itself a large area for inquiry. Drawing upon the strengths of the university team and perceived needs within the school, a focus on using the laptops within classroom literacy experiences in the upper grades seemed a meaningful and manageable focus. As such, the purpose of the research partnership between UOW and Grays Point Public School became twofold; it would aim to understand what happened when children in Stage Three were introduced to laptop computers and in particular identify the affordances laptops offered to students' writing development. This focus acknowledges the considerable debate that has surrounded the teaching of writing in both Australian and international contexts for some time and aims to investigate the implications the increasing profile of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) presents in classrooms for the classroom writing experience. The teaching of writing has been debated within educational contexts for some time. Within an Australian context, the teaching of writing has moved through some significant shifts over the past forty years drawing on key theories such as traditional, creative, process and genre approaches (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbill, 2003; Department of Education and Training, 2000, p. 8). As a school/university partnership we felt that it was a win-win situation; the school would receive valuable insight into how students create text using the computers to inform their teaching of writing in the 21st century and as university researchers we would be contributing to the amassing research surrounding ICTs in the school setting.

Further, a focus on writing was appropriate for the school due to its historical involvement with research of this nature. The school's involvement in the St George Writing Project (Turbill, 1982, 1983) promoted the 'revolutionary' conference approach to writing to support the teaching of writing in the primary school classroom across Australia. The teaching of writing has now been revolutionised by incorporating ICTs into classrooms (Reeves 2004; Snyder 1999). Through protracted discussion between the stakeholders it was agreed that the Grays Point project would aim to extend such research by situating it within the context of the primary school classroom, looking specifically at the effect of laptops on the construction of text.

The process or conference approach of the 1980's encouraged students to make 'marks on the page' however, the concept of a "page" is different in 2006. Children are being exposed to more information presented in various forms, an increasing range of genres, and access to many tools and media to facilitate their learning. There is in fact, a new generation of writers eager to put marks on both paper and screen-based "pages". Increased access to ICTs has become a reality for many children and educators need to address this reality.

> "…the children of the future need to have computer literacy and word-processing skills. They may increasingly rely on the computer for their language development, closing the gap between speech and writing and further blurring the boundaries between different genres of writing. Voice-activated computing may revolutionise how we view writing …" (Winch et al, 2001, p.190)

The teachers within the school acknowledges this need and were ready to assume the challenge of investigating how they could incorporate such technology into their classroom based experiences.

The challenges in obtaining the necessary resources

As already identified the ideas and planning for this project began at the school site in earnest in April 2004, however the attainment of the resources to support the project was wrought with challenges that almost led to the demise of the actual project. This journey will now be explored further.

After the initial discussions held in 2004 with the principal Mr. Philip Rouland we (Kiggins & Kervin) gathered together a small team of like individuals. We were aware of the history of this particular school and its penchant for research and writing outcomes so it seemed only fitting that Dr Jan Turbill once again be involved in this latest venture twenty years after her original groundbreaking work. Associate Professor Brian Cambourne synonymous for his lifelong research in literacy also joined our team, and to provide technical support for the school and ourselves we also enlisted our Faculty's IT consultant, Mr Ian Olney. We felt that we had a strong team to support the project and that we would all mutually benefit from our working relationship with the school.

Rouland, a newly appointed principal and visionary for the project, encountered enormous pressures at the school site as he set out on his first major undertaking in his new school. There were numerous frustrations, enablers and inhibitors that took place during this time frame. From an observer's point of view it became obvious that this project as his first major initiative and for the sake of any future projects at the school had to survive.

Grays Point as a school already had a better ratio of computer to student than DET targets, yet as a principal Rouland, knew that they could and should do better with the available resources. As he reviewed the resources that they had at Grays Point together with the school's culture he felt that there was a confluence of expert teachers, some with an excellent level of appropriate ICT knowledge, enthusiastic students and a very supportive community. Informed by research from Hayes and Harriman (2001) Rouland believed that Grays Point had the right conditions to do something really meaningful for the students of the twenty-first century. He decided to attain 60 laptop computers and place them with Year 5 classes using the Primary Writing Assessment (PWA) and the Basic Skills Test (BST) data to inform student achievement. These preliminary ideas were thought to focus on a project that improved literacy by using computer-based technologies rather than a project that injected

new technologies as a stand-alone and in isolation to the curriculum. In essence, the principal and his 'technology team' at Grays Point Public School wanted a 'one-to-one' laptop program. Such a project was founded on the readiness of the staff within the technology team to move their teaching into the 21st century.

The school based 'technology team' began to look at what resources they had, what they would need, and what could be done to facilitate this, what programs and lessons were already in place, what impact this would have on current teaching and learning programs and roles and responsibilities at school (staff) in their planning. The IT platform was considered revealing that the school had invested mainly in Apple technology. Interestingly, two of the more 'technically aware' teachers were pro-PC and relatively anti-Apple. Further, the university team were pro-Apple and felt they were in a better position to support the inclusion of this technology within the primary context due to knowledge of the software and system capabilities. These tensions would prove to be the first inhibitor at the school site as support for the project became surprisingly hinged on IT bias and preference.

Grays Point Public School has an active School Council and by June 2004 a list of possible sponsors had been compiled and a number of IT companies had been organised to visit the school. The momentum was so strong that at this point it was expected that with the support from UOW and the School Council arranging sponsorship for funding the hardware, it was expected that students would be working on their laptops in Term 4 2004.

Rouland and his School Council looked into various funding options from within the DET and the private sector. At the same time Rouland had to assure some parents who were outwardly resisting the IT plans as they believed this project was not of benefit to their children, especially as it was perceived that it was taking limited resources away from established programs. Buoyed from the results that were continuing to emanate from the WWP project in Canada, Rouland was convinced he should continue on this path. However as the third term of 2004 drew to a close funding had not yet been secured despite considerable interest and effort. Enthusiasm and support for the project began to flag, staff had other more pressing issues in relation to the demands of teaching and assessment. The once energised teachers appeared to remove their readiness for the project with their withdrawal of support. Rouland made the decision to let the project take a 'back seat' within the school agenda.

As the months rolled on and the laptops did not eventuate and the realities of university demands started to take their toll, holding onto our 'dream team' in the new academic year (2005) became harder and harder. As no research had yet been generated, no data had been gathered and definitely no conference presentations or 'marks on our screens' had eventuated, we were under enormous pressure to sever any notions of a university partnership with this school. As negotiations at the school site stalled to a complete standstill the academic team soon became two and more often than not any meetings with our 'partner' school in 2005 were conducted in conjunction with school liaison visits. It was indeed fortuitous that throughout this elongated period of frustrations and set backs that KBC students continued undertaking their school-based learning placements at the site, thus updates and planning could still continue.

Throughout this year Rouland continued to chase private sponsorship to fund his laptop project without any success. Meanwhile the Federal Government called for applications in its 'Investing in our Schools Program'. In response to this, Rouland set about writing submissions and seeking quotes to fund 4 separate projects naturally laptops, interactive whiteboards and data projectors to enhance pedagogy featured on his wish list, (along with an amphitheatre and rain water tanks and toilet upgrade). These applications were submitted in May 2005. It was hoped that if at least one submission attracted Federal Government monies then Rouland could ask the school's Parents and Citizens committee to commit to supporting technology to the tune of $5000 per year for 3 years.

Throughout this time contact between the school and us had begun to wane significantly because it was becoming increasingly obvious that there was no guarantee the project, would ever launch. However, late in October (2005) Rouland received a call from the local Federal member's office to

say that the school had been awarded $120 000. The acquisition of this significant funding meant that the discussions between our two institutions were now reignited albeit with new look teams from both sites. Rouland set about getting quotes and announced the news to the school community that the one-to-one project was now viable.

From October until December the team continued to meet and plan what the project would look like in the classroom in term one 2006. Rouland gathered and pursued quotes and increased security measures in the school for the arrival of the new hardware. It was at this point that what was once given cursory attention as a minor inhibitor in early discussions in 2004 remerged strongly in December 2005. Once again our fragile partnership was seriously jeopardised. It was stated in early discussions that there was a divide in the school and parent body about the desired IT platform. Now that the money was real and the purchasing of laptops imminent the Apple and PC factions became vocal and persuasive. It did not help that one computer company were making tempting offers in terms of purchase price per laptop, together with other long-term incentives. The UOW team had acquired their expertise using Apple technologies; we were unfamiliar with the PC platform or any of its supporting programs. It was inconceivable that after all the time we had waited and supported Rouland and his ideas that we were going to have to walk away because of incompatible platforms. As the school year drew to a close we were once again unsure as to where we stood with our school/university partnership.

A familiar scenario emerged with the 2006 New Year, no laptops, changes in the school personnel and increasing pressure on us as academics to put our energies into projects with foreseeable outcomes. However, after several tense weeks and equally edgy conversations on both sites we finally received the call that we had been waiting for; an order for 30 Apple iBooks had been placed. Needless to say our academic supervisor was 'reasonably happy'. On March 24th 2006, just one month shy of two years 30 Apple iBook laptops arrived in the school. Ten days (or two years) later on April 3rd the laptops were on the desktops of the Year 5 children and we had finally reached the 'implementation' stage of the project.

Moving into phase 2: The early stages of project implementation

The literature tells us that the implementation phase of a project consists of putting the ideas from the initiation into practice. This phase is greatly influenced by school and external factors. Miles (1986) highlights the importance of:

- Clear responsibility for orchestration
- Shared control over implementation
- A blend of pressure and support
- Sustained staff development
- Early rewards for teachers.

We have found that the realities of school life combined with the pressures of university life have made the planned changes "… a time consuming affair" (Fullan, 1982, p.69).

Just as we thought the tensions of establishing an academic partnership with our school had decreased new pressures emerged in the early stages of project implementation. We were now caught in the unenviable position of different expectations. Our academic supervisor and our school partner-principal both have different ideals about how much time we should be spending at the school site. Again, the competing pressures between the school and university settings surfaced.

The actual staffing of the project was a very real challenge that we have had to address, particularly in review of the project team. Understandably the school wants to see us frequently to support them with their endeavour and while we would like to, the realities of campus life prevent us from being able to provide the necessary time. Although both institutions share the same research ideal, the pressures we

face as academics are not clearly understood by school personnel as often we hear "how much easier it is for us because we are academics". In response to this challenge Rouland, Kiggins and Kervin decided that another person needed to be involved to help facilitate the connections between the university and school contexts. Mrs Jessica Mantei, a research student of Kervin, was identified as this support person. Mantei had conducted research focusing on the incorporation of computer-based technologies within literacy experiences, and as such had enormous insight to offer to all parties within the partnership. Rouland supported this initiative and employed Mantei for one day per week to support the project at the school level beginning mid-way through Term 1. While in its preliminary stages, such a decision appears to have supported the next phase of bringing about change, 'implementing the project'.

What have we learnt?

From tenuous beginnings the school/university partnership between our small team from UOW and Grays Point Public School is underway. As we write the project is in its neophyte implementation stage. The children appear to enjoy the time that they spend on the laptops and already the anecdotal evidence we hear from the teachers and Mantei regarding early signs for writing development are encouraging. It is still anticipated that an outcome of this study will be a grounded theory of how children engage with writing in a computer-mediated environment.

As university teacher educators and researchers we have learnt some valuable lessons. Our involvement with the project, the shared vision and trials with the actualisation of this has been wrought with excitement, frustration and many tense conversations. The groundwork associated with initiating the project was far greater than any of us had anticipated.

- Perhaps we were over ambitious?
- Perhaps we should have expected some of the challenges we encountered?
- Perhaps the initiation of the project needed to be led by the school with university involvement at a much later stage?

Whatever the answers are to these questions we have learned the importance of open and continued communication between the two contexts. We have also learned the need for shared understanding of roles and responsibilities.

In our current climate of academic pressures it could be asserted that we shouldn't have wasted nor waited the time that we did. However, because we have remained in partnership with Grays Point throughout the frustrations and lived the inhibitors with the principal we have in fact established a great enabler, namely trust. Orey (2000) reminds us that a continued relationship between a university and a school will create the trust necessary for successful partnerships. While there are many recommendations within the literature surrounding school/university partnerships we have discovered how unique partnerships can be. It is with anticipation that we continue with the implementation stage of our school/university research partnership, not yet sure of how the future phases of change will play out.

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