Joint observation of student teaching and related tripartite dialogue during field experience: partner perspectives

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Abstract

This article explores joint observation implemented as part of a partnership between schools and a teacher education institution during field experience (practicum) from the perspectives of student teachers, supporter (cooperating) teachers and tutors (university teacher educators). Joint observation comprising the viewing of student teacher practice in the classroom context by supporter teacher and tutor, and related tripartite dialogue, were implemented with a view to strengthening such collaborative partnership. In this exploratory study, qualitative and quantitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Findings identified the benefits and challenges of joint observation. Implications of the study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, it has been argued that quality teacher preparation is underpinned by strong partnership activity involving schools and universities delivering initial teacher education (ITE) (Beck & Kosnick, 2002; Lynch & Smith, 2012; Sivan & Chan, 2009; Smith, Brisard & Menter, 2006; Spendlove, Howes &Wake, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). However, researchers in different parts of the world have consistently highlighted problems with building successful, authentic partnerships between school and teacher education institutions (e.g., Author, 2008; Bullough, Draper, Smith, Birrell, 2004; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005; Cope & Stephen, 2001; Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, & Whitty, 2000; Jeffery & Tobias 2009; Smith et al., 2006; Zeichner, 2010).

The literature has reported that there is often a disconnect between university and schools during teacher preparation (Anagnostopoulos, Smith & Basmadjian, 2007; Cope & Stephen, 2001; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Zeichner, 2010). This disconnect has been partly linked to the location of teacher education in the dissimilar settings of schools and university (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985). Commenting on the dual setting in which teacher education takes place in many programmes in the United States of America, Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkleman and Nichols Jnr (2011) echoed the view of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) that the existence of distinct knowledge layers in these two settings can be detrimental to the school-based element of teacher education. In relation to partnerships in England, Spendlove et al. (2010) explained that "[…] a polarised view exists where school experience focuses [teacher] trainees very much on day-to-day pragmatics of working in school classrooms while staff in [higher education institutions] HEIs attempt to provide the theoretical basis to underpin and interpret these school-based activities" (p. 67).

Similarly, studies in Australia and Scotland, amongst others, have found that navigating these school-university terrains can create tensions for student teachers in particular (Lynch & Smith, 2012; Smith, 2010), such as anxiety over the summative assessment role of tutor supervision (Authors, 2013), and a student teacher's development of a sense of belonging while on school placement (Johnston, 2010). Commenting on partnerships in Australia, Lynch and Smith (2012, p. 132) noted: "Despite interest and progress, conceptual and practical difficulties remain in establishing, developing, nurturing and implementing successful partnerships so that core interests of partners are satisfied". These sentiments have a wider applicability, such as in Scotland where a recent review of teacher education has made recommendations for enhanced partnership between teacher education institutions, schools and local educational authorities (Donaldson, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to point to the potential benefits of joint observation and related tripartite dialogue (hereinafter, JOTD), and to initiate further research and deeper conceptualisation of JOTD as a key element in developing collaborative partnerships and horizontal expertise in and for teacher education. The paper specifically examines the perceptions and experiences of student teachers, supporter teachers and tutors of JOTD of classroom-based student teaching during field experience with a view to enhancing collaborative partnership activities between schools and universities to the benefit of all partners in a Scottish university-based teacher education programme. This exploratory study has the potential to provide initial empirical support for the further development of JOTD.

2.1 Collaborative partnership in teacher education

The call for enhanced partnership is based on the belief that learning to teach should be a joint venture between schools and universities, and that student teachers require appropriate

academic, practical and personal support in order to smoothly navigate the different settings for teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985). In particular, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) suggested that partnership underpinned by 'knowledge of practice' can better define any meaningful collaboration between schools and universities.

The international literature suggests that partnership is conceptualised in different ways, and that a number of partnership models have been explored, in different countries (Moran, Abbott, & Clarke, 2009; Furlong et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2006; Lynch & Smith, 2012). These models can be generally characterised as *cooperative* or *collaborative* in nature with a 'true' collaborative model being proposed as the more desirable enabling all partners (organisation and personnel) to have an equal stake in the development of teacher education (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2006; Zeichner, 2010). In Scotland, a hierarchical model has traditionally dominated where the nature of field experience is controlled by the university. This study investigates the application of a more collaborative approach to partnership where the aim is to ensure that all partners have a more equal stake.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to present a critical review of various partnership models, forms of collaborative partnership are discussed and problematised. Forms of collaborative partnership can be characterised by the personnel involved and/or the sites of partnership. For example, Professional Development Schools (PDS) have gained currency in the United States, assuming the role of 'clinical' sites for teacher preparation which aim "to maximise student learning, to support professional teaching practice, to enhance the professional education of novice and veteran teachers, and to encourage research and inquiry related to educational practice" (Sanholtz & Dadlez, 2000, p. 7). However, most of the activities (such as guided field observations and staged entry into teaching responsibilities)

characterising this model are said to be voluntary (Sanholtz & Dadlez, 2000). PDSs also raise the issue of equity since only a few selected schools are usually involved. It may further be argued that the 'closed' nature of the PDS may result in the development of student teachers based on experiences and conditions in specific school settings, leading to difficulties when they qualify and move to teach in new schools which have characteristics not aligning with the PDS setting.

Cope and Stephen (2001) proposed a model in which "school teachers, known as teacher fellows, [are] actively involved in the delivery of teacher education within the university" (p. 914). The assumption aligning with this arrangement was that teachers would be able to bring craft knowledge to university–based teacher education for the benefit of student teachers (Cope & Stephen, 2001). Specifically, "school teachers are considered to be a source of implicit, contextualised, expert, professional knowledge for preservice teachers" (Chalies, Ria, Bertone, Trohel & Durand, 2004, p. 766). However, within this arrangement, universities retain control over the definition and delivery of knowledge and skills deemed desirable in new teacher development (Barab & Duffy, 2000). Also, most of the activities appeared to take place within the university, and activities at classroom level involving a network of student teachers, supporter teachers and tutors were rarely discussed. These aspects may mean that the extent of true collaborative partnership is limited in such situations.

Anagnostopoulos et al. (2007) and Zeichner (2010) proposed that supporter teachers and tutors need to enact changes in their professional boundaries in reconstructing knowledge underpinning teacher education. The benefit of this co-constructed perspective is that it may "facilitate cross-institutional communication and collaboration" (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007, p. 140). Authors suggest that for 'horizontal expertise' (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007)

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and 'hybrid spaces' (Zeichner, 2010) to develop, an informed network between university educators and teachers in whose classes student teachers spend most of their time for field experience is required (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007). This mutual professional network may then be better placed to deal with any tensions which can arise to affect student teaching due to the distinctive settings in which teacher education takes place. Unlike the scheme discussed above, network meetings took place away from both university and schools thereby offering a neutral space to participants in which to explore student teacher professional learning (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007). However, similarly, the network activities do not appear to have a clear focus within the classrooms hosting student teaching.

Zeichner (2010) suggested the use of hybridity theory to link teachers and teacher educators, calling for the development of shared relationships, valuing school and university knowledge and realigning teachers and teacher educators in "a more synergistic way" (Zeichner, 2010, p. 93). A teachers-in-residency scheme was proposed as one way of ensuring that school knowledge is embedded within university courses. Comparable with the teacher fellow scheme (Cope & Stephen, 2001), such schemes occur largely in university space and may therefore be viewed as giving undue prominence to the role of university knowledge, and may bring into question the true collaborative nature of the partnership.

Based on this discussion, it is appropriate to suggest that effective collaborative partnership approaches value joint sharing of understanding between teacher educators and teachers in schools. It is suggested that bringing teachers and teacher educators more closely together in non-hierarchical *authentic* partnership has the potential to narrow the perceived disconnect between school and university, whilst directly supporting student teaching. However, for implementation of such collaboration, more appropriate operational structures are needed. In

this study, joint observation and tripartite dialogue were explored as part of an expansive 'community of practice' within which the student teacher was supported through scaffolded learning in a more authentic partnership model.

2.2 Situating Community of Practice (CoP) and Vygotskian scaffolded learning in collaborative partnership

This study is premised on the view that teacher education is not merely a university responsibility but rather a joint activity requiring collaborative partnership between schools and university (Lynch & Smith, 2012). In this section, the relationship between CoP, Vygotskian scaffolded learning and collaborative partnership is discussed.

Communities of practice can be defined as groups of professionals with shared interests who regularly collaborate to advance their knowledge and practice and achieve their individual and collective goals (Wenger, 1998). For successful field experience, it is argued that tutors and supporter teachers need to be part of a community of practice through which student teachers can engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998), whilst the more knowledgeable members scaffold student teacher professional learning (Dorn, 1996; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). It can be argued that collaborative partnership represents the coming together of tutors and teachers into *expansive communities of practice* within which teacher education is based (Roth & Lee, 2007). Through the creation of an expansive community of practice, common activities (such as joint observation and tripartite dialogue) can then be embedded within teacher education to foster mutual engagement.

From a Vygotskian perspective, "professional learning and development are best conceived and conditioned as aspect[s] of evolving participation in a social practice" (van Huizen, van

Oers, & Wubbels, 2005, p. 274). This social practice provides student teachers with "situated engagement [...] in a teaching community" (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998, p. 715). Other researchers (e.g., van Huizen, et al, 2005) have further suggested that learning-to-teach does not occur in a vacuum but rather involves interaction in social practice. Vygotsky emphasises social interaction as a tool for facilitating knowledge development and transfer (Dorn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). We argue here that activities such as JOTD are useful tools for facilitating knowledge development and transfer for all teacher education partners.

Further, through the formation of an expansive community of practice, partners are able to meaningfully fulfil their respective roles and responsibilities to achieve the goal of teacher education. Effective communities of practice are therefore those which culminate in joint activities between all actors in the partnership (Tillema, 2009; Del Prete, 2006), and help to scaffold a student teacher's learning (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). Activities such as JOTD create operational structures for scaffolded learning experiences between student teachers and more knowledgeable 'others' (Dorn, 1996). Roth and Lee (2007) viewed collaboration of this nature as a "collectivist interpretation of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) [that lead to] the production of hybrid spaces … in which all participants contribute to the emerging understanding … of teaching" (pp. 206 - 212). Within such activities, *cogenerative dialoguing* which values the perspectives of all partners (Roth & Tobin, 2001) is likely to emerge.

2.3 Joint observation and collaborative partnership

There remains a need to more meaningfully exploit school-based partnership activities, such as JOTD, during field experience. As Jeffery and Tobias (2009) have argued:

"Locating collaborative efforts at the school site, rather than the university is an important factor in bridging cultural divides and promotes egalitarian relationships among institutions" (p. 6).

For the purposes of this paper, joint observation is the planned presence of a tutor and supporter teacher in the same classroom to observe how the student teacher applies themselves in learning-to-teach during a lesson. The planned follow-up discussion in which the student actively participates is based on aspects of practice noted by supporter teachers and tutors during observation, and defined as tripartite dialogue. We argue that there is need to systematically embed these activities within an expansive community of practice involving all partners. We argue that JOTD allows supporter teachers and tutors to consider the student teacher's thinking and development in the classroom, and then engage in deliberate professional exchange to jointly scaffold their professional growth (Dorn, 1996). JOTD of student teaching may be viewed as essential because it values horizontal expertise (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2007), non-hierarchical knowledge systems (Zeichner, 2010), a greater role for the university tutors (Slick, 1998), and greater involvement of teachers in teacher preparation (Cope & Stephen, 2001). In this study, features of the JOTD framework included: deliberate two and three way professional exchange within the shared framework; informed interconnections across school-university 'boundaries'; more active roles and defined responsibilities for all participants; collective learning and professional dispositions, and collaborative development and enactment of activities.

Much of the effort to bridge the school-university divide seems to have been primarily aimed at ensuring that supporter teachers understand what constitutes ITE programmes (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2007; Cope & Stephen, 2001; Bullough et al., 2004). This has

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inevitably led to a tendency of pathologising school teachers, leading to reluctance, by some, to be involved in supporting students or involved in teacher education. There has also apparently been less focus on discussion about what teacher educators need to know about classrooms in which student teaching takes place. However, as Reynolds, Ferguson-Patrick and McCormack (2013, p. 3) noted, "A key role of a teacher educator is to work the interface between the academic world, the world of teacher education and the world of the practising teachers." Similarly, within an expansive community of practice, supporter teachers need to take on a more active role.

While JOTD may not be a particularly new idea, relatively limited empirical work on these concepts appears to exist in the literature. It has been suggested that practices can vary greatly with tutors and supporter teachers observing student teaching at different times, with a focus on different lessons. This may be due to particular logistical issues, such as where student teachers may be used as *stop-gaps* to overcome staff shortages (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010). It is also worth noting that in some countries, it is mandatory for the supporter teacher to remain in the classroom when a tutor is observing a student teacher, for example, where tutors do not have teacher accreditation. However, the presence of a supporter teacher does not necessarily suggest an agreed framework for joint support, especially in cases where teachers are not fully aware of their roles and responsibilities (Reynolds, et al., 2013). As Roth and Tobin (2001) have suggested, "many [student teachers] are uncomfortable with the idea that an 'outsider' can validly assess the effectiveness of their teaching in a classroom that is only shared by a teacher and the students" (p. 9).

The impetus for more systematic JOTD also emerged from researchers who suggest that supporter teachers and tutors do not always produce consistent feedback from observing student teaching to the extent that students have at times received contradictory and unhelpful advice about their professional development (Foster, 1996; Gipps, 1994; Zeichner, 2010). JOTD can provide structures to augment collaborative partnership for the benefit of all partners (Smith et al., 2006). These activities may also "facilitate the growth of reflexivity" (Gopinathan, Tan, Yanping, Devi, Ramos, & Chao, 2008, p. 10) and, as Cartaut and Bertone (2009) have argued, collaboration of this nature permits improved and more targeted support, whilst at the same time acting as a resource for self-renewal.

Clearly, problems affecting efforts to enhance collaborative partnership between schools and universities will not be simply resolved by systematically adopting approaches outlined in this paper. Equally, other contextual or local factors may affect the practical implementation of JOTD. In addition, whilst communities of practice bring together individuals to work towards common and individual goals, individual idiosyncrasies may interfere with these activities. It is therefore necessary to have a sense of perspective and consideration of contextual factors when systematically embarking on such activity as a way of enhancing collaborative partnership.

This study aimed to investigate the implementation of JOTD as a component of the operational structure of a collaborative partnership, and explores how these activities either reinforced or hindered collaborative partnership between schools and a teacher education institution. The specific research questions were:

(a) What were student teachers, supporter teachers and university tutors' views of their experiences of joint observation and tripartite dialogue during field experience?

(b) In what ways can JOTD contribute to the development of collaborative school-university partnership?

3. Programme description and context of study

The study was part of a [funding source removed for review purposes] funded Placement Partnership Project (PPP) investigating tripartite partnership between schools and a teacher education institution to support student teachers' field experience. The project connected directly to recommendation 15 of a recent review of teacher education (Donaldson, 2011), which stated:

> New and strengthened models of partnership among universities, local authorities, schools and individual teachers need to be developed. These partnerships should be based on jointly agreed principles and involve shared responsibility for key areas of teacher education (p. 91).

The project centred on a four year Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree programme. First year studies include courses in learning theories. In addition, student pairs investigate children's learning in the wider school community as part of six single day weekly school placements. In second year, studies include courses in teaching and curriculum theories, and students experience sixteen single day weekly placements. In third and fourth year, campus studies include courses in teacher professionalism, learning and teaching and core curricular studies. In addition, in year three and four, students go on a 14 week field experience. Fourth year students also undertake a small scale classroom-based action research project during their field experience.

This study was specifically focussed on the development of partnership activity to support the field experiences of third and fourth year student teachers. The majority of those involved joined the programme directly after completing secondary school and their ages mainly ranged between 20–22. Over ninety per cent of the group were female. Both student cohorts were on field experience during the same 14 week period, where they were placed in nursery/early years and middle/upper primary school stages respectively. Each student teacher was supported by university tutors and a host school supporter teacher during field experience, with tutors visiting for formative and summative assessment purposes, in line with documented requirements. Each tutor was allocated a group of around 20 students to visit. In total, 198 student teachers were placed in 115 schools spread across six partner local authorities.

The partnership model adopted aimed to work collaboratively with partners at local authority level, and with network groups of schools and their communities, at the design and implementation phases, and built on strong existing partnership. Specific activity under exploration included joint observation and assessment, student peer support and engagement, and the use of on-line interaction and support. Project funding provided the opportunity for tutors to visit schools to model joint observation activity with supporter teachers for both formative and summative assessment purposes.

In addition, project funding enabled 12 tailored half-day continuing professional development (CPD) events for participating supporter teachers and tutors, which took place in university and local education authority settings. The events took place prior to, and during, the fieldwork period in two series. Supporter teachers and tutors explored and shared the aims of

the collaborative partnership which promoted: genuine partnership with mutual respect and equal voice; closer tripartite working relationships; enhanced communication; shared understanding of theory and practice; evidence informed practice; teacher learning communities and; the removal of structural boundaries between university and schools. The events provided safe spaces for supporter teachers and tutors to co-construct and discuss the implementation of activities including JOTD, effective mentoring skills, observation techniques and tools for evidence collection. JOTD were viewed to have the potential to promote "greater integration of academic knowledge, pedagogical skills and praxis" (Gopinathan et al, 2008, p. 10), thus providing a platform for supporter teachers and tutors to effectively support student teachers simultaneously. The CPD offered an excellent opportunity for tutors to meet with teachers to initiate and build professional collaborative working relationships. Over 75 % of the supporter teachers and all of the tutors in the study attended the CPD. A majority of the supporter teachers had previously acted in this role, and all tutors had also previously supervised student teachers during field experience.

4. Methodology

4.1 Methodological approach

This study explored the implementation of partnership-based JOTD of student teachers as part of field experience, from the multiple perspectives of student teachers, supporter teachers and tutors, with a view to informing future practice in the field.

The complex 'real world' nature of this project led to the adoption of a sequential mixed methods approach (Mertens, 2005), within an interpretivist analytical framework (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using on-line survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. By combining qualitative and

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quantitative data, we hoped to provide a deeper and broader picture of participants' viewpoints about the phenomenon under study (Bryman, 2007). The qualitative data provided depth and nuances from participants' thoughts and experiences (Silverman, 2005) while quantitative data provided statistical scope of participants' experiences. As Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009) have argued, mixed methods can complement and expand research findings from a single method, and obtain insights that neither can yield in isolation (Towns & Serpell, 2004).

4.2 Data collection

Data were collected at the end of a 14 week field experience period. Questionnaire data were collected from 100 student teachers (in third and fourth year of the programme), 116 supporter teachers and 14 tutors. Respondent data was broadly representative of the actual numbers of student and supporter teachers working in each local authority. Interview data were collected from 14 student teachers, 15 supporter teachers and all 14 tutors.

On-line questionnaires allowed respondents to rate their experiences or perceptions, using a 4-point Likert scale, on a number of common items related to specific project activities (e.g. rating the effectiveness of the feedback and dialogue components of joint observation), and provide explanations of their ratings. Initial findings from the (large sample) questionnaire data were used to develop (small sample) semi-structured interviews with supporter teachers, student teachers and tutors.

Semi-structured interviews, allowing interviewees to talk in more depth and detail about their individual experiences (Silverman, 2005), were conducted after the initial questionnaire analysis. These interviews were conducted by two of the authors who were not involved in

the supervision and assessment of student teachers, ensuring that participants were more candid about their experiences and thereby making the process more methodologically trustworthy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Each interview, lasting around 45 minutes, comprised a set of questions (tailored for each respondent group) concerning many aspects of the partnership, including the nature, quality and value of joint observation activity. Most of the interview questions were underpinned by findings from the survey data (e.g., "Analysis of the tutor/teacher/student teacher survey responses has highlighted a generally positive response about conducting joint observations, what are your views?").

All research stages were carried out in line with published ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011). Organisation level ethical approval was granted through appropriate channels. All participants were given information regarding the purpose and nature of the project, and gave 'informed consent' for their involvement. Student teachers were assured that taking part in the research would not affect their assessment grades. Anonymity and confidentiality were also assured for all individuals who provided data (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

4.3 Data analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using simple descriptive statistical approaches. Respondents' ratings of their experiences of various activities were collated and percentages for each rating level obtained. For the purposes of this paper, only selected data on respondents' views of the effectiveness of JOTD (supporter teachers, tutors and student teachers) and aspects of CPD provision are presented.

The qualitative data were transcribed and coded using an iterative process to search for patterns and explanations, within a thematic analysis frame (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004;

Bryman, 2004). The process led to the creation of a more focussed set of interlinked themes which encompassed nuances, convergent or divergent views (see Table 1 for extracts of the developing analytical process). To enhance the reliability of the analytical process, the earlier analysis stages were carried out independently by the two researchers prior to comparison and contrasting of the conceptual themes emerging.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

We recognise that this study would have benefited from the addition of observational data and recordings of tripartite dialogue to enhance the findings. It is suggested that in future, such data should be collected to provide a deeper understanding of JOTD.

5. Findings

This study examines how student teachers, supporter teachers and university tutors' view their experiences of JOTD during field experience, and how JOTD might support collaborative school-university partnership. Findings emerging from the analysis of participants' data pointed to a number of positive views of their experiences of JOTD whilst also highlighting some issues and challenges. The findings are presented thematically using a selection of representative quotes to illustrate common viewpoints expressed in the interviews, and relevant quantitative data pertaining to the focus of this study.

5.1 Positive views of JOTD

Questionnaire data indicated that all respondent groups generally viewed JOTD activities as very or partly effective in terms of providing support for the professional development of all partners, specifically the development of skills in conducting observation, engagement in tripartite dialogue and the provision of useful feedback. A small proportion of respondents pointed to limited effectiveness. Figure 1 shows the responses from the groupings. Supporter teacher respondents appeared to view the core observation activities as more effective than the dialogue and feedback aspects. One possible explanation for this finding could be the more familiar core of prior observation experience that most teachers have in comparison to experiences of providing feedback specifically linked to joint observation. This finding did not seem to be reflected in the student teacher views of these observational practices.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

In addition, qualitative interview data highlighted a number of specific interconnected beneficial aspects of JOTD, which have been thematically grouped and exemplified in sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3.

5.1.1 Shared understandings and consistency of feedback

The interview data suggested that participants recognised the contribution of each participant to a shared understanding of student teaching through dialogue. Tutors learned more about how student teachers had been conducting their lessons through their joint observations *and* the information provided by supporter teachers. A tutor acknowledged the significance of the day-to-day contact between supporter teacher and student:

> ... It gives you a real starting point in discussion with the mentor teacher, so that when you go to do debrief you and the teacher have some common ground to kick off…it gives you a starting point for the discussion. Sometimes the students get really

nervous and it affects them so you can say, is that the way when you observe her she normally is? So it helps to put things into context... (tutor J).

Another tutor pointed to the importance of the supporter teacher's familiarity with the student when commencing tripartite dialogue:

> What I would say was that first of all because the supporter teachers had worked for considerably longer in the placement setting with the students, they were able to tell me if there was something going on or wasn't going on... I think there was also the fact that there were lots of things that we were seeing together…We were able to give a clear overview of what was going on... (tutor A).

Student teachers also noted the significance of their tutors and supporter teachers jointly observing. One pointed to the role that tripartite dialogue had on providing tutors with an overview of student teaching:

> I felt that when my tutor visited, my teacher was able to give the tutor a clear overview of my performance and they were able to work closely together to judge my teaching ... Feedback from both was always positive, constructive and useful for the future (3rd year student).

A supporter teacher remarked on how they felt the tripartite dialogue at which a teacher was able to offer their perspectives was helpful in the *situated learning* in the classroom (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998):

> ... I can understand it's pretty hard for the student teacher, but as a teacher that has developed the student teacher along... I would then be able to back her up after the lesson is finished and say, look, I can see she was a bit nervous and she maybe didn't do that quite as well. However, I have seen her do much better… (supporter teacher 15).

Responses reinforced the view that supporter teachers were able to reflect on student teaching overall. As a result, they provided tutors with a more realistic and reliable picture of student ability in context, not only during joint observed lessons, but also during lessons conducted in the tutor's absence.

The emergence of shared understanding through tripartite dialogue was noted by a supporter teacher, who said:

> I think in the past we often felt that we were the ones who were with the student teacher more and we would have observed them more and I sometimes felt with some of the student teachers, we weren't really listened to when there were difficulties and there wasn't enough weight put on our opinion…When we were both observing the same thing, we were able to have a more meaningful dialogue...(supporter teacher 10).

In relation to shared understandings, the issue of consistency between teachers and tutors regarding the way they provided feedback and supported student teachers was highlighted. This was an issue of particular interest as observation of student teaching is connected with assessment. It is vital that any potential for students to be disadvantaged due to inconsistent observation is minimised. One supporter teacher noted:

> It's reassuring when you are both singing from the same hymn sheet and I think it's critical... (supporter teacher 3).

Another supporter teacher felt that tripartite dialogue was beneficial in this connection:

> ...I think it's very worthwhile if you both see the same thing, even a small snapshot because it's a starting point for discussion (supporter teacher 13).

Student teachers echoed supporters' views in this regard, as illustrated by the following:

> I felt more confident about my abilities when I heard feedback/views from my supporter teacher and tutor that were similar (3rd year student).

> Tutor had time to talk in depth with myself and class teacher. I developed a strong understanding which I found supportive, as they both could offer advice which did not contradict each other (4th year student).

The comments pointed to the emergence of an enhanced collaborative partnership underpinned by the JOTD activity. There was an appreciation on the part of the student teachers, supporter teachers and tutors of the value placed on the voices of all partners. It

could be argued that in such a collaborative partnership where all partners are developing shared understandings about specific aspects of JOTD a community of practice may evolve.

5.1.2 Scaffolding situated learning

In relation to Vygotskian theory (1978), JOTD appeared to provide student teachers with supportive feedback, grounded in experiences within an authentic classroom setting (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). Student teachers insinuated double scaffolds; a situation where both tutor and supporter teacher provide supports:

> They both had the opportunity to observe me so could discuss my practice and provide me with more effective feedback (3rd year student).

As a result of the JOTD and feedback, student teachers felt reassured in navigating their professional learning and legitimate peripheral participant role (Wenger, 1998) as reflected in the following comments:

> It supported my learning as I felt they were working together and both wanted me to do my best. I felt I had two people behind me. Feedback was better also because it was not just one person's viewpoint but two (3rd year student).

These comments suggest that the social practice of professional learning was enhanced. The students were therefore not only being scaffolded in their learning by the tutor, but also by the supporter teacher and this joint support is likely to have had a bigger impact than when only one of the professionals has involvement. Equally, students felt that the feedback they received was more meaningful, a clear benefit of *double* "scaffolds in the field" (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998).

5.1.3 Better support for 'struggling' student teachers

While data suggested a generally positive response to JOTD, it was noted that these seemed particularly helpful for students who were experiencing difficulties. Such student teachers required more scaffolding of their professional learning as highlighted by tutors and teachers:

> …I would have to say that in one or two cases I felt [joint observation] was very useful. It was useful when the student teacher was actually struggling because it meant that I could actually pick out particulars to discuss with the class teacher that we had both actually seen when giving feedback to the student teacher…where the student was struggling... (tutor N).

> I felt that I wasn't on my own trying to cope, or trying to support a student who was having difficulties. I felt that I was being supported … I just felt that it was a very supportive, they were supporting, you were supporting…and I just felt it was giving me the reassurance that what I was doing was helping and it was the right thing ...(supporter teacher 10).

In some cases, adaptation of the tripartite dialogue into a four-way dialogue by including the head teacher proved an effective support:

> ... I do know that in one school where I supported a weak student teacher, we had the teacher, myself, the student and the head teacher… I just think that if you are all hearing the same thing that's probably better, than having to pass he message along and having it diluted in the telling (tutor G).

These comments would appear to suggest that JOTD were viewed as helpful specifically in cases where student teachers required more professional support as they tried to internalise teaching and learning.

5.2 Issues and complexity of implementing JOTD

While JOTD were generally valued by all partners, there were indications that some level of flexibility in implementation was required. In addition, a range of challenges were identified in relation to the enhancement of collaborative partnership.

5.2.1 Flexibility of joint observation and tripartite dialogue

Both tutors and supporter teachers expressed the need for some flexibility in the implementation of joint observation as opposed to *a one-size-fits-all* approach. One supporter teacher noted:

> ... I also thought it was good that [tutor] asked me to leave after a wee while just to see if the dynamics changed, so I thought that was quite good because then that gave the tutor a handle on what I was saying to kind of sort of verify what I was saying and what she was seeing from the university's point of view (supporter teacher 2).

Another supporter teacher reasoned:

> I could see the reason just coming in part of it and then the tutor being in herself a part of the time to see if the dynamics of the class changed because the teacher was around...(supporter teacher 6).

There was a view that the three-way dialogue needed to be sensitively navigated to ensure that it was a productive experience for both the student and their supporter teacher.

> I had the opportunity to speak to both student and the supporter teacher on their own and then ask them both if they felt a three-way discussion was useful…They responded very well to that. I think if we are going to do [it] regularly we have to have some capacity to support those not wanting to do that, because there may be issues where the student teacher has not built a great rapport with the mentor teacher and vice versa... (tutor K).

In these instances, drop-in JOTD were suggested to enable tutors to observe student teachers with and without a supporter teacher, and to subsequently engage in more candid dialogue in tripartite as well as dyadic settings.

5.2.2 Persistent cultural divide

JOTD also exposed some tensions between supporter teacher and tutor roles and expectations. It was evident from comments that a cultural divide persisted for some participants. A student said:

> I still think there is quite a *them and us culture* [authors' emphasis] where the school is where the real education happens and there is university where we all talk about education and there is a huge big gap in-between the two and I think maybe need a whole cultural shift rather than maybe just this partnership…(3rd year student).

Another student reflected on this situation:

> The only time my tutor and supporter teacher met was during formal assessment. The tutor angered my teacher as the tutor discarded her professional judgement and in all the years she has had students she said she had never met anyone like her before... (3rd year student).

A supporter teacher echoed these sentiments about a perceived inability of a tutor to listen during the dialogue:

> … when we were doing the first visit I felt that I was being criticised for my class and I think the tutor needed to listen to us and I think the University have to realise that we are actually quite busy people too and that we are kind of doing you a favour by taking students and we know our kids really well… (supporter teacher 14).

From these comments, it might be argued that a cultural divide can hinder the appreciation of the perceived value of joint observation and its practical implementation. Wenger (1998) noted that collective learning in a shared organisational and human activity would promote the emergence of community of practice. However, this was not always the case as observed here. The divide reported by some teachers suggested that some residual influence of the perceived knowledge hierarchy between school and university remained, or in some cases, was actually perpetuated by the JOTD, despite the aims of the enhanced partnership to overcome this factor.

5.2.3 Developing skills of JOTD

Data from the supporter teacher survey indicated that more than 85% of respondents found all aspects of the CPD provision, such as the development knowledge and understanding of roles and responsibilities, either useful or very useful. Some specific insights into the perceived usefulness of CPD provision from the supporter teacher perspective were uncovered. One teacher, reflecting the viewpoint of many of the group, commented:

> For face-to-face CPD, the great opportunity is meeting up with fellow professionals as well. … apart from obviously helping the student and things like that, it's another opportunity where teachers meet up, which you know, we don't often get, so bouncing ideas off each other, sharing experiences in a face to face context, I think is still pretty important (supporter teacher 7).

However, the questionnaire data indicated only 8% of supporter teachers disagreed with the statement "I would welcome more opportunity to undertake joint observation with tutors", suggesting that a vast majority of this group recognised the value of joint observation whilst also recognised the importance of continuing to develop relevant skills in this area. Related comments from tutors suggested that more clarity was required about joint observation:

> ...I have to say in a lot of cases the teachers who came in and observed really just sort of sat there, obviously feeling a bit awkward, they weren't really too sure why they needed to be there, they weren't that comfortable with it and that's where I feel that something that we need to build on if we are going to use that approach (tutor N).

One tutor suggested that a theoretical knowledge of observation might be helpful in developing observation skills:

> I think that dialogue is really good but I think we need to think about observations from a more theoretical point of view. I think we need to say to mentor teachers what observations are about...that it's discussed with the student before the observation and that the dialogue following the observation is only about that focus and nothing else... (tutor K).

The findings point to the need to reshape the CPD with a view to enhancing skills in joint observation. Some of the data pointed to additional CPD developments that may enhance the experience. One supporter teacher suggested:

> It would be worth having CPD time with the students and the teachers together to kind of give us that time together out of school to sort of share what's going on and what's being expected of us all (supporter teacher 13).

Whilst there was some recognition of the usefulness of CPD in relation to providing support for partners to enact their role, some need for the tailoring of aspects of future CPD provision was also highlighted.

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5.2.4 Staffing issues

Participants highlighted logistical staffing issues that can restrict opportunities for quality JOTD to be enacted. Some of the tutors noted the difficulty they faced in conducting joint observations due to constraints of finding another member of staff to cover for a class:

> I actually didn't do that many joint observations partly because teachers were busy doing something else and then they would come and join so sometimes that would happen. I think they would be actually working with another group...But where I did do it I think it was quite effective because at least we had seen the same things (tutor H).

The level of tripartite dialogue after observations could also be affected by staffing difficulties. One supporter teacher remarked:

> ...I think it would have been nice if the three of us could have had a chat but obviously I had to go back to my class so that the tutor could have a chat with my student, so it would have been nice if the three of us could have got together but... (supporter teacher 6).

Unavailability of cover staff in school also meant that some student teachers were not able to take part in tripartite dialogue immediately after joint observation. A student observed:

> ... When the class teacher was with my tutor I was still with the class and then I had to go, there was no one then to take over the class because the school couldn't get cover ... (3rd year student).

These comments echo a recurrent issue in the literature that student teachers may sometimes be adversely affected by staffing challenges in schools (Author, 2008), and in worst cases, may be required to act as stop-gaps to paper over staffing shortages (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010). The evidence from this study suggests that not all student teachers had similar opportunities to experience JOTD due to localised inability to 'free up' all the partners in order to engage in observation and dialogue.

5.3 The role of JOTD in developing school-university partnership

A range of specific ways in which JOTD appeared to promote school-university partnership was highlighted by partners. JOTD was found to be a helpful tool for enhancing the involvement of supporter teachers in the teacher preparation programme, essentially making them legitimate members of a teacher preparation community of practice. Supporter teachers felt part of teacher preparation as a result of their involvement in JOTD with tutors. One supporter teacher remarked:

> I did feel that I was part and parcel of that. Being involved in the observation was, you know, you just felt you were valued rather than move over it's our turn (supporter teacher 2).

Joint observation promoted more open dialogue between all parties and thereby brought school staff and university tutors closer together:

> I would say that on the day when the tutor came out, that there was a really open dialogue and we had the meeting again after I had spoken to the tutor, all three of us got together so we were able to have that dialogue which I think was beneficial again because the student was able to see what we both thought (supporter teacher 5).

Enhanced partnership, manifested through greater school involvement in teacher preparation, was also noted by student teachers.

> It was clear that there were a lot of inputs from the school about our progress this year and they were given the opportunity to put their own comments forth, giving a holistic picture of my practice (4th year student).

This was further supported by the views of another student teacher, who referred directly to the university role and connections with professional learning:

> My class teacher was very supportive, always willing to let me try ideas out, encouraging my ideas, giving feedback and offering advice. My teacher was very interested in what I was doing and what the university was saying and was willing to help me complete things and gave me the time to chat with her (3rd year student).

Tutors on the project also felt that JOTD facilitated professional relationship building and involvement with supporter teachers and school administrators:

> I was getting to know the class teachers a bit better but I was also getting to know like deputy heads who particularly…so they would make a point of actually coming to speak to me and then maybe afterwards if they've got time they would again come back and look for me so we would have a conversation, which I think was very useful. .. (tutor H).

Tutors were also involved in scaffolding professional development for supporter teachers who had not attended CPD:

> I didn't have a problem making contact with the supporter teachers. Some of them had not attended our CPDs and they would ask quite a lot of questions and I was glad that I could give them… (tutor M).

It appeared that the partnership underpinned by JOTD promoted learning conversations, and scaffolded learning, in turn scoping many different aspects of the partnership between supporter teachers and tutors.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This exploratory study has provided evidenced insights into the relatively under-explored implementation of joint observation and connected dialogue within a structured school-university collaborative partnership. The study takes account of the experiences and views of key stakeholders, and has potential implications for future developments in the field.

The findings indicate that student teachers, supporter teachers and tutors involved in this study were generally positive about their experiences of JOTD. Limited evidence suggested that some tutors benefited from the opportunity to gain more familiarity with the supporter teachers and their classroom context. As argued elsewhere (e.g., Slick, 1998), on many occasions tutors normally observe student teaching at a minimal level, by 'parachuting' themselves in and out of the classroom without developing a deeper understanding of the context. It is not surprising that previously, tutors had been labelled "disenfranchised outsiders" due to their limited involvement with cooperating teachers and student teachers

(Slick, 1998). However, it is still too early to suggest that as a result of this intervention, this position has changed. Further research in this area is recommended.

While joint observation did not entail an increase in the number of observation visits tutors made to schools, it allowed structured tripartite dialogue with student teachers and supporter teachers thereby providing opportunities for double scaffolding of student teacher learning and a better appreciation of dialogue (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998; Roth & Tobin, 2001). Equally, the presence of both tutors and supporter teachers in a classroom during joint observation could be argued to have offered an improved, more focussed way of integrating academic, pedagogical and practitioner knowledge and skills when scaffolding learning during the dialogue (Gopinathan, et al., 2008; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998).

While supporter teachers were keen to see that their observations mirrored tutors' observations, it is important to highlight the virtue in contradictory views between supporter teachers and tutors due to, for example, diverse experiences of teacher education. It would be helpful to respectfully explore contradictory views as part of a *cogenerative dialoguing* function (Roth & Tobin, 2001) within a community of practice rather than through a student teacher assessment function. It was also noted that there were still some cultural issues relating to some relationships between supporter teachers and tutors. This might be indicative of the complexity of working on a teacher education programme set in two sites and involving voluntary partnership. It has been acknowledged that bringing school and university together in collaborative practice will require a significant cultural shift for both partners (Sivan & Chan, 2009). Similarly, it is important to note that individual tutors and supporter teachers may hold idiosyncratic values which may not always chime with the values of their organisations.

In general, JOTD could be said to have helped in aligning expectations and the nature of feedback student teachers received. Through such activities, a community of practice was strengthened by student teachers taking up their legitimate peripheral participation role (Wenger, 1998). This appeared to have created a developmentally supported and supportive learning environment for student teachers (Hudson, 2007). Smith et al. (2006) suggested that collaborative partnership appears to be a favourable school-university partnership model in relation to supporting student teachers' professional learning. The findings in this study echo this whereby, as a result of joint observation activity, there appeared to have been greater involvement of schools in teacher preparation. Such collaborative partnership at classroom and wider school-university level may narrow the divide between school and university through engaging all partners in a community of practice in which student teaching is co-constructed and negotiated (Moran et al., 2009).

As the findings further suggest, there may be situations which require some level of flexibility in the implementation of JOTD without necessarily disturbing the spirit of collaborative partnership. These situations need to be sensitively understood and navigated at all times, and may include situations where personality clashes between student teachers and their supporter teachers exist which may be alleviated by the use of both dyadic and tripartite dialogues. Equally, it may be necessary where student teachers may be having academic difficulties that a differentiated joint observation and dialogue format would provide more effective support.

As identified within the findings, local staffing issues can present logistical challenges for enhancing collaborative partnership especially with regards to implementing uninterrupted joint observation and tripartite dialogue *for all* student teachers on field experience. This can

pose challenges of ensuring equality of experience in cases where student teachers who may require more support happen to be placed in schools which already faced staffing shortages. This suggests that innovative ways need to be explored to address the demands associated with this complexity. This may entail identifying a selection of designated schools in which student teachers requiring more support could be placed so that they might receive appropriate support through JOTD during field experience.

As discussed, even after collaborative CPD which brought tutors and supporter teachers closer together to share their knowledge and co-learn, some individuals may not always develop a shared perspective of partnership expectations and aspirations (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007), and a cultural divide may persist. It may be that more targeted CPD during which all tutors and supporter teachers freely co-construct teacher preparation may support this endeavour. Equally, it may be that not all supporter teachers or tutors are suitable to be enlisted to support student teachers during field experience. Only those who have developed appropriate expectations and also share the underpinning rationale of teacher preparation should be recruited to the supervisory role.

In addition, as Gopinathan et al. (2008) suggested:

> "Practical strategies [for supporter teachers and teacher educators which]... foster trust and collegiality such as engaging in social events, spending time getting to know each other and making each other feel that each one's contribution is valued" (p. 88).

However, the findings from this study have shown that mutual trust, and the valuing of each other's contribution to a student teacher's learning, had not fully emerged. In some cases, the

supporter teacher felt validated if their viewpoint matched that of the tutor. There remains a need to explore and understand how partners value each other's contributions in future implementations of JOTD.

Ideally, supporter teachers and tutors who support student teachers need to continue to engage with relevant CPD in mentoring, so that they are able to use appropriate skills and techniques to provide high quality support. Supporter teachers in schools may value and demand formal recognition of the mentoring role in form of certification, and be allocated time for mentoring student teachers. This may empower them to view the supporter teacher role as part of their formal development activities, other than seeing the role as an add-on with no consequence.

In conclusion, the findings from this exploratory study suggest that student teachers, supporter teachers and tutors had a range of views about their experiences while implementing JOTD. While their experiences were generally positive, partners also expressed views highlighting some of the complexity in developing and implementing JOTD as a workable operational structure to support enhanced collaborative partnership. As such, some strategies which may contribute to overcoming some of the outstanding impediments have been suggested. There is a need for continuing professional dialogue between school and university personnel to make JOTD a sustainable operational structure as part of an effective collaborative partnership, and to enable 'epistemic and pedagogic' development of partners (Tiko, Fusitu'a, Tore-Schuster & Arukelana, 2007).

JOTD appears to hold significant potential to help teacher educators forge more substantive and supportive partnerships with the school-based supporter teachers who bear significant

responsibilities for educating pre-service student teachers through field experience. This article provides a starting point for further research and theorising on this practice as an important aspect in strengthening school-university partnerships to improve teacher education.

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