

The Slippery Slope to Efficiency? An Australian Perspective on School/University Partnerships for Teacher Professional Learning

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ABSTRACT

Large-scale School/University partnerships for the enhancement of teacher professionalism and teacher professional learning have been part of the teacher development landscape in Australia for the past two decades. This paper takes a historical perspective on Australian school/university partnerships through detailing three national projects over a 15-year period, arguing that regimes of increased compliance and accountability that have characterised education policy in Australia over the past decade in particular, have impacted upon the way that school/university partnerships for professional learning have been conceptualised and framed. The kinds of transformative and emancipatory approaches described and advocated by scholars such as Stenhouse (1981, 1985a) and Carr and Kemmis (1986) in the 1980s, which visibly guided earlier iterations of national projects, are largely absent from their successors. Increasingly, projects have been guided by instrumentalist approaches that emphasise efficiency, such that university-based partners are positioned more as ‘providers’ of professional development (Grundy & Robison, 2004) than learning partners, and relationships are conceived of as short-term and funding-dependent (Elliott, 2003). Finally, the paper explores the capacity of school/university partnerships to overcome this trajectory, meeting the accountability demands of the current age of compliance while also working into the more transformative domain of teacher development. It suggests conditions under which such partnerships might flourish and concludes with a challenge to both school and university-based practitioners to reclaim this generative edge in their partnership work, regardless of the policy framework within which it is enacted.

Australia has a robust history of large-scale projects which utilise school/university partnerships for the purpose of supporting teacher professionalism and inquiry-based teacher professional learning. This paper seeks to trace some of this history through examining the aims and parameters of three such large-scale projects, enacted from 1993 to 2009. It argues that increasingly over this period, a desire on the part of governments to use teachers’ work and the quality of teachers themselves as a political tool, has shaped and formed these large-scale partnership projects to their detriment and the detriment of the teachers and schools that they were established to serve, such that we might view the trajectory as something of a ‘slippery slope to efficiency’.

This paper is presented in three parts: in the first, a portrait of the three projects that form the body of the discussion is drawn, with particular attention given to the project aims, project focus and the orientation to partnerships and teacher professional learning espoused in each. The second section then highlights some comparisons between the three projects, exploring the conceptualisations of teacher professionalism embedded in each and contextualising them within the broader political and educational trajectory of the past 15 years in Australia. A final concluding section then draws on the work of the members of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, to suggest some ways in which school/university partnerships might transcend the difficulties and issues raised by this trajectory.

A Tale of Three Projects: Large Scale School/University Partnerships for Professional Learning in Australia 1993-2009

At the outset, it should be noted that the three large-scale projects on which this paper focuses do not represent the sum total of all school/university partnership projects in Australia in the past 15 years. These particular projects have been chosen because of

their large scale, their emphasis on inquiry-based professional learning, and their particular timeframes, which mean that the breadth of the 15 year period is covered.

Innovative Links (1993-1996)

An initiative within the National Professional Development Program, which itself was an initiative of the National Project for Quality Teaching and Learning, established in 1991, the *Innovative Links* project involved over 100 schools and a consortium of 14 universities spread throughout each of the Australian states and territories. The National Professional Development Program was established in the context of award restructuring in Australia and the negotiation in 1993 of the *Agreement Providing for an Accord with the Teaching Profession to Advance the Quality of Teaching and Learning* (known as the 1993 Teaching Accord) between the Australian Education Union and the Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training. Both the 1993 Teaching Accord and the National Professional Development Program emphasised the importance of partnerships in the support of teacher professional development, namely partnerships between education authorities, universities and teacher organisations (such as unions and professional associations). The involvement of unions in the *Innovative Links* project was significant in that they provided something of a ‘safety net’ for teachers and schools in stepping outside the usual industrial regulatory frameworks, such as class size and working hours, in the context of their project-related work.

The objectives for the *Innovative Links Between Universities and Schools for Teacher Professional Development* project were established as follows:

- a. Examine and improve the work organisation practices of schools to enhance teaching competencies;
- b. Develop schools as learning communities in which research, rethinking and renewal are regarded as normal and essential work practices;
- c. Explore new possibilities for on-going teacher education and professional development through partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions in collaboration with members of Roundtables;
- d. Build upon the procedures, learning and principles of participation established through the National Schools Network;
- e. Encourage Roundtable-affiliated schools to focus on one or more of the target areas addressed in the national reform agenda and the Accord with the teaching profession;
- f. Develop collaborative relationships between participating school communities, employing authorities, teacher unions, the National Schools Network and members of the academic community;
- g. Provide participating schools with access to academic associates for advice and expertise on current research and theory relating to the area of concern for the school;
- h. Increase the skills of academic associates to develop, in partnership with schools and members of Roundtables, effective programs of professional development; and
- i. Enhance academic associates’ understanding of school reform, the national schools’ agenda, current classroom practice and the needs of educators and leaders in schools (*Innovative Links*, 1993).

Within the Innovative Links Project, schools registered their interest, outlining a particular focus for whole school change and a plan for action over a three year period, and were organised into *Roundtables*, each comprising five affiliated or participating schools, academics from the education school or faculty of a participating university (attached to the participating schools as ‘academic associates’), and representatives from educational authorities, teacher unions, professional associations and the National Schools Network, a body which had also been established under the National Project for Quality Teaching and Learning to foster partnerships for school reform. *Innovative Links* utilised an inquiry-based model of professional learning, where participant teachers undertook an action-oriented research project and were supported in their learning by an ‘academic associate’ who was committed to:

- principles of teacher research which give precedence to the research questions within the school setting, rather than within the academic environment;
- research grounded in principles of collaboration and democratic research processes, both in the development of research processes and in the interpretation of research data; and
- action-oriented research; that is, practical research intended to improve educational practice. (Grundy, Robison, & Tomazos, 2001, p. 206)

The 1993 Teaching Accord had identified seven key areas for school reform, and it was into these that schools were required to fit their *Innovative Links* project proposal. They were:

- Literacy
- The middle years of schooling
- Post compulsory education
- Curriculum statements and profiles
- National equity program for schools
- Aboriginal education
- Education of girls

Yeatman and Sachs (1995, pp. 22-23), in their formative evaluation of the first year of the *Innovative Links* project, indicated that almost half of the participating schools pursued projects in the broadest categories of the middle years of schooling and curriculum statements and profiles, while a further ten percent of schools had focused their project on literacy. Yeatman and Sachs (1995) also found that 77% of the participating schools had made a commitment to their project prior to receiving the partnership support and funding, and indicated that they had been intending to engage in the project had they not been successful in becoming an *Innovative Links* school.

The partnership model utilised in *Innovative Links* was unique in that it connected individual school projects through the Roundtable, a forum for sustained professional learning based on authentic and sustained dialogue across the breadth of the partnership. Both the formative evaluation of the *Innovative Links* project (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995) and the body of writing which emanated out of the project (Davies, 2005; Grundy & Robison, 2004; Grundy, et al., 2001; Sachs, 1997b, 1999) highlights the tensions inherent in such partnerships, exacerbated in the case of *Innovative Links* by the fact that the project represented a new way of ‘doing’ such partnerships in the Australian context. The tension between the different research interests and orientations of school- and university-based participants and also around the emerging

role of the academic associate are two such areas of identified, along with the capacity of these tensions to “interrupt the way things are” such that “new patterns of practice and partnership” (Grundy, et al., 2001, p. 216) might generatively emerge.

The Innovation and Best Practice Project (1997-1998)

Carried out over 1997 and 1998, the *Innovation and Best Practice Project* (IBPP) was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs and sponsored by a consortium comprised of the University of Melbourne, Edith Cowan University, the University of Southern Queensland and the University of Sydney. From the outset, the IBPP was placed firmly within the discourse of school effectiveness and improvement, aiming to use a second-order research approach to identify the necessary conditions for successful school innovation in order to gain a better understanding of sustained innovation in schools.

107 schools participated in the IBPP nationally, out of some 300 applicants (Cuttance, 2001). By way of application, schools were asked to describe an innovation they had undertaken, related in some way to one of the following context areas:

- Early literacy
- Mathematics
- Information and communication technologies
- The middle years of schooling

Schools were encouraged to design research frameworks (in consultation with a research consultant or academic partner, not a requirement of the project funding but taken up by the vast majority of IBPP schools), to support an investigation of their innovation and the collection of trustworthy and relevant data over the year of project funding. An action research framework was offered as a scaffold for research teams, with an emphasis on tracking improvement in relation to the innovation over the course of the project (Cuttance, 2001).

The school/university partnership dimension of the IBPP was twofold: in the first place, the project itself was a consequence of university-based researchers seeking to conduct their own research into school change and reform. The final research report from the project (Cuttance, 2001) represents a meta-analysis and synthesis of the 107 school reports on the individual school-based projects undertaken within the meta-project. Researchers from the university consortium and the project managers administering the project ran a series of professional development workshops for participant teachers to assist them in the focusing of their research aims and development of their action plans. Within the context of the project, schools then engaged their own research consultant, most of whom worked as researchers in university contexts, but whose role within the IBPP was to provide research support for the teacher researchers rather than to conduct the research themselves.

A significant feature of the schools' relationship with the researchers they engaged was its contractual nature and the strong focus on the school retaining ownership of the innovation and research. (Cuttance, 2001, p. 20)

In terms of partnership structures, this produced an interesting bifurcation in the IBPP. On the one hand the meta-project was conducted exclusively by university-based members of the consortium and their contracted personnel (Cuttance, 2001), utilising the data generated by and ‘mined’ from school-based research teams,

presented via a structured report designed by the consortium research team. On the other hand, as demonstrated in the above quotation, the discourse surrounding the project highlighted the high level of school and teacher agency within the project, practitioner as opposed to research consultant control over the design and processes of research and school ‘ownership’ of the research.

The Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (2000 – 2013) and Quality Teaching-Action Learning (2003 – 2009)

The new millennium saw an increasing emphasis by the Australian federal government upon issues in relation to teacher quality manifested through The Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP). In common with advanced nation states around the globe it was perceived that educational outcomes, particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy, mathematics, science, information technology and vocational education in schools rested upon teachers’ capacities and capabilities. The federal policy that covered the next decade, through a number of iterations, was directed towards improving teacher quality across all states and territories employing a process of competitive tendering. Teachers and managers within schools were required to submit proposals to their respective Public, Catholic and Independent employing authorities in accordance with both the Commonwealth criteria and those specified by the authorities themselves (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, 2003, 2005). The third iteration of this program, that was current until 2009, was slightly modified to include civics and citizenship, health education, languages and music. Upon a change of government in 2009 a more modest program was undertaken where funding was provided only to projects that catered for teacher working in the non-government sector and was inclusive of environmental education for sustainability, geography and student well being (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). All in all, across the decade some \$305 million of funding was directed towards teacher professional development and learning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). Since the program began 240,000 teachers and school leaders have participated in professional development opportunities in all Australian States. (Ewing et al 2010)

The focus of the AGQTP was principally aimed at teacher improvement in terms of the content of the curriculum with less attention being paid to overall issues in relation to pedagogy. Guidelines for the submission of proposals positioned teachers as ‘clients’ rather than as agents for change. Funding was only available to those teachers who had been successful in the tendering process (Hardy, 2008). Certainly, teachers worked in teams to secure the funding, but it was not a requirement under the program’s procedures to obtain the support of an academic partner although there was some encouragement to seek out advice from educators beyond the specific school (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). This led to professional associations also becoming active participants in the preparation and enactment of educational initiatives (Queensland Consortium for Professional Development in Education, 2002). Hardy (2008) cites a number of these that enabled widespread participation in Queensland where a range of consortia and networks were established.

Nonetheless, academic partners were sought out by a number of those participating in the program when it became evident that the scope for teacher release was limited by a 15% embargo on funding for that purpose. In order to actualize their proposals a number of teacher teams found it helpful to engage academics with some expertise in the field, many of whom had experience in working in those earlier programs such as

The Innovative Links Project and the Innovation and Best Practice Project. In their support to the schools the academic partners brought with them an orientation to inquiry and action learning that was situated and contextualized. This disposition was particularly manifest in the New South Wales government's administration of the broader AGQTP arrangements that became known as "Quality Teaching, Action Learning" (QTAL).

Quality Teaching, Action Learning: An AGQTP Project

Elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith et al, 2012, p.59), I have described the *Quality Teaching, Action Learning* (QTAL) project thus:

Quality Teaching, Action Learning (QTAL) was administered by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and offered to Government schools in NSW in four separate rounds over the course of the first three iterations of the AGQTP. Over the four 'rounds', 193 primary and secondary schools participated in the project, which gained almost \$3m of funding through AGQTP, with an additional \$1m contributed by participating schools out of local professional learning budgets.

While QTAL might be regarded as somewhat different to the two projects described above, in that it was confined to the Government sector in one state, thus lacking the national focus of the other two, in terms of scale it was much larger than both the Innovative Links project and IBPP.

A strong feature of QTAL since its inception was assistance from designated NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) project officers who took key responsibility for supporting the professional needs and activities of participating teachers in government schools. As well, the Project had a requirement that participating schools appoint an academic partner to support the school project team as a critical friend external to the participant school. The relationship between the Department's project officers and the academic partners was a noteworthy element of QTAL, extending notions of partnership beyond individual schools and into the system more broadly. Furthermore, the project was closely linked to an initiative by the DET that promoted a model of pedagogy known as Quality Teaching (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003). Drawing on work on Authentic Pedagogy (Newmann, 1996) and Productive Pedagogies (Education Queensland, 2001) Quality Teaching was commissioned and written by university academics for the DET in 2002. Quality Teaching was expected by the DET to penetrate deeply into practice in government schools across the state, and QTAL was conceived of as one means through which this implementation could be encouraged.

The features of classroom practice that have been linked to improved student learning outcomes in Quality Teaching have been characterised as representing three dimensions of pedagogy that promote high levels of intellectual quality, a quality learning environment and procedures that make explicit to students the significance of their work. In applying for funding under the QTAL arrangements schools were expected to address these three dimensions.

As reported in the meta-evaluation conducted by Ewing et al, the professional learning strategy for QTAL included:

- school-based projects to engage teachers in workplace learning that is based on a cyclic model of continuous improvement
- provision for some clusters of schools to work in collegial networks

- workplace mentoring and coaching aligned to meeting the NSW Institute of Teachers *Professional Teaching Standards*
- flexible learning that includes components such as self-paced and facilitated online learning, face-to-face workshops, video and teleconferences, online mentors, and discussion groups
- local, regional and state workshops and conferences that enable participants to have their work publicly celebrated and critiqued
- onsite and offsite participation in knowledge building and skill-sharing activities
- partnerships with higher education institutions to provide expertise in the development, design and/or implementation of professional development activities. (Ewing et al, pp. 4 – 5)

QTAL Schools were allocated an ‘Academic Partner’ whose role was to facilitate and support the action learning project, attending to the following suggested tasks:

- Conducting professional learning about the NSW Quality Teaching model
- Maintaining the focus on improving teacher professional learning
- Building understanding of the action learning processes
- Providing ideas and strategies for implementing action learning in the school context
- Encouraging interaction and sharing of ideas, feelings and experiences
- Documenting learning, e.g. by helping team members prepare progress and final reports (Bettison & Bradburn, 2006).

In the discussion regarding the role of the academic partner in the meta-analysis of QTAL it was reported:

In many ways we will suggest that school-based practitioners and academic partners have been engaged in co-inquiry (Yorks & Nicolaides, 2007) in that each has an opportunity to learn from their engagement with the project. The school-based practitioners are gaining insight and understandings about their practice and about methods of inquiry, the academic partners are enabled to add to their own store of both professional knowledge and have a more reflexive appreciation of approaches to field-based research. While this study does not explicitly explore the perspectives of the academic partners it is clear that they too had much to gain; in other words professional knowledge is an asset that accrues to both parties and is not exclusively owned by one or the other. (Groundwater-Smith & Way, 2010 p. 41)

While the QTAL project utilised an action learning approach, the focus of the project over its many iterations remained the broad implementation of the *Quality Teaching* framework in as many schools and classrooms as possible. While schools were able to fashion their local focus within these parameters, the reporting focus for each stage of the project emphasised the extent to which professional learning in relation to the NSW model of pedagogy had occurred and the extent to which this had changed classroom practice over the course of the project. In the final two iterations of QTAL, a ‘scaling up’ imperative was also emphasised within the project, where schools were asked to provide evidence that the professional learning and pedagogical change had expanded beyond the initial project team to other teachers within the school.

Teacher Professionalism and School/University Partnership Projects

The 15 year span over which these three projects were enacted were characterised by significant change in the arena of education and social policy generally in Australia and internationally. Each of the three projects described above was thus enacted in a different policy context, and the associated aims and supporting partnership structure

can be seen to reflect the particular context of the project. Table 1 below highlights each in terms of their aims, partnership structure and funding context.

The changing shape of school/university partnerships over this period of 15 years reflects a changing orientation toward teachers and teacher professionalism. Embedded within each of these large-scale projects were particular conceptualisations of teachers that were, by and large, enactments of various dimensions of the education policy of the day. In this section of the paper, I explore these underpinning conceptualisations of teacher professionalism and consider the links between them and the preferred model of partnership embedded in each project.

Project	Duration	Aims	Partnership Structure	Funding Context
Innovative Links	3 years	Developing the quality of teaching and learning in schools; building partnerships across schools, universities, employing authorities and teacher associations	Roundtables involving all partners were sustained across the duration of the Innovative Links project	1993-1996: Award restructuring: conscious commitment on the part of the federal Government to draw unions and other teacher associations into the professional learning arena
Innovation and Best Practice Project	1 year	Generating data for the meta-project concerned with understanding innovation in schools; fostering school innovation.	2 levels: Partnership between members of the consortium and participating schools, reflected in workshops; Partnership between individual schools and contracted research consultants	1997-1998: New Federal Government commitment to positioning education as the 'engine room' of the knowledge economy, and a renewed focus on 'what works' in schools
Quality Teaching, Action Learning	QTAL1: 6m QTAL2: 9m QTAL3: 1yr QTAL4: 1yr (+1yr ext)	Meta-aims of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program focused on improving teacher quality. Additionally, QTAL focused on implementing the Quality Teaching Framework in NSW Public Schools	Allocated academic partner with a defined role (subject to negotiation in the local context); relationship established between individual academic and the participating school.	2003-2009: Located within broad and enduring discussion of teacher quality and standards, reflected on both a state and national level

Table 1: Comparison of Innovative Links, IBPP and QTAL

Principles of what has been termed 'democratic professionalism' (Apple, 1996) can be identified in the underpinnings of the *Innovative Links* project (Sachs, 2001). Preston (1996) argues that this particular conceptualisation of teacher professionalism was explicitly utilised in the early 1990s by the Australian Teachers Union in the context of award restructuring. At the time, the Australian Teachers Union conceptualised the practical enactment of democratic professionalism in the following way:

...Democratic professionalism does not seek to mystify professional work, nor to unreasonably restrict access to that work; it facilitates the participation in decision-making by students, parents and others, and seeks to develop a broader understanding in the community of education and how it operates. As professionals teachers must be responsible and accountable for that which is under their control, both individually and collectively through their unions (Australian Teachers Union, 1991, p. 21).

Democratic professionalism relies heavily on the development and exercise of teacher professional judgement, and, as Preston suggests (1992), this in turn suggests a certain level of professional autonomy: privileging the nuance of judgement over the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of standardisation requires a level of trust to be placed in teachers that they will act ethically, in the best interests of their students and their society. Interestingly, Stenhouse, in providing a rationale for teacher research and inquiry, conceived of the link between professional judgement and autonomy in the following manner:

The essence of emancipation, as I conceive it, is the intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy which we recognise when we eschew paternalism and the rule of authority and hold ourselves obliged to appeal to judgement. Emancipation rests not merely on the right of a person to exercise intellectual, moral and spiritual judgement, but upon the passionate belief that the virtue of humanity is diminished in man when judgement is overruled by authority (Stenhouse, 1983, p. 163).

Yeatman and Sachs (1995) note that the *Innovative Links* project was positioned at the crossroads of an understanding that school restructuring was required to meet the needs of Australian society in the 21st century, and that teachers themselves were the best-placed drivers of the required reforms in education. Implicit in the National Project for Quality Teaching and Learning, which gave rise to the National Professional Development Project, was an understanding that the strengthening of teacher autonomy and agency was a desirable and necessary part of what Yeatman and Sachs (1995, p.15) call "the building of Australia as a learning society". Also embedded in the National Project for Quality Teaching and Learning was an understanding that the structures of the industrial model of education hold the capacity to work against student learning. Indeed, the National Schools Network, which, as has been noted above, also emerged from the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, has been organised for some two decades around the question "What is it about the way our work is organised that gets in the way of student learning?" (Australian National Schools Network, 2011).

Discourses of democratic professionalism have at their heart a concern for authentic collaboration and partnership in the education enterprise. The model of partnership embedded in the *Innovative Links* project, with a long-term commitment to professional dialogue between teachers, academics, representatives of employing authorities and members of other education-related associations, around issues related to school reform and relevant to professional practice in the local context, embody these democratic ideals (Davies, 2005) and reflect the positioning of teachers as skilled and autonomous professionals.

By the advent of the *Innovation and Best Practice Project*, the election of a conservative government led by John Howard had interrupted the somewhat comfortable relationship between teacher unions and the federal government. The 1993 Teaching Accord, which had given energy to the renewal of teacher professionalism through initiatives such as *Innovative Links* and the National Schools Network, had been dismantled and as Sachs observes, "the unified policy agenda of the early 1990s had repolarised into distinct industrial and professional concerns" (1997a, pp. 265-266).

Furthermore, discussions of teacher professionalism in Australia, as elsewhere, had become increasingly reflective of the prevailing managerial discourses (Sachs, 2001), succinctly described by Brennan as encouraging the emergence of:

...a professional who clearly meets corporate goals, set elsewhere, manages a range of students well and documents their achievements and problems for public accountability purposes. The criteria of the successful professional in this corporate model is of one who works efficiently and effectively in meeting the standardised criteria set for the accomplishment of both students and teachers, as well as contributing to the school's formal accountability processes (Brennan, 1996, p. 22).

School participation in the IBPP was framed by the meta-study conducted by the members of the university consortium, which had as its purpose a focus on understanding school-level innovation in the context of the positioning of education as the “engine of the knowledge economy” (Cuttance, 2001). Furthermore, the IBPP was informed by notions of school effectiveness and improvement, with its attendant focus on ‘what works’ (Blackmore, 2002). While the IBPP’s focus on the gathering of data to demonstrate the effectiveness of each school’s innovation was central, and elements of the managerial professionalism highlighted above were undoubtedly present in the project, teachers were also positioned within the project as agents of innovation and charged with the design and implementation of their research plans. While the roots of managerial discourses can be detected in the project’s desire for schools to quantify and standardise their reporting of their innovation and ‘improvement’, emphasis was also placed on local significance and relevance and schools were encouraged to be pro-active in framing their research questions and processes.

The capacity for genuine partnerships between schools and universities to emerge in the context of the IBPP was in many respects dependent upon the particular circumstances of each relationship. In at least one case, an enduring ‘academic partner’ relationship developed out of the IBPP that has been sustained for the past 14 years, but it is also the case that for many schools the partnership was limited to the funding period itself. In a desire to ensure that the research agenda emanated from the schools rather than from the consultant researchers, it could be seen that the potential for genuine partnerships to develop on a local level might have been hampered: the research consultant was very much positioned within the project as the ‘outsider’ with necessary expertise that could be tapped as the school saw fit rather than as a genuine partner with whom a relationship might be sustained over an extended period of time.

By the time of the advent of the *Quality Teaching, Action Learning* project within the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program, discourse regarding teacher professionalism in Australia had moved on yet again. The 1990s discussion of the quality of teaching and learning had transformed into a broad-based discussion of *teacher* quality, embodied in some ways by the very nomenclature of the AGQTP. While *Innovative Links* and to a lesser extent the *Innovation and Best Practice Project* problematised the structures of schooling and education (among them, of course, the means by which quality teaching and learning might be enacted), by the late 1990s/early 2000s, ‘the problem’ had become synonymous with teacher quality, while ‘the solution’ was increasingly seen (and indeed still is) to be professional standards and standardisation of practice.

The image of the ‘quality teacher’ who might be the preferred subject of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program might well be that teacher described by Brennan above, a construct of managerial professionalism who might thrive within a context wherein “the logics of practice which seem to be validated and valued are those associated with endorsement of governmental priorities” (Hardy, 2009, p.83). Indeed, the narrow focus of the *Quality Teaching, Action Learning* on the implementation of a pedagogical framework via inquiry-based professional learning could be seen to do justice to neither the framework itself nor the ideals of inquiry based professional learning. Instances such as this are what prompted Kemmis to write some years ago now:

Much of the action research that has proliferated in many parts of the world over the past two decades has not been the vehicle for educational critique we hoped it would be. Instead, some may even have become a vehicle for domesticating students and teachers to conventional forms of schooling (Kemmis, 2006, p. 459).

The partnerships fostered by QTAL were, on the whole, individual and short-term in nature. By and large, they were bordered by the duration of the funding, and like those that existed within the IBPP, their success or failure was largely dependent upon local circumstances and the personalities involved. Unlike the IBPP, the manner in which (in the majority of cases) academic partners were centrally allocated within the project and the fact that the engagement of an academic partner was a mandated part of the funding agreement meant that some schools (although not by any means the majority) came to the project regarding the academic partner as a ‘necessary evil’ and the relationship failed to move beyond this at any stage (Ewing, et al., 2010). With the short timeframes encompassed by QTAL and the emphasis on implementation and measurable outcomes in terms of the Quality Teaching Framework, as opposed to the long-term commitment of *Innovative Links* and the emphasis on dialogue and learning, it could be seen that QTAL embodied a relatively impoverished model of school/university partnership associated with a similarly impoverished embedded notion of teacher professionalism.

Beyond ‘the Project’ in Australian School/University Partnerships

The school/university partnership projects discussed above were all necessarily bounded by their ‘projectness’: whether long or short in their timeframe, the dynamics of funding mechanisms and established parameters of the partnership in the context of the project in each case impacted upon the form that such partnerships might take. Additionally, as I have tried to show above, each of these projects was a product of its time, imbued with particular understandings of teachers and their work that were to at least some extent products of the landscape of education policy and politics at that time. Evaluations of all three projects have observed that each had both successes and limitations in terms of both the professional learning imperative and the partnership imperative they pursued.

Over the past 10 years a school/university partnership of a different kind has emerged in Sydney, involving a cross-section of schools engaged in sustained inquiry-based professional learning and exploring democratic education through engaging with student voice in ways that aim to push toward what Michael Fielding has termed “intergenerational learning through lived democracy” (Fielding, 2011). Various dimensions of the work of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, supported by the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney, has been documented in detail in a number of publications (e.g. Groundwater-Smith & Mockler,

2009; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2011)¹. Many of the schools involved in the Coalition have at one time been part of one of the three funded projects discussed in this paper, but the Coalition itself is an unfunded network or ‘web’ of schools, representatives of which come together four times a year with university-based colleagues to share and critique their inquiry and student voice initiatives. From time to time member schools work together with each other and/or the academic partners and ‘friends’ of the Coalition on an an-hoc basis, but the relationships within the network far transcend any one project or initiative.

The Coalition is predicated upon a belief in the transformative capacities of an inquiry-based approach for all who engage in education, whether they are located in schools, universities or other institutions, and a belief in the capacity for democratic conceptualisations of teacher professionalism and education to interrupt, on at least a local level, the managerialist tendencies of the current age of compliance. I do not wish to present the Coalition as a perfect model of school-university partnership; rather as an evolving and different one to that fostered in the kinds of projects discussed earlier. After ten years of involvement in this particular school/university partnership, a few ‘lessons’ might be observed:

- Partnership can be powerfully located around process rather than via a particular content focus: the unifying dimension of the Coalition is a commitment to inquiry-based professional learning and authentic attention to student voice, regardless of the particular focus of a school’s inquiry. Over the years, this has allowed schools to bring to the table their research on a range of disparate areas such as student engagement, pastoral care mechanisms, beyond-classroom learning and specific pedagogies, according to their local and current needs. This effectively allows schools to fashion inquiry according to the circumstances of their community rather than to fit a set of externally imposed parameters. While the opportunity to ‘make public’ (Stenhouse, 1985b) and open their work to critique beyond their immediate context comes through their involvement in the Coalition, it comes without the constraints of an external project
- Authentic partnership ‘feeds’ everyone: there is no hierarchy of partners in the Coalition. Whatever their work context, participants, including teachers, students, academics, bureaucrats and education officers in public institutions such as museums and libraries, come to the Coalition table to both contribute and take learning away. Over the years, we have developed an environment where the wisdom and contribution of all members is genuinely valued by the group and there is no sense of one set of partners ‘providing’ for another. Likewise, roles present no boundaries within the Coalition: members contribute to the knowledge building enterprise working from their own skills and strengths, regularly crossing the traditional boundaries of their role as they desire.
- Partnership takes time: the Coalition has grown steadily but very slowly over the past decade, a product of the time it takes for partners to build trust and authentic relationship. Being unbounded by the time constraints of projects has meant that this evolution has been able to occur naturally. Partnership also takes time in the sense that there is an ‘opportunity cost’ to being involved that has meant that

¹ I was a founding member of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools and have worked alongside Susan Groundwater-Smith to build and grow the network over the past decade. Hence the use of ‘we’ at different points in this discussion.

some partners have retreated from the Coalition after a number of years, a product usually of changing school personnel and/or competing priorities at school level. While this was once a source of some angst, we have come to understand it as part of the natural ‘ebb and flow’ of a network such as this.

While these lessons might not be vastly different to the experience of similar networks elsewhere, they do highlight the difference between the kinds of school/university partnerships developed in the context of a large-scale project (even those that have an extended timeframe and a commitment to dialogue and process over intervention and implementation) and that which might emerge from a more organic organisation over an extended period of time. The Coalition provides a small but powerful example of how school/university partnerships might work to foster and support learning across a very wide range of contexts and institutional ‘homes’.

Reflecting on these lessons in the light of the earlier discussion of school/university partnerships, three key tenets might be identified as a framework for understanding authentic partnership in this context:

A focus on local concerns and issues

The funded project can be a ‘double-edged sword’, funding often bringing with it a pre-ordained focus or implementation imperative that does not always sit well with the issues and concerns that are important for students, teachers and school communities. While it is not impossible for partnerships that develop in this environment to transcend the project itself, a focus on local concerns and issues such that the requirements of both the project and the local school community are met requires a level of creativity in both school and university-based members of the partnership. Furthermore, using the funded project as a ‘jumping off point’ for partnerships that might be sustained over the long term can be fruitful: many a generative long-term partnership was begun under these conditions, highlighted in both the large and small-scale examples cited here.

The active development of trust and reciprocity

Trust and reciprocity are central to authentic school-university partnerships: genuine relationships are built between people, not between institutions, and the Australian experience, both from the large-scale projects discussed and the small-scale experience of the Coalition, highlights that these take time and a readiness to actively bridge the cultural differences between schools and universities. Additionally, the development of robust relationships relies on a willingness on the part of all participants to get to know each other, understand different perspectives, put aside pre-conceptions about the ‘other’ (whether teachers or academics), develop an openness to learning, and engage in vigorous and hardy knowledge creation together.

A commitment to supporting teacher autonomy and responsibility

Closely linked to the first two tenets is the notion that generative and enduring partnerships between schools and universities for teacher professional learning should be focused on the fostering of teacher autonomy and responsibility, rather than the implementation and accountability demands around which they can sometimes be focused (as observed in some of the examples cited above). Linked back to Stenhouse’s observations about the links between teacher professional judgement, autonomy and emancipation, this tenet points to the importance of school-university

partnerships transcending the accountability agenda to support what Judyth Sachs (2003) has referred to as ‘activist teacher professionalism’.

The current trajectory of education in Australia represents a ‘slippery slope to effectiveness’ in many ways. As in other parts of the world, an increasing emphasis on elements such as standardised testing for students, teacher standards, and a “back to basics” discourse impacting on classroom practice are the hallmarks of our time. Unfortunately, the further down this slippery slope we go, the more difficult it becomes to engage in authentic professional learning in collaboration and partnership: these are perennially hampered by a desire to find and replicate ‘what works’. The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools provides one example of what it might look like to swim against this tide, valuing dialogue over the ‘quick fix’, and eschewing methods of accountability that shut down generative and constructive critique, such that the fruits of inquiry become celebration instead of the welcoming of ‘unwelcome truths’, problem solving over problematizing, implementation over critique.

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