# 'Upgrading' - Co-constructing A Community Of Learners

## Barbara Whyte

## School of Education University of Waikato New Zealand

## Paper to be presented at AARE Conference

## Sydney 2000

### Abstract

When does 1+1+1+1 = 1 ? When the recent establishment of an outpost university campus has provided the opportunity for development of a locally-flavoured version of the imported concept of Professional Development Schools (PDSs). The combination of inter-school knowledge, a teacher education programme, experienced teachers upgrading diploma qualifications to a degree, plus doctoral and Ministry of Education contract research data, has prompted an inter/intra school/university dialogue which is fast evolving into an authentic, co-constructed community of learners. Facilitated by university staff working cooperatively with school principals and teachers more interested in 'career lattices' than 'career ladders', this collaborative project is underpinned by Sergiovanni's notion of *'cultural leadership'* (power to accomplish <u>vs</u> power over people) which fosters the notion of 'all teachers as leaders'. Rising to the challenge of developing a genuine transformative partnership, the educational community in a small city of New Zealand is exploring creative ways in which to integrate novice student teachers and experienced veteran practitioners into a community of extended professionals. This paper describes the process and explores the issues, of a partnership striving for 'deep' rather than 'surface' engagement.

### Paper

In 1998, the University of Waikato in Hamilton established a satellite campus in the Bay of Plenty, at the city of Tauranga. Motivated by the possibilities of such a site, the university's School of Education (SoE) extended operations to the new campus by offering a Bachelor of Teaching teacher education programme there in 1999. Local Tauranga principals had been agitating for SoE input in their area for some time and willingly assisted with the first round of student selection interviews in the area. The aim of the Tauranga SoE was to offer a replica degree programme equivalent to the Hamilton 'mother ship', but in order to do so, provision for in-school practical work for the pre-service students needed to be accommodated. In Hamilton, there were 'normal schools' (demonstration schools) that provided student access to children for curriculum practise lessons. In the new environment, Tauranga schools needed to be approached and recruited to work in a similar way.

In the inaugural year of the Tauranga B.Tch programme, overtures to schools were based on a 'cap-in-hand/please' basis. The programme requirements were discussed with schools; schools agreed to cooperate; in-school time was negotiated; students did their curriculum practice; and schools were paid for 'services rendered'. A system that worked efficiently, but one that was driven by and used to greater advantage by the university, than the participating schools. It was awareness of how this system might work more*effectively* to the mutual benefit of both the university and the schools, which triggered an interest in partnership models. And this awareness first came about at the 1999 NZARE/AARE conference in Melbourne.

Attendance at papers presented by Australian counterparts that described creative and innovative university/school partnerships, provided the impetus for the programme coordinator to review the way the traditional 'cap-in-hand/please' approach could be improved. Reading further literature (Darling-Hammond, Cobb & Bullmaster, 1998; Tripp, 1990; Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth & Dobbins, 1998), extended knowledge and understanding, particularly on the conceptualisation of Professional Development Schools (PDS). Professional Development Schools (collaborations between schools and universities, created to support the learning of prospective and experienced teachers, while simultaneously restructuring schools and schools of education) was enticing. The PDS notion seemed to represent an innovative way to develop the new small-scale teacher education programme at the satellite campus. The size and autonomy of the programme appeared to offer the opportunity to 'structure' (rather than 'restructure') this new mini school of education, in an interesting way. Literature suggested that going down the PDS path was an evolutionary process (Darling-Hammond et al, 1998) and it was not long before the evolution of a 'Tauranga-flavoured' PDS model started to take shape. Excitingly, the millenium year (2000) has seen the seeds of the concept planted in semester one, blooming forth in semester two. As both the university and Tauranga schools develop greater appreciation of the benefits of working in this way, there has been noticeable development of a more cohesive educational community within the area.

Previously, while visiting schools to recruit participation in the Tauranga B.Tch programme's curriculum practical work in 1999, the programme coordinator had been surprised to find there was an obvious lack of 'exchange' between schools. Often even those schools sited physically close to each other, did not appear to have knowledge about the staff and classroom programmes being run in neighbouring schools. The educational reforms of the 1990s can be seen to have had a negative impact on the way schools perceived each other. Competitiveness was a new element in the educational community equation (Fitzsimons, Peters & Roberts, 1999; McKenzie, 1999; Thrupp & Smith, 1999), that probably exacerbated the occurrence of such 'distancing' between schools. The upshot was a noticeable dampening effect on the knowledge exchange that had traditionally been common within the education sector. Accountabilty had also had an influence on the way schools operated. They now appeared to be more inward than outward looking, as they attempted to justify the way teaching programmes were organised and evaluated. According to the programme coordinator, the Tauranga educational 'community' appeared, from the perspective of a new person on the block, to be relatively disparate and fragmented.

At the same time as these observations were being made, the idea of 'giving back' something to cooperating schools via Tauranga university lecturers, working in the teacher education programme, had been hovering in the wings. And the year 2000, was the year that this idea came out onto the stage. Once-a-term, no-cost-to-participants, after-school professional development workshops for teachers were offered, and teacher attendance was high. It didn't take much to extend the dialogue prompted by these workshops, to regular feedback meetings of school representatives and university staff. Similar to how the group of 'upgrading' teachers having the opportunity to talk with each other, seemed to facilitate the breaking down of barriers; so too did having personnel from different schools interacting together at workshops and meetings, seem to influence a communication breakthrough within the dynamic of the local educational community. Formalising some of this inter-school dialogue into social, feedback meetings appeared to provide a catalyst for fostering a more interactive educational community in Tauranga.

Added to the broader situation, there was a discrepancy amongst teachers in the area that was also having an impact on the educational community. Pay parity had eliminated the salary differential between degree-qualified teachers in primary and secondary schools, a situation that had previously advantaged secondary teachers. As a consequence,

concomitant salary changes in the primary school system meant experienced primary teachers without a degree found less-experienced counterparts *with* a degree were being paid considerably more for doing an equivalent job. Frustrated by this situation, these disadvantaged teachers agitated to the university that was by now entering 'their' territory, to provide papers that would enable them to upgrade a lesser-salaried teaching diploma to a higher-paid Bachelor of Teaching (B.Tch) degree.

Obligingly, the University of Waikato made arrangements for these teachers to upgrade their qualifications by offering degree papers after school hours. But it was not only access to these papers that was to occur from this provision. What also eventuated, was the unfolding of a mini-community of teachers from different schools in the area, who found they were on the same 'wave length'. Not only did these 'upgrade' teachers have the common bond of attempting to pass university papers, but they also found that they shared a renewed interest in educational theory. Not only were these teachers keen to discuss the educational ideas and issues that came though in the degree papers, but they were also interested in discussing cross-school ideas and issues. As well, not only did these teachers talk the same language as their colleagues from other schools, but they often also had a lot to exchange in terms of pragmatic teacher-talk - especially over post-lecture dinners. The term 'upgrading' it seemed, was not limited to merely describing formal qualifications, but could be equally applied to the social interaction that was now being generated by this group of 'born-again' learners.

Alongside these developments, the teacher education programme coordinator continued on with previously begun doctoral research into identifying change-creating critical events that occur on the professional landscapes of classroom teachers. The 'upgrading' teachers fitted the criteria (teacher returning to study) for inclusion in the research and were persuaded to participate as interview subjects. One trend emerging from this particular group of interviews was that the 'upgrade' teachers found to their surprise, they actually *enjoyed* returning to study and formal learning. They recognised the required readings challenged their thinking and appreciated that reading academic material could be quite stimulating. Most found the readings often affirmed practice and gave greater insight into what they were doing in classrooms. While the initial motivation for returning to study had been financial, it appeared that renewed learning had become intrinsically rewarding to these teachers. Interestingly for the university, it was found that more than half of those interviewed had intentions of continuing on with a higher degree. Moreover, not only did the teachers consider they had become more reflective practitioners as a result of their studies, but they saw themselves as extended, rather than restricted professionals because of their study and their reading. They also felt this study and reading had prompted more critical and informed discussion in their schools, as interested colleagues probed them on academic terminology and concepts that were now inadvertently being brought into staffroom conversations. One principal noted with pleasure, that the overall level of staffroom discussion had been 'lifted' from anecdotal conversation to more challenging professional discourse, because of the university papers staff were undertaking.

This finding about positive teacher response to academic reading, resonates with conclusions that came out of a NZ Ministry of Education project conducted in 1998. The project trialed a particular method of 'Curriculum Integration' (CI) teaching in various primary and secondary schools close to the University of Waikato. Milestone reports (Fraser & Whyte, 1999) demonstrated that teachers who were required to read academic articles while participating in the CI professional development contract, often found the readings stimulated them to question and reflect on their personal teaching and learning philosophy. This in turn motivated them to rethink and alter their ideas and classroom practices. The teachers reported the reading of articles as having a significant impact on their re-conceptualisation and challenge of embedded ideas and practices.

Similarities aside, an added bonus for the 'upgrade' teachers which didn't apply to the CI contract participants, was that some of the university papers these 'upgrade' teachers were taking were the same papers attended by student teachers in the teacher education programme. Mutual respect developed as teachers appreciated the qualities and ideas student teachers brought to the tutorials. Likewise, student teachers appreciated the abundant knowledge, skill and expertise these 'veteran' teachers had to contribute to the sessions. Teacher interest in the teacher education programme increased through such contact and benefits were two-fold. Veteran teachers felt more positive about the student teachers coming into their classrooms for curriculum practicals during the year, and for concentrated practicum experiences. At the same time, student teachers were empowered to make more informed choices about which veteran teachers they wished to work alongside, when selecting schools and associate teachers for practicum.

Similarly, by tapping into the teacher 'grapevine', the university was able to employ classroom teachers identified as having specific skills and knowledge, to tutor some of the B.Tch degree curriculum courses. Recognising and acknowledging the expertise of classroom teachers was a genuine way of gaining their support. Such involvement on their part meant they had a vested interest in how the programme operated. The main advantage though for the university, was that both the teacher education programme and the university were now seen to be inclusive components of the Tauranga educational community. Therefore, introduction of the concept of PDS within such a setting enabled schools to be quite receptive to the idea from the onset, and at the same time reduced the likelihood of resistance that might occur under less favourable conditions.

An introductory one-day workshop for teachers from interested schools was held, based around clarifying components of the teacher education programme, exploring the possibilities for in-depth school involvement in the programme, and examining the extent of research and writing that might come out of becoming a PDS. The options of working in partnership as a cooperating school or choosing to take involvement to greater depth as a PDS school were analysed and synthesised. Participants, most of whom held positions of responsibility or management units in their respective schools, considered where the PDS concept might lead and the mutual advantages it could provide. The education reforms and salary changes mentioned earlier, meant many primary schools in NZ now operated a 'career lattice' approach with staff, in preference to a 'career ladder' approach (Howey, 1988). Financial gain was no longer the motivating carrot that attracted classroom teachers to hierarchical 'ladder' positions of power, because with a degree they could earn an equivalent salary without the extra work that went with the responsibility. As a result, many schools were moving away from a hierarchical, to more of a flat management, approach. Workshop participants were therefore willing to embrace ideas that represented a more equitable distribution of power, which is what the PDS concept seemed to offer. A partnership perspective and the potential of action research (Robertson, Trotman & Galbraith, 1998) seemed to have particular appeal and therefore, enthused by the PDS concept, the workshop teachers decided to adopt an action research approach to get it under-way in their schools. The first step in the process was to hold a 'bring-your-principal' follow-up breakfast-meeting in the near future, aimed at convincing principals of the value of committing to become a PDS partner with the university. Despite the principles of 'all teachers as leaders', 'flat management' and/or 'transformative leadership' (Deal & Peterson, 1991; Marshall & Tucker, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1991) that seemed to pervade many of the schools these workshop participants came from, they all appreciated that their own support and interest was not influential enough to make the commitment for their schools. Without the blessing of the principal, they surmised, the university did not have a chance of establishing a real PDS partnership with their school.

By the end of the breakfast, one principal had already committed her school to becoming a PDS partner, and by the end of the week, a further four schools had added their names to the list. Other schools signalled interest but wanted time to consult with staff and engage their interest. For a small programme this was an exciting beginning, enhanced by the range of school-types willing to commit to participation. Two of the five schools are large, long-established inner-city schools; one is newly-established and technologically innovative, sited in a new middle class housing development; one has a diverse population and is sited in a lower-socio-economic area; and one is a small country school on the outskirts of the city. The range of ideas of different ways schools could contribute to the programme that participants had suggested at the first workshop, had obviously influenced the ways the schools now felt they could be involved. Thinking creatively about the partnership and having ownership of ideas, had broadened perception of the ways a partnership could work and some schools were now ready to take advantage of the possibilities.

A week later, the first overture for a collaborative school staff development project came from one of the committed schools. This was cause for celebration, because there was now a sense that the impetus was not just coming from the university, and that a *real* start was being made as schools began to take the initiative. The issue of trying to create a genuine partnership, with both partners contributing ideas and effort rather than one having more input than other, seemed to be no longer a problem. A two-way exchange had begun and this event signalled that a truly 'Tauranga-flavoured' PDS/university partnership was 'on the way'.

Interestingly, this first project combines several of the elements discussed at the first workshop. There is opportunity for school staff at this, and associated schools involved in the project, to develop and extend information technology skills via a special projects degree course offered through the internet by the university 'mother ship'. Action research underpins the project and therefore, the way the project develops will be determined by all the school participants, in combination with various university staff. At the same time, improving the teaching of numeracy is another professional development agenda for the school and this aspect is being integrated into the university NET course work, alongside practical input and consultation on the topic provided by one of the Tauranga-based lecturers. Another Tauranga lecturer is an adviser for the research aspect and is coordinating ideas on how Year 1 and 2 student teacher coursework and practicals can be directly linked into the project. One of the most experienced teachers in the school is being released for a day a week in the first semester of 2001, to co-teach two of the B.Tch degree courses at the Tauranga campus with the programme coordinator. Not only will this teacher contribute pragmatic expertise to the courses, but will have the opportunity to develop personal interests and knowledge while becoming familiar with the required literature for the courses. Increased knowledge of the programme will also enhance this teacher's involvement with student teachers and the teacher education programme in the future.

Similarly, the opportunity is available for another classroom teacher in the educational community in Tauranga to share pedagogical knowledge and curriculum expertise with the student teachers. A one-year full-time teaching fellowship is available to teachers in schools participating in either a cooperating or a PDS, partnership with the university. The main criteria are 1) experience and recognised expertise in a specified curriculum area, and 2) a bachelor's degree and teaching diploma. The teacher selected for the 2001 fellowship is from the 'upgrade' group of teachers mentioned earlier and completed her degree this year. Courses to be taught by this person are negotiable, due to the small size of the programme and number of staff, providing scope for individual and/or collaborative teaching. Provision is made for the teacher to do research, write articles and present a paper at a NZ conference, as part of the position. It is intended that this fellowship will be perceived as a sabbatical equivalent, and as a desirable opportunity for teachers in the area. It was conceived as a

means of tapping into the wealth of pragmatic skills and knowledge in the local educational community 'bank', but also, as a way of encouraging teachers to continue studying and extend qualifications. Increased involvement with the university should, if the experiences described earlier indicate a pattern, enhance interaction amongst teachers and schools. This in turn will hopefully have a positive effect in developing a more cohesive educational community in the area.

There are indicators also, that the schools committed to a partnership are taking their role in the pre-service teacher education programme quite seriously. Moves have been made to integrate schools' 2001 curriculum planning with student teacher curriculum practicals. Lecturers are currently attending school syndicate planning meetings in an attempt to ensure a better fit between degree course requirements and the 'when and what' of curriculum delivery in schools. It is also possible for greater flexibility to occur when student teachers are doing practicum in these schools. Individual needs can be better catered for, as lecturer and student teacher knowledge of the teachers, schools and programmes develops through interaction. A recent instance of a student teacher needing extra practicum experience was accommodated most graciously by one partnership school. At the collaborative meeting of principal, student teacher, associate teacher and lecturer, to decide whether the student teacher should pass the practicum, the principal was pleased that the situation had become what she saw as a win-win situation. She described the case as an exemplar of the way a partnership could work effectively to the benefit of all concerned. She went on to say though, that she felt it was a responsibility to the teaching profession, for the local schools to be involved with the development of novice teachers in the university programme. In her view, if the educational community wanted the university in the area preparing teachers for their classrooms, then it needed to be prepared to help with the programme in a constructive way.

A school conceiving its role in this manner is obviously feeling comfortable with the partnership concept. Only at an embryonic stage of development, such examples of collegiality and reciprocity within the project have encouraged those involved to already see the benefits of operating in this way. Underpinned by Sergiovanni's notion of *'cultural leadership'* (power to accomplish <u>vs</u> power over people) and an equity stance, one of the main aims of the partnership approach is for all parties concerned to gain maximum benefit from the interaction - but most of all, children in schools. At the initial teacher workshop and at the principal's breakfast meeting, it became clear that schools perceived the partnership as a way to improve the quality of education for their children. This of course is the crux of the matter. If the quality of education for children can be improved, then that is the major justification for participation.

While all seems rosy at the moment, it is appreciated that this *is* the honeymoon period for this school partnerships project. Nothing is perfect and therefore there are, naturally, potential issues that need to be contemplated. One problem that came through in a search of the literature (McGee, 2000) suggested teachers often attempt to take over the agenda in partnership arrangements. Some universities try to formalise arrangements with written policies and agreements in order to circumvent such action. While this is something the Tauranga project needs to be wary of, it is felt that structuring arrangements at this stage may precipitate an undesirable formalised approach. With the partnership still in a developing state, the mutual trust that is being carefully fostered could easily be undermined by the intrusion of a formal contractual agreement.

Similarly, attempting to secure funding to assist with the research aspect, particularly action research, can equally be fraught with such formalising difficulties. University research funding is often for specifically prescribed purposes and can, as McGee (2000) notes, drive the nature of the research that is undertaken. This could inhibit the main virtue of action

research, which is that it allows for the direction of the research to be a flexible response to participants' needs and ideas.

And of course partnerships infer *people* and whenever people are involved, there is the potential for issues to arise. Differences in approach between SOE staff and classroom teachers can lead to tension. Likewise, providing access to courses for partnership teachers to enable them to become more reflective practitioners, can have a positive effect. At the same time though, this broadening of ideas can also pave the way for tension-creating challenge and debate of philosophical issues that could undermine the partnership relationship itself. Grossman (1994) reported that partnership teachers believed colleagues had become much more aware and informed of what was going on in education, since the partnership was established with their school. While this effect would normally be perceived as a desirable outcome, particularly as academics we welcome such debate, it nevertheless has equivalent potential to lead to tension and conflict. As has also, the natural propensity that people have, to move about. Teachers change their jobs in schools fairly regularly and just as a principal and staff appear to be comfortable with the university and working in a partnership environment, it is inevitable that someone will move on. There is always the possibility that the ensuing personnel changes may not be so conducive to total harmony. But harmony is only one aspect of a partnership, and if the partnership is a genuine one, harmony would not necessarily be expected all the time.

As educational partnerships in Tauranga evolve, harmonious or otherwise, participants need to be mindful of such issues. As teachers though, participants are used to pre-empting potential difficulties and planning to counter them before they happen, therefore using the same strategy will probably be the most effective way of operating in this project.

In any true partnership, both parties can have an entirely different conception of whatever it is they are perceiving. There are as yet undiscovered possibilities and potential and therefore, at this early stage, outcomes cannot be predicted. But if the ethos that underpins this partnership project is one that sees an enhanced educational community working collaboratively together to improve the learning opportunities for children in schools - then that must validate the need to explore and pursue this partnership concept further.

## References

Darling-Hammond, L., Cobb, V. and Bullmaster, M. (1998). Professional development schools as contexts for teacher learning and leadership. In K.Leithwood and K. Louis (Eds), *Organizational learning in schools*, Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger (149-174).

Deal, T. and Peterson, K. (1991). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*. USA: Department of Education.

Fitzsimons, P., Peters, M. and Roberts, P. (1999). Eonomics and the education policy process in New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol 34, 1, (35-44).

Fraser, D. and Whyte, B. (1998). *Curriculum Integration Milestone Reports 1-4*. Hamilton: University of Waikato.

Grossman, P. (1994). In pursuit of a dual agenda: Creating a middle level professional development school. In L. Darling-Hammond (Ed) *Professional development schools: Schools for developing a profession* (50-73). New York: Teachers College Press.

Groundwater-Smith, S., Cusworth, R. and Dobbins, R. (1998). *Teaching: Challenges and dilemmas*. Marrickville NSW: Harcourt Brace.

Howey, K. (1988). Why teacher leadership? *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol 39, 1, (28-31).

McGee, J. (2000). Study Leave Report. Report presented to the Leave Committee, University of Waikato, Hamilton, NZ.

McKenzie, D. (1999). The clouded trail: Ten years of public education post-Picot. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol 34, 1, (8-17).

Robertson, J., Trotman, S. and Galbraith, A. (1997). *Action research: A strategy for school and teacher development*. Hamilton: Waikato University Educational Leadership Centre.

Sergiovanni, T. (1991). *Value-added leadership*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Thrupp, M. and Smith, R. (1999). A decade of ERO. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol 34, 1, (186-198).

Tripp, D. (1990). Socially critical action research. *Theory Into Practice*, Vol 29, 3, (158-166)