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## School-university partnerships to support professional learning

Karen Smith - *University of Hertfordshire*, Renata Joseph and Katie Magee - *Canons High School*



### Introduction: school-university partnerships

The University of Hertfordshire has a long tradition of working with schools and other education settings. Much of this work has been through accredited undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Since 2012, changes to the delivery of initial teacher training across the sector have impacted on how universities work with schools (Universities UK, 2014). The movement towards school-led training has shifted the balance of power between schools and universities; partnership models between schools and universities are being re-shaped (Brown et al., 2015: 19). While partnerships between schools and universities remain around the broad areas of initial teacher education, continuing professional development, and research and consultancy, the emphasis has moved away from paternal, university-led partnerships towards those based on collaboration, mutuality, and reciprocity (Handscorn et al., 2014). It was with these underpinnings that the partnership between the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire and Canons High School was developed.

### Context: Canons High School

Canons High School (CHS) is an 11-18 Academy and joint lead school in the Canons Park Teaching School Alliance. In a constantly evolving educational context, CHS believes it has a responsibility to provide good quality professional learning opportunities so that all staff feel equipped to deal with change and student outcomes do not suffer, but are in fact enhanced. It is clearer today than ever than educators need to learn, and that is why 'professional learning' has replaced 'professional development'. Developing is not enough. Educators must be knowledgeable and wise. They must know enough in order to change. They must change in order to get different results. They must become learners (Easton, 2008). Following staff evaluation, the findings of the school's CPD Audit (in conjunction with the Teacher Development Trust) and recommendations from Lessons for London Schools (Baars et al., 2014), the school reflected on current and potential learning opportunities for all staff and opportunities to collaborate with external experts to enhance professional learning. Building on a successful programme of Teacher Learner Communities (TLCs), CHS established Professional Learning Communities (PLCs); grouping staff learners to share, critique and interrogate their practice in an on-going, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth promoting way (Bolam et al., 2004). Although each PLC had a different focus, they shared a five key characteristics the school believes will make them effective.

1. Shared vision and values. An undeviating focus on all students' learning (Hord, 2004).
2. Collective responsibility for student learning. Assuming that such collective responsibility helps to sustain commitment (Newman and Welhage, 1995).
3. Reflective professional enquiry, including reflective dialogue, conversations around educational issues or problems, discussions around how new learning can be applied, joint planning and development for the curriculum (Louis et al., 1995).
4. Collaboration including developmental activities that went beyond superficial exchanges of help and support (Hord, 2004).
5. Group as well as individual learning.

## An ethical collaboration

The University of Hertfordshire has an existing relationship with Canons around initial teacher education, where the University is a strategic partner for the First Direct / Harrow Direct programme. Over the last academic year (2015-2016), the University of Hertfordshire and Canons have sought to develop their partnership around research. Initial conversations led to UH inputs into Canons' INSET day and also sowed ideas for new approaches to research, evaluation and review using Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). A University staff member participated in two of the PLCs, providing initial guidance on constructing research questions and subsequently collaboratively leading the research design PLC with a Canons Grassroots Leader, responding to participant needs and pooling expertise and experience. Throughout the collaboration, we have shared ideas, given and received feedback, and jointly presented at University seminars and Canons Park Teaching School Alliance conference. The collaboration is built on mutual respect, trust, and a shared vision of the positive role that research can play in teachers' professional learning and development (Cordingley, 2015).

## Benefits of partnership working

This collaboration has provided mutual benefits. It has enabled Canons to become more engaged in research and to draw on research expertise, a critical friend and an external sounding board to support the ongoing and future development of Canons' research culture. Equally, the partnership has enabled staff at the University of Hertfordshire to get closer to practice and see how research practices are played out in specific locations and contexts (Greany and Brown, 2015). For the University, such a partnership supports the diversification of engagement they have with schools and for Canons it marks a movement away from teachers as translators of university-generated research knowledge, to teachers as original contributors to knowledge (Elliot and Sarland, 1995). Without the pressure of the time constraints often attached to funded projects (Mockler, 2013), the partnership has evolved naturally allowing the partners to develop their roles and responsibilities.

## Challenges of partnership working

Inevitably, there have been challenges of working collaboratively. We work within different cultures, which operate to different time scales. This collaboration is less structured than some of the ways that schools and universities partner; while this has the benefits of enabling organic development, it also means that partners have to be both flexible and responsive in our ways of working. We are often faced with different priorities and can approach the partnership with different motivations. We have needed to recognise and be sensitive to these differences and to be transparent and honest about what we hope to achieve and what we can realistically offer (Greany and Brown 2015). We have also considered the sustainability of the partnership; all partnership is essentially about relationships and initially a partnership is based on a relationship between individuals and time needs to be devoted to fostering these personal relationships (Baumfield and Butterworth, 2007). Yet, the partnership needs to extend beyond a small number of individuals. Efforts have been made to build capacity and involve more people in the collaboration, thus securing its sustainability over time.

## Future developments

As we move forwards, the intention is to overcome some of the challenges of partnership working while building on the clear benefits.

In terms of ITE, Canons and the University of Hertfordshire will continue to work together to train teachers through their Harrow Direct programme. With regards to continuing professional development, School of Education staff will continue to provide support for practice-based research and the development of a research-rich culture. We look towards formalising relationships around accredited provision, with Canons staff being supported to participate in postgraduate study and Canons' staff involvement in the development of new University programmes. For consultancy and research, the University and Canons will continue to discuss research approaches and methodologies and seek to implement research ideas. Ultimately, we intend to develop joint bids to external funders to support collaborative research for professional learning.

As a model for working, a school-university partnership has the capacity to support the professional learning of all involved. The challenge of working across cultures in a 'third space' creates opportunities for innovation, creativity and the co-construction of new knowledge (Handscob et al., 2014). This is an exciting prospect.

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