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University-school Partnerships: To Learn and to Serve

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Titles are worthy of study in their own right, not simply as aesthetic forms, but as signifiers of the play of positions in the intellectual field.

(Bernstein 2000:41)

Universities are ... required to move much more into the territory of the practicum and adjust their way of working so that knowledge is produced which has practical implications, ... Built into the practicum is more than a set of mechanisms which allow it unproblematically to absorb knowledge ...

(Scott et al., 2004 forthcoming)

This paper draws together the strands of the School Service Scheme which was initiated by the Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU).¹ As its motto 'To learn and to serve' suggests, the scheme is one which combines service with learning. The presentation is concerned with filling out and extending the sketches adumbrated in the pilot scheme in a more systematic and coherent manner. It begins by briefly tracing the orientations and outcomes of the pilot scheme – as part of a larger ongoing project – in the context of university-school partnerships. It then discusses relevant concepts emerged from the evaluation of the scheme, as well as the directions for future research into field experience.

¹ The presentation of this paper draws on the report of the pilot School Service Scheme, which was prepared by Mr William C.H. Cheng, former member of the School Service Committee (2002-03), Department of Education Studies of HKBU.

Our presentation is in three parts:

- contextualising university-school partnerships
- piloting the School Service Scheme
- setting an agenda for university-school partnerships in field experience.

CONTEXTUALISING UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Currently, the governments of Hong Kong, Britain and Australia, for example, are all concerned with issues of effectiveness, efficiency and social equity in their education reforms. The review processes are predicated on the notion of internationalisation and global competition: all are aimed at meeting ‘the needs of a knowledge-based society’ and raising ‘the standing of their institutions in a competitive world’ (South China Morning Post, 7 November 2002). The success of education reforms in part depends on the active and enthusiastic engagement of front-line educators across the primary, secondary and tertiary stages. This directs us to the possibilities and prospects of university-school partnerships in responding to contemporary changes.²

In capitalist societies such as Hong Kong, where technological change is rapid, the growth of the service economy is powerful, and managerial functions are increasingly complex, the education system is subject to many pressures. These pressures are translated to the form of curriculum and to the demand for qualified teachers, as manifest in the Education and Manpower Bureau’s attempts to reform the school curriculum, and to enhance the qualities of teachers through benchmarking. The external economic pressures from the society as a whole also challenge teacher-education providers. According to a preliminary study of schools’ criteria for recruiting teachers by HKBU (e.g. Mingpao/Singtao/South China Morning Post/Takungpao/Wenweipo, 14 October 2003), professional attitude, subject knowledge, and ability to use languages topped the list of the essential qualities for teachers.³ Less emphasis is placed on academic background which is no longer adequate for meeting the challenges faced by teachers in current contexts. The call

² Partnerships may take different forms, for example: parent and school partnerships in supporting literacy and numeracy (e.g. Warren & Young, 2002); mentoring in school-university partnerships (e.g. Perry et al., 2002); and school-university partnership in educational research (e.g. Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge).

³ The results were drawn from a questionnaire survey led by Mr S.W. Yeung, chairperson of the Practicum and School Partnership Committee, Department of Education Studies of HKBU. The data comprised responses from 47 principals in primary and secondary schools. Teachers with professional attitude are expected to be ‘life-long learners who are responsible, flexible and enthusiastic about their students’ (South China Morning Post, 14 October 2003).

for front-line teachers to achieve a wide spectrum of competencies is clear.

Against this background, we have attempted to demonstrate how university-school partnerships might benefit the student-teachers, the schools as well as the pupils, and contribute to the development of teacher professionalism in Hong Kong. It may be argued that Hong Kong education is situationally unique, but not completely different from other national educational realities. This increases the capacity of this study to contribute to the broader field of teacher education.

PILOTING THE SCHOOL SERVICE SCHEME

Although the close relationship between learning to serve and field experience has long been recognised in teacher education, its various dimensions have rarely been examined empirically (e.g. Furco & Billing, 2002; Mintz & Hesser, 1996). With the context of university-school partnerships in place, this paper traces the orientations and outcomes of the pilot School Service Scheme, in which 30 secondary schools and 57 student-teachers participated (June – August 2003).

Orientations

What follows is a brief introduction to the School Service Scheme in terms of its goals, categories of service, the duration of service, the procedure of participation, and the obligations of participants.⁴

Goals of the scheme

The scheme provides opportunities for student-teachers of HKBU to further their professional, social and personal development through voluntary school service. Participating schools, particularly their pupils, will also benefit from the input which these student-teachers bring with them. More specifically, the scheme, as a merger of service and learning that strengthens both, is expected to generate a whole greater than its parts put together.

⁴ The contents of this section are reproduced from the introductory booklet of the School Service Scheme (2003-04) with the consent of Dr Raymond M.C. Chan, chairperson of the scheme, Department of Education Studies of HKBU.

Through the scheme, participating student-teachers will be able to:

- consolidate their professional knowledge
- develop an ethos of professionalism in teaching
- enhance their expertise in teaching and teaching-related skills.

With additional input from student-teachers, participating schools will be able to:

- better facilitate the implementation of new teaching ideas and methods
- utilise the resources brought by student-teachers to the benefit of their pupils.

Categories of service

The services provided by student-teachers can be categorised into four areas:

- subject teaching/tutoring (e.g. running tutorial classes)
- curriculum/materials development (e.g. designing teaching-aids)
- extra-curricular activities (e.g. supervising a school club)
- other teaching-related work (e.g. assisting with school library work).

The types of school service offered by the student-teachers of HKBU (June – August 2003) are summarised as follows:

Subject teaching/tutoring

Chinese	English	Mathematics	Art
Music	Statistics	Putonghua	History
Geography	Piano	Integrated science	Computer literacy
Computer software application			
Physics/Chemistry/Biology			

Curriculum/materials development

Chinese	English	Mathematics	Geography
History	Computer	Integrated science	Art
Physics/Chemistry/Biology			

Extra-curricular activities

Uniformed groups/social service

Uniformed groups (e.g. Red Cross/Girl guide/Boy scout)

Voluntary service (e.g. assisting in organising voluntary service/student-exchange programme)

Academic-related activities

Chinese club	English club	Art and craft
English creative writing	Computer	Maths interest club
Chinese creative writing	Writing skills	IT application
Putonghua	Translation	Critical thinking
Phonics/Pronunciation	Music theory	Geography club

Interests/hobbies

Sports activities	First-aid	Musical instruments
Choir conducting	Singing	Creative music work
Public speaking	Poetry	Drama
Graphic design	Ceramics	Handicrafts
Silk screening	Video-taping	Film club
Religious fellowship	Cookery	Astronomy

Duration of service

Student-teachers should be realistic about their time available for school service. Once a commitment is made, they should make all efforts to honour it.

- The duration of service and the hours involved will vary across schools and student-teachers. An agreement will be made between participating schools and student-teachers before the start of the scheme.
- During term time (January – March), 2-6 hours of service per week are feasible; during summer time (June – August), longer service hours may be taken up by student-teachers.

Procedure of participation

Step 1

Student-teachers indicate interest in joining the scheme by filling in the form 'Indication of interest in joining the School Service Scheme – Student'.



Step 2

Schools indicate interest in joining the scheme as partner schools by filling in the form 'Indication of interest in joining the School Service Scheme – School'.



Step 3

The School Service Scheme Committee matches the needs and preferences of student-teachers and of partner schools, and maintains contact with both.



Step 4

Student-teachers contact partner schools to confirm their service schedules.



Step 5

Student-teachers' service schedules are confirmed by partner schools; consent forms are duly signed.



Step 6

The School Service Scheme starts.

Obligations of participants

Partner schools

The service scheme is free for participating schools. They are under no financial obligation to student-teachers who offer school service. However, partner schools should provide adequate support and guidance for student-teachers by assigning a member of the teaching staff to be mentor. This host teacher is expected to:

- advise student-teachers and facilitate their work and progress
- encourage student-teachers to reflect on their experience of learning to serve
- complete the student-teacher progress record form
- report any irregularities to the secretariat as and when necessary
- complete and return the student-teacher service evaluation form

- provide student-teachers with the insurance policy set for activities of the school.

Student-teacher participants

Participating student-teachers should evaluate their capacities and limits before embarking on the service scheme. Once a commitment is made, they should honour it, and acquit themselves well in the service.

School Service Scheme Committee

The committee members are responsible for:

- co-ordinating the whole service scheme
- providing basic training for participating student-teachers
- matching student-teachers with schools and maintaining contact with both
- monitoring student-teachers' work and progress with the help of a support team and providing assistance where needed
- providing student-teachers with the insurance policy set for activities of HKBU students.

Outcomes

The relevance of the School Service Scheme in terms of its contributions and limitations was evaluated by means of questionnaires at the end of its pilot phase.⁵ The feedback collected from the partner schools and student-teachers was disseminated in a press conference (e.g. Mingpao/Singtao/Takungpao/Wenweipo, 14 October 2003; University Relations Hong Kong Baptist University, 13 October 2003).

From the point of view of partner schools, the School Service Scheme provided them with a wealth of multi-talented student-teachers, as shown in the types of school service (i.e. subject teaching/tutoring, curriculum/materials development, and extra-curricular activities) available by the 57 participants over the summer period (June – August 2003). The provision of services by these student-teachers offered additional human resources to the 30 schools at a time of budget-cuts by the government. As commented by a partner school principal in the press conference:

⁵ The questionnaire data were analysed by Mr William C.H. Cheng, former member of the School Service Scheme Committee (2002-03). The evaluation of the pilot scheme was presented in the form of a report for the Department of Education Studies of HKBU.

One of the contributions of student-teachers through the School Service Scheme is the alleviation of host teachers' workload. Pupils also benefit from the additional input from student-teachers.

(Partner School A, 13 October 2003)

The data also indicate some connection between school band and the demand for pedagogic and administrative support: the lower the school band, the stronger the need for additional input from student-teachers.

From the perspective of student-teachers, they particularly valued the opportunities to serve in assessment-free contexts. Similarly to the School Experience which is an important component of our Integrated Practicum,⁶ the School Service Scheme is designed to familiarise participating student-teaches with the various aspects of the school organisation. Such field knowledge and experience would better equip them for the competitive labour market (e.g. Wenweipo, 14 October 2003). As mentioned by a former student-teacher participant in the press conference:

The School Service Scheme broadened my perception of the school as an institution, and enabled me to better understand its daily operation. I also benefited from developing teaching materials, and from offering tutorials through VITLE on the web in the aftermath of the SARS outbreak.⁷

I would say the School Service Scheme enabled me to further develop myself as a teacher in a practical sense. I was better equipped by learning how to serve.

I thought my experience of participating in the School Service Scheme might have helped me to secure a teaching job more easily in current situations.

(Former Student-teacher X, 13 October 2003)

The data also suggest the importance of matching the needs and preferences of student-teachers and of partner schools. For those student-teachers who were assigned suitable jobs, boosted confidence was reported in classroom management,

⁶ As specified in the handbook for student-teachers, Integrated Practicum consists of Subject Instruction and Microteaching; and Field Practice, which includes School Experience and Supervised Teaching Practice. School Experience, being one of the three components of the Integrated Practicum, aims at facilitating student-teachers' assumption of their teaching, teaching-related, and administrative responsibilities by familiarising them with various aspects of the school organisation in which their teaching practice is going to take place.

⁷ Details about 'Virtual Integrated Teaching and Learning Environment' (VITLE) can be found on http://dynamic.macromedia.com/bin/MM/showcase/scripts/showcase_cs_cover.jsp?Showcase_OID=861301.

materials preparation, decision-making, and needs analysis. As highlighted by other former participants:

I was thrilled with the experience of involving myself in a creative music programme in a traditional boys' school. Such experience usefully prepared me for being a reflective and creative teacher.

(Former Student-teacher Y, 13 October 2003)

During her [the student-teacher's] stay, she was assigned to design teaching materials and project learning for S1 and S2 Chinese. She was found to be punctual, enthusiastic and responsible. She always managed to meet the deadlines of her work.

(Partner School B, 22 July 2003)

Thus, it is crucial at an early stage to ensure that the host schools will value the personal and social dimensions of the scheme, and subsequently plan the student-teachers' duties with these in mind. Equally important are to acquaint student-teachers with negotiation skills and with the appropriate attitudes towards school service, and to foster a sense of belonging and commitment among them. As reported by another partner school:

The students [student-teachers] were at first displeased about the programme [arrangements], and could not be definite about their time commitment with the school.

It is a pity that they [the student-teachers] could not be involved in our school for a longer duration, as this would enable them to be more involved, and therefore could understand better the daily operation in teaching.

(Partner School C, 28 August 2003)

It was through taking initiatives that student-teachers developed a sense of ownership of their school service. This raises the issue of student-teacher autonomy in field practice which deserves more attention in teacher-education programmes.

SETTING AN AGENDA FOR UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN FIELD EXPERIENCE

Despite the limits of the engagement, the evaluation of the School Service Scheme could well serve to set an agenda for university-school partnerships in field experience. The evaluation of the pilot scheme lends itself to the emergence of relevant concepts:

- value: possessive and experiential values
- knowledge: academic and professional knowledge
- pedagogy: competence and performance.

Reflecting on the feedback from the participants of the School Service Scheme, two types of values are identified in the context of university-school partnerships: possessive value and experiential value. The former directs us to the vocational aspect of field experience; whereas the latter points to a rich experience of learning, a development and stretching of minds, as well as intellectual challenge and adventure (e.g. Walsh, 1993). What, then, counts as valid field experience for student-teachers in the context of contemporary change in Hong Kong?

In meeting the needs of a knowledge-based society, knowledge is no longer characterised by ‘an indifference to the practicum’, or ‘the designation of the practicum as merely the source of theoretical deliberation’ (Scott et al., 2004 forthcoming; see also Gibbons et al., 1994 & Usher et al., 1996). In keeping with the contemporary change, our Field Practice (which comprises School Experience and Supervised Teaching Practice) offers opportunities for student-teachers to acquire practitioner knowledge, which is context-dependent. However, it is not sufficient to focus primarily on skill development (e.g. presentational skills, pedagogic/strategic knowledge, and technical ability) without paying due attention to the development of professional attitude among student-teachers, as mentioned earlier.

It is also relevant to contrast between two pedagogic models in field experience: competence and performance. According to Bernstein (2000:44), ‘a performance model of pedagogic practice and context places the emphasis upon a specific output of the acquirer, upon a particular text the acquirer is expected to construct, and upon the specialised skills necessary to the production of this specific output, text or product’. These concepts are particularly pertinent to the organising principles of our Field Practice. It may be apt to generalise that the design of our Field Practice

combines a competence model with a performance model. Similarly to the School Experience, the School Service Scheme provides student-teachers with extended opportunities to serve in assessment-free contexts; the performance of student-teachers is more weakly classified (i.e. higher autonomy; implicit control). This is compared to the Supervised Teaching Practice in which the performance of student-teachers is more strongly classified (i.e. lower autonomy; explicit control).

In this necessarily brief account, we have attempted to demonstrate the relevance of university-school partnerships through the School Service Scheme. It is possible to extend the emerging concepts to capture key aspects of field experience – an essential element of teacher education – in comparable contexts.

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