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## Leading Change in Teacher Education: Balancing on the Wobbly Bridge of School-University Partnership

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**Abstract:** Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes have been critiqued widely for failing to connect educational theory with everyday practices in schools. More meaningful collaborations between schools and teacher education providers have featured prominently among key recommendations addressing the traditional theory-practice divide. This paper traces and critically analyses one 'simplex' story of initiating and leading a large-scale school-university partnership (SUP) network in the Republic of Ireland. Using a narrative approach, the protagonists and researchers of this SUP story bring their 'simplex' journey of doing and shaping SUP to life. Analysis of the Irish case study emphasizes the authentic transformation of teacher educators' institutional identities as a powerful enabler of meaningful collaboration while also highlighting ethical dilemmas that arose for university tutors in the context of deeper relational engagement in the school-university cross-boundary space. Constrained in their ITE praxis by power relations and a disequilibrium of responsibilities, tutors' doubts, discomfort and, at times, disillusionment led them to readjust their expectations with regard to SUP while also refocusing their energy and hopes in student teachers as collaborative future change agents.

**Keywords:** *Initial teacher education, school-university partnership, teacher education policy, school placement, mentoring, teacher development, policy change, leadership, narrative.*

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### Introduction

Many scholars and policy makers have concluded that traditional approaches to teacher education have fallen short of meeting student teachers' needs and failed to enhance learning in schools (Korthagen, Loughran & Russel, 2006). The persisting theory-practice divide has been critiqued widely (Loughran & Hamilton, 2016; Zeichner, 2010) and closer and more meaningful collaborations between schools and teacher education providers have featured prominently among key recommendations forwarded by researchers (Conway, Murphy, Rath & Hall, 2009; Donaldson 2011; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell 2006; Ramsey, 2000). However, research from various international contexts has also consistently emphasized significant challenges associated with building authentic school-university partnerships (Mtika, Robson & Fitzpatrick, 2014).

In 2011, the Irish Teaching Council's (TC) 'Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (2011a) provided the basis for the reconceptualization of initial teacher education in Ireland. The policy document envisaged the development of 'new and innovative school placement models where higher education institutions (HEIs) and schools actively collaborate as partners in the organization of the placement'. In contrast to some system wide approaches implemented in a variety of international contexts where significant responsibility for initial teacher education has been transferred to schools, for example the United States' Professional Development Schools (Darling-Hammond, 2012), Scotland's Education and University Initial Teacher Education Partnerships (Donaldson, 2011), and the School Direct programme of England and Wales (Gu et al., 2016); in Ireland, the responsibility for ITE programme design and implementation lies solely with ITE providers in the higher education institutions. School's support and collaboration is of a voluntary nature; schools decide to accept (or not) student teachers for placement and the level of and approach to the support provided varies significantly across contexts. Teacher educators and researchers have raised concerns about the lack of equity of experience for student teachers in post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland due to the lack of a

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tradition of supervision in schools and poor school–university partnerships (Heinz, 2013b, 2014; McWilliams et al. 2006; Young & MacPhail, 2016).

The sizeable gap between the realities of school placement arrangements and practices in Ireland and the Teaching Council’s aspirational vision resulted in a request from ITE providers across Ireland for the Teaching Council to facilitate formal negotiations between HEIs and schools. In parallel to stakeholder negotiations, lasting for two years and resulting in the publication of the Irish Teaching Council’s (2013) ‘School Placement Guidelines’, the leadership team of one Irish ITE provider developed and implemented an innovative partner school placement model with a network of initially twenty, growing to thirty, self-selected partner schools based on a bottom-up collaborative and action-focused approach<sup>i</sup>.

This paper traces and critically analyses the story of the NUI Galway partner school initiative from conception and initiation through to the completion of the first three years of its development (2011 to 2014). Using a narrative approach, the protagonists and researchers of the initiative – Dr. Manuela Heinz, school placement director, and Dr. Mary Fleming, director of teacher education – bring their journey of imagining and leading the development of a large school-university partnership network to life.

### *Conceptualising school-university partnership in Ireland*

Following the Teaching Council’s initiation of the ITE programme accreditation process (Teaching Council, 2011b) we, the NUI Galway School of Education team, reviewed and reconceptualised our ITE programmes. We applied a principled approach (Korthagen, Loughran & Russel, 2006)<sup>ii</sup> in the development of our conceptual framework incorporating ‘meaningful partnerships with schools’ and a ‘collaborative approach to ITE curriculum design and school placement support’ as central guiding principles. We knew that building collaborative school-university partnership represented our most ambitious goal.

In Ireland, similar to other international contexts, a polarized view existed in ITE where staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) provided the theoretical knowledge base and schools facilitated the practical day-to-day classroom experience (Spendlove, Howes & Wake, 2010). The traditional approach upheld clear boundaries between institutions and people and failed to take account of dissimilar cultures, contexts, knowledge, power and social relations (Mtika, Robson & Fitzpatrick, 2014; Young, O’Neill & Mooney-Simmie, 2015). We had long been aware of the problems our student teachers were facing as they moved between the realities and day-to-day requirements of schools and the academic world of the university (Heinz, 2011a, b; Mtika, Reid & Weir, 2013).

We approached our goal with the critical awareness that school placements are situated in complex settings where multiple actors with varied histories, understandings and perspectives on teaching interact (Valencia, Martin, Place, Grossman, 2009). We studied different conceptualisations and models of school-university partnerships presented in the international literature (Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting & Whitty, 2000; Moran, Abbott & Clarke, 2009; Sim, 2010; Smith, Brisard & Menter, 2006; Tsui et al., 2008).<sup>iii</sup> We were most attracted by collaborative approaches that valued practicing teachers’ implicit, contextualized, expert and professional knowledge as an important contribution to university-based ITE programmes (Chalies, Ria, Bertone, Trohel & Durand, 2004). We knew that the meaningful collaboration we envisaged necessitated considerable ‘changes in our professional boundaries’ and the development of a co-constructed perspective on ITE and student teacher mentoring (Zeichner, 2010).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework underpinning the initial design and initiation of our SUP initiative. Following the approach taken by colleagues in various parts of the world (Sim, 2010; Tsui et al., 2008; Mtika et al., 2014) we envisaged the creation of a community of practice (CoP) formed around teachers’ and teacher educators’ shared professional responsibility for the introduction of new teachers to the professional community. The CoP framework aligned with our perceived need to prioritise dialogue among participants to allow the exploration of various (and sometimes contradictory) assumptions, contexts, constraints and goals, hopefully leading to a community of trust uniting in pursuit of a shared mission.

While the CoP framework provided some concrete tools in the design phase, helping us to articulate a mission which we hoped our partners would share, and guiding us in the design of boundary objects and boundary brokering approaches (Wenger, 2000), our mapping of our context-specific SUP micro and macro environments depicted a politically loaded and highly uncertain environment for our endeavour (see Figure 1).

As actors within this landscape of dynamic cultural, economic, institutional and policy complexity we realized that even our most careful analysis of the wide range of constituent elements would not provide a key to the best way of establishing school-university partnership in Ireland. We felt that the existing SUP literature, while suggesting useful frameworks, providing helpful descriptions of success-enabling factors and problematizing inter-institutional relationships, did not help us to fully capture and make sense of our uncertainties – of the wobbly steps we were taking in a new direction. We noticed that the SUP we envisaged was considerably larger than SUPs explored in the existing academic literature.<sup>iv</sup> With 350 student teachers teaching all over Ireland our network of constituent elements (schools and universities) and agents (principals, teachers, university tutors, student teachers, pupils, parents, etc.) was expansive.

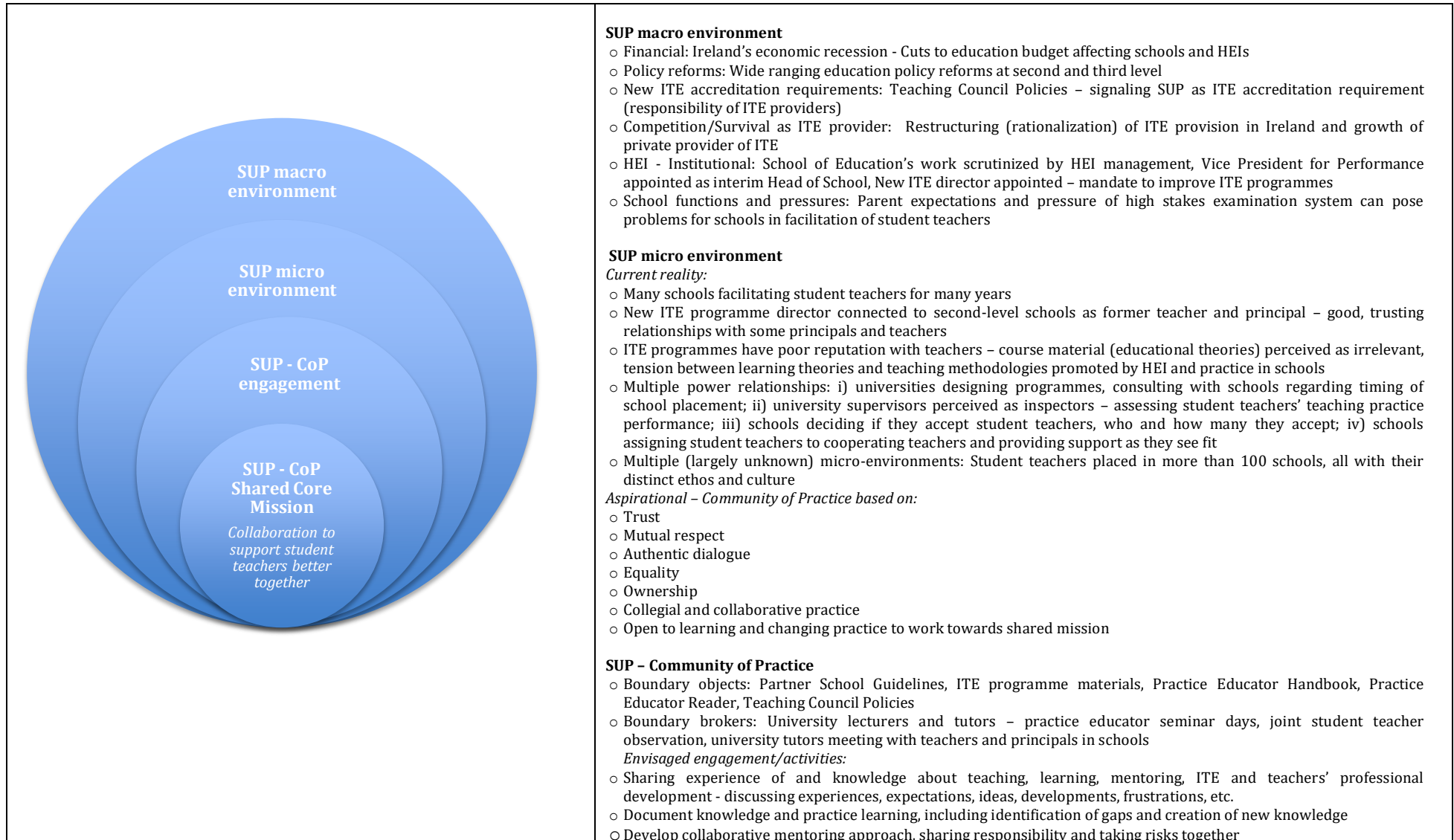


Figure 1: Initial Conceptual Framework for the development of the NUI Galway school-university partnership network

We explored complexity theory as an explanatory framework for our turbulent SUP environment. Its emphasis on emergent properties and behaviours that result not only from the essence of the constituent elements of a system but, more importantly, from the connections among them (Mason, 2008) refined our expectations and understandings of the process of SUP development. No matter how much we planned, we would not be able to control, indeed we would not even be fully aware of, the wide range of emergent practices in schools.

We decided to take action. We hoped that the Teaching Council's 'Policy Document on the Continuum of Teacher Education' (2011) would help us to gain the attention of principals. It provided an aspirational vision without a fixed route and without a long list of prescribed practices. We saw a chance to create our own story of SUP. We felt energized and empowered by the idea of a collaborative bottom-up initiative – a welcome opportunity at a time when schools and HEIs were positioned largely at the receiving end of policy changes and budget cuts. We decided to take a 'simplex' approach to building a SUP, fusing 'complexity of thought with simplicity of action'; action that we hoped would 'clarify by shaping what we were attending to and, in the doing, shape what was going on' (Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012).

### Methodology

We used a narrative enquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to trace our lived story of leading SUP in a broader social and cultural context. Having conceptualized our SUP within a 'simplex' theoretical framework, our understanding of complexity theory urged us to take notice of all things, big and small, as apparently trivial or inexplicable parts of our SUP system 'may be constituent of the critical level above which emergent properties and behaviour become possible' (Mason, 2008). Through narrative writing we hoped to gain insights into the big and small constituents of our experience (personal and social) and practice (past, present and envisaged) that might not be obtained through objective, abstractive analysis.

As teacher educators and initiators of the NUI Galway School-University Partnership project, we have recorded the development and our experiences of the SUP as an Irish case study since 2011. Our narrative was constructed following analysis of various SUP documents (proposal document for the university management team, partner school guidelines, minutes from relevant meetings), our own records and reflective notes (from meetings, partner school visits and informal discussions), and transcripts of interviews (with 4 university link tutors).

In our analysis we used three narrative coding tools suggested by Connelly and Clandinin (1990): broadening, burrowing and storying. With regard to the first, we paid attention to the broader social, historical and cultural context of our story. In our telling of the story, we are adding descriptions of key participants' backgrounds and values as well as descriptions of relationships and other contextual issues that are not contained in the data itself but have been explored during the collaborative analysis process so as to provide an insight into "what else we know about the storytellers and their local and general circumstances" (Mishler, 1986, p. 244).

Secondly, we 'burrowed' deep into our data by investigating how critical events/happenings have impacted our lived experiences. This 'burrowing' was achieved through reflective writing and reflective discussions throughout the process as well as retrospectively at several stages during the data analysis and story construction process when we remembered and reflected on the impact that key incidents and stages of the development of our SUP initiative had had on our understandings, decisions, and feelings. We sketched, discussed and resketched our SUP story bringing our own lived experiences and those of other actors to the centre (Kim, 2015). Our selection of relevant excerpts for the final narrative account presented in this paper was guided by the following questions: 1) How did we experience our story of SUP development?; 2) How did social, cultural and historical factors influence our actions, experience and the course of our journey?; 3) What have we learnt from our SUP story and how can our learning help us to improve our practice?

Constructing and publishing our authentic narrative involves a certain level of risk. To protect anonymity of some of the actors, accounts have, sometimes, undergone small changes and pseudonyms are used for all actors except the protagonists and writers of this article. In making these changes we have always endeavoured to preserve the essence of our experiences and learning.

### Balancing on a wobbly bridge of school-university partnership

The following chapter will tell our story of seeking to build a collaborative school-university partnership in Ireland. We will provide some contextual information as well as details about the protagonists' backgrounds followed by a narrative of key events in the SUP development.

#### *Setting the Scene - The Times They Are A – changing – in Ireland*

After the 'Celtic Tiger' years (early 90s to beginning of 2000s) had brought record economic and population growth and unprecedented ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity to Ireland, the country's economy bust and entered one of the deepest recessions in the euro zone leading to austerity measures which continue to affect all public services. In this context, teachers' morale has been severely impaired as a result of cutbacks imposed since 2008 which led to increased pupil-teacher ratios, removal of promotion opportunities, reduced take home pay and additional workload and

responsibilities' (Leydon & Judge, 2011). Similarly, university staff have experienced reduced take home pay, increases in student-staff ratios, and a new culture of commercialization, competition and performativity in the Irish higher education sector (Mercille & Murphy, 2015). In addition, teachers' daily work has been affected by an avalanche of reforms directed at curriculum, pedagogy, accountability, and professional norms (Heinz, Keane & Foley, 2017) and ITE in Ireland has been restructured, consolidated<sup>v</sup> and reconceptualised (Heinz, 2014).

#### *Protagonists and narrators of the SUP story*

**Manuela:** Director of School Placement since 2010 and Director of the Professional Master of Education at NUI Galway since 2018. Originally from Dresden, Germany. Modern language teacher with experience from Germany, UK and Ireland.

*When I started working in the Education Department I was surprised to find out that student teachers teach 7-10 classes a week after a short 5-week induction and that many of them take full responsibility for these classes (teaching on their own) pretty much from the beginning. I was amazed thinking it takes a lot of courage to do that. I completed a concurrent ITE programme in Germany. We only started teaching full classes in our third year. We taught less classes overall, always in the presence of the class teacher who provided regular feedback.*

*I can now see the advantages of both systems – I see how student teachers' early teaching experiences make their learning relevant, make them eager to learn more about education and pedagogy. However, while I appreciate these benefits of early teaching experiences I do wonder why so much of it and why so much responsibility? I think our student teachers have very little time and 'head space' to think deeply and critically about learning and teaching.*

*I have often told colleagues (in universities and schools) about my experiences and thoughts and when I did I always sensed a genuine interest and, perhaps, a realization that – 'oh yeah – that's interesting – maybe we need to question some of the things we take for granted which have just become the norm'.*

*I remember the review and reconceptualization of our programmes (2011) as a very positive collaborative and collegial experience. We enjoyed exploring our educational values and goals for our ITE students. In a context of increasing workloads, new performance measurements that privileged academic outputs over educational values and care, and the continuing threat of closure, we were energized by the collegial support and the feeling of pulling together to prove and improve the quality of our work.*

**Mary:** Director of Teacher Education since 2011. Originally a second-level teacher and principal in Ireland over 16 years, pursued a PhD in the early 2000's and subsequently employed part-time on various education programmes, including within Medical Education.

*Having been Director of Teaching Practice and through my experience in medical education I highly value clinical learning based on collaboration between academics and practitioners. I was convinced that if student teachers could get the 'feedback' and support in 'real time' from a person with knowledge and understanding of their classroom and pupils, there was a great opportunity for 'deep' learning and development. Having worked in second-level schools I knew the expertise was there and possible to tap into - with the support of school management.*

*I remember 2010/11 as a time of rapid and continuous need for documentation; writing of reports, reviews, evaluations - revisiting everything; programmes, organization, relationships with other institutions and amongst ourselves. For the ITE review group we had to generate a document outlining our vision for teacher education, identifying our uniqueness - we were making a case for our survival as an ITE provider in Ireland. It was a very difficult, uncertain and yet exciting time - and it did generate energy. The University management 'woke up' to our existence and, possibly, importance. They provided us with good support and there was a certain commitment to our future.*

#### *Action - Our story*

##### *The Start – planning and recruiting partner schools.*

Following discussions with principals in spring 2011, we presented a 7-page written document to the university's senior management team (June 2011) proposing the development of a new model for teaching practice supervision. The proposed strategy envisaged school-based practice educators (experienced teachers with a strong interest and commitment to supporting student teachers) taking an active role and increased responsibility for supervision (guidance, observation and feedback of classroom practice) and assessment of student teachers' teaching practice in collaboration with university tutors. Participating schools would be paid a fee per student during the pilot year to facilitate the release of practice educators to participate at SUP seminar days. The proposal was accepted.

During the last 2 weeks before the summer break we rang more than 60 schools.

*I made sure to highlight our gratitude and recognition for the excellent support that schools had already been providing for student teachers over many years. I explained that we were introducing our Partner School Placement initiative in response to suggestions from principals at our recent regional meetings and that finances would be*

*made available from the university's 'Innovation Fund'. The explanation that we had adapted the title of 'practice educator' from other professions like speech and language therapy and medicine (where collaboration between academics and practitioners had a longer tradition) helped to ignite interest [Director of School Placement reflective diary].*

We launched our SUP initiative with 20 interested schools in September 2011.

*Year 1 – First steps into SUP practice (September 2011-August 2012)*

We assigned university link tutors to all partner schools. Most tutors implemented at least one collaborative observation and feedback cycle with the practice educator. We were delighted to see that we generally picked up on the same feedback points.

One-to-one and small group conversations with teachers in schools revealed multiple complex organizational and political issues affecting the initiative. One teacher was anxious wondering what she *had to do* after finding the Practice Educator Handbook together with the name of the student teacher assigned to her in her locker. She confessed feeling *'frightened, unqualified for this work – who was she to tell and judge?'* [quotes recorded in university tutor's reflective diary].

*I explained that it wasn't about judging, but about support and sharing her professional experience. I assured her that we would work together, observe together and start things slowly [university link tutor reflective diary].*

As we began to engage in regular conversation with teachers, they told us many stories about inspectors who had, in the past, come into schools without even saying hello, who had observed and left student teachers crying after providing sharp and negative feedback. When we talked and observed together, when we came into the staffroom telling students not to worry, when we provided encouraging feedback to the students and had a quick word with the practice educators afterwards they noticed that 'things had changed'. We were building relationships with teachers - remembering names, personal details, praising their teacher work and practice educator support, drinking coffee and checking in with the principals before we left. The inspector image was slowly beginning to melt.

The initiative didn't develop smoothly everywhere. There were occasions when we arrived in schools only to find out that the teachers had not heard about the new collaborative approach. We noticed that principals were cautious not to make demands on teachers. Some teachers had been instructed by their unions not to take on any additional work. There were many situations when we disguised our real feelings of disbelief, disappointment, insecurity and powerlessness behind an understanding smile. We were worried that students could be caught in the middle of the confusion. We needed to explain to students that some schools could, after all, not yet fully commit to providing structured support. We assured our students that there was nothing to worry about and that we would look after them.

In November, one of our tutors noticed that one of her students felt increasingly stressed about the approaching Christmas concert. The school had asked her to take on a leading role in the organization and performance. The student declined the tutor's offer to talk to the principal about the situation – *she was clearly afraid of the possible repercussions – she knew that the reference from the school would be massively important in her future job applications* [extracts from tutor reflective diary]. The tutor provided additional support, keeping their conversations confidential, while we approved extensions for coursework. In the longer term we needed to address the excessive additional workload that many schools put on students in an anonymised fashion so as to protect our students' experiences and future opportunities.

There were many occasions when we felt relieved to be able to debrief unsettling experiences among our group of university link tutors. The understanding and support, the mutual trust and respect we built and the laughter we shared became our source of confidence, energy and commitment to this project.

*SUP Seminar Day (January 2012).* There was a cheerful atmosphere at arrival. We kept all our meetings very casual. In mixed teacher-tutor group and whole group discussions we explored experiences and practices, approaches to observation and feedback and student teacher development. Comparisons of experiences highlighted the enormous impact that support from the principal could have. Some teachers had not spoken about what they were doing to other teachers in fear that they would judge them or that their expertise would be questioned. In other schools, mentoring student teachers had become a standing item on meeting agendas.

When exploring areas of concern, teachers and tutors talked about students who did not have enough knowledge of the curriculum, students who were overconfident and did not appear to hear their feedback, and feelings of disappointment when the teachers and university tutors did not manage to meet in schools. As our conversations developed, teachers began to look back at their own ITE experiences realizing that they 'didn't know it all at the start, often felt insecure, did not know how to move in the school or where to sit in the staffroom', wondering 'what impression they might have made on their mentor teachers back then?' Stories from the past also led back to experiences with university 'inspectors'. While some were praised for their support and the huge influence they had had on teachers' professional development, the memory of others evoked 'shivers and anger'. Personal stories of ITE and discussions of good practice were in dialogue and we 'sprinkled in' theories about student teachers' developmental

stages and approaches to mentoring (largely based on Conway & Clark, 2003; Fletcher, 2000; Furlong & Maynard, 1995) to further spark reflection and discussion [all quotes recorded in notes taken during the seminar day].

Collaborative engagement with our teaching practice assessment criteria was welcomed by teachers. Exploring indicators of teacher performance sparked reflective discussions about teachers' own conceptions of good teaching, about their struggles, pedagogical approaches and the role of independent learning and experimentation in teacher professional development.

*It felt like teachers opened up when they looked at our assessment criteria. They connected to them – they saw something that was real about teaching produced by us (the academics). I remember one teacher stating enthusiastically: 'This is excellent. This is what we need. Even though some of us teach in the same school we never have time to sit down and talk about these things [university link tutor reflection after SUP seminar day].*

We left the meeting delighted to know that all teachers wanted to continue their work with us.

We were developing meaningful relationships with some principals and teachers. We worked together and cared together for the student teachers, providing a more coherent and supportive experience.<sup>vi</sup>

We realized that our role as tutors had expanded immensely and was challenging us in many new ways. As partner school link tutors we needed to be well informed and able to argue our viewpoint about policy issues affecting schools, engage with critical feedback from principals and act upon it. We now were colleagues – real people – and our 'inspector' armour was gone (Higgins, Heinz, Fleming & McCauley, 2013). Not only did we spend more time in schools, we also needed to employ additional skills, personal qualities and a broader knowledge base.

*Year 2 - More schools, no more funding, successes and a more critical perspective on SUP (September 2012 – August 2013)*

Ten more schools joined the initiative in its second year. Funding was not renewed and as a result, and in consultation with teachers and principals, we reduced the number of yearly SUP seminar days from three to one. We hoped that partner school link tutors and practice educators could continue the conversations on mentoring, observation and feedback in their schools. This worked generally well but we felt that we were losing the 'buzz' of coming together to share our experiences and renew our commitment:

*Our practice educator days made the whole idea of collaboration and mentoring a special and very enjoyable experience. We shared stories, learning, frustrations and laughter. There was a real community spirit, which cannot be created in short one-to-one or small group meetings in the school – there is always time pressure and it is more business-like – definitely doesn't have the same special feel [university link tutor reflective journal].*

We continued to share our experiences and concerns in our regular SUP link tutor meetings. One tutor shared her experience of a "very unusual and unsettling" classroom observation that had made her 'question a lot of the new observation and feedback practices that we were promoting between student teachers and their practice educators in partner schools' [notes from SUP link tutor meeting].

Excerpt from SUP tutor's reflective journal:

*This observation was very strange. The student teacher has a very soft voice is very feminine and well spoken. She is young, very friendly and polite. Her classroom management style caught me by surprise. The comments she made seemed totally out of character: 'zip it', 'cut the attitude', 'I don't care that today is the last day before your holidays. I want to get this done' [...]! Later I wondered if Monica (pseudonym) had seen those strategies in her practice educator's class? Was she copying them even though she felt uncomfortable? They clearly didn't fit her personality. Could too much observation and advice have a negative impact on the development of some student teachers? I can see how the phrases Monica used would come across very differently if used by her practice educator who has a very different personality [...] When Monica used these phrases I felt they stood between her and the boys. This incident raised a lot of questions for me: Are we giving mixed messages/contradictory advice? Am I criticizing something my student has seen her practice educator doing in the classroom – after endorsing her and explaining that I will work closely with her to support Monica? How would that affect their relationship?*

We recognized that there was a need for more discussion with university tutors and practice educators about how we can all best support student teachers to develop their own teacher identity and style, their own relationships with students.

Another tutor was sensing tension between the SUP coordinator and the various practice educators in one school. Given that the initiative was highly regarded in that particular school we believed that teachers may perceive the role of SUP coordinator as one of few available (in the current economic climate), and thus desirable, leadership positions which could, despite being unpaid at that moment, support their career advancement in the future. Having a coordinator in the school made our task of working with up to six student teachers and sometimes twenty or more<sup>vii</sup> associated teachers in one school manageable. However, were we unintentionally creating a hierarchical system causing divisive competitiveness among teachers?

Some of us began to notice that a small number of our practice educators were providing feedback that was incoherent with our programme's and educational values. At times we were wondering if our very few negative experiences were just the tip of the iceberg:

*We have no guarantee that the feedback students receive is of consistently high quality. We have no control. While I am conscious that there is excellent practice in the schools I am also conscious that there is practice that may not be great. We need to question how beneficial more observation and feedback from practitioners really is in our context where we have no say in the choice of practice educators and where school policies of allocating student teachers are often not connected to teacher quality criteria [university link tutor interview].*

Our deeper relational engagement with principals and teachers had helped us to build collegiality, trust and more coherence in many schools, but it was also raising ethical dilemmas. We struggled with the tension between trust building and confidentiality. We felt uneasy when we bit our tongues in order to safeguard our relationships with schools. We questioned if we had an unconscious tendency to make relationship building with schools our top priority. We noticed tensions between our future-oriented relationship work with schools and the need to provide the best support for student teachers in the presence. Our worry that student teachers might get caught in the middle pushed us to scrutinise our practice.

The end of Year 2 was marked by our meeting with the Teaching Council Accreditation Panel who showed great interest in our initiative and, in their report, commended 'the strength of our relationships with schools' and 'staff's appreciation of the complexity of achieving the cultural changes involved.' When we received an invitation by the Teaching Council to talk about our SUP initiative at their 'School Placement Guidelines' Stakeholder Meeting (June 2013) we were thrilled and eager to share learning from our achievements as well as challenges and dilemmas with colleagues and policy makers on a national stage.

*Year 3 – Disappointment and doubts, fine-tuning our practice and refocusing our energies (September 2013 – August 2014)*

Over the summer, the Teaching Council finalized the first 'Guidelines on School Placement.'<sup>viii</sup> The document portrays the school placement in a very positive light, highlighting many benefits for all involved. It spells out responsibilities for all actors including student teachers, HEI placement tutors, co-operating teachers, and school principals for the first time in the Irish context. Yet, we, and many other ITE providers, were hugely disappointed to receive a blueprint which emphasized that HEIs have overall responsibility for the school placement while considering it just 'desirable that all schools will be open to hosting student teachers' and recognizing that school support will continue to be 'based on the goodwill of teachers and their voluntary participation' (ibid, p. 14, 10).

While we were enjoying our work in many of our partner schools immensely we also realised that, still, less than half of our students received structured in-school support. Our energy and our levels of excitement were dropping – we started to wonder whether we had gone as far as we could with a voluntary initiative based on goodwill?

*At any time teachers can say sorry it doesn't suit us, we're out of here. I don't think that goodwill can give a quality assurance to the way teachers are educated. I think it's a fairly nebulous concept on which to hang teacher education [university link tutor interview].*

We realized that the road towards equal partnership – a space where we, as critical teacher educators, would be brave enough to challenge thinking and practice in schools – would be much longer than we had anticipated. We acknowledged many of our ethical dilemmas and fine-tuned our relationship work with student teachers.

*I am more open with my students. I try to give them a more realistic insight into our partnership work, showing them, at times and where it is appropriate, how complicated this work can be for us and explaining that we are slowly working toward achieving a long-term goal. I explain to them that I will have to keep all these people happy, talk to everybody and keep the show on the road but that, really, most importantly I want to support them. I think that my students now have a more critical awareness of the political landscape of teacher education and the school placement [university link tutor reflective diary].*

We noticed that many of our students were igniting curiosity in schools as they engaged in new school-based assignments: a peer observation activity, a small inquiry-based project, and, more recently, practitioner research projects<sup>ix</sup>. These activities require students to work in teams, to consult with teachers, to give and receive feedback and to identify, explore and address an issue in their teaching practice. Many of the learning outcomes are aligned with the Department of Education and Skill's new School Self-Evaluation Guidelines. We realized that setting challenging, relevant and innovative school-based tasks for student teachers offered us the opportunity to challenge thinking and practice in schools in a very effective way.

*Students talk about their assignments in schools – let teachers listen in their own time when they are not under pressure – that might be a way to deliver our message rather than us talking at them about change ... [university link tutor collaborative meeting]*



Our 'discovery' of the student teachers as collaborating change agents renewed our energies and provided a new focus in our school-university partnership work:

*I put most of my hopes for the future into our students. If we can give all our students a positive ITE experience, a deep appreciation of professional learning and mentoring support and a critical understanding of learning, teaching and wider societal issues we might be building a culture of goodwill and shared responsibility for ITE [excerpt from university link tutor's reflective diary].*

### Discussion

Our story has provided new insights into the lived experiences of teacher educators leading the development of collaborative approaches to ITE during educational reform and boom to bust economic times. It has confirmed the importance of a number of generally accepted requirements for effective partnerships including the necessity of establishing a common vision (Anyon & Fernandez, 2007), cooperative goal setting (Anyon & Fernandez, 2007), and the development of mutual trust (Jones et al., 2016; Walker, 1999). Similarly, we experienced commonly discussed constraints of collaboration like differing institutional cultures and time demands (Sim, 2010). However, it is our look underneath these abstract descriptors of partnership – our look at our *doing, shaping and experiencing collaboration* – that provides new insights into the complexities of SUP.

The doing of our story started with our *being* – being there at a good time and being who we are. In our analysis we identified 'newness' as a significant factor facilitating the successful initiation of our SUP. We were both recently appointed to our positions. We brought a new set of experiences and perspectives to ITE. Mary had been part of the Irish second-level school culture, *an insider*, for many years. Manuela's positionality as a 'cultural stranger' provided the opportunity to question and carefully expose 'insular paradigms' (O'Sullivan, 1992) governing ITE practice. We engaged with principals and teachers in a new way – more open, more honest, more authentic, more collegial. When we asked principals and teachers to support us by providing feedback on programme changes the picture of the superior academic fell apart. We were new people developing new ITE programmes. It is possible that this newness, and our conscious positioning in the boundary space between university and school culture, made it easier for teachers to suspend negative attitudes towards academia and to enter a new relationship with *teacher educators*.

Our SUP seminar days allowed us to get to know each other on a personal as well as professional level. Exchanging 'news' from schools and the university broadened our perspectives and enhanced appreciation of our complex differing, yet closely related, pressurized work contexts, creating acceptance, empathy and genuineness. Sharing *HiStories* – the telling and reliving of personal experiences of ITE, of 'inspectors', and of a missing link between university and school work – helped us to reconnect as caring educators and served as a springboard for discussions of student teacher development and mentoring practices. Exploring a diverse range of *HiStories* together with carefully selected research insights offered opportunities to challenge some tacit beliefs and practices stemming from teachers' 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975) as pupils, student teachers and mentees. In addition, ITE programme assignment briefs and assessment criteria served as catalysts for professional dialogue around topics ranging from the responsibilities of teachers and mentors to specific teaching, learning and mentoring methodologies.

However, affirmation and progress were only part of our story. We often felt like balancing on a wobbly bridge, hoping to gain and sustain the commitment of teachers and schools whose participation was based on 'goodwill' and highly susceptible to turbulent economic and political factors. In year two funding was cut resulting in decreased opportunities for deep collaborative engagement in the 'third space' that had given us the freedom and 'power to communicate our needs, pressures and expectations' (Martin, Snow & Torrez, 2011). Our growing awareness of the impact that the disequilibrium of responsibilities had on our engagement caused doubts, dilemmas and discomfort and made us more careful in our relationship work. Perhaps we were too careful? - Thinking that we had no choice but to hold back critical perspectives, that we needed to suspend, or hide, our transformative agenda? Fearing that our wobbly SUP bridge could collapse – that the time wasn't right yet to challenge school cultures and predominant pedagogies?

We were learning all the time and as we developed closer relationships with schools our role expanded far beyond what we could anticipate. Our regular engagement with practice educators in their schools emphasized the need for us to be mindful of school politics, relationships among teachers, teachers' perception of, and readiness for, the new 'practice educator' role. We had created a new role in schools that could, at times, evoke fears, insecurities, suspicion and divisive competitiveness. Without a nationally formalized role for practice educators we found that we needed to carefully negotiate in-school dynamics in addition to the central 'triadic relationships' between practice educators, student teachers and university tutors.

ITE policy developments weave through our story as enablers as well as prohibitors of SUP. Initially, the policy vision of new and innovative school placement models provided us with a strong rationale as well as energy and determination to create our own story and inform national policy. Positive feedback from the Teaching Council's accreditation panel and invitations to share our SUP experiences at stakeholder meetings (Heinz, 2013b) reenergized and focused us in times of growing doubts and emotional exhaustion. When the new 'School Placement Guidelines' (Teaching Council,

2013) perpetuated the power relations that were constraining our professional agency we felt disillusioned, wondering what to do next? How could we possibly provide innovative school placements based on school-university collaboration for 350 student teachers working with up to 8 teachers each in a policy and institutional context that lacked regulation, even an expectation on schools to engage in ITE? How could 'goodwill' and a set of aspirational (but for schools non-binding) guidelines assure a quality educational experience for our student teachers?

Our story describes how we refocused our hopes and energy. We continue to work very closely with many excellent and committed teachers and we enjoy these collaborations enormously. We also continuously aim to increase our network. However, we don't push, we don't want to win every school at any cost. In this context, we are not sure how long it will take until we can confidently say that all our student teachers are experiencing a truly collaborative school placement.

Going forward we are placing a great deal of our hope in the potential of our student teachers as future change agents in schools. We take care to create ITE experiences that allow student teachers to experience innovative pedagogies. We design assignments that require and empower them to inquire critically and collaboratively into their practice. We strive to establish open, respectful and trusting personal and professional relationships and we collaboratively explore institutional and cultural contexts impacting on their ITE experiences, including on our mentoring approaches.

### Conclusion

Drawing on our experience, we suggest that the authentic transformation of teacher educators' institutional identities and their readiness to lead by *being the change* that is needed are powerful enablers of meaningful school-university collaboration. Engaging in school-university partnership challenged us to revise our 'habituated institutional identities' as teacher educators in the university. We needed to 'forge new identities, as teacher educators working closely with practicing teachers in and between the university and schools, to mark joint ownership' of our initiative. Our story has shown that identity formation in the context of leading the development of collaborative ITE practice is 'multiple, shifting, and complex; a site of tension rather than a source of stability' (Chan & Clarke, 2014). In our ongoing research we hope to further explore how teacher educators construct their identities within this new, still wobbly, collaborative space and how university based teacher educators and school-based mentors position themselves as "credible and legitimate practitioners" (Murray, 2014) within a collaborative teacher education space.

Our lived experiences emphasize the need to conceptualise the school-university collaboration as a social practice mediated by participants' identities, desires, perceptions, relationships and knowledge, as well as past, present and imagined future experiences. In particular, a major implication of our journey is the need for teacher educators and policy makers to pay attention to how existing identities, power relations and contractual responsibilities mediate, constitute and constrain ITE praxis. For us, leading school-university collaboration involved regular confrontation with new dilemmas and a significant expansion of our role. Central to our experiences of the various social and cognitive cross-boundary interactions was emotionality and the need for collegial support and guidance.

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<sup>i</sup> There was a strong emphasis on new expectations (TC policy) which lacked guidelines for implementation. We set out to explore possibilities to collaborate together (university tutors and school personnel) to find the best way for us.

<sup>ii</sup> Korthagen et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of developing central principles underlying teacher education programs that are responsive to the expectations, needs and practices of student teachers.

<sup>iii</sup> Due to word count limit we cannot provide a discussion of the various models here. Broadly, the different models can be characterized as cooperative or collaborative.

<sup>iv</sup> Most studies describe processes/experiences establishing partnerships with a small number of schools, many of which were selected on the basis of their reform-oriented outlook (Lefever-Davis, Johnson & Pearman, 2007; Mitchell, Hayes & Mills, 2010; Young et al, 2015).

<sup>v</sup> 19 state-funded providers were required to merge into 6 university-based teacher education centres.

<sup>vi</sup> Feedback received from students who had been engaging in their school placement in partner schools was very positive and many students commented on a "good connection" between the school-based practice educator and the university link tutor (Fleming, Heinz, Higgins & McCauley, 2012).

<sup>vii</sup> In large schools, student teachers could be taking (teaching) classes from sometimes up to 8 different teachers.

<sup>viii</sup> Composed by a national working group of stakeholders as an addendum to the accreditation criteria for ITE programmes.

<sup>ix</sup> See for example O'Mahoney & Heinz, 2016; Duffy & Heinz, 2019; Keane & Heinz, 2019.