

# A SCHOOLS-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP ACROSS FIVE COUNTRIES IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational systems accept as fundamental that elementary and secondary school teachers need staff development opportunities. For teachers working in remote South Pacific island countries, however, meaningful and affordable inservice opportunities are often difficult to obtain and rarely experienced because of the large geographical distance and the technologically poor environment involved. One feasible solution to this problem involves assistance from a provider such as a university that has the resources, expertise and willingness to provide such staff development opportunities in a university-schools partnership. This concept is not new to education.

University-school partnerships have been a major focus in education (Goodlad, 1985, Gross, 1988; Holmes Group, 1990; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2001) and partnership research has been reported in various education forums (Goodlad, 1993; Hendrix & Kinsey, 2002; Leiberman, 1992; McBee & Moss, 2002; Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988; Sommerfeld, 1993; Su, 1991; Teitel, 2001). Many studies have identified key variables in the partnership dynamic. Su (1991) condensed from the literature four necessary characteristics of successful collaborative partnerships. These characteris-

tics include a shared vision of the future, simultaneous renewal, an ongoing evaluation, and "symbiotic mutualism." Su noted that having both the university and the schools working to accomplish a clearly defined purpose in the partnership is obviously a basic requirement for success. Similarly, ongoing evaluation of the effect of the arrangement in terms of adjusting for success is required. Planning to include strategies for ongoing evaluation, within this collaboration, is often an afterthought but can be of immense value to the long-term improvement of the undertaking. Su's research also found that the need for simultaneous renewal, and "symbiotic mutualism," is less obviously necessary, particularly on the university side of the partnership. As a result, it is the university that generally provides leadership by virtue of possessing the knowledge required. It is feasible that such partnerships not only better facilitate the needs of schools but may indeed even become "symbiotic" (Allen-Haynes, 1993), returning to the university partner unforeseen benefits, leading to a new definition of "university-schools partnership".

In another study, Myers (1996) suggested that the concept of a "university-schools partnership" should be redefined as a professional learning community for all participants by including the newest and best ideas about schools, learning, teaching, and professional development. He detailed four areas of focus that connect facets of school improvement in an interconnected and forward looking context. These areas are (a) the community nature of schools; (b) the constructivist nature of learning; (c) the problem solving nature of teaching; and (d) the personally constructed nature of teacher knowledge and competence. Myers' partnership would be a living relationship and a personal journey of discovery for all participants, regardless of their organizational attachment. A method to create this concept of a "university-schools partnership" in practice across distance and culture is the essence of this study.

### THE PROBLEM

In 1995, the sponsors of a group of private schools approached the School of Education at a liberal arts university in Hawaii to propose the establishment of a partnership. This partnership, if successful, would result in the improvement of the teaching effectiveness of their staff and the academic achievements of their

students. The sponsors represented the concerns of 16 secondary, middle and elementary schools in four South Pacific countries (Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati) that included over 5000 students and approximately 300 teachers. These four countries are island nations and have many global cultural and economic similarities. Each country, however, enjoys a diversity of cultural practices and beliefs while maintaining its sovereignty as a nation. Similarly, while the schools operate in general as do Western schools, their respective faculties frequently approach their teaching assignments from a much different perspective. For example, the gender role in the society impacts on how the business of teaching is conducted, as does the place of adult and child in relationships. Contact and discussion was planned between the two entities to investigate the potential for a partnership.

The sponsors sought a useful partnership where resources could be best spent in their favor. Previous attempts to improve faculty qualifications required the funding of the faculty member and their family on half salary at an institution in another country for one or two years. This exercise was of limited success because it was costly, limited to a few faculty, often one per two years, and did not always have a 100% completion or return rate.

## **METHOD**

To begin the process of partnership development, a series of meetings between the university's School of Education (SoE) and the sponsor's representatives were held. This group evolved to become the International Teacher Education Program (ITEP) Executive Committee and continued to direct the affairs of the partnership. At these executive meetings, the problem was defined, resources identified, and the framework of an acceptable solution system proposed. The SoE agreed to provide university level teacher education courses to selected teachers of the schools. The teachers who enrolled in these courses received grades and transcripts through the Continuing Education program of the university.

In relation to delivery of courses, expertise was provided through the voluntary service of recruited retired university educator couples from the United States and Canada. These educators were generally assigned for up to two years in the respective country where they delivered education and English

language courses to enrollees after school hours and offered their inservice skills to the general faculty. These semester courses were supplemented by short-term workshops directed by visiting SoE faculty. Oversight, correlation, and management were provided through an office on the university campus also staffed by a retired educator couple. A full-time member of the SoE faculty was assigned to the role of ITEP Director, which provided for continuity as personnel changed in the project. Ongoing discussion and evaluation between the SoE faculty and the principals and administrators in the schools kept the arrangement current, focused, and responsive to the sponsor's objectives.

To enable the program to proceed, financial costs of the program were spread among the schools and the university. The university agreed to provide very low cost tuition rates to the participants and to cover the cost of the campus office while the sponsor agreed to cover the in-country costs of operating the program. Travel costs were borne by the organization of the traveler, while the sponsor covered the cost of teaching materials. The retired educators paid all of their own costs of living in-country including rent and utilities. As a result, teachers were charged a very minimum fee per credit for their enrollment.

Over the five years that the partnership has existed, 17 U.S. and Canadian retired educator couples have spent up to two years in the South Pacific supporting the partnership. These retired educators were carefully selected so they could be approved as adjunct faculty to the university School of Education. All had experiences as either university professors of education or school district administrators. Orientation for each couple included time at the university reviewing program and partnership goals and the realities of South Pacific living. In-country orientation was the responsibility of the sponsor, and contact and support were available in the form of regular email service and the society of other U.S. personnel who were in the country for other purposes.

## RESULTS

The partnership has operated since early 1997. Table 1 displays the distribution of schools in each of the four countries and their respective student enrollments.

**TABLE 1**  
**Schools and Student Enrollments by Country**

<i>Country</i>	<i>High Schools</i>	<i>Middle Schools</i>	<i>Elementary Schools</i>
Fiji	1 (390 students)	1 (in the HS)	1 (350)
Kiribati	1 (473)	1 (in the HS)	-
Samoa	2 (961)	2 (in the HS)	3 (850)
Tonga	2 (1130)	5 (900)	-

While these numbers make it difficult to envision places and people, they do nevertheless represent real places where the pursuit of education is increasingly important. Over 6000 students enrolled in the schools relied on these teachers to prepare them for life in a country of limited opportunity and economy. Opportunities for education meant that fewer qualified teachers were available than in more developed countries. Those who were qualified with either a baccalaureate degree or a trained teacher certificate chose deliberately to return to their country of limited resources, to work and live. For positions where no qualified teacher could be hired, often the best local substitute was employed to fill the position as best they could. These are the untrained teachers referred to in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Profile of Teacher Qualifications Across Sponsor's Schools**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Untrained</i>	<i>TC</i>	<i>BA/BS</i>	<i>BA/BS +TC</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>MA +TC</i>	<i>Total</i>
Fiji	2	20	5	14			41
Kiribati	9	1	13	4			27
Samoa	10	53	27	20			110
Tonga	46	17	35	23	4	7	310

Many teachers either received a trained teacher certificate at a teacher training institution in New Zealand or Australia many years ago when those institutions were separate from the universities, or they received it recently at a newly established teachers college in their country. Almost always, bachelor's degrees and bachelor's degrees with teaching certificates were obtained overseas in New Zealand, Australia, or the United States of America.

In the time period of 1997 to 2000, 82 courses had been provided in these countries by a total of 17 retired educator couples as well as the SoE faculty, all targeted to non-certified faculty members. Credits have been recorded, and salary increments have been obtained. Each country has completed a number of courses and enrolled many participants (see Table 3). Overall, a large number of credits have been awarded for successful completion of ITEP courses.

**TABLE 3**  
**Numbers of ITEP Participants, Courses Offered**  
**and Credits Awarded**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Cumulative Participants</i>	<i>Different Participants</i>	<i>Courses Offered</i>	<i>Credits Awarded</i>
1997	215	125	13	609
1998	280	145	18	644
1999	354	155	25	1019
2000	382	201	27	999
				(projected)
2001			34	(current figures)

An evaluation of the ITEP program was conducted in the year 2000 by the ITEP office at the university (Bailey, Loosle, & Loosle, 2000). Surveyed teachers (109) who participated in ITEP courses indicated that they had primarily improved their teaching skills (51), classroom management (42), variety in teaching methods (27), and command of the English language in the classroom (60). Some teachers (41) noted that students participated more in

classes and increased their achievement level. Thirty-three teachers responded that their students who took part in national examinations performed better as a result of the ITEP courses. Professional reasons (70) rather than salary (21) or social reasons (17) were the predominant motivation for engaging in ITEP courses.

Benefits teachers most commonly enjoyed because of their participation in ITEP classes were increased creativity (24), flexibility (21), friendliness (19) and relaxed manner (14). As of August 2000, an average of seven ITEP courses had been completed by participants, 95 of the 109 surveyed indicating they were happy with the courses offered and the delivery system. The offer to provide additional workshops was met with a positive response (76) even though the hidden cost of ITEP involvement in the amount of time required, in addition to their regular work and home load, was of concern. However, none of the surveyed teachers indicated they were less happy with their work as a result of their ITEP coursework.

In the same evaluation, 20 school administrators were asked for their observations of the ITEP program in their school. ITEP education courses and ESL courses improved spoken English in the classroom (14), they said, but not all of those who needed ITEP courses were enrolled in them (10), highlighting that ITEP involvement is voluntary and not seen as crucial by every potential participant. As to the why teachers enroll in ITEP courses, administrators are split between professional and salary reasons. Seventeen of the 20 administrators agreed that additional one-day workshops for the entire faculty and occasional help sessions for administrators would be helpful.

The retired educators, both past and present, had a very positive view of the ITEP program regardless of the challenges of after-school hours and the overloaded work schedules of the intended participants. Lack of teaching resources suited to the island context for education courses and a general lack of good teaching materials for the participants to use in their work in the classroom posed difficulties for the application of some course concepts. Where school administrators involved themselves in ITEP planning and attendance at courses and took a leadership role in encouraging the program with their faculty, ITEP flour-

ished. Strengths of the ITEP program, they said, focused on the enthusiasm for teaching that teachers gained by their involvement in courses and interaction with each other, along with the salary increments and professional qualifications at a minimal cost. Though the primary role of the retired educators was to deliver education courses, a developing secondary role included being an on-site advisor and confidante to the school administrators in relation to school management and development issues.

The executive committee considered the sharing between the retired educators and administrators to be acceptable and encouraged the relationships because of the retired educators' expertise as educators, and experience in all facets of school administration. Trust and confidence in the retired educator by school administrators was not automatic but developed over time. Since these retired educators had no "line authority" they were often able to assume the role of an impartial consultant and thus be consulted often on local issues. School administrators were not uncomfortable involving them in discussions, enabling the mutual trust between them to increase. When such relationships were strong, i.e., the administrator knew that the retired educators knew their place, and all advice was freely given without obligation for action, progress in the university-school partnership was made. Two annual school principals' conferences have now been held (Samoa 2000, Tonga 2001) as a direct result of the availability of these retired educators in the countries, in which administrative concerns have been addressed and inserved, primarily with their help.

While university credit courses were being delivered by the retired educators in an ongoing and as-needed basis, faculty members of the university also traveled intermittently to the four countries to provide additional coursework and workshops. In Samoa, a weeklong workshop with primary school teachers reviewed the details of the writing process using critical thinking activities, children's literature, and applications from the lives of the participants. At the high school in Kiribati, teachers experienced the challenge of mathematical games. Similar workshops were held in Tonga with the faculties of middle schools and a high school. In Fiji, two university faculty focused on raising the high school's level of national exam passes through the alignment of



curricula and external examination syllabi of the Fiji government. A suggested initiative to enable high school students to do homework in an electricity-poor village, made via a culturally appropriate meeting with the village chief, was implemented and continued on unknown to the university faculty who first suggested it. As a result, official reports regarding relationships between the school and the village improved, and family support for their students improved also (M. Lesuma, personal communication, September 15, 2001).

Four annual conferences involving the Executive Committee and the retired educators have been held in Fiji to review the activities of the partnership and resolve its concerns. Systemic issues have been raised, discussed, and resolved, such as the roles related to supervision of U.S. student teachers in the sponsor's schools. Developing issues related to experimental program offerings also have been presented and reviewed, such as the principals' conferences. Additionally, the annual conference has provided a vehicle where benefits and concerns are explored and decisions made with the sponsor representatives' input and support. Because of the coup in 2000, the 2001 conference was held in Samoa.

## DISCUSSION

The primary beneficiaries of the partnership, i.e., the schools, have developed an appreciation and increased commitment to the partnership. They cite improved classroom teaching and increased teaching morale as two apparent benefits (Bailey, Winstead, & Loosle, 2000). To encourage participation in the program and to recognize effort, the sponsor agreed to modify faculty salary schedules to recognize each 15 credits of coursework completed. Furthermore, some participants see the ITEP courses as a fundamental part of a total faculty inservice program and an attempt has been made to move in that direction in one of the countries.

Our initial view is that such an approach cannot be sustained in the long term but that in the areas of mentoring and teacher certification there will be small pockets of faculty requiring service. Similarly, when the majority of the faculty is teacher certified, the retired educator roles will need to change. While

some ideas are planned at present, no clear decision has yet been made. The agreement of the university to make available a non-resident degree program will give further impetus to the professional development of the faculties and ITEP, adding other dimensions of tutor and program manager to the roles the retired educator currently play.

Thus far, the university faculty have been unanimous in their support for the partnership. They have experienced a growing understanding and appreciation of the partnership and their commitment to it has deepened. Three major changes have occurred at the university as a direct result of the partnership. These are (a) the assignment of funding for professional development to the departments to enable partnership support, (b) the rethinking of the SoE mission statement to reflect the changed perspectives of the faculty, and (c) the extension of the preservice teacher education program to an international clientele. These changes have resulted from discussions among the various university groups supporting the partnership. Shared visions and common values regarding the partnership have been formulated, and long-term commitments have been strengthened, ensuring the continuity and development of the program. As the School of Education faculty reflected on current mission statements, a realignment of priorities occurred. For example, the reconstitution of a teacher training program at the university for international students planning to teach in their home countries resurrected a previous School of Education focus. The full effect of this program will result in the internationalizing of course content in the SoE, including identification of international texts and familiarity with international education. This international preservice program coincides with a new initiative intended to leverage the effectiveness of the total university in its efforts to work extramurally with students in Pacific and Asian rim countries.

The university has now approved after several years of negotiation among the faculty, a Bachelor of General Studies degree with an emphasis in Education, solely for the ITEP enrollees. This non-resident degree program will enable teachers in the partnership to complete a bachelor's degree where they would not previously have been able to do so. This is a major milestone for the partnership and perhaps a model for other extramural university programs.

In addition to the major changes previously noted, the School of Education has identified additional areas of important growth as a result of the partnership. These areas include (a) increased faculty sensitivity and awareness to cultural differences in teaching and learning, (b) needed on-campus and project organizational policy changes, (c) understanding and accommodation of existing diversity across the project, (d) increased celebration of diversity within its own on-campus program, and (e) the recruitment and mentoring of future faculty. As a result, university administrators and faculty who were once insular in their thinking are now actively looking for ways to further the effectiveness of the simultaneous renewal model. Hiring patterns within the university and the SoE have also evolved with faculty now beginning to reflect the diversity of the students. The student population at the university is 45% Pacific Islander and Asian, but relatively few members of the faculty have been hired from or with experience in this geographical area. Few are familiar with the full school and country culture that surrounds the British educational system found in many of these countries.

### CONCLUSION

As noted previously, the essence of this study was to describe and report on a methodology used for developing a successful university-school partnership. The partnership reported on included four South Pacific nations that are isolated by distance, technological access, and struggling economies. In part, the partnership was successful because of the university's opportunity to recruit retired educators, supported by SoE faculty visits. These retired educators brought expertise plus a commitment to live in-country for up to two years. This in-country commitment brought success to the partnership and provided for the delivery of credit-bearing courses when coupled to long-term mentoring which now occurs. Faculty support from the university supplemented the long-term in-country commitment and enabled courses to be provided that were beyond the retired educators' expertise. Consequently, university faculty involvement served to broaden individual perspectives on the needs of students attending the university from these four countries.

Overall, the partnership became a "fully duplex" conduit between selected South Pacific schools and the university SoE.

While the SoE has in the past been primarily a preparation program for Hawaii and US mainland teachers, a current initiative is underway to create and build an enrollment of international preservice teachers. The university anticipates structuring a training program that will prepare the student for certification in their home country. This increased enrollment of international students will create the need to internationalize the curriculum presently used in School of Education courses. Similarly, while accreditation with U.S. groups such as NCATE and WASC is necessary, some thought is now being given to the usefulness of international accreditation with the International Standards Organization for the benefit of international students.

The university is also currently considering a degree program without residential requirements for which the education major would be a pilot. Furthermore, university consideration is being given to the delivery of other courses, including general education selections, by distance learning means.

Although the ethnographic differences among the indigenous peoples of each country are major, they have been barely noticeable in the partnership program. Some differences have required accommodations by the retired educators, but they have been transparent to the people in-country. As each retired educator remains in one country for the duration of their experience, local adjustment to the program is not observed by other couples located in other countries because of their own isolation. As a result they assume that the adjustments they are making to get the program working effectively are the same adjustments others cope with in their respective country. Such differences in indigenous values can include approaches to authority, time use, course demands, the prioritizing of conflicting events as well as commitment to the teaching role.

This partnership project was built and developed in the quest to improve classroom instruction for more than 5000 students. The results achieved have been remarkable and viewed positively by both the sponsor and the university, but more importantly by the enrolled school teachers and their students.

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