

Conclusion and Recommendations

Abstract The purpose of sharing this partnership story is to promote quality learning experiences in physical education, and subsequent promotion of health and wellbeing. Data gathered suggest the learning opportunities created through partnerships were relevant, engaging, contemporary, physically active, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate for all stakeholders, namely, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) university pre-service teachers, primary school children, and primary teachers. This story is about the localisation of non-funded partnerships in Gippsland, Victoria, Australia. Stakeholders were predominantly of the Australian national level but were also international.

The purpose of sharing this partnership story is to promote quality learning experiences in physical education, and subsequent promotion of health and wellbeing. Data gathered suggest the learning opportunities created through partnerships were relevant, engaging, contemporary, physically active, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate for all stakeholders, namely, ITE university pre-service teachers, primary school children, and primary teachers. This story is about the localisation of non-funded partnerships in Gippsland, Victoria, Australia. Stakeholders were predominantly of the Australian national level, described as vital (Sajdik 2015), but were also international.

This story is told by interweaving journey threads, from which emerge community collaborative themes. These themes include Partnerships, Social Justice, Mentoring and leadership, and Problem-solving. The story offers direction for the future of Health, Well-being and Physical Education (HW & PE) within communities which is timely and relevant given the recent release of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Partnerships are identified by the UN as essential for implementing the SDGs, which apply to all nations around the world. This is significant as Goal Three and Four directly relate to HW & PE. The story that unfolds has a focus on the physical dimension of health which not only has physical health benefits but also promotes mental, emotional, and social wellbeing (UNESCO 2015; Lynch 2005). The physical dimension which in schools is embedded within the PE curriculum is optimised when quality physical education (QPE) is enacted; this involves planned, progressive, and inclusive learning experiences (UNESCO 2015). Both data gathered in this programme and through research (UNESCO 2015) suggest QPE is enhanced when partnerships are established.

Within the Best Start initiative strengths were combined within the local, national, and international communities to “increase the scale of effectiveness of activities, reduce transaction costs, bring together resources and tools that otherwise would not be available to one actor only and it helps to mutually understand perspectives that otherwise would not be understood appropriately” (Leisinger 2015). Thus, the community collaborations creatively optimised the resources available within a rural community through connections with the wider state of Victoria, as well as Australia and UK. Access to basic services, facilities, good parks, playgrounds, play spaces, and close, affordable, and regular transport is reportedly low in rural Victoria (DEECD 2013). Implementation of the HPE learning area was carried out by generalist classroom teachers in all but one of the six partner schools. This particular school had a delegated PE teacher, but the teacher had no specialist training. Hence, collaboration was seen to be advantageous for all stakeholders and for future provision of quality HPE lessons at no or minimal cost. Furthermore, Manning (2014) urges the strengthening of resources in disadvantaged communities for the wellbeing of children. Hence, partnerships were associated with social justice, as was the Australian curriculum.

Within literature and the Australian curriculum, this type of community collaboration adopts a strengths-based approach, embedded within

a futures and salutogenic perspective. This perspective “views healthy living as multi-dimensional and encompassing physical as well as social, mental, spiritual, environmental and community dimensions” (McCuaig et al. 2013, p. 113). Thus, it advocates preparation for quality life and well-being, which involves knowledge and skills to be transferred across contexts. However, while Australian education policies strongly advocate HPE and physical activities, requirements do not appear to be consistently enacted (Curry 2012), and this is similar internationally (Hardman 2008; Sloan 2010). It is argued that partnerships hold the answer, and we are encouraged to keep striving towards public–private–people partnerships (United Nations 2014).

The story presented is the model of a HW & PE project: ‘Best Start: A community collaborative approach to lifelong health and wellness’. The initiative models the UN ideals contextualised into local schools and communities. What began as a pathway seed quickly grew to involve multi-stakeholder partnerships: Australian universities, schools, Australian Registered Training Organisations (RTO), the local health industry (local leisure and sports centre), Education departments, sport governing bodies at the national level, and a world-leading international ITE university course in the UK.

This story is told using the ‘Nine building blocks for successful partnerships’ (ICSC 2014) framework for reporting. The building blocks were identified for creating successful multi-stakeholder partnerships based on over 15 years of research from successful and failed partnerships (ICSC 2014). The categories of actors, process, and context allow for the ‘what’ as well as the ‘how’ to be shared, offering guidance and strategies for various stakeholders in understanding contemporary and future directions for HW & PE. The dynamics detailed, which include both impediments and successes, allows insight for community leaders, teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, as well as community members, more generally, to consider suitability and possibilities for partnerships within their context.

Research suggests that partnerships between universities and schools are difficult to enact (Darling-Hammond 2006), with many teacher educators not knowing where to begin or how to progress (Zeichner 2010). While there were various problems during the programme, the major obstacle underpinning Best Start was the lack of funding. Eventually, this led to the termination of the four-year programme which Zeichner (2010) suggests is to be expected, as strengths-based partnerships will

often require financial assistance for initial course development, extension, and sustainability.

Changes were made as a result of evaluation during the programme; one, for example, was the leader's decision to liaise with schools directly. This was because when the swimming supervisor managed communications, there was no preparation time for the pre-service teachers. As a result, QPE planning, progression, and inclusion were affected. At the "heart of promoting children's health and wellness is communication and partnerships... with strong links between school, home and community" (Elliott 2014, p. 191). Problems also related to the variance between capitalism of business and the social justice of education. This was particularly obvious when choosing an RTO for swimming and water safety qualifications.

Despite copious feedback and data that evidenced success and education enhancement, there were larger priorities for the region and higher education institutions. Gippsland 'Best Start' programme began in semester one 2011 and ceased in semester two 2014 due to decisions that were beyond stakeholders' control. Unbeknown to all stakeholders, there were plans made by Monash University and governments that offered an explanation for the lack of funds and which eventually led to the demise of the 'Best Start' programme. In May 2013, Monash University announced that it was to transfer its Gippsland campus to be part of a new Federation University Australia (formally Ballarat University). This was described as a merger and occurred on 1 January 2014. Monash ceased making offers to new students, and made arrangements with Federation University for teaching its continuing students.

The four-year programme was deliberately designed so pre-service teacher confidence and competence could be progressively developed. Beginning with Level 1 higher education courses (first year), the students taught the content using peer teaching episodes (EDF1600 HPE in schools). This led to small group teaching experiences with children from local schools under teacher educator support, school teacher support, and peer support. In Level 2 and 3 (second and third year), the pre-service teachers taught lessons to groups of children from Foundation Year to Year 6 in a chosen sport and tennis (EDF3619 Sport and physical activity education), and swimming and water safety (EDF2611 Experiencing aquatic experiences). The lessons only took place after the pre-service teachers evidenced they were prepared and maximum safety was ensured.

The Best Start programme was supported by the TEMAG report (2014) recommendation for prioritisation of quality ITE through uni-

versities and school collaboration. The apparent pre-service teacher benefit was extended learning opportunities, as lessons provided ‘hands on’ practical, experiential learning and teaching. Lessons also provided local primary school children with quality swimming, sport sessions, and tennis coaching (at no cost). Furthermore, professional development was delivered for classroom teachers. As the partnership setting was in a socio-economically disadvantaged area, equity and social justice advocated by international policy and literature, such as the UN SDGs and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which had filtered down to Australian curriculum documents, were enacted and satisfied.

As proposed by the discussion paper ‘A tertiary education plan for Gippsland, Victoria’ and ‘Action Now, Classroom Ready Teachers’ report, learning and teaching over the four-year ‘Best Start’ programme (2011–2014) obtained outstanding results. While data was gathered by various methods, the SETU were specifically designed for planning, reviewing, and staff development, offering valid and reliable data. Another indicator of teaching and learning quality was the growth of the units. At Monash University (Gippsland), on average 55 of the 80 (69 %) first-year intake Bachelor of Primary Education students chose to study the PE major stream during the Best Start initiative. While the course cohort intake remained the same, these numbers continued throughout second and third year where they increased as much as 79 % in biennial units, from 39 (2011) to approximately 70 (2013) for swimming. This growth increased the future development of health and wellbeing for children in schools, as quality and realistic pre-service teacher preparation maximise children’s learning (DEECD 2012).

University ITE students (pre-service teachers) who traditionally selected the PE discipline were often passionate about being physically active. Many of these students were involved in sports at a high level and represented their town in traditional popular sports such as Australian football, soccer, netball, cricket, and basketball. These students brought with them a most valuable quality for advocating learning through the physical in primary schools. However, the growth in the Best Start programme offered at Gippsland saw increasingly more students selecting PE not because they were confident and high achievers in sports, not because PE was necessarily their favourite subject at school, but because they wanted to be the best teacher that they could be. For example, the prerequisite for pre-service teachers electing the swimming unit was that they were interested in PE or learning more about swimming, not that they were competent

or confident swimmers. They wanted to learn and grow in all dimensions of quality teaching and learning, and they were aware of the essential role the 'physical' and holistic health and wellbeing plays in the development of the child.

The data clearly found that the effort of creating and developing the Best Start partnership programme was vindicated. Children's voices in previous studies such as the Sport Wales School survey 2015 and the implementation of the HPE curriculum in three case study schools (Lynch 2005) were supported. Children enjoyed developing the ability to take part, feeling comfortable taking part and having the confidence. Furthermore, school is the most important place in which children learn the competence and confidence to participate in physical activity, where all children can be accessed. Parents came to support their children, and comments from teachers, teaching assistants, parents, and the children expressed their gratitude for the lessons provided. The Churchill Primary School Prep-Grade 2 team leader summarised best the benefits of the Best Start programme and gratitude within this context:

It was a fantastic opportunity for our students [children] as many have never had formal (swimming) lessons before. The low socio-economic situation of many families in this area means that many students are not able to have the opportunity of learning about water safety with instructors. While Churchill Primary School does offer a swimming lesson program we often find that those most in need of lessons find the price too high. By offering free lessons through the University program we had 100% attendance from Prep/One/Two, which is amazing!

The children were very excited about going to the swimming lessons and were looking forward to going each time. They enjoyed getting to know their instructors and it was good to see the university students grow in their confidence of dealing with junior primary school children. Relationships between the instructors and students were just beginning to develop, so it was a shame there weren't more lessons.

We have also received many positive comments from parents about this wonderful opportunity. Many were amazed that the lessons would be offered free of charge. One family has three children in the Prep/One/Two area and normally sending all three to swimming lessons is too expensive. However, this time because they were free, all three children were able to go. Their Mum was so happy she didn't have to exclude any of her children from the lessons. (personal communication, 13 June 2013)

Efforts in adopting a strengths-based approach to learning are intended to create a shared collegial environment, also referred to as a ‘hybrid space’, a “non hierarchical interplay between academic, practitioner and community expertise” (Zeichner 2010, p. 89). This fosters respect and support for all stakeholders, increasing the individual pre-service teacher development. Teachers reinforced support and encouragement for the university students (pre-service teachers) and were also introduced to the latest educational practices (and vice versa) as advocated by Whipp et al. (2011). It was accentuated from the outset that by working collaboratively, respecting and supporting all stakeholders, the programme would be supervised efficiently and would enhance learning opportunities.

This journey is significant as innovative initiatives in education partnerships, underpinning the Best Start project, are explicitly targeted and advocated by the UN. Furthermore, partnerships and the reporting of partnership successes and failures are urgently required so that effectiveness can be increased, specifically shared knowledge and understanding of how to solve problems. The story is significant for education departments around the world who want to optimise QPE and wellbeing. Within this particular context, the leader reflected on previous experiences to carefully persuade the stakeholders to believe in the opportunities provided. He did this by being a knowledge broker and directing stakeholders to learning partnerships (Beare 2001; Ernst and Young 2012; Slaughter and Beare 2011), had realistic and achievable goals, placed no pressure on stakeholders, oversaw pre-service teacher planning, ensuring all needs were catered for, experiences were at all times inclusive and progressive, utilised the human resources available such as the administrative team assistance, didn’t personally access any money at any time, and carefully and meticulously planned and monitored the programme for quality assurance. Hence, UNESCO’s national strategy for QPE was addressed:

1. Teacher education, supply, and development
2. Facilities, equipment, and resources
3. Curriculum flexibility
4. Community partnerships
5. Monitoring and quality assurance (2015, p. 23).

Although partnerships are not new, there was limited high-quality research in practice (Clift and Brady 2005); thus, the international research of an Ofsted ‘Outstanding’ awarded UK ITE programme, explic-

itly acknowledged for its established partnerships with nearby schools, and offered valuable insight for quality preparation of teachers in PE. This study illustrated for the leader: the importance of having strong, genuine, and respectful relations developed over time with partner schools; all stakeholders having a shared belief in the partnership; partnerships needed to be long lasting and be supported by course/programme sustainability; that a lack of space and other obstacles could be overcome (QPE maintained) through sharing assets with partners; and funding is often an issue but much can be done with a small amount. Another pertinent feature of interest was the UK ITE hall, which was situated halfway between the university grounds and the schools. This hall acted as a metaphorical bridge, a third space, and possible hybrid space.

These insights were transferred to the Gippsland context, and in particular, the leisure centre facilities used during the Best Start programme (pool, stadium, and hockey fields). The facilities were also situated halfway between the university grounds and the partner schools forming a third space. The programme and research story are relevant and significant for the preparation of pre-service teachers and are underpinned by the philosophy that quality and realistic pre-service preparation maximises children's learning. Teachers of today and in the future need to be "analytical, critically reflective and professional as well as one who demonstrates a continuing openness to new ideas. The ability to respond to, and manage change, is a central requisite." (UNESCO 2015, p. 78).

This research story suggests that governments, universities and schools, and policy and decision makers can and need to learn from partnership programmes such as Best Start. There is extensive evidence and literature, suggesting that partnerships improve the quality of education and specifically HW & PE. It is inevitable that governments, universities, and schools need to keep changing and searching for relevant and purposeful methods of learning in this new age. For while "the notion of valuing the physically active life is a point of focus... it is also a complex, many-sided process that might move us towards a tomorrow that is better than today" (Kirk 2014, p. 106).

While a hybrid space is an ideal, and at times may appear unrealistic and even not possible, it is argued "universities must engage ever more closely with schools in a mutual transformation agenda, with all the struggle and messiness that implies" (Darling-Hammond 2006, p. 3). The fundamentals of education are built upon continually attempting to enhance quality. This involves constantly searching and finding new ways

to improve. Hence, partnership benefits and efforts need to be prioritised and perceived as an investment. Pioneers who lead in partnerships and evidence drive and success need to be supported through funding, time, and workload to allow possible communication opportunities and efforts required to discover possibilities to collaborate.

While the UN is supporting partnerships on a global level, there are gaps in the layers in between global and local. All partnerships begin small at grass-roots level and need fuel to grow as they are built on trust. The localisation of partnerships for this reason requires continued research so that amendments can be made to optimise the opportunities. An obvious barrier that could and should have ended the Best Start programme before it began was the leader requiring a Certificate IV qualification. Another was the university ITE units being taught biennially. Within this journey, it is essential that systems in place within universities, schools, leisure centres, and educational policies that threaten sustainability are identified. Once they are identified, then every effort must be made to minimise policy barriers so that partnerships are achievable and sustainable.

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