School-University Partnerships within the Scope of an Erasmus+ Project: Benefits and Challenges

Edvina Bešić[1] *& Douglas C. McKnight*[2]

Abstract

Our society is facing difficult challenges, including the increasing adoption of digital technologies throughout all aspects of daily life. In this rapidly changing context, moving teacher education away from its traditional location solely at the university to a more collaborative effort between schools and universities is crucial. One way of accomplishing this is through "School-University Partnerships" (SUPs).

The Erasmus+ project "Reaching the 'Hard to Reach': Inclusive Responses to Diversity through Child-Teacher Dialogue" (ReHaRe) established this kind of partnership during its three-year duration. The project aimed to develop effective strategies for improving classroom practice to include all children in lessons, particularly those who are perceived as "hard to reach." In order to achieve this goal, the Inclusive Inquiry, an approach to teacher development that involves trios of teachers cooperating with each other and their students to find ways of making their lessons inclusive, was used in primary schools. The project was implemented through a three-cycle action research process in five European Union countries (Austria, Denmark, England, Portugal, and Spain).

In each country, a local university closely collaborated with one primary school that took on the role of the 'hub'. These hub schools acted as the local facilitators for the project. Each created a local network of five additional primary schools along the project. This strategy was chosen to transcend traditional research/practice barriers, which should facilitate the design of effective, sustainable, and scalable educational interventions.

This chapter describes the ReHaRe project with a specific focus on the perceived benefits and challenges that emerged while creating a SUP and a school network within the scope of an Erasmus+ project in Austria.

Keywords

school-university partnerships, inclusive education, professional development, teacher education

1 Institute for Secondary Teacher Education, University College of Teacher Education Styria, Graz, Austria

2 Independent researcher, Graz, Austria

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1 Introduction

Our society is facing difficult challenges, including the continual impact of globalization on traditional economic structures and the increasing adoption of digital technologies throughout most aspects of life. The university, as an institution designed to serve the public good, can play a critical role in overcoming these challenges and must "organize its resources for increased responsiveness to, and engagement with, society's core challenges in the century ahead" (Wegner, 2008, p. 1). This connection between twenty-first-century dilemmas and the university's role in helping respond to them is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in the field of education. Whether due to more diverse student bodies, quickly evolving technologies, or the interruption of education through health crises, teachers must be able to respond to a range of new challenges in order to be effective in their classrooms (Kennedy & Heineke, 2014, p. 226; OECD, 2021).

In this rapidly changing context, moving teacher education away from its traditional location solely at the university to a more collaborative and career-long effort between schools and universities is crucial (Burns et al., 2016, p. 92). One way of accomplishing this is through "School-University Partnerships" (SUPs). Broadly speaking, these are partnerships between teacher education institutions and schools with the "aim of facilitating teacher professional development as a means of promoting student achievement" (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009, p. 163).

Practitioners and governments from around the world have increasingly advocated for the use of these SUPs, including in the United States (e.g., Carroll et al., 2001), the United Kingdom (e.g., Burns et al., 2016), Hong Kong (e.g., NG & Chan, 2012), and Norway (e.g., Smith, 2016). Scholars have noted the broad benefits of SUPs. Some point specifically to the benefits for the university partners, such as "increased relevance of educational research" in the school context (NG & Chan, 2012, p. 38). Others see wide-ranging benefits for the school partners, including increased professional development and improved teaching quality (Maheady et al., 2016, p. 34). Specifically, in the field of inclusive education, scholars stress that through SUPs, teachers are introduced to new and different teaching practices, challenged to reflect on their views of specific student groups (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013, p. 23), and can leverage outside resources and expertise (Ainscow, 2020, pp. 12, 14). According to Waitoller and Artiles (2013, p. 23), SUPs are one of the most promising approaches to developing school capacity in the field of inclusive education.

Although the benefits to SUPs are clear – and implementing them has been a priority of the European Council for almost a decade (Council of the European Union, 2014/C 183/05) – little research has been conducted analyzing the nature of these partnerships in the European context (Pesti et al., 2020, p. 24) and within the scope of Erasmus+ projects. To help close this lacuna in the field, our chapter describes the benefits and challeng-

es of one such recently concluded partnership. This partnership was established within an Erasmus+ project of the "Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices" key action and the "Strategic Partnerships for School Education" action type, both of which aim to improve learning experiences and share innovative practices.

2 The Project

"Reaching the 'Hard to Reach'" (ReHaRe) was a three-year Erasmus+ project (2017–2020). The project was implemented in five European Union countries (Austria, Denmark, England, Portugal, and Spain). The central purpose of the project was to develop effective strategies for including all children in lessons, particularly those who might be perceived as "hard to reach," such as migrants, refugees, students with disabilities, and others who might be marginalized for a multitude of other reasons.

Following the "umbrella model" to SUPs (Handler & Ravid, 2001), ReHaRe had several project teams collaborating within a set framework, with the University of Southampton acting as the facilitator of the project. Members of the project included university-based researchers and school-based teachers. ReHaRe involved active collaboration and dialogue between teachers, students, and colleagues from both schools and universities. In each country, a local university closely collaborated with one primary school that took on the role of the "hub" for that country. The hub schools were equal partners within the project, sharing responsibilities for completing the necessary tasks and achieving the intended outcomes. For their work, they had an allocated budget within the project.

Chosen because of their diverse student bodies, these hubs acted as local facilitators for the project and created a local network of five additional primary schools. This network was important, as research suggests that collaboration between schools can build the capacity of individual schools to respond better to student diversity (Ainscow, 2020). Throughout the project, a three-cycle collaborative action research approach was used to transcend the oft-observed "theory/practice" divide and design an effective, sustainable educational intervention.

During the first cycle of the project, the university researchers worked closely with the school principal and a teacher trio from the hub school in piloting and revising the "Inclusive Inquiry" (Messiou & Ainscow, 2020). The Inclusive Inquiry is a research-based approach that helps teachers develop inclusive responses to diversity by considering their students' perspectives on various issues. It is based on the lesson study (Lewis et al., 2006), in which teachers work in trios to design a lesson (known as "research lessons"), teach it while being observed, and then revise it in the light of colleagues' and students' feedback. What is distinctive about the approach is the way it considers students' views in designing and revising lessons. To effectively participate in this project, students were trained by their teachers to become "student researchers." In this role, they acquired a basic un-

derstanding of important research terms and methods that were then used to observe, collect, and analyze their fellow classmates' opinions after each lesson with the goal of assisting the process of lesson planning.

During the second cycle, the hubs actively promoted the Inclusive Inquiry in a network of primary schools in their area. The hubs facilitated the expansion of the project within these networks, each of which had six participating primary schools. The development of these school networks occurred in specific contexts that are important to mention. England and Portugal, for instance, have a history of school-to-school collaboration while school isolation is the norm in Austria, Denmark, and Spain. In the former pair of countries, the project networks were developed within existing school clusters, which made the network easier to sustain. In the latter set, since the networks were perceived as a temporary arrangement, these were more difficult to initiate and maintain.

For all five countries, though, the importance of the hub cannot be overstated. With their help as gatekeepers, a total of 30 schools in five countries participated in the project, with one participating teacher trio from each school. Each trio received specific training on the Inclusive Inquiry, which was organized by the hub with the support of the university researchers. In the final cycle, the Inclusive Inquiry was adopted more widely in the schools, and teachers beyond the original teacher trio used it.

Keeping in mind the value of evaluation for SUPs (Maheady et al., 2016, pp. 35–36), we evaluated the impact of the Inclusive Inquiry with classroom observations of the research lessons, interviews with students and teachers, and questionnaires. These showed that the Inclusive Inquiry had a significant impact on teachers' thinking and practices, students' engagement in class, and the teacher-student relationship. This is in line with the findings of Messiou and Hope (2015), who have shown that considering students' views can help teachers become more sensitive towards their own beliefs, which can lead to a reflection process that initiates changes in their teaching practices.

There were also indications that the project shifted teachers' perspectives on student diversity, giving the project a longer-term impact in the school as well (Messiou, 2019, p. 11). Teachers in some schools stressed, for example, that the Inclusive Inquiry helped develop greater democratic tendencies in their schools due to its engagement with student voices. The dialogue with students and other teachers encouraged experimentation with new methods in lessons, making them more inclusive as well (for more results, see Bešić et al., forthcoming). Below, we describe the school network in Austria in more detail, specifically highlighting the role of the SUP in establishing and maintaining it.

2.1 The school network in Austria

The network consisted of five schools in Graz and one in a suburban area close to it. The hub school's principal suggested the schools and also served as a gatekeeper for the project. All six schools, none of which had collaborated before, have a significant number of students from disadvantaged and/or immigrant backgrounds. The university researchers helped the hub establish the networks at an early stage and sent all participating principals a letter outlining the project, responsibilities, and commitments.

The hub school had one designated teacher coordinating the necessary activities, ensuring that tasks were completed on time and in line with requirements. For the ReHaRe project, this was supposed to be a senior staff member because, as Florian and Beaton (2018, p. 873) note, these are experienced teachers with "practical wisdom" that can be leveraged throughout a project. In Austria, however, this role was taken on by a junior member, which had significant consequences on the successful implementation of the project (which we describe below).

This designated teacher collaborated with two other teachers, a principal, and university staff and led teacher training, which helped prepare the other schools in the network for the project activities. Three teachers from each school attended three training sessions (i.e., interschool in-service training, Andreitz & Müller, 2015). These were three hours long, and each teacher received teacher education credits for attendance from a university. In Austria, since teachers from compulsory schools must complete 15 hours of in-service training outside of class hours (§ 43; 2 SchUG - School Education Act), we chose this approach to motivate them to participate in the project and to compensate them for it.

2.2 Project benefits and challenges

Like most SUPs, significant challenges quickly emerged in ReHaRe. As scholars have noted elsewhere, successful SUPs require major time investments from all partners (Smith, 2016, p. 20; Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009, p. 156; Carroll et al., 2001, p. 52). Teachers, particularly those working in under-resourced schools (e.g., Edens & Gilsinan, 2005), often feel the responsibilities connected with a SUP simply add to their workload without consideration for their already stressed schedules. Unsurprisingly, one of the biggest complaints from teachers who participated in RaHaRe was a lack of time for it and the amount of work involved.

The evidence-based research approach conducted by the university researchers also proved to be problematic for the SUP. In most schools, the teacher trio perceived the university researchers as only "transactionally" involved, meaning that they felt the researchers simply came to their classrooms, conducted research, and did not provide feedback or instruction. While this criticism of "transactional partnerships" (Teitel, 2008, p. 76) is fair, it misconstrues the roles of the school and university in the Inclusive Inquiry. As Ainscow

(2020, p. 11) makes clear, it is the dialogue between teachers and their students about how to make lessons more inclusive – an exploration of differences that leads to creative experimentation – that is the central aspect of the Inclusive Inquiry. In effect, the role of the university researchers here was to, first, help teachers implement the project and, second, collect evidence. As Ainscow (2020) has stressed numerous times, this second step is critical to the success of inclusive education and cannot be overlooked.

In addition, overcoming a "behind closed doors mentality" – that is, the "tension that exists between working alongside colleagues [...] [students and university staff] while simultaneously working alone behind a closed door" – was challenging. This is in line with data from the OECD's TALIS study (2019), which showed that Austrian teachers are more likely to favor "simple exchanges" over in-depth forms of professional collaboration. With the Inclusive Inquiry approach, however, teachers are challenged to open their classroom and "rethink their lesson planning and facilitation" (Ainscow, 2020, p. 11). Hence, more collaboration between teachers and students is needed in order to effectively use the Inclusive Inquiry.

Finally, the last significant challenge related to leadership, specifically the way school leadership implemented the project. Effective leadership is critical for the success of a SUP, and individuals with decision-making authority must be involved throughout (Messiou et al., 2016, p. 59; Gardner, 2011, p. 80). In the case of four schools, it quickly became clear that instead of having a "hands-on" approach to the project, principals did not engage with the project after its initial introduction to their school, leaving teachers feeling isolated and having to fulfil the necessary obligations on their own. As noted in other SUP case studies, this style of management can leave "teachers feel[ing] that various reform efforts are always implemented at their expense" (Edens & Gilsinan, 2005, p. 135).

While these challenges to ReHaRe are important to keep in mind, several aspects of the project were also successful and could be replicated in future SUPs. All participants emphasized the need to have supportive principals who deem the project a priority not just for individual teachers, but for the whole school. Particularly in schools operating in "crisis mode" – where a "lack of time, inadequate funding and resources, staff turnover, changing priorities, and competing agendas" is the norm (Carroll et al., 2001, p. 53) – having active, effective principals is crucial to the success of a SUP. Considering that the Inclusive Inquiry requires teachers to observe colleagues' lessons, substitutes are needed, and these can only be organized through effective principal leadership.

In two schools, principals were able to successfully spread the Inclusive Inquiry through their entire school. These principals were highly engaged. In their recent literature review on SUPs in Australia, Green, Tindall-Ford, and Eady (2020) highlight the influence that a few key individuals can have on the outcome of a SUP, which we observed during ReHaRe as well. These principals had "make or break relationship functions" (Gardner, 2011, p. 80) in their schools. They used these to effectively organize the project and ensure

that Inclusive Inquiry had a central place in their school's development plan for the entire year.

Finally, just as Smith (2016, p. 20) observes in her study of SUPs in Norway and Messiou et al. (2016, p. 58) show in an Erasmus+ project, teachers also reiterated that trust and respect were crucial. For the Inclusive Inquiry to work, teachers had to collaborate well and remain patient. This required a learning environment of trust and mutual respect. Moreover, as part of the Inclusive Inquiry, teachers received feedback from their students, which is often a new concept to teachers. It was mentioned that those who managed to stay open to their students' voices and opinions benefited tremendously from them (Messiou, 2019). Here, it should be noted that changing roles in the classroom – that is, teachers perceiving students as partners in lesson planning and not just as passive consumers – is a process and not something that occurs immediately after the adoption of the Inclusive Inquiry. Likewise, establishing a SUP takes time and must be cultivated for it to have a long-lasting impact.

3 Conclusion: A Pathway to Success

From our experience working on the ReHaRe project in Austria, universities looking to start a SUP within the scope of an Erasmus+ funding opportunity should keep the following things in mind to improve the chances of the project being successful.

As explained above, one of the biggest challenges to ReHaRe was the type of relationship cultivated between the university and the schools, particularly between the researchers and the teachers. One way to think about this is through Teitel's "Partnership Continuum" (2008, pp. 76–77). While most partnerships initially aim for what the author calls "transformative partnerships," most get stuck in the "transactional" variety or ones where there is "little or no connection" between partners. These relationships then become "missed opportunities for mutual learning" and "can contribute to blame and distrust, as each sector tries to improve itself independently, and then, especially when accountability for outcomes ratchets up, possibly feel disappointment with its 'partner'" (Teitel, 2008, p. 77).

While collaboration always brings issues of power to the fore, mutual respect and equality between partners can help move partnerships from the latter end of Teitel's continuum to the former. A strategy to achieve this is through "co-construction," where both university-based researchers and school-based stakeholders have a role in creating, implementing, and evaluating project measures. Carroll et al. (2001, pp. 44–45) argue that universities should adopt several principals for this to be effective, including tailoring the project to the unique needs of the socio-cultural demands of the school, learning from the school community, treating school-based teachers as peers, discarding hierarchical ways of thinking, and being patient.

The co-construction of a SUP can help reduce the issues related to the oft-discussed "theory/praxis" divide (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008) in these types of projects. Certainly, project partners initially come to a SUP with different types of knowledge. University researchers arrive with "academic knowledge" while school-based teachers possess their "practitioner" counterpart (Zeichner, 2010). Since these different types of knowledge and institutional cultures often clash in SUPs (e.g., Burton & Greher, 2007), creating an effective "third space" (Bhabha, 1990) in which these sets of discourses and norms can productively interact with each other is crucial. In this hybrid space – not the university and not the school – the boundaries between all project participants can be blurred, producing new ways of learning in the process (Arhar et al., 2013, p. 220). In the two schools where the project went well, a friendly relationship between the principals and teachers and the university staff was established. Meetings, for instance, were organized in outside spaces (e.g., coffee houses), and both forms of knowledge were brought together to find solutions to common problems.

Admittedly, creating this type of environment within a SUP is challenging. It requires a significant change in thinking that moves away from individualized ways of working, teaching, and learning to more collaborative ones (Gardner, 2011, p. 65; Ainscow, 2020). To support this process, it is important to recognize the basic, logistical issues involved. Partners, for example, must agree on roles, responsibilities, scope, and goals before the project gets underway. Likewise, there should be agreement as to where partnership-related meetings and seminars will occur (Burns et al., 2016, p. 88).

Both financial resources and time commitments must be kept in mind as well. While the hub school was indeed provided funds for its participation in ReHaRe, the project did not set aside funds for the other network schools, which might have caused resentment amongst the others involved and a feeling of "what is in it for us" to develop. Although we ensured that teachers received education credits, more was needed. That is why it is crucial that SUPs have ample funding to ensure project partners can participate and are adequately compensated for doing so.

Regarding time, SUPs demand a large amount of it, often outside of or in addition to normal work obligations. For university researchers – who tend to be recognized for traditional research and not for SUP-style contributions to schools – finding motivation and extra time to commit to such projects is difficult to come by, which is why such work should also be rewarded by university departments and/or planned within the project budget. This was an issue in ReHaRe that has also been observed elsewhere (Edens & Gilsinan, 2005, p. 134). Similarly, the university side of the partnership should recognize the effort put in by teachers and school staff by, for example, distributing a newsletter, organizing social luncheons, and even creating a type of participation award for the school. In ReHaRe, we supported two of the schools that remained active in the project for its

entire duration to apply for and receive a prize that is highly regarded in the public-school system in Austria.

Effectively assessing and evaluating the SUP should also be a priority. Using evidence effectively has been shown to be a "stimulus for improvement" within schools (Ainscow, 2016, p. 13). As Maheady et al. (2016, p. 35) clearly state, "educational outcomes for children are more likely to improve if teachers use practices shown empirically to enhance pupil performance." Hence it is necessary to make sure that the involved schools understand the importance of evidence in such projects in order to overcome the feeling that universities are only "transactionally" involved in a project.

Finally, for SUPs to be successful, you also need committed partners from schools from two levels. As the "the lynchpin of the partnership" (Nettleton & Barnett, 2016, p. 27), ReHaRe showed that effective leadership from principals is needed. Likewise, a highly engaged teacher must act as the coordinator between the school-based teachers and university-based researchers. This person can take on the role of what scholars have called the "research champion" within the school (Burn et al., 2021, p. 617), that is, the person who is the main liaison between both worlds of the SUP. To best influence practices in the school, this person should ideally be a more senior teacher who is well respected and known throughout the building. In our case, the junior researcher, although highly engaged and competent, had trouble gaining respect from her colleagues within the school network, which complicated the project's successful implementation.

Of course, there is no magic formula for successful SUPs. In our Erasmus+ project, however, we have learned that if both sides are "open to learning about how they need to change in order to improve their own practices" (Clark, 1988, p. 79), they will recognize the comparative advantage that each side brings to the project. Ideally, "the outputs of each organization become the inputs of the other" (Clark, 1988, p. 49).

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