



Partnerships for learning : an international perspective on the development of inclusive schools

AUTHOR(S)

Julianne Moss, J White, K Moore

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Partnerships for learning: An international perspective on the development of inclusive schools

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'Noticing' and professional learning

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Julianne Moss, Julie White and Karen Moore

The University of Melbourne

Abstract

One of the most difficult issues faced in school university partnerships is the legitimacy of the collaborative relationship. Getting invited in as a university partner and staying on to support teacher knowledge is challenging. Through an account of a case study set in one large secondary school located in the western suburbs of Victoria, we disentangle the importance of seldom considered barriers that impact on professional learning. Shaping our understanding through a theoretical model where the movement between identity, beliefs and decision and action is identified as 'noticing' (Moss et al. 2004, Mason 2002) we describe the potential of the model in developing a 'pedagogy of hope' (hooks 2003). Noticing, working at the elusive intersections of observation and construction, permits non-linear connections. A 'pedagogy of hope' works for a sustainable learning community- a community for all students, teachers and school leaders.

School university partnerships

School university partnerships in Australia have a documented history. Given the continuing pressure for teacher education to develop collaborative relationships and partnerships with schools (Ramsay 2000, Department of Education Science and Training 2003, University of Melbourne 2002), accounts of the legitimacy and outcomes of this activity have a continuing relevance to schools, schools systems and the higher education sector. Whilst much has been written about the benefits such as improvement of learning for both teachers, teacher educators and their students, there is growing recognition that the likelihood of ongoing collaboration can be adversely affected by the conditions that exist in the participating institutions (Peters 2002, p.239).

Less accessible in the Australian literature and more challenging are the issues of the legitimacy of the relationship between the university and the partner, how they become established, continue and what are the outcomes of these experiences are. Our account works at the legitimacy of the activity through our role as researchers and learners in a new context honouring and ‘encouraging the trying, recognising it as embryonic to the full multiplicities of identity re-formulation’ (Richardson 2000).

The paper describes from one school context insights into the process of establishing a collaborative professional learning relationship with a secondary school located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. Since March 2003 we have worked in a professional learning role as co-facilitators and dialogical critical friends with all levels of the staff, beginning teachers, established teachers, leading leadership teams, Key

Learning Area (KLA) teams or subject based teams, the assistant principals and the school principal. We use the term dialogical critical friends¹ as this is how we have understood our relationship with our colleagues at St Aspens Secondary College.

The school has a strong student centred culture, however the same could not be said for the experience of the staff. Staff identities and relations broadly mirror the “‘impregnable fortress’ of the school – subject department” (Green & Dinham 2001). We use this case as a way to problematise the lexicon of inclusive schooling and to illustrate that making more schools inclusive is more than a focus on structural frames of race, gender, disability, rurality and the like. Shaping our understanding through a theoretical model where the movement between identity, beliefs and decision and action is identified as 'noticing' (Moss et al. 2004, Mason 2002) we describe the potential of the model to develop a 'pedagogy of hope' (hooks 2003) and its potential for enhancing a sustainable learning community for students, teachers and school leaders. Making more schools inclusive is a cultural story, a 'big story' (Moss 2002, 2003). Once inside the 'narrative turn' (Gough 1998), where local conditions and everyday practice are accessible we can understand how 'culture constrains but also enables individual performance' (Artiles, 2003, p. 191).

We are not expecting that this account will to lead an argument focused on how the selected case study school could become a more inclusive school. What we are

¹ Carrington and Robinson (2004, p.143) note a critical friend is someone 'who has been trusted to provide guidance and honest feedback'. In this context the dialogical relationship signifies mutual informing and critiquing. It differs from the conventional 'critical friend' in that it is not limited to the outsider observing the insider. The insider also observes the outsider as well as the self.

anticipating is that we can move towards understanding the school culturally. The school is attempting to manage change in a very interesting way. It is accessible, it is a school that has committed leadership and an openness to the need to change in order to more readily meet student, professional and community needs.

Moreover, through writing about the experiences we have shared, we can ‘offer critiques and methods for examining the functions and effects of any structure or grid of regularity that we put into place (St. Pierre & Pillow 2000, p. 6). Outlining how we were invited in, the context of the school, and what we believe is the uniqueness and commonality (Stake 1995, p.1) of the setting, the case enables understandings from the perspective of both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (MacLure 2003). Through the account we recognise that when ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ are positioned as binary opposites, they are liable to turn ‘inside-out’ and this is ‘always going to be a fraught and partial business’ (MacLure 2003, p.103).

In Australia during the late 1990’s, social justice struggles have been blurred and obscured by a politics that has played heavily on the intensification of teachers’ work. During this period teachers’ perceptions of their capacity to develop practice that actively recognises and supports new ways of working has become less certain. The last decade of the twentieth century saw teachers taking on the challenges of the digital revolution and increased accountability requirements, yet they are expected to enact more democratic ways of working with few tangible ongoing supports. Appearing as contradictory educational agendas, this has meant for school communities that the way

they organise themselves has inextricably changed forever. For others this journey may have not yet begun. Donna Haraway (1991, p.42), reminds us:

We must, however be acutely aware of the dangers of using old rules to tell new tales. This is compatible with a larger refusal to pretend that science is either only discovery, which erects a fetish of objectivity, or only invention, which rests on crass idealism. We both create nature and ourselves.

Practitioner research

This research located in the field of practitioner research takes up the method of the ‘Discipline of Noticing’ (Mason 2002, Moss et al. 2004), narrative and critical ethnography as a way of working through the messiness experienced by practitioners researching their own practice. In understanding and researching the cultural studies of schooling the many textual forms that often are in the hands of educators as they work stories, images, documents Moss, 2002, Moss 2003, Moss 2004) produce data. Taking the everyday as a ‘politics of discourse’ (Taylor 1997, p.34), rather than a certain truth, this form of critical ethnography is the result of the convergence of two trends in epistemology and social theory. The former is the movement from quantitative to qualitative paradigms and the second is the significant influence of the interpretive movements in anthropology and sociology. The cultural informants of critical ethnography are carriers of social reality and are themselves theoretical constructs. In this way these participants are “...systematically and critically unveiled” (Thompson 1981 in Anderson 1989, p.253).

Narrative assists us to write stories and from the writing of the story to interpret meanings and actions within ‘the contingencies of history and circumstance’ (Van Maanen 1995, p.12). Working from an eclectic methodological stance these data are freed from

relativism, having established through a sense of ‘catalytic validity’² (Lather 1991, p.68), the positioning and power constructs of the social actors. To imagine theory building within the site of practice Jean McNiff (1993, p.18) suggests that:

- each individual may legitimately theorise about her own practice, and aim to build theories;
- the action of theorising as a process is a concept more appropriate to educational development than the state of referencing a theory. In this view, people change their practices, and their practices change them;
- the interface between person and practice is a process of theory building, which involves a critical reflection on the process of ‘reflection in action’, and which legitimates the notion of a changing individual interacting with the world.

Critical ethnographic research provides a way for inquiry and the creation of knowledge about everyday work. Notes, reflections, conversations, the reading of texts constructed by students, policy documents, the writings of others are all signifiers of practice. We ‘assemble these texts as data’ (Rhedding-Jones 1995). Popkewitz and Brennan (1997, p.293) remind us that a social epistemology locates the ‘objects by objects constituted by the knowledge of schooling as historical practices through which we understand power relations’. Statements and words are not signs or signifiers that refer to fixed things but social practices that generate action and participation’. Taking from Brown and Dowling the line of challenge to the ‘pragmatic professionals’ (1998, p.1620), is:

that educational **practitioners** need to move outside of the their professional practice and into the distinct activity of educational **research**. This is essential if they are to generate the dialogue between research and practice that is necessary for mutual development.

To ensure that professional practice is linked to the distinct activity of research, but is possible within the world of everyday work remains an ongoing challenge. The methodology in this research envisions potential for doubling our meanings – if in our theory building we ‘move towards practices of academic writing that are responsible to

² Catalytic validity is described as ‘the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energises participants in what Friere call “conscientisation”, knowing reality in order to better transform it’ (Lather 1986 in Scheurich 1997, p.83). More simply catalytic validity is the degree to which the research empowers and emancipates the research subjects (Scheurich 1997, p.83).

what is arising out of both becoming and passing away' (Lather 1996a, p.18), we can know the fragility of practice yet see everyday work as unmediated. Narrative theory 'invites us to think of all discourse as taking the form of story and poststructuralism invites us to think of all discourse as taking the form of a text' (Gough 1998, p.60). The threads of meaning weave a thick cultural fabric, pieces that can be used for our conversations, critical analysis and deconstruction.

As informants and participants in the research we share an interest in not only what people do and did in respect to a significant current issue, but we were interested in what might happen, 'in the development, in what could be, in what is possible and how that possibly might be actualised' (Mason 2002, p. 181). Further as Mason states:

The researcher focuses on useful sensitivities and effective actions (in their experiences) *and* on how to make these available to colleagues so that they too can recognise them as potentially useful, and sufficiently aware of possibilities to try them out in practice themselves...The process of refinement is then also part of the research, as people report back on what they have noticed in trying out what they saw as possibilities in their situation (Mason 2002, p. 181).

Mt Aspen Secondary College

The first thing that strikes you about Mt Aspen Secondary College is not the intrusive building works, nor the cramped car park and corridors. It's the friendly and student-centred staff. They're not all saints, and scepticism and cynicism fly about in the staffroom, but there's a clear ethos of caring in this school – caring for students, that is. We have become involved in an extraordinary partnership in this school and this is the second year we have worked there. The Professional Development Coordinator made contact with us via the Teacher Learning Network (TLN), a professional learning organisation auspiced by both teacher unions in Victoria, The Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU). We were asked

to provide a program addressing issues of mentoring and collegiate support for the leading teacher team. We agreed to fit in with the after-school Professional Development Module (PDM) structure and presented a program over three extended sessions. This program was well received and we were asked to also offer this to the Experienced Teacher With Responsibility (ETWR) group.

Term 2: 2003 ETWRS and their professional careers

The impact of decisions such as performance appraisal frameworks and life occurrences including those involved in family and health has worked in equal measure to shape the professional identities and outlooks of the teachers within this group. In the opening session of the first of three one and a half hour after school sessions, through storylines (Harré and Slocum 2003), we asked the ETWRS to trace their professional histories and provide a brief oral report. The narratives they told held us spellbound. Teachers talked passionately about loss of position and status through structural change, bullying by former principals, and the overall frustration with imposed external mandates. Also running through the narratives were a lack of respect for *personal* professional knowledge and detailed descriptions of experiences that had served to gradually wear away resilience and a sense of hope for some of these teachers.

Further the teachers also commented that they had no idea of each other's professional biographies and were shocked to learn so much about each other and the destructive forces that had left them personally and professionally battered and bruised. The collaboration and 'mutual storytelling' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) appeared to serve a

powerful function amongst the teachers. Through the process of talking out loud the (r)elation of narratives, being heard, and acknowledgement by their peers seemed to represent some sort of breakthrough. We are all aware that we know more than we can tell, however these and subsequent sessions illustrated that in order to ‘know’, we first must ‘tell’. As Wenger et al. (2002) comment: ‘sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation [and] coaching’ (p. 9).

Term 4 2003: Another request

We were also asked to conduct a program of professional learning for the handful of teachers who hadn’t fulfilled their quota of after-school modules. Over one calendar year each teacher is required to participate in four three-hour modules in addition to the school requirements of whole curriculum days. While this group at first appeared to be reluctant and resistant to pedagogical change, they quickly embraced the thinking and possibilities for their own classrooms. Indeed they actively participated in the six hour session and reported in corridor conversations with us that they had found it professionally stimulating and it had impacted on their day-to-day practice.

Term 1 2004: Beginning teachers and leadership teams

We also worked with seven beginning teachers and focused on issues of identity, narrative and finding a voice within the established and settled staff. While some of these teachers had been at the school for almost five years, they had narratives of personal isolation, resentment and blame that needed to be told in order for them to move

on and address the broader pedagogical and professional issues that surround the early years of teaching.

Formal-informal links

The all female leadership team began to informally look to us to support their work and we increasingly became involved in planning and generating ideas. We would often visit the school to work with teachers in the after-school modules and would find ourselves also involved in impromptu leadership meetings. We attended meetings with leading teachers and worked with whole faculties. The partnership strengthened when we began to invite staff from the school into the university. Firstly, we invited the Professional Development Coordinator to speak with our final year students about transition into the profession. One of the Assistant Principals also came to the university to develop informally and extend through dialog the content of a curriculum-planning day for learning area co-ordinators. We also were approached through a corridor conversation and subsequently invited one of the learning teams to focus their team-building process away from the school setting at the university with our support. This required support from the leadership team who were asked to approve and fund teacher release time. At the time of writing we are supporting nine teachers in a three-week module in hands on sessions that focus classroom pedagogies.

The partnership

Our collaborative partnership is characterised by a dialogic relationship, mutual respect, care and ongoing support. The sustained relationship over two years has had a

‘snowballing’ effect, affirming time as key to the development of trusting relationships. Initially the school designed the professional learning program, and one year on, we are contributing to the growing dimensions of the program such as support and coaching to individual teachers. From our two years in the school we have ‘noticed’ (Moss et al, 2004; Mason, 2002) that the school has a distinctive ethos of care and compassion and long-term stability. Many teachers have been at the school for twenty five years or more and many have not taught anywhere else. Further, many of the staff are professionally dissatisfied, and have maintained their anger with systemic change, and still hark back to the conservative ‘slash and burn’ Kennett era of the 1990s in Victoria.

Our experiences in the school have lead us to concentrate on processes and practices that illuminate the signifiers of more elegant possibilities for ‘curriculum visions’ (Doll & Gough, 2002) and teacher professionalism. Inevitably this involves examining the discourses of knowledge traditions that have traditionally been perceived as contributors to supporting the needs of individual students, pedagogy and teacher action. We have co-facilitated professional learning sessions as described earlier in mentoring and collegiate support, pedagogical decision making and a program for beginning teachers. What we are beginning to consider is the how ongoing dialogical relationships and ‘teacher tales’ unsettle the structural and historical legacy of professional learning discourses. When teachers talk up (hi)stories and cultural practices of what it means to teach and change how you teach, the deep struggle inherent in movement from semi-professional status (Lortie 1975) to transformed professionalism is exposed.

For example during the ETWR program we provided information about the registration requirements for new teachers seeking registration in Victoria through the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) and the possibility that all Victorian teachers in the future would be required to develop a professional portfolio as is the case for beginning teachers (VIT, 2004, White 2004, White & Hay 2004, Hay et al.2004). On hearing this pronouncement, a dead and uncomfortable silence swept over the room. Over the next few minutes, sheer disbelief and a conversation of resistance followed. For these teachers the VIT actions represented yet another professional assault and imposition on teachers' integrity and professional identity.

Rubbing out the literature

Smith, Lee & Newmann (2001) alert us to key research about ways to improve student learning and assert that 'their findings call into serious question the assumption that low achieving, economically disadvantaged students are best served by teaching methods that emphasises didactic methods and review' (Smith, Lee and Newmann 2001, p.2).

Teachers at Mt Aspen Secondary College largely recognise this understanding, and are endeavouring to make the gradual changes that enable them to be more responsive towards all their students and their local community. In 2004 the school has embraced the strategic goal of the Western Metropolitan Region (WMR) of the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DE E&T). They have actively worked to implement the 'Community Links' team objectives of improving learning outcome opportunities and learning pathways for all. The recently appointed teacher in the newly

defined co-ordinating role has demonstrated vision and energy, and the ‘can do’ approach necessary to link school and community initiatives.

In their research Smith, Lee & Newmann (2001) further found an important relationship between teachers’ professional preparation and the presence of key organisational supports within the school. Mt Aspen Secondary College, through the development of the visible professional learning program, can also demonstrate this level of organisational support.

Indicators of high quality professional development, cited in the Smith et. al. (2001, p. 41), from survey responses of more than 5000 teachers in 384 Chicago elementary schools (Grades 2-8) consisted of experiences that:

- Provided opportunities to work productively with teachers from other schools;
- Changed the way that teachers talk about students in this school;
- Included opportunities to think carefully about, try and evaluate new ideas;
- Shifted approaches to teaching in this school;
- Helped my staff work better together;
- Addressed the needs of the students in the classroom;
- Deepened my understanding of the subject matter;
- Helped me understand my students better;
- Were sustained and coherent, rather than short-term and unrelated;
- Included opportunities to work with colleagues in my school;
- Led me to make changes in my teaching.

In Victoria as in other Australian states, professional learning resources are largely devolved to individual school management and budgets. Whilst there is a considerable body of professional learning literature that focuses on the least likely approaches to impact on teacher learning ‘the old model of staff development survives in a world where everything else has changed’ (Miller 1995, p.1 in Carrington & Robinson 2004). This ‘old model’ has to a large extent been challenged and overtaken at Mt Aspen Secondary College. Teachers make decisions and have choices and voices. They work in small-sustained professional teams and build localised professional discourses. Professional learning is not measured in terms of instantly measurable and transferable learning outcomes for students. The Professional Development Coordinator has a high profile in the school and is highly respected by most teachers. But we continue to encounter pockets of deep resistance to active professionalism and are reminded by the leadership team of the previous years school climate survey where morale and communication difficulties were cited as barriers to staff well-being.

The account of Smith, Lee & Newmann (2001), whilst resonating with our experiences and knowledge of professional learning, however, now speaks to the silences, and the erasures of this literature. Moreover it is in the literature of major research and development programs in which biographical or autobiographical orientations are represented (Nias 1989, Lortie 1975, Connelly & Clandinin 1999, Britzman 2003) that foreground our experiences at Mt Aspen Secondary College. Deborah Britzman (2003) reminds us of the intensity involved in the experience of learning to teach:

One of the great surprises in learning to teach is how deeply emotional an experience it is and how quickly one's emotions become fantasies of rescue and revenge. How easily one can move from elation and hope to embarrassment and blame, from feeling all is in control to becoming undone, all within a moment's notice. How easily one can become lonely in a crowded classroom or suddenly wish for solitude and to be left alone. In the emotional life of a teacher, how easy it is to hate or love students, colleagues, and the self...How, even if no other adult is in the classroom, one feels watched and judged, or that one wishes someone would magically appear and help because that other knows exactly what to do to fix a mess...And there is a sense that all of these thoughts and affects should remain hidden, lest the teacher appears too emotional, uncertain, or vulnerable (p. 21).

Whilst most of the teachers at Mt Aspen Secondary College are highly experienced and talented teachers, the current context of performance and accountability, has reconceptualised curriculum and the need for extended professionalism. To some extent our work has focused teachers' attention on the complexity of their work. The sharing of significant narratives has allowed the micro world of the individual teacher to be turned inside out. Experienced teachers at Mt Aspen Secondary College are feeling the heat.

Britzman (2003), drawing on Bakhtin (1975), affirms the image of teaching as a dialogic relationship : 'teaching must be situated in relationship to one's biography, present circumstances, deep commitments, affective investments, social context, and conflicting discourses about what it means to learn to become a teacher' (p. 31). Further, she argues that teaching involves 'coming to terms with one's intentions and values, as well as one's views of knowing, being, and acting in a setting characterized by contradictory realities, negotiation, and dependency and struggle' (p. 31). She also explains that 'Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become (p.31).

Personal and professional theory

In recent work (Moss et al. 2004) we have attempted to develop a simple form for thinking about identity and who we are as teachers. It is not intended that this be read as a model for teaching. Rather it is a way of noticing what contributes to our personal and professional theory that informs learning and teaching decision-making and actions. The model is an invitation to think about:

- who you are personally and professionally,
- what your beliefs are,
- the pedagogical actions you initiate with your learners.

A visual representation of this form is:

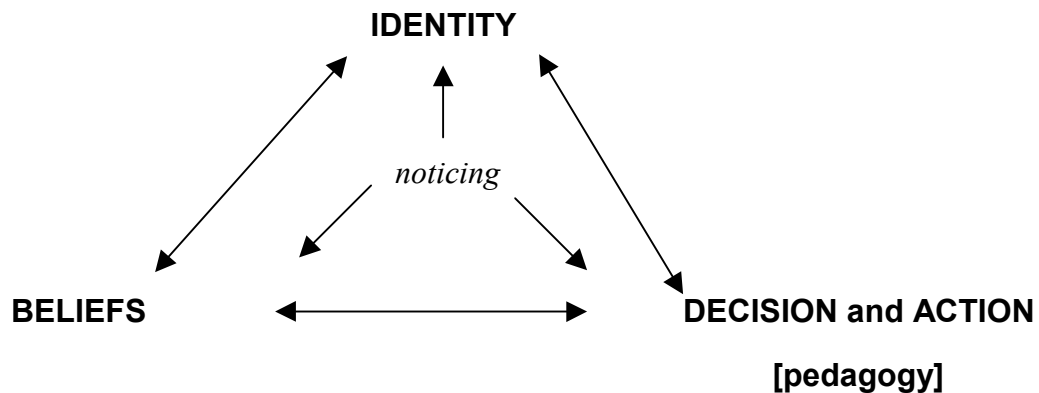


Figure 1 Shaping personal and professional theory

The three interdependent aspects of Figure 1: identity, belief and action continually interact with each other. We have called the movement between these elements ‘noticing’. This term is intended to shape an active process of awareness, reflection and response. ‘Noticing’ as opposed to observing, means looking beyond the superficial to allow interpretation of influences and elements that are not always directly observable. It is also knowing what to observe. It is observing from within your particular framework of self, knowledge and belief. As Mason (2002, p. 1) notes we have to develop implicit

theories of action in order to make professional life tolerable. Judyth Sachs (2003) provides a starting point for her discussion about teacher professionalism with the following observation:

The idea of professionals and professionalism has such common currency in everyday language that the explanatory power of these concepts is becoming meaningless. At a time when real estate agents refer to themselves as professionals, window cleaners claim that they provide professional service and sellers of used cars celebrate a professional code of practice, we are left asking what relevance does the concept have for teachers individually and collectively? (p.1).

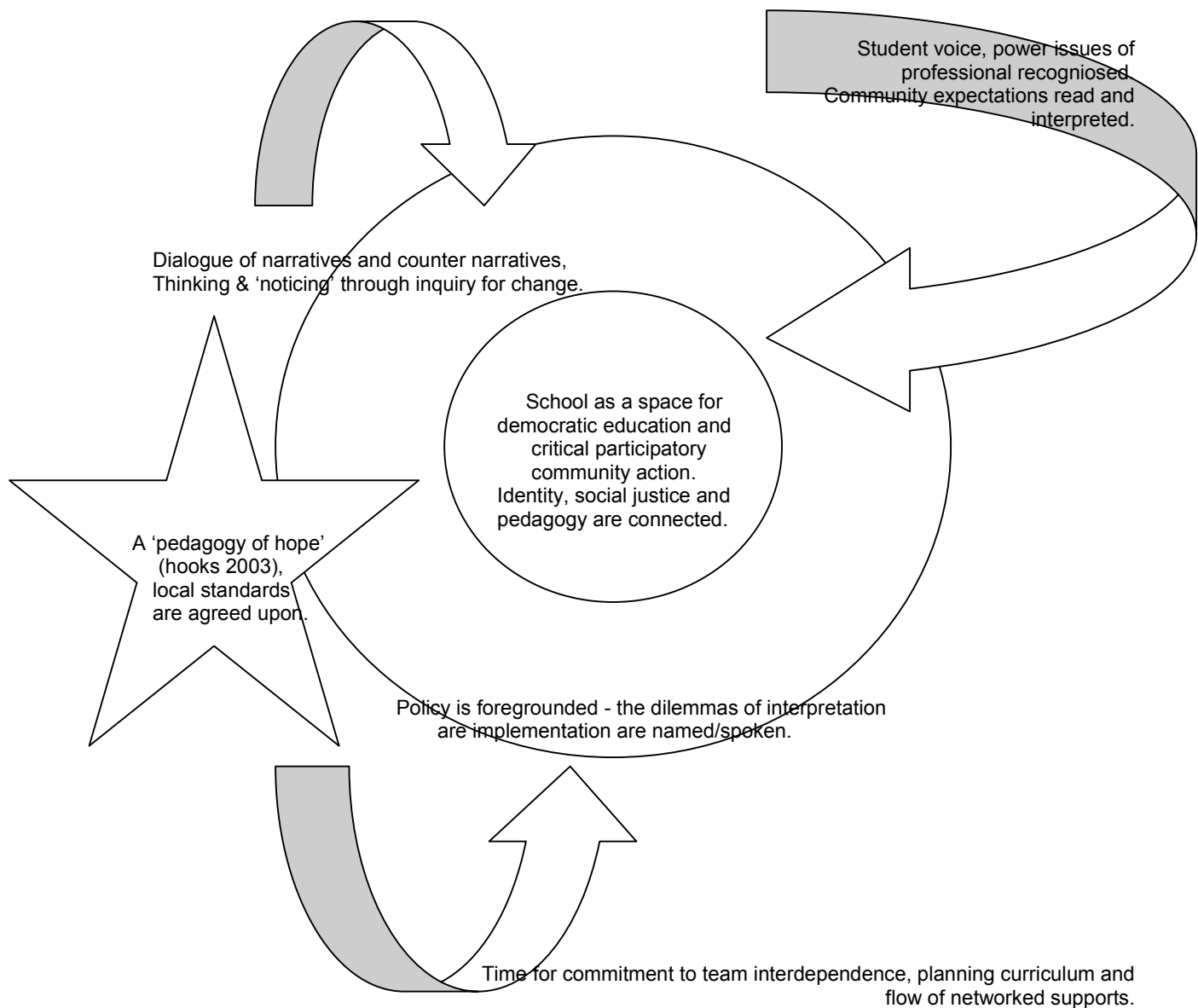
Currently in Victoria the professional organisation established to represent teachers, the Victorian Institute of Teaching, is complicit in implementing the agenda to reduce teaching to bundles of skill and competence through restricted domains of practice, the antithesis of both Mason's and Britzman's scholarship. As Furlong, Barton et al (2000) remind us '(D)espite the widespread use of the term, the concept of a 'professional' remains deeply contested in our society' (p. 4). In particular:

As professionals work in uncertain situations in which judgment is more important than routine, it is essential to effective practice that they should be sufficiently free from bureaucratic and political constraint to act on judgments made in the best interests (as they see them) of the clients (Hoyle & John, 1995 in (Furlong et al., 2000)

To this end, as professional partners with our colleagues at Mt Aspen Secondary College, we are reminded that Australian education in the twentieth century has been overlaid with largely technical solutions derived from dominant hegemonic positions (Connell 1994, p.137), and progress towards more generative curriculum has been all too slow. Our learning at Mt Aspen College is ongoing. We are all insiders and outsiders engaged in fraught and partial business, but we have been confronted with what it means to embrace, through professional learning, a commitment firstly to the diversity of teachers' biographies and secondly the 'other person' or 'other community' (hooks 2003, p. 47). Professional learning is a space to be taken up through networks, dialogues of narratives

counter narratives and inquiry (see Figure2). Thanks St Aspens Secondary College for the timely reminder and about collaborative networks and their legitimacy in producing voice and free flowing thinking, we are now more hopeful.

Figure 2: Flows of sustainable professional practice: making more schools inclusive



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