School and university partnerships: The development and consolidation of a process of collaboration

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Modern educational dialogue espouses the need for collaboration, teamwork and cooperation order to create ‘teaming organisations’ (Senge 1990). A true ‘teaming organisation’ will have input from both universities and schools. This can be achieved by linking educational research to school practice through the formation of partnerships. Unfortunately, despite attempts to develop links, a gap still exists between schools and universities.

A major obstacle preventing university educators and school educators developing effective partnerships has been a lack of understanding. Pre-conceived ideas about status, expertise and motives tend to transcend the reasons for collaboration. Sirotnik expresses the situation:

The norms, roles and expectations of educators in each of these realms could not be more different, for example, the regimen of time and space in the schools versus the relative freedom of these precious commodities in the university selling: an ethic of inquiry in the university versus an ethic of action and meeting immediate needs in the schools...These two cultures are very different and it is hard to fit them together in productive, long-term, useful ways (1988).

From the school perspective, teachers have been surprised and even fearful of approaches by university academics coming to the chalk-face. This fear of the unknown nature of the work and the expertise of the other has caused major problems. Educators in schools have perceived that theoretical knowledge gives academics the power to meddle in schools and that the university educator could be checking on efficiency and collecting data to expose weaknesses. University educators have often felt misplaced and ill-at-ease in a school setting. They often have access to knowledge that could facilitate improved learning in schools but feel inadequate in the role of ‘the expert’.

In the past some attempts at collaboration have aggravated the situation. For instance:

- attempts to collaborate have been construed as ‘good deeds’ rather than useful experiences by both parties;
- teachers have felt that the academic has interfered in the working of the school;
- academics have indicated to the school that they are the mere providers of data to suit the needs of the paper to be published rather than to forge long-term school improvement;
- many teachers see the intrusion as additional work in an already crowded curriculum.

These examples highlight some approaches which have been detrimental to the establishment of effective partnerships. Schools have seen the researcher as having the power and status in a hierarchy rather than as a partner. Researchers have a long history of elitism, of being the 'knowers' and creators of new knowledge. Even the use of the words 'academic—researcher' and 'school practitioner—teacher' are fraught with notions of superiority—one as
the doer and the other as the creator. Consequently teachers have been distrustful of the findings of academic research contributing to the strained relationship between the two groups.

In recent years there has been a growing change to this elitist and, we might suggest, flawed approach. The roles of teachers and academics have undergone significant change. Teachers have become involved in their own research and the cosseted role of the academic is underdoing scrutiny and change. Research in schools undertaken by university educators has continued but there has been a quantitative and qualitative leap in research undertaken by teachers themselves. The idea of the practitioner as researcher has been an important change in the education research scene and is slowly gaining respectability.

The benefits for school–university collaboration have been discussed by a number of writers, mostly written from the university–academic perspective and they are generally not without commitment and support for this change. As in good academic sites there is a questioning and criticism of this movement as the teacher-as-researcher movement has gained impetus. Huberman in Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1998) accepts that teacher research is moving mainstream and has questioned whether teacher research is research at all. Huberman imposes on this new movement the generally accepted features of research that of generalisability, truth and transferability. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1998) suggest that Huberman misses the point and state that the possibilities for learning from teacher research have great potential:

....it is precisely their inside perspectives as participants and the distinctive lenses they use to make sense of classroom life over long periods of time that promise to illuminate new aspects of teaching, learning, and schooling (p. 26).

A new era for education research is providing exciting possibilities for both university researcher and school practitioner. Where there is mutual trust and teamwork to determine united purposes there is much to be gained for teacher and academic professional development as well as improved outcomes for schools and universities. The benefits of collaboration need to be discussed and understood. But these benefits can only occur if there is understanding of the processes and assumptions underlying the collaboration. Sachs (1997b) believes that partnerships are based on two assumptions—power and social relationships.

This paper describes the process of developing a partnership between Kurri Kurri High School and the University of Sydney. An understanding of power and social relationships was integral to the success of the partnership. The acknowledgment that there were two different cultures, that the differences were accommodated and that there were a number of commonalities was central to the collaboration. The experiences throughout 1997 and 1998 have provided the authors with new insights into the potential of links between school and university. This paper documents the tenuous path of the partnership, the experiences and benefits of collaboration between schools and universities. The paper does have a happy ending.

Background to the partnership

The Australian National Schools Network has been modelling processes of collaboration while attempting to build a culture of research in schools (Carter & Halsall 1998). Research
circles involving personnel from a range of diverse sectors including school- based and university personnel have been one part of the new culture. Research circles are based on principles of equality and democracy. The different perspectives of participants are shared, challenged and respected within their own context, knowledge and understandings.

In 1997, through the national middle schooling project, in conjunction with the National Schools Network, the collaborative partnership between the University of Sydney and Kurri Kurri High School began. The research circle was instrumental in linking the diverse views of the school and the university. Barriers were removed, roles were negotiated and re-defined and mutual outcomes of the partnership were established. In this case it was the common interest in research into an aspect of educational innovation: integrated curriculum in the middle school as a concept for improving outcomes for young adolescents provided the mutuality of the partnership.

The School

Kurri Kurri is a comprehensive high school situated in semi-rural New South Wales. The majority of teachers are fairly conservative and have taught in the Hunter Valley for their entire teaching career. The community is characterised by persistent unemployment with many households in the low socio-economic level. The school has been identified by the Department of Education as a disadvantaged school for a number of years. Curriculum emphasis has traditionally been rigid with an academic bias. There has been little desire to change, despite the fact that student interest, motivation, truancy and retention rates reflect the failure of the present structure to meet the needs of many students.

In 1994 after professional development input, exit outcomes for students of Kurri Kurri were formulated by all staff. There was a general agreement that any future curriculum change should aim to achieve these outcomes for all students. During 1995 several curriculum alternatives were investigated and as part of the review the school saw the advantages to be gained by joining the Innovative Links Roundtable and later the National Schools Network.

At the beginning of 1996 a climate survey was initiated to determine staff opinion on matters relating to the effectiveness of the curriculum offerings at Kurri Kurri. The following areas of concern were identified:

- the atmosphere in the school did not focus on student learning;
- students were not being given opportunities to think for themselves;
- the curriculum was not meaningful, challenging and balanced in many cases;
- staff were not working as a cohesive team;
- shared decision-making was not occurring.

A School Improvement Team was set up to undertake a major curriculum review. The team included members of the school executive, teachers, ancillary staff, students and parents. It was determined that the team would use the tools of quality management to analyse the present curriculum offerings, to investigate alternative curriculum options, and to link any changes to the exit outcomes agreed on by all staff.

Context for the partnership

During 1996 the School Improvement Team developed a middle school model to be
implemented in year 7, 1997. It was believed that this model would allow for the development of an integrated approach to learning. The teaming of teachers would facilitate the adoption of an integrated curriculum and discussions between teachers would lead to the sharing of more relevant teaching strategies. The model proposed that year 7 would be organised into six mixed ability classes with two teachers from two different key learning areas forming a team for each class, to make a total of twelve teachers. Literacy was the common link between each subject area. Skills and knowledge were developed for all teachers in the middle school through a range of professional development activities.

Ongoing meetings between the teams occurred at least once a week to ensure that management decisions, welfare matters, literacy issues, assessment and reporting procedures and teaching strategies were discussed in an atmosphere of collaboration and support.

This model was so successful in 1997 it was extended in 1998 with the inclusion of twenty-six staff members into the teaching teams. Professional development of staff involved in teams was unprecedented and the changes had a profound effect on the culture of the school. For example, staff have shown an interest in the innovation, a willingness to become involved in the change and a commitment of their own time to develop professionally.

One of the important aspects of the philosophy of Kurri Kurri High School was that the school had embraced the concept of teacher-as-researcher to effect change in the school. The concept of teacher involvement in school-based research as a strategy for school improvement had been explored and adopted.

The success of Kurri Kurri’s improved outcomes for students and for teacher professional development can be attributed to a number of factors and are supported by Carter and Halsall (1998) who identify essential characteristics of teacher-as-researcher in school improvement:

- the teachers undertook research into a practical problem;
- data was collected and analysed for the explicit purpose of improving an identified and owned problem of the school;
- the focus was on professional development at the school site;
- change occurred as a result of the data collected and analysed; and
- constant and on-going monitoring was undertaken as part of the school improvement focus.

Developing the partnership

One of the findings of the Research Circle in the Middle School Project was that ‘the Research Circle model of collaborative research best serves the goal of equitable outcomes’ (Barratt 1998). On paper the notion of a school–university collaboration seemed an interesting idea. But the ambiguity of the roles was met with suspicion by both the school and the university. Time had to be spent exploring the ways of how each partner could mutually benefit. The partners believed and made explicit that a partnership had to be a two-way relationship.

The implications of becoming involved in the National Schools Network research circle in early 1997 were not realised initially at Kurri Kurri High School. Two staff members who attended the first meeting of the research circle were apprehensive. Their feelings were of inadequacy and insecurity. From the school perspective the whole concept of working
with a university colleague was a novel concept. The goal was to produce material for the National Schools Network but how this was to be done had not been specified. At the same time the university colleague was to be a part of the research circle but that role had also not been defined. The school personnel felt that the university colleague was unsure about the role that the university would play. The first conversations were tentative, to say the least.

Vivienne White pinpoints the uneasy feelings experienced by those involved in university–school links:

Here we have a group of people from two, sometimes very different worlds, working collaboratively, doing research together, digging where they stand. Any time we dig where we stand it gets messy; the answers aren't always there, and more often than not, we find surprising outcomes. Schools doing this type of research are breaking new ground, finding better ways to do their work, and learning about each other in the process. All of our organisational cultures have different pressures, and not all of them align. The pressure to publish is one, the daily pressure of thirty children's literacy needs is another; the lecture and tutorials await, the teacher unions have multiple pressures and policies, and employing authorities have various priorities (1995).

If the partnership was to be successful the fundamental tension about the roles and purposes of each party needed to be resolved. The model of working collaboratively was to be developed through negotiation by the school and the university. However, it took some time to determine the most appropriate roles. The partners discussed their concerns and determined that the partnership could be modelled in one of two ways.

The first, the expert–client model (Yeatman & Sachs 1995), determines that the role of academic is as facilitator, sharing professional expertise with the school. The implied power in this model was not appropriate to the model of collaboration that the partners envisaged. Another of the problems with this model was that theoretical knowledge would inform action with little consideration of the value of practitioner knowledge. The school felt that they had a wealth of experiential knowledge which the university could utilise. Both partners agreed that the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience should be the basis on which the partnership could be developed and that both the school and the university should benefit from the partnership.

The second model, which was ultimately adopted, is one based on collaboration, mutual respect, support and sharing of resources. The partnership was to be similar to the one which Hargreaves (1994) describes as a 'culture of collaboration'. As Hargreaves argues:

The challenge in developing extended cultures of collaboration is more than a challenge of administrative contrivance, of reconstructing interpersonal relations within the teaching community (1992, p. 235).

The idea of a collaborative relationship, one where there is mutual exchange and learning posed a different kind of challenge. The understanding by the partners of a collaborative partnership was that the roles would be flexible, changing and elastic. No assumptions about the roles were made but it was stressed that they would be durable, buoyant and resilient.

A collaborative partnership involves the mutual exchange of ideas and viewpoints and understanding which grows from looking from different perspectives. It was learning about
the differences in university and school cultures and determining at which point they could intersect which helped inform the partnership. One of the most significant aspects of developing and consolidating university–school collaboration was the importance of the social interrelationships. Time had to be spent getting to know each other, overcoming the distrust of each other and negotiating the roles by which both organisations could benefit. This was done at a variety of sites, including the university campus, the school site and on neutral territory. It was also essential that time and opportunities for exchange had to be provided on a continuing basis.

Both partners believed that each should learn from the experience, and dialogue was always conducted as equal partners. It was agreed that the roles would evolve and could change. The university colleague would be able to observe the school from a dispassionate and different viewpoint and would therefore able to give an objective perspective on what was happening at the school. The university colleague could act as ‘critical friend’ (Altichter, Posch & Somekh 1993), a confidant and mentor to discuss situations and to give expert advice. At the same time the teacher could provide a different perspective, bring new understandings and provide research opportunities for both the school and the university.

Once an understanding of the roles and responsibilities required for a partnership were established, the focus was to produce quality materials for the National Schools Network and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association research circle. But even in those early times there was an excitement relating to the long-term possibilities of the link between school and university.

**Reflection on the partnership**

The partnership which evolved was strong, sustained and equal. The reasons for its success were:

**Negotiation of roles**

The partners were willing to negotiate their roles. The flexibility and elasticity of the roles as they evolved were important as the partners mutually exchanged their expertise. Joint writing projects, sharing of resources and mutual staff development initiatives are some examples of this exchange. As Sachs (1997b) suggests:

> Through building joint endeavours, teachers and academic associates are involved in extending how both parties work in schools and universities alike. It means that both parties search for possibilities and alternatives, and in all this they learn from their ongoing interactions.

Both partners respected the different cultures of the two organisations and understood that the demands on time were different. Previously schools assumed that university educators had time for reflection and freedom. However, as result of the partnership there was a greater understanding of the demands of the university educator. Similarly university educators have learned that teachers' roles in schools are diverse. The ongoing demands of school, community and system must be met. However, for school improvement to occur, a culture of research must also be developed.
Development of social relationships

The development of social relationships was essential to a successful collaboration. Mutual benefits occurred when the partners were willing to give the time needed to develop the social interactions. The university and school partners made visits to each other’s workplace, attended conferences together, exchanged resources and papers and created opportunities to talk and share with each other face-to-face. The frequency of the visits was important to the long-term success of the partnership.

Within the school, the partnership was established carefully. Communication was essential and involved discussion about the links in a relaxed atmosphere. During the school visits the university partner was able to observe how the school operated. Staff members were encouraged and given time to talk with the university colleague. The university colleague attended meetings at the school which involved teachers, parents and students. Involvement in the total school community enabled the university partner to understand and relate to the school ethos.

An important outcome of the partnership was that the school visits were not seen as intrusive. The university colleague felt comfortable within the school and was met with warm enthusiasm by the school community. Teachers were keen to share their ideas and their experiences. The university colleague has gained new insights from these interactions. Good social relationships allowed trust to be developed.

Integration of theory and practice

The partnership provided an important forum for the integration of theory and practice. Ideas related to contemporary educational theory and practice were shared. The university colleague and the National Schools Network provided a source of knowledge and expertise. The links enabled a culture to develop in the school whereby educational theory was valued. Its review was crucial to the change process.

Current theory is used to inform future practice. There is a greater benefit, pointed out by Carter and Halsall (1998): that of the empowerment of teachers. Teachers develop new theories which emerge from the analysis and exploration of their practice. By working at the school site the outsider or academic can support and contribute to the research culture. The university partner brings a different, more distant and objective perspective to school improvement. When data are collected by an ‘outsider’, objectivity and credibility are increased and it corroborates data already collected.

Outcomes of the partnership

The partnership enabled the school and university to jointly prepare and submit the materials required by the National Schools Network within the tight deadlines. The university colleague offered expertise in reading the documents and suggestions to meet the academic rigour required in such documents.

The partnership also provided staff development opportunities for staff at the school. Members of the research circle were able to present at a workshop session at the ACSA Conference in July 1997. This forum provided an excellent opportunity for school personnel to network with academics and staff from other schools and systems. Staff felt comfortable discussing innovations and their relationship to current educational theory. The school—
university link had initiated an educational dialogue in the school and the wider educational community. Staff were able to develop networks with other university personnel and practising teachers. These networks were invaluable in supporting future planning innovation and planning.

A culture of research has been firmly established in the school. Teachers have ‘come to know the epistemological bases of their practice’ (Sachs 1997b). The practitioners have begun to ask critical questions about their practice, collected and analysed data and presented their research both within the school and to audiences outside of the school setting. As change has been primarily concerned with understanding and improving educational practice at the classroom level there has been widespread acceptance of staff to school change and improvement.

The partnership has also contributed to the acceptance of teacher as valued researcher at the school. School staff have learned the means and skills of academic writing and presentation of research reports. The publication of materials which relate to the school have been well received, especially as the documents celebrate the changes implemented at the school. Morale at the school has improved as a result of the school community seeing published documentation of their work.

There were a number of unanticipated outcomes from the partnership. During discussions, parents questioned the university educator about the theoretical underpinnings of the innovations. They were keen to link educational theory to practice and validate the change. The level of interest and participation of parents was surprising and encouraging. They also took the opportunity to be quite candid about the school—its advantages as well as its shortcomings. It was unfortunate perhaps that they saw the university person as the expert who could fix up what they saw as shortcomings of the school!

Teachers, students and parents were keen to share their views in the collection of data. Using the outside person as a data gatherer encouraged the openness with the interviewees. As Carter and Halsall (1998, p.90) point out:

they (external critical friends) can sometimes more easily gain access to, and elicit more honest responses from, certain sorts of data providers.

A further unanticipated outcome was the involvement of the university colleague in the training of a group of teachers in research skills. They were able to understand the wealth of data already in schools which was untapped and then suggestions were made about how that data could be used for analysis and reporting. Teachers felt inexperienced to accurately report their research findings. This concern about the form of reporting is supported from other research (Carter & Halsall 1998) who state that schools suffer from their lack of knowledge about the language currently accepted in research reporting. The university colleague was able to assist in this role, offering commentary and suggestions.

The importance of the role of the teacher-as-researcher has contributed to school improvement at Kurri Kurri High School. The school is keen to celebrate its successes and now has the confidence and credibility to share beyond the school community. This would not have happened without the contributions and opportunities created by the university partner.

The link between the school and the university has survived beyond initial expectations. The project was a short-term collaboration which was to terminate after six months. However, the partners have realised the future benefits for both school and university and teamwork has developed. For example, the school has a strong literacy focus. The
integration of some of the innovative approaches to teaching literacy are being explored as part of teacher training programs in literacy across the curriculum. Visits by student teachers to the school are planned in the future. Further research projects are being negotiated. The school is currently undertaking research concerned with assessment and reporting. The School Improvement Team is building a knowledge base of research articles and is working in conjunction with the university and the National Schools Network. After eighteen months the exciting possibilities anticipated at the start of the partnership have been realised. The ongoing strength of the partnership is confirmed by the continual generation of ideas and opportunities.

Conclusion

The experiences of the authors have clearly demonstrated that there are mutual benefits to be gained from university–school partnerships. The creation of a professional dialogue both in schools and universities has generated analytical insights into, and improvement to, classroom practices (Yeatman & Sachs 1995). The professional exchange especially witnessed first-hand by being on-site, had benefits for the academic. As Sachs (1997b) points out:

Central to this is the ability to talk about it, to tell stories about it, not as a second order representation of what to do but as an integral part of what it is to be an expert performer. Learning is thus a way of being in a particular social world not merely knowing about it or describing it.

This partnership has moved beyond professional dialogue. Both partners feel comfortable and confident to exchange ideas openly and honestly. Teamwork and equality are essential. Each partner can challenge each other's viewpoint to demonstrate another perspective which is the basis of a true 'learning community'. The collegiality within the school community and its willingness to be open to scrutiny encourages collaboration. Kurri Kurri High School is proud of its achievements and celebrates its successes. It is this confidence which enables the school to welcome outsiders into its midst.

The validation of teachers-as-researchers continues to grow. The involvement of university colleagues with school personnel in the collection and use of data supports and expands the greater acceptance of schools as being valuable contributors as well as recipients of the research process.

This partnership continues to work for a number of reasons. The roles were negotiated initially but the roles have been re-negotiated and changed; further avenues for exchange have been explored. The university colleague has continued to be involved in the school improvement process; the school partner has continued to contribute to the research output both inside and outside the school setting. The structures have been put in place to ensure that the partnership will survive beyond the personalities of the people involved.

This study demonstrated that collaborative partnerships result in improved learning outcomes for the school and the university. The experience has provided numerous challenges for the future which will enhance educational theory and practice.

If these initiatives are undertaken by both academics and school-based practitioners then teacher education can be both reconceptualised and university faculties restructured in mutually complementary ways. The
outcomes of this activity will be the development of a more active, informed and socially responsible profession (Sachs 1997a, p.55).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


