

Reflections on collaborative research from the realms of practice¹

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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to share some of my learning about collaborative school-based research.

As I am among friends, I would like to let you know how I actually came to be here. Late last year, at the end of a very long and difficult week—it was a dark, rainy and cold Friday evening—I stayed back at school to sort through a pile of unopened mail. As I began looking at the mail, I came across a rather interesting letter on Sydney University letterhead. I remember holding it up to the light and thinking that ‘it looks authentic, like the real thing’. But as I opened and read the letter, I decided that one of my friends—soon to become an ex-friend—was having a joke with me. I honestly took the invitation to speak at this conference as a joke. Without too much thought, I filed the invitation in the bin! Several weeks later, a rather anxious John Currie rang me and said, ‘Hey, we haven’t heard from you’. It was only then that I took the invitation seriously. John was absolutely stunned that I would see an invitation to speak at a conference like this as a joke.

I tell you this story not to trivialise the importance of this get together, but to show you that school-based educators often place research, and thinking and discussion about research, as ‘somewhere out there’, as part of the work of others rather than part of the work we do in schools.

In the end, I was pleased to accept the invitation to speak, as it challenged me to think about:

- research;
- the purposes of inquiring into everyday activities at class and school levels; and
- the importance of getting together with others to learn with them.

I am pleased to be here to share with you some of what we have learnt about collaborative research at Riverdale School. However, I want to make it clear that our work is still in progress, so I haven’t a finished story to tell. We still have so much more:

- to know,
- to understand, and
- to learn.

These words form part of our school logo and are based on the Aboriginal word ‘tirkandi’, which is part of the language of the Karna Plains people who originally lived in the area where our school is situated. Seeking to know, understand and learn is a very important part of our school culture and I look forward to talking about that with you. I hope that by sharing some of our disasters and our delights, I can inject some school-focussed insights into our collective conversations about collaborative research.

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In this session I plan to:

- provide you with some information about our school so that you can appreciate the context in which our learning has taken place;
- briefly describe the research projects in which we have been involved;
- discuss our learning from collaborative research with university-based colleagues; and
- outline how and why we have involved our R-7 students as collaborators in our research.

Finally, I will summarise where we, as a school, can go from here and invite you to join with me in accepting some of the challenges that we all face as we seek to forge more successful collaborative partnerships between school-based and university-based educators and researchers.

Riverdale R-7 School: The research context

Multi-aged classes

Riverdale R-7 School commenced in July 1990 with 48 students, grouped together in two multi-aged classes. By the end of term 2, 1998, the school had 346 students in 13 multi-aged groups and a small special education setting for students with vision and intellectual impairment and disordered perception. The commitment to multi-aged grouping has grown out of continuous critical reflection about:

- current practice;
- feedback from students and parents; and
- national research into improving student learning.

Shared decision-making

Many of the school's practices grew out of that tiny start. For example, our commitment to collaborative decision-making evolved from a time when it was really easy to have a whole school involved in decision-making; all of the students and all of the staff and many of the school council members gathered during the day, sat on the floor, and discussed 'Well, what shall we do next?' As the school has grown, we have reaffirmed our commitment to shared decision-making, but we have also needed to develop structures and strategies that will enable that to happen.

Student profile

Although most of our students live in families where English is spoken as the first language, we have small numbers of students from Polish, Laotian, and Aboriginal cultures. Significant numbers of students live in poverty and in a variety of family structures. Rather than forming an homogenous group, Riverdale students have diverse needs and bring a wide range of experiences and perspectives to school.

Student participation

A feature of our school is the ability of students to participate in, and describe, many aspects of school life. Students regularly talk with interstate and international visitors about their participation in the school's decision-making processes. Rather than have a Student Representative Council, students and staff decided to use a system of committees, with each committee accepting responsibility for one aspect of the school. We have 10 committees with one student from each of the 13 classes on each, so, at any one time, 130 students aged 5 to 13 work on committees to 'have a say' about what happens at their school.

This kind of arrangement doesn't just happen. Student participation is 'lived' at Riverdale as we deliberately teach the skills that are required for this level of student involvement in the life of the school.

Staff collaboration

We are committed to working collaboratively at Riverdale. However, even with 25 people we needed to build some structures and systems that enable small teams to meet every fortnight. The purpose of these teams is to provide support and to enable people to develop close relationships with some others on staff, so they have a real sense of belonging. Collaboration is really built on trusting relationships where people are safe to share their differences; where they are willing to voice alternative ideas without fear of derision or rejection.

By working collaboratively we have had to break down institutionalised roles and hierarchical responsibilities. One small way we do this is to call everybody at the school by their first names—absolutely everybody. We have come a long way—and sometimes we get it wrong! Yet we continue to work towards mutuality and equity in our decision-making, goal-setting and evaluation. We believe that:

learning occurs as we bring different perspectives to the table, challenge others' thinking and compare our experiences as we work together (Johnston & Kirscher 1996, pp. 147-8).

Research

Research is part of our culture at Riverdale. We believe that we can only improve if we are thinking about what we are doing and challenging ourselves and each other to find better ways of teaching and learning. An important part of our work is continued critical reflection on our practice and a commitment to changing structures and strategies that impede student learning and effective teaching.

Since 1994, Riverdale has participated in a range of collaborative research projects which can be placed along a continuum from completely school driven research to university led research. Some of these have been:

- within-school collaborative projects where we have worked with staff and students on issues identified by the school as problematic. An example of this was our National Schools Network funded action research into restructuring staff training and development from a whole-school focus to team level;

- school–university collaborative projects where school-based researchers and university colleagues worked as equal partners to research such things as the development of a whole school peer support program;
- Salisbury Plains Coalition of Schools and university collaborative research where school-based personnel identified an issue of concern and sought assistance from university colleagues. An example of this was the Childhood Resiliency Research Project (Johnson, Howard, Dryden & Johnson 1997) in which the expertise of university researchers was crucial in determining methodological approaches and the analysis of data.

As a result of our involvement with these and other research projects, we know that:

- critical reflection is most effective when small teams or teaching partners are released from usual duties. This doesn't mean that critical reflection only happens during that time, but that it enables 'space' in which teachers can think, question, challenge, and forge new ideas. We have found that moving from the physical setting of the school often assists staff in small teams to see issues from different perspectives, almost with 'new eyes';
- there are benefits from undertaking school-wide action research;
- there are benefits from joining other schools and university colleagues in collaborative research partnerships.

As a consequence, we have been really determined in our efforts to gain additional funding so that we can release people, so that we can link with colleagues in other States and schools, so that we can conduct action research, and so that we can continue to learn with our University colleagues. We are currently engaged in the following special projects:

- the Curriculum Corporation's trial of civics and citizenship curriculum materials;
- the Department of Education Training and Employment's (DETE) Cluster Curriculum Project, which involves conducting action research into the programs and structures to teach democratic decision-making.;
- the School Based Research and Reform Project, a really exciting collaborative project between DETE, the University of South Australia and the Australian Education Union (SA) in which we are conducting action research into bullying and children's role in its prevention;
- the Northern Schools Pilot Project, a really challenging project in which we are looking at integrating therapy and educational practice to cater for the needs of some of our students who have severe disabilities.

Differences between schools and universities: A cultural chasm?

In talking about partnerships between school-based and university-based researchers, I would like to highlight two differences between the two groups which presented us with enormous challenges in our research. The differences represent a chasm or divide that separates key stakeholders in the research enterprise and can negatively impact on the degree of collaboration that can be achieved. The first difference relates to the valued forms of communication used in each professional culture, while the second relates to a theory—action dichotomy.

Valued forms of communication

Communication in schools, whilst supported by documentation, is largely oral. Certainly staff and students at Riverdale engage in a lot of talk which explains, justifies, and reviews particular practices. Documentation kept by teachers on their programming, student welfare issues and student achievement, and minutes of meetings, is often brief. Sometimes it is just a checklist or anecdotal jottings. I don't think that the kind of documentation teachers produce does justice to the quality of the educational debate and discussion that occurs in schools. Indeed, most of our documentation does not stand alone, as it requires more talk to explain and justify quite complex issues and decisions that are not reflected in our writing; our tradition is indeed oral.

In contrast to our oral tradition, the written word is strongly emphasised and, of course, valued in universities. Academics write all the time—memos, emails, applications for research funding, formal papers, lectures, reviews of literature, policy critiques, and, in these increasingly legalistic times, even feedback to students is largely written. Writing is almost as common as breathing, and constitutes the most powerful means of academic accountability.

This difference between the worlds of schools and universities was made apparent at our very first Roundtable meeting in the Innovative Links Project in September 1994. As part of the negotiation process about the outcomes of the project, a discussion document was prepared by one of the academic associates working on the project. In the document, it was stated that:

- the discipline of having to write often leads to deeper reflection and the revelation of new insights into our practices;
- publications increase our professional status and that of our institution;
- writing provides us with the opportunity to describe the complex reality of school change processes and therefore challenge simplistic bureaucratic recipes for change.

The gap between school- and university-based researchers threatened to become even greater, with a member of Riverdale's research group publicly claiming that, 'I am not a writer!' Such responses to the perceived rigours of writing were not limited to our school or even to the South Australian Roundtable. It is interesting to note that the journal writing associated with the action research undertaken by Susan Noffke's team caused initial tensions in their group. Barbara Clark, one of her partners, said 'They must be kidding! I don't have time to write everything down!' (Noffke, Clark, Palmer-Santiago, Sadler & Shujaa 1996, p. 168). She went on to say that 'this seemed an overwhelming task that really was of no immediate benefit.'

It was clear that Riverdale's teachers were keen on action, and were quite prepared to leave the writing and the development of theoretical insights to our university colleagues. However, we didn't get away with that so easily! Our university colleague listened to us, visited the classrooms of every member of the working party, was well informed about the kind of work people were doing, understood the pressure on teachers, and understood their reluctance to write. But she challenged us. She asked questions like:

- How will you remember what you have done and why?
- How will you compare the end of this project with the beginning?

- How will you record your growth?
- How will you record your changed thinking?

We didn't have answers to any of these questions!

However, we were also committed to not keeping individual journals, so we agreed on a compromise. We agreed that we would note our reflections about the action research process and our personal involvement in it at the end of each working party meeting. This was done as a collegial activity, rather than individually by group members, thus challenging the view that *individual and private* journal writing is an essential component of action research. The group had such a strong commitment to thoughtful reflection and this process of collaborative recording that no-one left working party sessions before 'group jottings' were completed.

One of the exciting aspects of preparing this address was having the opportunity to go back to our 'Innovative Links Memoirs Drawer' as we call it, to re-read our shared reflections, and to look at photographs, charts, diagrams and other evidence that confirmed that we had done some serious thinking about our research. I was also able to identify how our group reflections became more considered, and how we became increasingly willing to talk about our differences and to share our concerns and anxieties about the project.

Another source of tension within the project was the largely university driven expectation that one of the outcomes of the project should be a 'quality publication'. If the differences between school-based and university-based researchers over written products were large during the action research process, then they assumed mammoth proportions once the project was completed. While our university colleagues were united in their desire to produce a tightly written compilation of the schools' research and reform endeavours, school-based participants seriously questioned the purpose of such a publication, particularly once the project had ended. Most had 'moved on' to other initiatives and couldn't see the point of investing large amounts of time and effort in a publication that would bring few rewards to its school-based co-authors.

At issue were the different reward structures operating within schools and universities. Academics and their Faculties are rewarded in tangible and intangible ways for producing very formal and traditional written outcomes from their research work. Teachers, on the other hand, are rewarded for their research efforts primarily through the improvements they notice in the students they teach, and the collegial camaraderie they experience working together on common problems. For teachers, once the research enterprise ends, most of the rewards end too.

At Riverdale school we have worked really hard to document, in our own ways, the research processes we have used, and the outcomes we have achieved. Our documentation has taken the form of:

- pamphlets;
- summaries of successful teaching and learning strategies;
- short overviews of our work;
- newsletter articles;
- photographic histories;
- 'big book' displays.

These research 'products' served our domestic purposes quite well, but we realised that these forms of documentation did not allow us to share the extent and complexity of our

work with a wider audience. We began to realise that a new need—to have the means to share our learning with the wider educational community—could only be addressed through a more formal and detailed account of our work.

We would have preferred our university colleague to assume a major role in the write-up, but she insisted that ‘you need to have your say; your view is different; your voice is different’ (Le Cornu 1996). So, with her support, encouragement and patience we accepted joint responsibility for reporting our story. We negotiated processes which ensured that we met agreed timelines. We sought joint visibility, as well as shared responsibility in reporting our work. We shared writing tasks, scheduled editorial meetings, exchanged phone calls and faxes, and managed to remain friends despite the demands placed on us. As we can testify, collaborative writing involves challenging processes—ones that have to be recognised and acknowledged if school-based researchers are to be involved in the writing of more formal accounts of their work.

The theory–action dichotomy

The second aspect of the cultural chasm I would like to briefly explore is that of action versus theory. Perceptions about schools as places of action and universities as places of theory continue to influence our collaborative research initiatives. In spite of recent and impending changes to the professional lives of university-based researchers, they still seem to have the time to conduct research and to deliberate over their findings in ways that their school-based colleagues can not. They have more autonomy and discretionary time because they are not confined to classrooms with responsibility for thirty 8–10 year olds from 8.30 am until 3.15 pm. In fact, their role statement or job description values research, recognises the importance of reflection, and encourages dialogue with learned colleagues. So, the contrast between their lives and the action-oriented lives of classroom teachers, perpetuates the idea that academics theorise but rarely act on their theories, and that teachers act but rarely theorise about their actions. Joanne Saddler, one of Noffke’s partners, sums up this view when she writes that, ‘Public School Educators do not have the luxury to mull over ideas for months at a time before putting theory into practice’ (Noffke et al. 1996, p. 170).

However, I would like to challenge the veracity of such a stark characterisation of teachers’ work as it tends to make invisible the cognitive elements of that work.

Certainly the sense of urgency to do things in schools is intense, but I don’t think that the actions we take in schools are thoughtless or overly hurried or lacking in considered decision-making. Many of the reforms being implemented in schools are based on very close examinations of particular practices and their impact on students. The strategies we use might be informal but they are coherent and systematic.

Similarly, our collaboration with university researchers has led to a weakening of the stereotype of academics as ‘theory only’ contributors. Our university colleagues promoted purposeful reflection about our practice so that we could improve that practice, that is, so that some changes could be made to our actions. They were very clear—as we were—that the purpose of the reflection was to improve our actions. They assisted us in making explicit the links between theory and practice and in recognising that both theory and action are integral parts of our work as school educators.

Clearly, the divide between the school’s emphasis on action and the university’s perceived emphasis on theory need not be so great.

Action research

Through collaboration with university colleagues in the Innovative Links Project, and, indeed, our work with the National Schools Network, we have learned much about action research.

We have learned that action research is much more than what teachers already do; it is much more than a 'common sense' problem-solving process. We established that it is a process of sustained, systemic enquiry that involves planning, action, monitoring and reflection. We encountered some huge difficulties trying to do these things, yet I suspect that others face similar problems and dilemmas when they engage in action research. For example, we were swamped by the amount of rich and valuable data we collected. So much so, that it became a common joke to say that we nearly drowned as we became 'submerged' in all our data, rather than 'immersed' in the data as the handbooks on qualitative data analysis suggest!

Finding time to meet, and working towards whole staff commitment were also difficulties we had to overcome. But these were powerful lessons for us as we now know the advantages of starting small, releasing people to make action research part of their work rather than an 'add on' on top of their usual commitments, and involving different people on working parties.

Explaining action research to our students was also a priority, because we wanted them involved in the process as co-researchers. We said that action research is research we do together, in that it emphasises collaboration and the willingness to jointly explore issues. It emphasises that we are empowered to look at our own work, and that it is participatory. We have said that it helps us rethink much of what we take for granted in schools and that we should actively seek different ideas and perspectives. We have made it clear that action research is about change. It is about the commitment to be practical, to take actions as a result of our thinking. We have acknowledged that change is not comfortable, but messy, disruptive and exciting. We have said that action research is research that 'helps us to learn as we go', and that we don't have to wait until 'the end' to make discoveries.

Critical reflection

We have learnt about the importance of working with others outside of our own institution, so that the 'way we do it at Riverdale' doesn't become invisible, or uncritically taken for granted. We have valued the observations, comments and questions that have enabled our ideas and our assumptions to be challenged and made problematic. The role of our 'friendly outsiders' (Erickson & Christman 1996, p. 156) has been pivotal during this process.

However, 'critical reflection' can become a 'buzz phrase' in situations where those involved have no shared understanding of the processes or their purposes. It can become a slogan, which doesn't have links to other aspects of a school's culture and structure. The term can be used to 'dress up' what is fairly conventional and conservative thinking that lacks the challenging and problematising edge that characterises authentic critical reflection.

We have sought to guard against the dangers of diluting the practice of critical reflection in three ways. Firstly, we have consciously extended the data on which we reflect by including students' views and perspectives. Secondly, we have actively encouraged our university colleagues to challenge us by raising other perspectives on issues. Finally, we

have repeatedly used a simple but important question to focus our reflection. That question is:

- How will this make a difference for all students at Riverdale?

This question has enabled various groups in the school (including parents and students) to have a common and very fundamental criterion by which to evaluate the worth of current practices and reform proposals.

Some of our learning about critical reflection has occurred through our participation in the National Schools Network Professional Development Schools as well as through the Innovative Links Project. For example, at one of the NSN-PD Schools, Nancy Moore, who was then Principal of University Heights High in New York, presented three questions to help focus critical reflection:

- what?
- so what?
- now what?

When I first started using these questions to review and challenge our practices, some of our teachers sneered each time I asked, ‘so what?!’ However, the reason for posing the questions wasn’t to put down our work, but to encourage us to be more critical and honest. A typical sequence of questions would be:

- What are we doing? Describe it.
- So what? What does that tell us about what we believe and value? Is that what we want?
- Now what? What can we do differently?

These questions have enabled us to:

- make explicit the processes of critical reflection;
- ensure that our decisions were thoughtful;
- link our reflection directly to action.

We are still learning about critical reflection, but it is one means of challenging ourselves so that we maintain a critical and problematic orientation to our work at Riverdale.

Building relationships

Building relationships between school and university researchers is a really important aspect of any collaborative partnership. However, from a school perspective, there are significant barriers that need to be overcome before effective working relationships between school-based researchers and university-based researchers can be forged. Some of these barriers have their origins in peoples’ past experiences, while others are based on shared myths and common misconceptions of universities and academics.

At Riverdale, for example, some teachers openly feared being evaluated and judged by our university colleagues. Perhaps because of their past relationships with university lecturers prior to teaching or even during postgraduate study, some teachers felt vulnerable

about being judged and graded by these powerful 'experts'. They believed that the university academics involved in our projects (like the Innovative Links Project) held positions of authority over them, and that they would judge their work just as they had graded their assignments and their teaching as undergraduates. These fears of being graded or being judged were quite overwhelming and debilitating for some teachers, particularly those who had had little contact with academics since leaving university. Interestingly, teachers within Susan Noffke's research team reported similar concerns about 'being graded' (Noffke et al. 1996, p. 169).

Other teachers feared that university academics would use a very formal and exclusive discourse which would marginalise them and devalue their professional knowledge and language. Many school-based people, particularly classroom teachers, had not had opportunities to talk about new ideas and literature, to debate different beliefs and philosophies, or to engage in critical dialogue with people outside of their school. Consequently, they entered the relationship with academics from a position of uncertainty about their ability to contribute, at best, or at worst, a position of inadequacy manifested in thoughts like, 'they'll think I'm stupid!'

In Peters' interview study of teachers involved in the Innovative Links Project, school participants revealed some degree of anxiety about interacting with university colleagues at the school level as well as in Roundtable meetings. As Peters reports,

This anxiety centred on perceptions of the academic nature of universities and was compounded where university colleagues used language that was perceived as highly theoretical (Peters 1997, p. 29).

One other problem we encountered was that some teachers thought that university academics had little of relevance to contribute to contemporary schools. Many middle-aged teachers had memories of their own training that were far from positive, so they were inclined to discount university input and involvement, and trivialise and deride it.

We tried to be fair by examining the barriers to forming relationships from the university perspective. As a staff we acknowledged that the rituals and routines of schools could be interesting, at best, and bewildering and alienating, at worst, for people who don't live with them daily. The frenetic pace of school life can also be a barrier for university-based people working in schools, as activities change every minute, and any conversation longer than about two minutes is inevitably interrupted!

We decided that it might be helpful to use a sporting metaphor to describe the difficulties university academics might experience working with us in schools. Given that there are invariably more school-based researchers working on a research working party, and that the group meets on its 'home ground'—the school—we viewed every meeting as an 'away game' for our university colleagues. From their perspective, some of the locals were a little aloof and even hostile, they had few of their supporters to cheer them, they were vastly outnumbered, and they didn't know some of the local rules and finer points of etiquette.

In spite of all these barriers to forming relationships between school and university personnel, our collaborative experiences with university-based researchers have been very positive, probably because they have been built on mutual trust and respect, and a commitment to reciprocal learning. It could also be that we have just been lucky in working with people who have displayed the personal and professional characteristics that enable collaborative partnerships to develop. Yet based on our experiences working with people

like Dr Rosie Le Cornu (University of South Australia), Professor Anna Yeatman (Macquarie University), and Dr John Dryden (University of South Australia) on a variety of projects at different times, we feel that we can highlight some of the characteristics of these researchers that we value, and that enabled us to work together to break down the barriers that impede quality collaboration.

Valuing our work and its context

Our university colleagues demonstrated that they valued our work and school context in a variety of ways:

- they came to the school, they lived with us, and they shared our professional lives; they didn't take the easier and safer option of staying 'disengaged'. Rather, they got in and got to know us well;
- they asked questions respectfully and with sincere interest. They seemed to follow Patton's maxim that 'it is a grave responsibility to ask and it is a privilege to listen' (Patton 1990, p. 359);
- they sought opportunities to contribute to the life of the school by offering to conduct staff development activities.

Becoming partners in our work

Our university colleagues became our partners by:

- communicating openly;
- being genuinely humble in acknowledging that they wanted to learn with and from us;
- treating teachers as fellow researchers whose perspectives and knowledge were valuable;
- negotiating ways of operating that took account of their needs and our needs;
- sharing power and prestige;
- ensuring that the voice of school-based participants was heard in larger forums and in the 'written word'.

Sharing knowledge and expertise

Our university colleagues generously shared their knowledge and expertise by:

- making links between our work and other research and theory;
- helping us develop and use different research techniques;
- challenging us by participating in shared critical reflection on our work;
- providing us with resources and professional reading.

Sharing our enthusiasm

Importantly, our university colleagues were genuinely excited about the research we were doing. They entered into it with enthusiasm and with a willingness to share our commitment to reform through research.

Learning from collaborating with students

Perhaps the most challenging collaborative research we have undertaken has been with our students. As I explained earlier, Riverdale has a culture of student participation which grew out of its small origins and an ongoing commitment to students 'having a say' in all school affairs.

We believe that student voice is central to the operation of the school and have programs, resources, time and a commitment from all teachers to support student participation. We believe that students have a right to have a say in the processes that effect their lives because it enables them to develop a sense of belonging and empowerment. We think that the inclusion of student perspectives on all school-based processes acknowledges young people's capacity to think about issues, demonstrates that they are treated with dignity and respect, and enables adults to see the familiar from an unfamiliar angle.

We have included students as partners in the research we have undertaken at Riverdale. In our first application to join the Links Project, we had the students involved in helping to write the application. Each home group selected a student to join the application writing team which discussed the project, heard input from staff and provided students with the opportunity to say, write or draw something in support of our application.

In those days we believed in being authentic, so grammatical and spelling mistakes all went into the application. Later, in our statement of acquittal for the project at the end of 1994, we named all 256 students at Riverdale, as non-teacher participants in our research. Our university colleagues were very tolerant of our 'over-the-top' commitment to conveying our inclusive research processes!

Students have always taken an active role in our research. Examples include:

- collecting data—in our study of the use of play spaces, 5, 6 and 7 year olds were part of a group that was rostered by other students to watch what was happening in the play ground, and they took their role as data gathers very seriously;
- analysing data—groups of students have helped analyse data, in the form of written feedback that was gathered from other students; and
- developing research instruments—students have proposed indicators to measure how effective committees are, by responding to the question, 'how can you tell if a committee is working well?'

Students have worked with staff to make sense of some of our accepted structures and strategies, but can we call our students true research partners? Can we really claim that they are collaborating with us? Jean Ruddock has urged caution in using the term 'partnership' with students. She rightly identifies the imbalance in power relationships in many schools and believes that the mutual respect that is necessary for any kind of partnership is not easy to achieve between staff and students. Ruddock suggests that 'it is not easy to build the kind of confidence and trust that genuine partnership across institutional and age barriers requires' (Ruddock 1997). I acknowledge that traditional, hierarchical ways of operating certainly act as barriers, that it takes time and commitment to build relationships and that it is not easy to create opportunities for children to influence their worlds.

But I am encouraged by the work of Shirley Grundy and her associates who found that 'not all schools marginalise students or ignore student voices' (Grundy, Bonser & Hickey 1997, p. 11). At Riverdale we are serious about working with our 5 to 13 year old students

to create a collaborative research community. We are also serious about forming more equal partnerships with them to investigate questions they raise about their schooling.

One of our research initiatives this year was prompted by feedback our students gave external researchers about the level of bullying in the school. Staff hadn't seen bullying, hadn't heard it, and found it difficult to understand. However, the feedback from students was clear, and now we are responding to the challenge of finding ways to involve our students right from the beginning of an action research project.

Conclusion

There are huge challenges for schools wishing to conduct action research into issues of local concern, particularly as external accountability requirements increase in the context of decreasing resources and the narrowing of criteria by which schools are assessed. We face the challenge of ensuring that research is an integral part of our work, rather than just an 'add-on'. We face the challenge of creating new ways of working with students that are more democratic and just. We face the challenge of maintaining collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships with our 'friendly outsiders' from the university sector. And we face the challenges associated with making sure that we share our learning with others in a civil, cooperative education community, rather than contributing to the insidious movement towards privatisation, competition and marketisation in education. School reform for improved teaching and learning is hard, it is complex, and it requires partners committed to working together in ways that promote our collective 'tirkandi'—our knowing, understanding, and our learning.

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