Nature of School-University Collaborative Research

Prepared for the Ontario Education Research Panel

By Anna Yashkina and Ben Levin, OISE

August, 2008

“Researchers do not know better, they know differently”

(Ancess, Barnett, & Allen, 2007, p. 332)

For decades schools and educational departments in universities have been connected through a number of activities in such areas as pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher education or teacher professional development, consultation, and research. Traditionally, universities were exclusive producers and providers of theoretical knowledge. Recently, the emphasis has gradually shifted, and the focus is now on collaboration and partnership between the two parties. This shift is particularly evident in the research area, wherein school-based educators have started to take an active part in designing and conducting research happening in their schools.

Levin (1993) identifies three rationales – pragmatic, philosophical and political - for turning research into a collaborative effort. A pragmatic rationale argues that the work of researchers will only have an impact to the extent that it is conducted in a collaborative manner. In other words, the more school people are involved in research, the more confident in and committed to the results they are. In the center of the philosophical argument is the view that one can only learn about a social world from the people in it. Researchers should take teachers perspectives and ideas seriously rather than treating them as “subjects” or “objects” of their
research. And finally, the political rationale states that researchers have a moral obligation not just to study, but also to act in the interests of those they study.

This paper will explore the nature of collaborative research between schools and universities. Five questions will guide the investigation: what does collaborative research look like?, what challenges are associated with collaborative research?, what factors support collaborative research?, what strategies can be used to advance collaborative research?, and what outcomes are associated with collaborative research?

What Does Collaborative Research Look Like?

Recent literature on the topic includes a number of cases of collaborative research efforts between schools and universities’ departments of education, ranging from small and informal ones, such as a university faculty member collaborating with several teachers to help them improve their practice, to large, complex and very formal ones, such as state-wide and even national networks of universities and schools sharing research tools and data, disseminating research results, and designing and implementing reforms.

The nature of inquiry universities and schools get engaged in also differ from case to case. In general, partnership studies focused on one or more of these three aspects: inquiry into the partnership process, inquiry into professional development, and inquiry into professional practice (adopted from Hunkins, Wiseman, & Willams, 1995). Inquiry into the partnership process, a systemic study of patterns, promises, and pitfalls of current partnerships, can substantially contribute the success of the partnership in the future. For example, one school-university partnership decided to analyze patterns of interaction between the partners assuming that interactions are the basic units of collaborative activity (Wiseman & Nason, 1993 in
Hunkins, Wiseman, & Williams, 1995). The analysis revealed that most discussions focused on the partners' self-interests, with only a few instances of discussion that focused on differences between partners' institutions. The study demonstrated to the participants that members of partnerships need more understanding of the nature of their interactions in order to improve their ability to be mutually supportive in partnership function.

Inquiries into professional development can help to evaluate current pre-service and professional development programs organized in partnerships. For example, partnerships will be able to assess what is going well in their programs and what needs revision and adaptation after collecting and analyzing reactions of teachers who have just completed particular professional development activities.

Inquiry into professional practice is a very beneficial area of research and inquiry in partnership schools. It focuses on how school educators can improve their practice by examining best practices and exploring current issues in schools and classrooms. Ross, Rolheiser, and Hogaboam-Gray (1999) provide a good example of how collaborative action research helped five Canadian teachers to increase their self-confidence and change their teaching practice. These teachers participated in two-phase action research, where with the help of university researchers they studied student evaluation practices of “exemplary” teachers (Phase 1) and then in Phase 2 they used the Phase 1 findings and inquiry processes to strengthen their own practice.

Despite such a variety, all of the authors seem to describe collaborative research as “research conducted with the active participation of people in an organizational setting, with the goal of producing knowledge which is meaningful and useful both for academic purposes and to the people in the setting being studied” (Levin, 1993, p. 331).
According to Tikunoff and Ward (1983), ideal characteristics of collaborative research are the following:

a. Researchers and practitioners work together at all phases of the inquiry process;
b. The research effort focuses on “real world” as well as theoretical problems;
c. Mutual growth and respect occur among all participants;
d. Attention is given to both research and implementation issues from the beginning of the inquiry process.

What Challenges Are Associated With Collaborative Research?

Many of the cases described in the literature lacked one or more of the ideal characteristics presented above. The reason is the complexity and difficulty of the collaborative process. In almost all cases, the authors, who were also the participants in the research partnerships they described, write about multiple challenges and tensions they had to face. The most common challenges were:

- Difference in agendas and expectations - Academics are required to do ‘‘research’’ and to write ‘‘research papers’’, and school-based practitioners are required to do ‘‘professional development’’. So, while academics want to engage in deep discussions based on observations and theories, educators expect an efficient PD package or something they can apply in the work;

- Lack of research knowledge and skills – Though teachers are expected to work alongside academics as co-researchers, they may feel like subordinates because they are considered or consider themselves lacking necessary research skills and knowledge;
- Ethical concerns – Academics wanted teachers to examine theories and situations to develop new understandings; teachers perceived academics as dominant and considered them as assessors of their teaching practice;

- Time constraints and methodological concerns – Different participants have different time expectations: the challenge is to find a way to compromise on project timelines that protect research rigour while also providing timely results. It also takes a lot of time for new partnerships and trust to develop;

- Lack of recognition - Universities often do not encourage applied research, while school organizations do not always see research as a way to cope with problems, School teachers rarely receive extrinsic rewards for participating in collaborative research;

- Political and financial instability - Unlike tenured university faculty, school boards are not stable over time. Publicly elected school boards can change their policies and programs with the turn of an election. Additional instability occurs as the district and the school experience shifting levels of state and local financial support. When educational financing goes down, a district may decide to discontinue funding collaborative research projects (Davies, Edwards, Gannon, & Laws, 2007; Gaskell & Flessa, 2007; Hunkins, Wiseman, & Willams, 1995; Mitchell, 2001).

What Factors Support Collaborative Research?

The following factors supporting collaborative research were identified in the literature:

- mutual interest

- clear expectations
• shared goals
• respect and trust in the other party
• flexible research design that would accommodate the demands of both parties
• willingness on the part of both parties to experiment with different research roles
• adequate allocation of time and resources
• long-term commitment on the part of university researchers and school and district personnel
• support and recognition from the administration
• shared power and ownership of the research project (Davies, Edwards, Gannon, & Laws, 2007; Lang, 2001; Schulz & Hall, 2004).

While widely supported in the literature, these factors are not always easy to create in practice. They are, however, are crucial for success. The literature offers a number of examples of partnerships that went awry because one or more of the above mentioned factors were not present. For example, in one case, lack of interest on the part of a school district led to lack of involvement and commitment and when collaborative research project disappeared from the picture the moment budget deficit became an issue (Levin, 1993). In another case, differences in expectations spoiled the picture (Davies et.al., 2007). While university researchers expected teachers to act as co-researchers and equals in extending current knowledge of all participants, teachers saw university researchers as the ones with the knowledge and the skills and expected to receive a more practical, already developed professional development package. When teachers realized that they were not getting what they expected, most of them dropped out.
What Strategies Can Be Used To Advance Collaborative Research?

The literature suggests that the following strategies can be helpful in overcoming some of earlier identified challenges and building successful research partnerships:

a. Implementing reward and recognition systems
   i. University tenure and promotion processes need to be adapted to take collaborative/applied research into account;
   ii. Top school and district administrators should demonstrate their full support of research partnerships;
   iii. Intrinsic rewards of collaborative research for teachers such as professional expertise, increased knowledge and efficacy, enhanced collegial interaction, and strengthened positive attitudes toward teaching, should be emphasized;

b. Dealing with time constraints
   iv. Schools can use pre-service teachers to support in-service teachers’ research activities;
   v. University students can be paired with teachers to serve as research assistants;
   vi. Sharing of tasks in research teams can decrease time commitments for teachers;

c. Dealing with lack of experience and training
   vii. For teachers not familiar with research techniques graduate study opportunities or workshops can be offered at the partnership school campus;
viii. Collective design, analyses and interpretation of data help engage different perspectives of practitioners, students and academics in ways that encourage critical reflection, collaborative learning, and mutual critique;

d. Disseminating knowledge

ix. Academics and teachers can contribute articles to journal and conferences;

x. They can also report findings to school boards, local educational groups, and peers or build them into professional development and graduate study;

xi. Teachers should also apply newly created knowledge to their instructional practice;

e. Providing political and financial stability

xii. School boards should emphasize long-term commitments to the research partnership by allocating sufficient funds and supporting the partnership’s agenda;

f. Being open-minded

xiii. All participants should alter their perception of research and the roles that they have played in research in the past;

xiv. They should be ready to experiment with new research roles;

g. Negotiating agendas and improving collaboration

xv. Regular and ad hoc meetings should be explicitly built into the research process to signal to individuals that the process is their responsibility and that the partnership requires their personal time and attention (regular meetings); and to provide opportunities to deal with emergent issues, to
School–University Collaborative Research

change direction if necessary, or to check on current needs or perceptions (ad hoc meetings);

xvi. There should be constant communication between the participants. This can be achieved through meetings, exchange of discussion papers and memos, telephone and email conversations, forums, and access to shared online databases.

xvii. Creating liaison positions for large and complex partnerships can help improve communication between the parties and coordination of activities (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004; Hunkins, Wiseman, & Williams, 1995; Mitchell, 2001).

What Outcomes Are Associated With Collaborative Research?

A number of positive outcomes were mentioned in the literature. Collaborative research has some positive effects on teachers’ sense of agency such as increased self-confidence, enthusiasm for and enjoyment of teaching and learning. Positive outcomes for teachers’ professional development, such as extended pedagogical content knowledge and improved teaching and research skills, were also observed. As a result of participation in collaborative research, teachers may achieve transformative understandings about themselves and their profession. Collaborative research helps develop professional communities and trusting relationships. It also provides teachers with opportunities to assume new roles and exhibit leadership. And finally, it helps decrease gap between theory and practice (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004; Baumfield, & Butterworth, 2007; Lang, 2001; Sirototik, & Goodland, 1988). One reason for the gap is thought to be inadequate dissemination strategies. Ainscow, Booth and
Dyson (2004) propose an alternative explanation, arguing that research findings may continue to be ignored, regardless of how well they are communicated, if they are not consistent with the ways in which practitioners formulate the problems they face and the constraints within which they have to work. Collaborative research, they believe, allows us to merge academic and practitioner perspectives and therefore makes research more useful and meaningful.

**Collaborative Research Examples**

1. The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, & Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, partnered with the Institute for Student Achievement and local schools to support and document the development of new small high schools and small learning communities that serve students at risk by preparing them to be college-ready: [http://www.tc.edu/ncrest/projects_isa.htm](http://www.tc.edu/ncrest/projects_isa.htm)

2. This Network of researchers from three universities and 24 schools in UK used action research to facilitate the development of practices to increase the participation and achievement of marginalized learners: [http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1asept.html](http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1asept.html)

3. The four year project involves four UK universities working in partnership with schools in five LEAs and two Virtual Education Action Zones to advance both understanding and practice of learning how to learn in classrooms, schools and networks: [http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2f.html](http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2f.html)

4. The Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat contracted OISE and two urban school districts, to determine the factors that contribute to success in schools facing challenging circumstances: [http://www.curriculum.org/leadingandlearning/main.html#Main](http://www.curriculum.org/leadingandlearning/main.html#Main)

5. The Metropolitan School Study Council is a 63-year-old organization that represents a network of 22 tri-state area school districts and Teachers College and is dedicated to current analysis of educational issues, curriculum innovation, and school improvement: [http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/mssc/history.htm](http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/mssc/history.htm)

6. Northeastern University's School of Education partners with five Boston Public Schools to develop innovative and effective practice in urban schools and communities based upon
leading edge research and development in urban education:
http://www2.bc.edu/~shirleyd/title2/TempSite/Pages/Partners.htm#Northeastern
References


(Eds.). *Collaboration Uncovered: The Forgotten, the Assumed, and the Unexamined in Collaborative Education.* Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey


