

# TENSION AND CHALLENGE IN COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL–UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** *Collaborative university and school research projects are inevitably labour intensive endeavours that require the careful negotiation of trust and the joint critique of current practice. While this raises tension it can also build generative communities of inquiry that enhance both theory and practice.*

*This article refers to an arts project undertaken in eight primary schools between university staff and generalist teacher co-researchers, focusing on children's idea development in dance, drama, music and visual art. The two-year project is briefly outlined and some issues that arise in school research are explored. There were issues related to insider–outsider tensions, the familiarity all project members have with classrooms, and the associated difficulties with reconceptualising how things might be done. While there are many strengths in collaborative research, there are also tensions. Some of the tensions outlined in this paper include: the need to exercise healthy scepticism alongside interest in the arts; the different cultures of schools and universities and how these influence research; and issues of risk and trust, which are both sensitive areas of ongoing negotiation. These issues and paradoxes in collaborative research are considered alongside particular processes that build school and university partnerships.*

## **INTRODUCTION: ON DOING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

Research is an intriguing, important, rigorous and dynamic undertaking as we endeavour to examine assumptions, test out ideas, and scrutinise and redefine problems. Educational research is not really about problem solving, although this often does occur; it is about furthering and deepening understanding. In order to begin to suggest ways forward in any educational sphere we need to carefully understand the nature of the issues at stake. Research provides the necessary “tools” to resist the lure of premature closure, common sense hunches, and one's own biases. Without research we are too easily captured by whim and fancy, by popular band-wagons and by the way-things-are-done-around-here. With research we are in a much stronger position to take a stand that holds up under criticism and scrutiny. Research does not provide all the “answers” but, if undertaken well, it does provide us with an informed, considered position. It helps us to make wise decisions in the light of actual evidence, rather than knee-jerk reactions. Meacham makes the point well: “one abandons both the hope for absolute truth and the prospect that nothing can be known; in wisdom, one is able to act with knowledge while simultaneously doubting” (cited in Claxton, 1998, p. 195). This is what research offers and what makes the pursuit of knowledge so worthwhile.

The particular focus of this article reflects my recent work with teachers as partners in the research process. As aforementioned, what happens in classrooms warrants close scrutiny for without knowledge of classroom life (both the explicit and the hidden), we are making assumptions about what should guide teachers' practice and students' learning in schools. Add to this the vexed problem that teachers tend to teach as they were taught (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Lortie, 1975; Norsworthy, 2008), and there is an imperative to work with teachers to consider alternatives that improve education. When teachers have a part to play in a research process, and when they see the gains that research can add to their teaching and their students' learning, then they are much more likely to question their existing practices, change what they do, and seek improvements.

### **THE ART OF THE MATTER PROJECT**

The project referred to in this article (The Art of the Matter) focused on the arts and investigated what children brought to the arts areas and how they developed their ideas and related skills in each of the arts disciplines (drama, dance, music, visual art) in the primary school. By focusing on children's learning in the arts, we are in a stronger position to ascertain the ways in which teachers can effectively facilitate children's learning processes, particularly their development of ideas and related skills in the arts (see "Developing ideas in the arts" strand of *The arts in the New Zealand curriculum*, Ministry of Education, 2000). Of particular note is the fact that this project took as a given the value of the arts and, therefore, did not need to advocate for the arts nor show critics how vital the arts are for aesthetic awareness, multiple perspectives, productive surprise, non-verbal ways of knowing and expressing, and personal transformation through immersion in an art form (see e.g., Eisner, 2000). Moreover, another liberating aspect of this project was that the researchers were able to focus closely on what happens during teaching and learning in the arts without having to justify the ways in which the arts can support literacy and other subject areas of the curriculum; often regarded as necessary in art education research (see, for example, findings reported in ACER, 2004; Alton-Lee, 2003; Ewing, 2004; Harland et al., 2000; McMaster, 1998). Arts researchers are often beholden to show the relationship between art and other things deemed beneficial such as improved achievement in literacy, improved attendance at school, higher self-esteem, retention of minority students and improved attitudes to school generally. While these are noble outcomes and influences there is a tendency for arts research to show how it improves the "other", be it attendance or literacy levels. In this project the arts were not the bridesmaids for any other discipline or goal, they were respected for their unique and original forms. The widespread marginalisation of the arts and the concomitant emphasis on numeracy and literacy in many countries is the norm, so it was with considerable appreciation, therefore, that the researchers had the scope, over two years in eight schools, to research art for art's sake.

In addition to scrutinising children's interests, abilities, needs and preferences, this project investigated what generalist teachers were teaching and what children were learning in each of the arts disciplines. It scrutinised the nature of any "ritual

patterns” (Efland, 2002; Nuthall, 2001) of teaching that support or constrain arts education and, by doing so, considered ways of developing pedagogical processes that deepen children’s experiences and understanding in the arts. As a major outcome, the project sought to deepen knowledge of how generalist teachers can enhance and extend children’s experiences, understanding and engagement when they are developing arts ideas in primary classrooms.

A brief outline of the research design follows. The article then focuses on the school–university partnership that formed the basis of the research team and examines some issues in collaborative research.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The design of the study was responsive and open to the unexpected, the unpredictable and the expressive, all of which is particularly relevant in the arts (Eisner, 2002). It drew on ethnographic, case study, self-study, and action research traditions of educational research. In keeping with naturalistic inquiry, this project recognised that “meaning arises out of social situations and is handled through interpretive processes” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 138).

The project comprised a team of 10 generalist primary school teacher researchers working alongside three university researchers over a period of two years in eight schools, with children across the Year 0–6 age range. The project team were interested in the arts and willing to engage in the hard work and soul searching necessary for critically scrutinising current practice. The first year focused on case studies and the second on action research. At the end of the first year, case studies of teachers’ existing practices were produced by the academic partners. These highlighted themes and issues related to how children develop their ideas in the arts, and what appeared to support or constrain this process. The case studies were devised from an amalgam of classroom observations, work samples, surveys, interviews and reflective self-study comments. Perspectives from teachers, university staff, children and school policy documents helped to build rich, triangulated, sense-making accounts of current practice (Stenhouse, 1985). These case studies provided a platform upon which to base the action research phase wherein teacher partners devised questions of concern to explore problems, issues and possibilities. Ongoing discussion amongst all the research team enabled the refining of both questions and methods. Teachers were assisted in this process by the university-researchers acting as critical friends as well as joint investigators (see also Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson & Manuel, 2004). This action research cycle formed the majority of the second year’s focus. Some of the questions included

- What effect does non-verbal feedback and feed-forward have on the exploration and development of ideas in dance?
- What effect does children working as individuals, as pairs, and in small groups have on the development and refinement of ideas in music?
- How are students currently exploring, generating and developing their ideas in the visual arts? What supports or constrains students’ self-directed imagery using learned skills and strategies?

- What is the influence of *teacher-in-role* on children developing and refining their ideas in drama? In what ways can *teacher-in-role* contribute to deepening the drama and children's ownership of ideas in drama?

These questions provided direction for ongoing data collection that enabled a close scrutiny of learning and teaching in the arts. They represented the authentic or felt questions, issues and concerns of the teachers themselves (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) as they strove to scrutinise and extend their current practice. Teacher ownership of the questions is vital during collaborative action research and it affirms their knowledge as practitioners and as partners in research.

### **WORKING WITH TEACHERS AS PARTNERS IN RESEARCH: CHALLENGES IN COLLABORATION**

The study was a collaborative research project between university and school staff. Such partnerships aim to bridge the divide between academia and the profession and can help to ameliorate common theory–practice divisions. Collaborative research of this nature builds on knowledge with teachers who have direct influence on the children they teach. Such a process has much potential for change that can benefit and enhance children's learning alongside improvements in teachers' pedagogy.

However, for all the positive intentions there are issues that also require careful consideration. As Frankham and Howes (2006) argued, "there is much talk of collaboration between teachers and researchers in accounts of action research and many utopian visions of what such relationships might achieve. Although some authors acknowledge challenges ... the details of how these "challenges" manifest themselves, or are addressed, are largely left untold" (p. 618). Also, Grundy (1998) asserted, the principles of partnership between school and university based co-researchers are easier to espouse than to achieve. More often than not, "the partnerships for most collaborative research projects are formed after the funds have been obtained ... this has implications for whose questions and interests the research is really addressing" (Grundy, 1998, p. 43). Gore (1995) provided five principles underpinning collaborative research

1. Democratic relationships that avoid expert "positionings";
2. Account taken of distinctive interests of all parties;
3. Trust, communication and understanding of each partner's perspectives;
4. Recognition of problems and "rewards" in collaborative activities; and
5. All involved are jointly responsible.

These points are valuable to a degree but there are issues with several of them. For example, the first denies the specific expertise that each partner has. To avoid expert positionings denies the important expertise each partner brings to a joint project. "The expertise held by teachers is valuable insider knowledge for classroom-based research, and the expertise held by academics complements what practitioners contribute. Capitalizing on both sets of expertise means that "expert positions" will be taken from time to time" (Fraser et al., 2006, p. 59) by each partner but from quite different foundations. The academic partners bring more

research expertise to the table, and the teacher partners bring more practice expertise. Acknowledging the strengths of both of these is essential to a respectful partnership. Moreover, one set of expertise should not be regarded as superior but rather as different. This also holds for the different interests, values and cultures that schools and universities reflect. Cognisance of and respect for these differences enables a working partnership that values rather than judges the contrasts. Such research partnerships avoid imposing theoretical and academic sovereignty and allow teachers' indigenous theories space to co-exist and breathe (Smyth, 2004).

The second and fifth of Gore's principles overlook practical and structural impediments (Grundy, 1998). The third is particularly relevant when collecting data that are contentious and suggests that changes are made to pedagogy in order to enhance children's development of ideas. Teachers can feel exposed when their practice is revealed through the collection and analysis of data. Trust and risk are both apparent, a point that will be returned to later.

All of these principles raise issues rather than provide a blueprint for how to undertake school–university research. These issues contain tensions and paradoxes, some of which are outlined to follow.

### **HOLDING THE TENSION OF APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS**

Collaborative research of this nature is typified by ongoing dialogue, trust building and the inevitability of paradox. As the subtitle says, paradox is holding the tension of apparent opposites. Living the experience of paradox seems to be largely necessary and inescapable if we are to surprise ourselves in the familiar landscape of classrooms (McWilliam, 2004), resist the lure of premature closure, and maximise school–university partnerships. Project collaborators need to exercise caution in their examination of practice and strive to resist affirming only what is already valued. All parties need to hold the tension of apparent contradictions, being both interested (in effective arts pedagogy) and disinterested (in order to heighten perception), so that they might "surprise themselves in a landscape of practice with which many are very familiar indeed" (McWilliam, 2004, p. 14). Some of the paradoxes discussed here are: the tension between passion and disinterest; the goals of practice and theory; differences in school and university cultures; and issues of risk and trust.

#### **Passion and disinterest in arts education**

All of the research team were passionate about the arts and appreciated their value for students. It is this very passion, however, that can make people blind to envisaging alternatives to preferred rituals of teaching and learning, and deaf to nagging doubts and questions. Passion and its attendant enthusiasm can make us positive and celebratory at times when we should be exercising healthy scepticism. With passion we defend our allegiance to the arts but in so doing we risk losing the critical edge that is the heart of research. This is exacerbated by the ways in which the arts are largely marginalised in education, so that advocacy for the arts becomes a somewhat habitual response by those who understand the value the arts provide for learning and the importance of the arts as distinct and valid disciplines.

Ironically, such advocacy can have the effect of diminishing the ways in which the arts are regarded, especially if this leads to large claims that are not valid or are exaggerated. So even though this particular project did not require that the arts assert their value in any explicit way, the peripheral positioning of the arts in the school curriculum can lead to advocacy by those aware of their fragile status.

Moreover, some critics of action research with teachers maintain that such projects lack any objectivism and result in the unqualified “confirming their own common sense” (McWilliam, 2004, p. 114), rather than raising questions and probing assumptions. Indeed, how can any of us ensure the necessary disinterest within a sphere of interest in order to think differently about current practice? “There is a need to provide practitioners with a means of discovering their situation anew while at the same time valuing the tacit knowing that is produced out of their embeddedness in practice” (McWilliam, 2004, p. 121).

Research is to re-search, or to search again (Berthoff, 1987). It requires and demands a questioning of the status quo and assumptions that underlie the rituals of teaching and learning in classrooms (Nuthall, 2001). It means raising doubt in a sea of certainty and asking

“What is going on here? Why? What does this mean?” It requires researchers to avoid over-blown claims that are often the result of advocacy for the arts and does not make for robust research. It requires resistance to looking for only what is desired and also an alertness to surprises, nuance and exceptions. While not everything in a study can be data-based researchers should try to disprove their arguments and hypothesis in order to strengthen the validity of their research. (O’Toole, 2006)

Inevitably, wherever we “stand” we are all complicit in the research process. We need to acknowledge that we are historically constructed and locally situated as human observers of the human condition and that the meaning we seek to learn about is radically plural, always open and politically saturated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). With this in mind we are more likely to hold the tension of passion and disinterest in order to produce quality research.

An example of this tension in the project was our regular “roundtable” meetings where we shared perceptions, insights, questions and issues including methodological concerns and theory building. Generalist teachers shared alongside arts educators, consultants and a lecturer in human development (all of whom comprised the arts project team). Video-data clips from the classroom teachers’ rooms were shared through a process of initial description, in order to avoid judgement, based on what each person saw. After each person spoke, the same data were discussed a second time based on what each person interpreted from what they observed. This describe, then interpret process (Feldman, 1973) helped the team to withhold initial judgements, avoid defensiveness and minimise the biases that leaping to judgement usually entails (Claude, 2005). This process did not guarantee freedom from bias but rather helped to ameliorate and counter seeing what one chooses to see. Hearing each person’s interpretation often provided contrasts and refinements and any agreements helped build analysis that was robust and

trustworthy. Issues of trustworthiness are essential in qualitative research generally but the advocacy feature (and Achilles heel) of the arts makes trustworthiness a particularly important process.

### **The goals of practice and the goals of theory**

Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) noted that teachers' perspectives are often marginalised in research in favour of theories generated by researchers. School–university projects like this aim to ensure teachers' perspectives are heard and their views taken seriously. This requires ongoing dialogue wherein one set of voices (the academic) is not constantly privileged over another. While dialogic “mechanisms for knowledge construction” (Zellermayer & Tabak, 2006, p. 48) are more complex and more time consuming than traditional research, they can “produce more practical, contextualized theory and more theoretically grounded, broadly informed practice” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 599).

Research between teachers and university staff that focuses on classrooms often has a greater emphasis on the needs and concerns of practitioners (Johnson, Peters & Williams, 1999) and that improvement in *teaching* becomes a central goal in teacher research (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). This practice-based preference by many teachers can dominate and obscure other research goals such as methodology refinement and creating substantive research. These different goals are not necessarily competing, nor discrete, and there are opportunities for projects such as this arts research to serve both sets of goals in a manner that does not detract from the value of either. Moreover, with increasing numbers of school–university collaborative projects, there is a need for universities to recognise the importance of “partnerships with schools as an integral part of academics' work” (Ewing et al., 2004, p. 5), including the induction of research novices and valuing their insider knowledge.

However, teachers will not always share the goals of their university colleagues. Contributions to knowledge in an academic sense were not regarded as important as the professional development teachers expressed as their main agenda for participating in this collaborative research. Improving their teaching and having time to focus carefully on the children in their classes was highlighted again and again as important. The research processes used in this project enabled teachers to see their practice afresh and gain multiple perspectives on what was happening in their classrooms.

### **School and university cultures**

One of the tensions in fostering reciprocal dialogue is that there are a number of marked differences between school and university cultures (see also Sewell, 2006). This palpable difference is both a strength and a challenge when engaged in joint research projects. The three university researchers in the project are all ex-school teachers and one of the teacher–researchers was a university lecturer for a period. Therefore, the differences outlined here are not “ivory tower” observations based on opinion nor naïve judgement uninformed by theoretical perspectives, but rather

jointly constructed comparisons discussed as a community. Three of these cultural differences are outlined below:

1. Schools generally have a strong emphasis on problem solving. They are adept at identifying key problems and attending to the business of rectifying or addressing these. From playground bullying to raising funds for school camp, schools are constantly at the forefront of problem-solving processes, which often involves their students and their wider community. Universities, on the other hand, have a history and culture of “problematizing”. In general, universities hold dear the importance of questioning the status quo and of raising thorny and often unpopular issues. The traditional role of critic and conscience of society is evident across universities. This is not to say that universities don’t ever solve problems or that schools avoid speculation; rather, there tends to be a dominance of one over the other in terms of the institutional culture. Alongside the search for solutions and certainty, schools are required to identify and teach in relation to specific learning outcomes. Research, on the other hand, is more about tolerating multiple meanings, resisting premature closure and asking new questions.
2. While intensification of work has increased in both university and school settings (Johnson, Peters & Williams, 1999), the sheer pace of school classroom life is relentless and fraught with numerous demands and interruptions. Bells, announcements, timetables, library times, swimming times, lost property notices, lunch orders, assemblies, playground duties, children’s extra classes for sport, or reading recovery, or violin practice, and a myriad of other competing demands literally eat up the hours. John Gatto sceptically commented, “But when the bell rings I insist they [students] drop whatever it is we have been doing and proceed quickly to the next work station. They must turn on and off like a light switch. Nothing important is ever finished in my class nor in any class I know of” (1992, p. 6). While Gatto is scathing in his commentary about compulsory schooling, he was highly successful himself at teaching in the very culture he condemned. He does, however, highlight a palpable feature of classrooms that run by strict adherence to short timeframes, usually determined by teacher and school structures. Balancing curriculum demands and the restrictions of timetabling have been identified by teachers themselves as a major barrier to inservice development of any kind (Hipkins, Strafford, Tiatia & Beals, 2003). Universities also have timetable restrictions when it comes to teaching but less so when it comes to research. While there are budget constraints and targets to meet, the flexibility is greater than the usual school week and research needs can be organised around shifting work demands. Moreover, research and scholarship require reflective mulling, the careful consideration of competing perspectives and time to consider the nuance of emerging themes and their significance. In this arts project, university staff by necessity re-entered the hectic pace of classrooms and adapted data collection methods to flexibly capture the constant flux of learning in the arts while fulfilling the need for consistent and triangulated data. And teaching staff needed to tolerate what

seemed at times to be the ponderous pace of questioning and analysis required for careful research. Goodwill between both parties was essential to ensure smooth communication and productive school–university interface.

3. The distinctive interests of each party (Grundy, 1998) is an inevitable issue in joint research. Some of the teachers were particularly keen to use the project to promote their school and this is perhaps of no surprise given the competition between schools for publicity, boosting school rolls and parental approval. However, some teachers' enthusiasm for media coverage and public dissemination of findings was somewhat premature. Moreover, teachers' publishing outlets seldom required the scrutiny and evaluation of peer review. On the other hand, teachers' desire to quickly disseminate findings is understandable given the pace of their working lives (see point 1) and the slow process of academic publication. For all the teachers in the project, the months (and sometimes years) required for publishing in academic journals is excruciatingly slow and seems rather pointless. Therefore, a blend of both succinct teacher-targeted papers, and articles for academic peer review are required if project members are to feel that dissemination counts and meets the expectations of their specific audiences.

### **Risk and trust**

One of the main findings of the Australian Government's quality teacher program (AGQTP) evaluation (Ewing et al., 2004) was that high levels of risk-taking by teachers and trust in their university colleagues led to powerful learning related to teachers' own practice. A major feature of collaborative research in the arts is also this productive tension between risk and trust, with the former growing in direct relationship to the latter. One of the challenges, however, is identified below:

If collaborative researchers have learned anything from such endeavours, it is that trust takes time, and members of a group never develop trust in synchrony. We know that collaboration is soul-searching, labor-intensive work for anyone participating, that shared understanding and significant change takes longer than expected, and that nothing is perfect (Bolin & Falk, 1987; Hall & Hord, 1987; Jackson, 1988). Although these factors are sobering, such findings are better than feeling powerless and isolated in one's work setting. (May, 1997, p. 230)

In the first weeks of the arts project one teacher admitted feeling stressed when she was being observed and felt she wasn't as relaxed as normal. Another (very experienced teacher with previous research experience) commented that she didn't intervene nearly as much as usual with a group of children in her class because of the video and other researchers in the room. These "confessions" reveal the inevitable tensions that arise. Such feelings are important to acknowledge as part of the "exposure" through the scrutiny of the research process. Time and trust building is required to move beyond such vulnerable feelings of surveillance.

The teachers also risked their identities with each other when exposing their practice and their research at regular roundtable meetings between all in the team

from the eight schools, but such sharing helped to build collegiality within and across schools and across arts disciplines. This required considerable trust amongst the research team and helped to build a climate wherein questions, concerns and issues could be shared. As generalist teachers who taught all four art forms, they seemed genuinely interested in each other's questions and issues. Teacher release from schools was paid for as part of the research project to enable time to share, plan, evaluate and reflect, unencumbered by the daily demands of classroom life. Moreover, ongoing collaboration between university and school partners was maximised due to the flexible relationships with academic partners located fairly close to participating schools (see also Ewing et al., 2004).

Resistance to change by teachers is common when the change suggested is not of teachers' choosing or design (Obert, 2006). Instead, when the central focus is on the research questions that come from teachers' authentic concerns, teacher change is more likely to be something that they seek with the support of their university colleagues. Outside pressures on teachers to change often lead to feelings of frustration and even fear and resentment (Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves, 2005) and exacerbate risk without the necessary counterbalance of trust. Trust is maximised when teachers are considered as both generators of knowledge and as agents of change (Beck & Kosnick, 2001; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Teachers also need to reconsider traditional views of researchers as detached observers and regard them more as co-learners, collaborators and critical friends.

Developing relationships that engender trust requires regular, ongoing interaction between university and school partners—interactions that create a climate of hospitality and charge (Palmer, 1998). Relationships need to be hospitable so that partners in research feel supported and understood. But the research partnership should also be “charged” so that challenge is welcomed, dispute is encouraged and competing perspectives are aired. It is this challenge that also enables the taking of risks as teachers try new interventions and work alongside their university partners to interrogate emerging themes and findings.

## CONCLUSION

As evidenced by the teachers' research questions, the teachers' role in collaborative research of this kind bridges the traditional duality of teacher *or* researcher and theory *or* practice. Eisner (2002) addresses the need to move the initial teacher education focus from *episteme* (formal theory) or *phronesis* (practical knowledge) on into *artistry*, because it is within artistry that the notion of knowledge viewed as embedded and resident within self appears to be understood. He states:

Teachers, for example, are not regarded now as those who implement the prescriptions of others but as those most intimate with life in classrooms ... Teachers are collaborators in knowledge construction and bring to the table of deliberation a kind of insider knowledge ... (2002, p. 381)

It is just this intimacy and the insider knowledge that was the strength *and* challenge of this project as we worked together to interrogate assumptions, ask hard questions and constantly surprise ourselves in the all too familiar landscape of

school classrooms (McWilliam, 2004). The power of the teachers' knowledge construction as described in this quote is such that they all have much to share with the professional and research community. Collaboration as co-researchers extended into the dissemination of findings as some of the teachers presented papers on this project one year at a research symposium and the following year co-presented at the New Zealand annual research in education conference. These events convey the message that the research is jointly constructed and owned rather than produced by academics and transmitted to teachers in a top-down manner (Sewell, 2006). Collaborative research is not without its tensions some of which this paper has outlined. Recognition of the challenges is part of the transparency and dialogue that comprises such joint endeavours.

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