

# Paradox and promise in joint school/university Arts 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 development of critique of current practice. While this raises tension it also builds generative communities of inquiry that can enhance both theory and practice.*

*This paper reports on an Arts project undertaken in primary classrooms between university staff and generalist teacher co-researchers focusing on children's idea development in dance, drama, music and art. This two year project is briefly outlined and some issues that arise in school research are explored. Project collaborators need to exercise caution in their examination of practice and strive to resist premature closure. 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 2004:14). These issues and paradoxes in collaborative research are considered alongside some particular processes that build school and university partnerships.*

## **Introduction**

The project outlined here (*The Art of the Matter*) focuses on the Arts and investigates what children bring to the Arts areas and how they develop 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, one is 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.

The Arts are part of the national curriculum in New Zealand and every primary school teacher is expected to teach dance, drama, music and visual art. Each of the disciplines in the Arts consists of four strands to guide teachers' planning: developing practical knowledge in the Arts, developing ideas in the Arts, communicating and interpreting, and understanding the Arts in context (Ministry of Education 2000). Music and visual art were the main arts subjects taught until 1983, when in a major change to the school curriculum, the Arts became one essential learning area, with the addition of drama and dance in the Arts curriculum in 2000. As is common across western education, the Arts in New Zealand are marginalized in a curriculum that emphasises literacy, numeracy, technology and science as separate subjects but collapses four art subjects into one learning area. Attention in this project was deliberately given to developing ideas, as this area is often neglected in research, Ministry of Education resources, and in practice.

Of particular note is the fact that this project takes the value of the Arts as a given and therefore does not need to advocate for the Arts nor

'prove' to 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 (e.g. see Eisner 2000).

As a major outcome, the project seeks 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. We suggest that this may be connected to teaching the Arts in ways deemed socio-culturally relevant and responsive to diverse groups of children and to the congruency between what child and teacher bring to the Arts and how ideas are acknowledged, negotiated and scaffolded.

The study is a collaborative research project between university and school staff wherein teachers are co-researchers with university colleagues. Such partnerships help to bridge the divide between academia and the teaching profession and can help to address the common problems of theory-practice divisions. Moreover, collaborative research of this nature builds research capacity amongst teachers who have direct influence on the children they teach. The research process in the hands of teachers, with the support of academics, has much potential for change that can benefit and enhance children's learning. This paper focuses specifically on the school-university partnership which forms the basis of the research team and examines some issues in collaborative research.

## **Research Design**

The design of the study is responsive and open to the unexpected, the unpredictable and the expressive as is particularly relevant in the Arts

(Eisner 2002). It draws on case study, self study and action research traditions of educational research. In keeping with naturalistic inquiry, this project recognises that 'meaning arises out of social situations and is handled through interpretive processes' (Cohen et al 2000:138).

We are currently just over one year into the project having built a team who are passionate about the Arts and willing to engage in the hard work and soul searching necessary for critically scrutinizing current practice. The project comprises 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. For the purposes of the project, two teacher researchers focused on dance, three on music, three on visual art and two on drama.

Case studies of teachers' existing practices have been produced by the team of teachers and university researchers and these highlight themes and issues related to how children develop their ideas in the Arts and what appears to support or constrain this process (for a paper on the early emerging findings related to learning in the Arts see Fraser et al. 2005). The case studies were devised from an amalgam of classroom observations, work samples, surveys, interviews and reflective self-study comments. Initial observation data were shared after each lesson with each teacher researcher and a summary was co-constructed on what seemed to support and what seemed to constrain learning in the Arts. Any other salient points that neither supported nor constrained were noted as 'interesting'. The strength of this analysis was its immediacy (as close to the action as possible) and the co-constructed nature of it in order to capture multiple perspectives. The analysis also helped to identify any 'rituals of practice' (Nuthall 2001) that were part of each teacher's practice.

In addition, teacher-researchers were involved in analysis alongside Arts educators, consultants and a lecturer in human development (all whom comprise the Arts project team) at regular roundtable meetings. 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-researchers devised questions of concern to explore problems, issues and possibilities. Ongoing discussion amongst all the research team has enabled the refining of both questions and methods. Teacher-researchers were assisted in this process by the university-researchers acting as critical friends as well as joint investigators (see also Ewing et al. 2004). The action research cycle forms the majority of this year's focus. Some of the questions include:

- What effect does non-verbal feedback and feed-forward have on the exploration and development of ideas in dance?
- What influence do children working as individuals, and as pairs, 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 provide direction for ongoing data collection that enables a close scrutiny on learning and teaching in the Arts. They

represent the authentic or felt questions, issues and concerns of the teachers themselves (Lankshear et al. 2004) as they strive to scrutinize and extend their current practice. Teacher ownership of their questions is vital during collaborative action research. It affirms their knowledge as practitioners and as developing researchers.

Collaborative research of this nature is typified by ongoing dialogue, trust building and the inevitability of paradox. Living the experience of paradox is necessary and inescapable if we are to surprise ourselves in the familiar landscape of classrooms (McWilliam 2004), resist the lure of premature closure and maximize school-university partnerships. Some relevant paradoxes are discussed below.

### **Passion and disinterest in Arts education**

All the co-researchers are passionate about the Arts and appreciate their immense value for students. It is this very passion however, that can make us 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 skepticism. 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 way in which the Arts are largely marginalized 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 (O'Toole 2006). So even though this particular project does

not require that the Arts assert their value in any explicit way, the way in which the Arts are positioned on the periphery in school curriculum can lead to advocacy by those aware of the fragile status of the Arts.

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: 114) rather than raising questions and probing assumptions. Indeed, how can we all 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 2004:121)

To '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?* As mentioned above, it requires researchers to avoid over-blown claims that are often the result of advocacy for the Arts and to not just look for what is desired but to also be alert to surprises, nuance and exceptions. While not everything in a study can be data-based we should try to disprove our arguments and hypotheses in order to strengthen the robustness of our 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 et al. 2000). With this in mind we are more likely to hold the tension of passion and disinterest in order to produce trustworthy research.

An example from our project is our regular 'roundtable' meetings where we share perceptions, insights, questions and issues including methodological concerns and theory building. Generalist teachers share alongside Arts educators, consultants and a lecturer in human development (all of whom comprise the Arts project team). In order to avoid judgement, data from the classroom teachers' rooms are shared through a process of initial description, based on what each person *sees*. After each person speaks, the same data are discussed a second time based on what each person *interprets* from what they saw. This describe, then interpret process (Feldman 1973) has helped the team withhold initial judgements, avoid defensiveness and minimize the biases that leading to judgement usually entails (Claude 2005). This process does not guarantee freedom from bias but rather, helps to mitigate and counter seeing what one chooses to see. Hearing each person's interpretation often provides contrasts and refinements and any agreements help build analysis that is robust and trustworthy. This issue is relevant for research generally but the advocacy feature (and Achilles' heel) of the Arts as outlined by O'Toole earlier, makes trustworthiness a particularly important process.

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

Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) note that teachers' perspectives are often marginalized 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. Conversely however, research between teachers and university staff which focuses on classrooms often has a greater emphasis on the needs and concerns of practitioners (Johnson et al.1999) and that improvement in *teaching* becomes a central goal in teacher research (Lankshear et al. 2004). This practice-based preference by many teachers can dominate and obscure other research goals such as methodology refinement and creating trustworthy and substantive research findings related to students' *learning*. These different goals are not necessarily competing nor discrete and there are opportunities for projects such as this 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 recognition by universities of the importance of 'partnerships with schools as an integral part of academics' work' (Ewing et al. 2004:5) which includes the induction of research novices alongside valuing their insider knowledge.

However, teachers will not always share the goals of their university colleagues. Contribution to knowledge in an academic sense is generally not regarded as important as the professional development goals teachers express as their main agenda for participation in collaborative research. Improving their teaching and having time to focus carefully on the children in their classes is highlighted again and again as compellingly relevant. The research process enables teachers to see their practice afresh and gain multiple perspectives on what is happening in their classrooms. This is a practical advantage of collaborative research wherein teacher development is an inextricable part of the

study. The tension for academics however, is that the more teacher-friendly the project, the more the goals of theory can be reduced or overlooked in favour of trust-building and practice goals. The distinctive interests of each party (Grundy 1998) are an inevitable issue in joint research of this nature. Some of the teachers are 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 may be considered somewhat premature. Moreover, teachers' publishing outlets seldom require the scrutiny and evaluation of peer review. On the other hand, teachers' desire to quickly disseminate is understandable given the pace of their working lives 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 rather pointless, as their major focus on development has already been achieved. Therefore, a blend of both succinct teacher-targeted papers, and articles for academic peer review have been produced and that helps the project members feel that dissemination counts and meets their specific audiences.

### **Risk and trust**

One of the main findings of the Australian Government 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 1997:230)

In the first weeks of the project one teacher-researcher admitted that when she was being observed it was still quite stressful for her and she 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 because of the video and other researchers in the room. These 'confessions' are a healthy indication of trust. Such feelings are important to acknowledge as an inevitable part of 'exposure' through the scrutiny of the research process.

The teachers also risk their identities with each other when exposing their practice and their research at regular roundtable meetings amongst all in the team from the eight schools, but such sharing helps to build collegiality within and across schools and across Arts' disciplines. The roundtable meetings required considerable trust amongst the research team and helped to build a climate wherein questions, concerns and issues could be shared. As generalist teachers teaching 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 researchers is maximized due to the flexible relationships with academic partners located fairly close to participating schools (see also Ewing et al. 2004).

There is risk and trust issues for university staff as well as we bring together different discipline knowledge and perspectives and at times are working outside our respective discipline areas (e.g., the music educator working with a teacher in dance). While the project brings in consultants to advise in areas beyond the expertise of any one researcher we need to ensure that consultants do not adopt the role of professional adviser and lesson evaluator. To maintain the integrity and purpose of collaboration the central focus needs to be on the research questions and teachers working with university staff as co-researchers to investigate these.

Developing relationships that engender trust requires regular, ongoing interaction between university and school co-researchers; 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 boldly try new interventions and work alongside their university partners to interrogate emerging themes and findings.

## **Conclusion**

The initial case studies revealed a number of common rituals of practice

in classrooms (Nuthall 2001). Depending on the context and goals of the lessons and the needs of the children, these 'rituals' or largely taken-for-granted assumptions could support or constrain what happened when children were learning in the Arts. The common rituals included the following:

- There was an emphasis on the teaching of practical knowledge and skills, with little attention or time given to development of ideas.
- Group work was a common device for both management and pedagogical reasons in the teaching of dance, drama and music.
- Visual art was usually undertaken individually even if children were placed in groups.
- The teacher chose the topic or theme to be explored in the Arts and this was usually framed around a narrative. While these were open-ended enough to allow children to locate their experiences, deviation from the set brief was rare.
- There was a distinct emphasis on explaining art skills and processes in *words*, which was mostly spoken and sometimes in written form.
- While the value of process was recognized, explicit valuing of sub-task completions, presentations and finished work was often foregrounded.

As mentioned earlier, the teacher researchers are currently involved in 'disrupting' some of these rituals through the action research phase wherein they are trialing interventions with the support of their university colleagues and in-school buddies. Such interventions reveal teachers' ability to question the status quo, explore new approaches, and explore unpredictable pathways and possibilities. As evidenced by the teachers' research questions the teacher-researchers' role 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 writes:

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. . . (2002:381)

It is just this intimacy and the insider knowledge that is the strength *and* challenge of this project as we work 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. Our collaboration as co-researchers extends into the dissemination of findings. Some of the teachers have already presented on this project at a research symposium last year and we are co-presenting at the annual research in education conference later this year. Joint presentation by teachers and academics underlines the ways in which practice and theory can be mutually enhancing.

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Page 221