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The TLRI: Teachers' perspectives on partnership and research

This research project examines the roles of teachers within a number of the current school-based TLRI projects and the teachers' views and experiences of research and partnership.

The TLRI aims to

- (a) build a cumulative body of knowledge that links teaching and learning;
- (b) enhance the links between educational research and teaching practices; and between researchers and teachers, across the early childhood, school and tertiary sectors; and
- (c) grow research capability and capacity in the areas of teaching and learning.

The intention is to achieve these aims through researchers and teachers working in partnerships to undertake research into teaching and learning and to disseminate project findings to the communities of interest. As the TLRI programme entered its second year of operation in 2004, the TLRI Co-ordination Team was interested in finding out from the teachers' perspective how partnerships were working in practice so that it could identify ways to support and develop the partnership model within the overall TLRI programme. Alex Oliver, an experienced teacher, user of research, and Master of Education student, undertook this study.

This summary report begins with a brief review of the literature on partnerships and teacher research and then describes the findings of the research into the views of 16 teachers involved in five TLRI research projects.

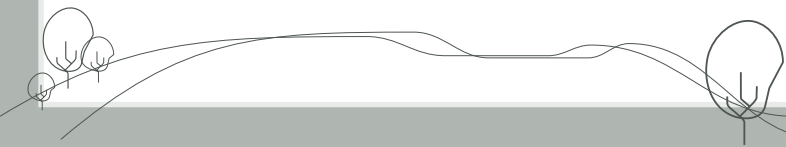
Teachers working in research partnerships

Notions of partnership

There are numerous ways in which a partnership can operate, but the underlying premise is that there is collaboration and a sharing of tasks, in which each individual accepts some level of responsibility for the overall task and the team establishes processes that "promote learning, mutual accountability and shared power over relevant decisions" (Timperley & Robinson, 2002, p. 15). This way of working together provides opportunities for all team members to

learn from each other's expertise and locates the teachers "inside", as producers of knowledge about teaching and learning, and not as the receiver of the research. Traditionally, teachers have been seen as consumers of knowledge and academic researchers as its producers. Robinson (2003) suggests that this leads to a gulf between the two and that, rather than "thinking of practitioners and researchers as different categories of person, we should think of them as different roles" (p. 27).

Effective partnerships are based on trust and respect, enabling the balancing of different points of view (Bransford et al., 2000). Trust is a critical element, given the variety of ways





responsibilities may be shared—while in some project teams all the members may work in unison on the tasks, in others it may be more practical for partners with differing experience to divide the work into distinct tasks and assign them appropriately. In these situations members of the partnership may be working independently of each other, and there may be differing levels of interaction between various members of the project team (Timperley & Robinson, 2002).

Benefits of teacher–researcher partnerships

The research literature suggests that engaging in teacher research:

- enhances the teachers’ professional self-esteem and overall sense of self;
Engaging in research stimulates personal and professional growth, and provides opportunities for reflection and self-examination (Dyson, 1997). It also has the potential to motivate and develop a greater sense of self-efficacy (Berger et al., 2005; Cushman, 1998; Evans & Songer-Hudgell, 2003).
- improves teacher’s skills and knowledge of teaching and learning;
Teachers’ knowledge of teaching and learning is enhanced through opportunities to examine their practice (Dyson, 1997). They are also more likely to find evidence credible if they actively participate in its generation (Elliot, 2004).
- encourages collaborative practice.
Increasing use of collaborative teacher development has led to benefits such as interaction, feedback, and the sharing of ideas. This form of development may be of greater value than individual learning (Hawk & Hill, 2003; Noe & Colquitt, 2002; Sites, 2003). It is these same features—social interaction, collaboration, idea-sharing, interaction, and feedback—that teachers find supportive when engaging in teacher research. Research partnerships promote the voice of the teacher, the voice that is confident in class, yet less so when communicating knowledge to peers. The partnerships give the teacher-researchers an opportunity to talk about their work to colleagues (Flack & Osler, 1999), so that other teachers and academics can learn from it and they themselves are able to make a difference to the profession (Flack & Osler, 1999).

Conditions that support teachers working in research partnerships

Teachers involved in research need to be supported by a strong school culture, with positive modelling from the principal and a supportive senior management that encourages collegiality and collaborative teacher work (Berger et al., 2005; Jones and Moreland, 2003; Lodge & Reed; 2003).

One intention of the TLRI is for teacher-researchers to transfer their learning from the research project into their classroom practice and to other teachers in the school. Groundwater-Smith and Dadds (2004) found that, for research to have impact beyond the immediate classroom and to be transferred to other settings, it needs to be embedded within the overall school culture, and that the school—perhaps led by the principal—needs to plan for specific ways to use and embed the knowledge in order for it to be useful in practice.

Other key factors that support teachers working in research partnerships are: adequate time for research activities such as data collection, reading, journaling, and meeting with colleagues (Berger et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993); and a sufficient allocation of money and materials. In order to sustain their involvement the teachers require support from their researcher partners in areas such as acquiring the skills and language of research, project management, and encouragement to present work to wider audiences (Flack & Osler, 1999).

The research study

Purpose

The research asks the following questions:

- What is the nature of the involvement of teacher-practitioners in current TLRI projects?
- What are the teacher-practitioners’ views of the strengths and limitations of their role as teacher-researchers in TLRI project teams?
- What can be learnt from talking with teachers that could influence the future direction and planning of the TLRI?

The study involved 16 teachers in 10 schools who were taking part in five TLRI project teams. These participants comprised one school principal, four deputy principals, one senior teacher and 10 classroom teachers. Eight of the participants were working in secondary, and eight in the primary–intermediate sector. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews guided by 12 open-ended questions. The interviews generally lasted 45–60 minutes and were taped. The tapes were later transcribed.

Findings

Views of partnerships

Most participants had a view of partnership built on trust, collegiality and professionalism, where members were equal but took different roles and different times.

A partnership means to me that I can be behind the wheel as well, and I share the driving. It could be that the researcher is doing the driving and I might be the co-driver, helping to navigate and then swap around ... not just having that one person there behind the wheel.

(Participant 10)



Some teachers saw the purpose of the research partnership more as supported reflective teaching, where the emphasis remained on the teacher and the teacher's learning, rather than for the teacher to take on a research role.

It really is a process whereby somebody else is sharing a teaching learning experience with you and being able to reflect things back to you and allowing you time to respond to what they have seen.

(Participant 4)

Research roles

However, it was apparent that all had research roles within the teams—mostly in the areas of data gathering, data analysis and, in the case of three projects, contributing to the dissemination of research findings.

All the participants thought that the projects were of relevance to them. They had either been able to shape their own questions within the overall research question or the project design was connected to their teaching practice, interests, and their ideas of teaching and learning.

According to the teachers, the roles that the researchers undertook included oversight of the design of the research projects, preparation of the expression of interest and other associated correspondence, framing of the research questions, drawing up the project plan and the budget, monitoring, resourcing, mentoring, co-ordination, assistance with reflective practice, feedback, project management, supply of related reading material, guidance on methodology, and writing for academic and practitioner audiences.

The teachers felt that their level of involvement was about right, and they appreciated the amount of work that the researchers did as part of the respective projects. In most instances they spoke highly of the researchers, who had clearly been very supportive, professional, and had worked hard in the schools to maintain or create a culture of trust, respect, and deep learning.

Benefits of involvement in research partnerships

Fifteen of the 16 teachers felt they had benefit greatly from the project partnerships. The benefits cited included:

- being encouraged to try different ways of teaching;
- being supported to try new challenges;
- receiving opportunities for self-reflection, critical examination of practice, and ongoing support and mentoring to change;
- enjoying the collegiality provided through partnership with other teachers.

All the teachers considered the partnership as a strong form of professional development and thought that what they had learnt would have a lasting impact on them as teachers. The research partnership provided the opportunity for them to learn and practise in the context of their own classrooms, with their own students. Usually two or more

teachers from a school were involved in the project team. In one project where several teachers, all in different schools, were undertaking their component of the overall research study as part of their Masters study, all but one had implemented their initial plan, which was to bring other staff into the partnership. These partnerships were strong models of collegiality and collaborative teacher researching.

Support needed

While the relationships that developed between the teachers and researchers appeared to be a vital aspect of achieving positive results, it is clear that school support for the research and a supportive overall school climate are equally essential. The one teacher who was unable to identify many positive aspects of the partnership relationship had not received any release time “because it was not organised”.

The workplace factors most critical to the success of the projects were:

- release time;
- support from senior management;
- a strong sense of collegiality among staff (which included characteristics such as trust and respect);
- a supportive and positive school climate in general.

It was evident, however, that involvement in research projects, while manageable, was very time consuming. In general, the teachers thought that the support and assistance they received from the researchers was the vital element in keeping them going. However, in one situation the teachers felt there was additional pressure on them to gather data, as the tertiary-based researcher working with them was also using the research towards personal qualifications. One secondary school teacher said that, given the amount of work involved, some type of reward (such as being credited with a postgraduate-level university paper) would have made participation in the project more worthwhile.

Recommendations

To teachers and researchers

1. Teachers who are involved in the early stages of designing the research and writing the research questions tend to be clearer from the beginning about the purpose of the research and what they are working towards achieving. I recommend that partnerships be formed early in the research planning, or at least that this point be considered when teachers are brought into the partnership.
2. Where appropriate, project budgeting should take account of research activities inside schools, to enable teachers to undertake the necessary administration and to provide relief for teacher–student research activities.



- As part of the project planning and budgeting, I recommend that the team members work out the expected workload for each teacher involved. The time commitment required by the project needs to be made explicit. Teachers participating in the research project need to be able to renegotiate time allocation and/or time frames if the initial plans are not implemented as intended.

To the schools

- I recommend that school management meets with teachers undertaking research partnerships, to ascertain what their requirements are in terms of time and other research-related costs. Such costs need to be included within project budgets and then used as planned. I further recommend that all of the staff be informed about the project and encouraged to take an interest in it.

To NZCER

- I recommend that, where the partnership is not adversely affected, teachers be supported to contribute their research work towards higher qualifications.
- I further recommend that research assistants who work in partnership with teachers be able to contribute their research towards further qualifications—but only where doing so is not detrimental to the partnership.

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Alex Oliver has 21 years' teaching experience. After several years of primary school teaching she trained as a hard materials technology teacher, most recently teaching fabric technology at secondary level. As a secondary school dean she undertook research into truancy and presented her findings at an ANZELA summit conference. Alex is currently completing her Masters degree in Education.