Building Relationships Between State Stakeholders and Researchers: People, Persistence and Passion

Rhonda Horne
Department of Education, Training and Employment
<rhonda.horne@dete.qld.gov.au>

Katie Makar
The University of Queensland
<k.makar@uq.edu.au>

Partnerships between state stakeholders, researchers and schools are often idealised as a way to create innovative solutions to persistent problems in education, and portrayed with deterministic histories. This paper argues that these relationships often begin long before they are formalised and are at times dictated by circumstantial timing. A long-term relationship is discussed between university researchers, mathematics curriculum leaders in a state education department and local primary schools. Recommendations are included.

Literature and policy documents often promote partnerships between universities and schools, district and/or state education bodies as a way to pool strengths and resources to promote improvement in education. These partnerships are at times idealised as unproblematic, however Peel, Peel and Baker (2002) argue that most partnerships wither away after a short time. In a review of literature, they reported that this was a result of unrealistic goals due to lack of shared vision, lack of empowerment and collaboration, lack of financial support, lack of continuity, negative perceptions, lack of honesty and trust, and lack of communication. Goldring and Sims (2005) reported additional issues:

> Most school-university partnerships face a troubled existence … strained because of differences in terms of the tempo of work, professional focus, career reward structure, and incongruent personal power and efficacy. Collaboration shock, turf issues and communication are typical problems … [as well as] negative past experiences with collaboration, difficult past or present relationships among agencies, personality conflicts, lack of precedent, and fear of risk (Anderson, 1996). (p. 224-225)

The term partnership in literature is used loosely and rarely defined (Clifford, Millar, Smith, & deLima, 2007), but classically comprises of a planned, mutually beneficial relationship that relies on three broadly worded criteria (Goodlad, 1991, p. 59):

1. Sufficient dissimilarity to seek complementarity in fulfilling some functions;
2. Sufficient overlap in some functions to make potential benefits clear; and
3. Sufficient commitment to overlapping functions to warrant loss of some authority.

The definition suggests that each partner has common vision (overlap), complementary roles (dissimilarity) and the trust (commitment) required to motivate surrender of some control (loss of some authority). These are echoed by Grundy, Robinson and Tomazos (2010), who list trust, community of inquiry, commitment to democracy rather than hierarchy, recognition of interests of each party and acknowledgement that differences must be enough to spark change. Most successful partnerships are long-term rather than just one or two years (Lonsdale, 2010; Peel et al, 2002). However, the "agenda should not grow out of preoccupation with sustaining a partnership for its own sake" (Goodlad, 1991, p. 59). Goldring & Sims (2005) acknowledge the centrality of authentic commitment, hard work and awareness of "possible pitfalls of one partner overpowering the other" (p. 246) as a central force in maintaining mutual respect. Grundy et al (2010) add a need to "tip the 'balance of power' in university/school relationships in the direction of teachers" (p. 205).

In this paper, we outline a history and issues that emerged in creating and sustaining a partnership to work towards improvement of curriculum and pedagogy in mathematics for

In V. Steinle, L. Ball & C. Bardini (Eds.), Mathematics education: Yesterday, today and tomorrow (Proceedings of the 36th annual conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia). Melbourne, VIC: MERGA.

Queensland state primary schools. A significant outcome of the relationship has been the 2013 release of curriculum units tied to the Australian Curriculum as resources in inquiry-based mathematics for state school teachers in Prep-Year 9 (see paper by Debritz and Horne). We end with recommendations for creating and sustaining partnerships.

Initial History

A formal relationship was initiated in 2006 with the then mathematics curriculum division of the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) for an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project. The aim of the project was to study teachers' evolving experiences as they developed expertise in teaching mathematics through inquiry. For the researcher, the benefit was clear: in-kind support required to garner a first nationally-funded grant. For the curriculum division, the benefits included the opportunity to forward their numeracy goals (Education Queensland, 2007) in making mathematics more meaningful, and to support a new curriculum framework (QSA, 2008) and *National Statements of Learning* (Curriculum Corporation, 2006) for the forthcoming national curriculum. The ARC grant initially only required in-kind financial commitment from the Department[5], necessitating little risk for either party.

This smaller project led to a larger ARC Linkage Project between the researchers and the Department in later years. The formal relationship had, however begun years before. The then curriculum division leader (not the author) and the researcher knew one another through interactions at state and national mathematics initiatives. Through those several meetings, they recognised they had similar visions, beliefs and criticisms for the direction of mathematics education. These encounters were likely critical in that they built mutual respect, and trust that this respect could be sustained if expectations increased. Both parties had experienced poor outcomes, unreasonable demands or strained relationships from previous partnerships (Goldring & Sims, 2005), so this trust was tacitly but highly valued.

Timing was Right

The Queensland Numeracy Framework 2007-2010 (Education Queensland, 2007) was developed to recognise key elements and supports that enhanced and promoted numeracy practices. The *Queensland Curriculum and Reporting* (QCAR) *Framework* released its curriculum documents (QSA, 2008), based on the *National Statements of Learning* (Curriculum Corporation, 2006). The *Ways of Working* in particular aimed to engage students in mathematical practices that would develop higher-order thinking and increased participation. These initiatives made the timing of the research project ideal to align with Education Queensland (EQ) initiatives in that (1) EQ and local schools were seeking resources to increase the focus on numeracy and the teaching of mathematical practices (both promoted by inquiry) and (2) some funding could be justified under these schemes due to the research project's extensive professional development of teachers in mathematical inquiry pedagogies and numeracy strategies. The project also promised tangible resources in the form of inquiry units developed by project teachers that could later serve as resources for teachers across the state.

Initial drafts of the Australian Curriculum highlighted inquiry as an overarching practice in mathematics (ACARA, 2010). Even though this explicit focus on inquiry was

[5] At that time, ARC Linkage Projects allowed for only in-kind support for projects under $50k per year. This scheme was ideal for early career researchers garnering their first ARC project.

almost completely removed in later versions of the document, the Proficiency Strands continued to promote increased emphasis on mathematical reasoning and problem-solving (ACARA, 2012). Mathematical inquiry was still seen as a significant way to promote this emphasis. Nevertheless, the formalities for a subsequent ARC Linkage Project with the Department required intense internal negotiations to approve the proposed financial support.

Near the end of the second ARC Linkage Project, EQ was undertaking a major curricular overhaul to support implementation of the new Australian Curriculum. The curriculum leaders from the "Curriculum into the Classroom" (C2C) project saw potential for including the inquiry units being developed by the project for their Prep-7 (and later Prep-9) mathematics units. The timing and maturity of the research project was ideal in many ways. The units, designed by project teachers for their own classrooms, required substantial revision, however, to allow for scaling up. As reported in the paper by Debritz and Horne, the researchers and project teachers helped design (and redesign) inquiry-based units for EQ's implementation of the Australian Curriculum for Queensland state schools.

Benefits

Outcomes of the partnership resulted in benefits for the researchers, the schools and the Department. The clear benefit for the researchers has been in the provision of research outcomes (see paper by Makar and Dole, above). In addition, the partnership has allowed for easier access by the research team to subsequent projects both in the partner schools and others in the region (through word of mouth). For EQ, one benefit was through the project's professional development for its teachers, particularly for schools in the more rural areas where sustained professional development is less common. There was also a commitment to the development of teacher leaders, which has allowed for teachers and schools beyond the project to benefit as well.

The schools reported benefits similar to those reported in the literature (Lonsdale, 2010) such as a change in school-wide culture, professional learning of teachers, improved pedagogies across content areas, deeper understandings in mathematics, critical numeracy, and improved student engagement and outcomes. Similar to partnerships summarised by Lonsdale, evidence of benefits for the specific schools has been largely anecdotal. However, benefits for the researchers (e.g., research output) and education department (e.g., development of the curriculum units) have been more tangible. The accountability requirements for these two parties are likely the primary reason for this. These parties may want to consider offering schools help in seeking ways to collect their own evidence for change to give their commitment and improvement increased visibility, acknowledgement and methods for monitoring change once the project concludes.

Recommendations

From our experiences, we provide the following recommendations for partnerships between researchers and state education agencies. While the first three align to findings found in the literature, the remaining three are less commonly reported.

1. *Design a win-win project*. This is perhaps the most important. Successful relationships mean that everyone wins in ways that are meaningful in their context. Design the project to ensure that everyone gains in tangible ways that are significant to them; this perspective promotes respect, trust and commitment (Goldring & Sims, 2005; Grundy et al., 2010).

2. *Have a common vision and/or values*. A common vision and/or values for the planned project will support the trust and perseverance needed to endure obstacles and challenges encountered along the way (Goodlad, 1991; Peel et al., 2002).
3. *Maintain mutual respect and flexibility*. It is of benefit to the relationship if the parties have different roles to play (Goodlad, 1991; Grundy et al., 2010). It is therefore vital that each party is aware and supportive of the needs of the other to accomplish their goals. Respect and flexibility on both sides to support the partner to reach their own goals is an important aspect of a successful partnership.
4. *Practice patience and persistence*. Outcomes do not always happen how or when expected. The volatile nature of educational contexts often interrupts plans. A balance of patience and persistence can be critical.
5. *People are paramount: value your local champions*. Most projects depend not only on the lead partners, but also on key people behind the scenes who are vital to the work. Seek ways to value and appreciate their contributions.
6. *Network for the long-term*. Consider all relationships with stakeholders as potentially long-term. It often takes years of interactions before the partnership begins to build a foundation of trust, respect and mutual understanding. New partnerships can be created out of these long-term networks and provide authentic ways to seek out partners with common vision, values, communication and commitment.

References

ACARA (2010). The Australian Curriculum: Mathematics (v. 1.0.1). Draft Consultation Version. Melbourne: Education Services Australia.

ACARA (2012). The Australian Curriculum: Mathematics (v. 4.0). Melbourne: Education Services Australia.

Clifford, M., Millar, S. B., Smith, Z., Hora, M., & DeLima, L. (2007). *K-20 Partnerships: Literature review and recommendations for research.* Report to the National Science Foundation: SCALE Project (System-wide change for all learners and educators). Retrieved 20 January 2013 f rom http://scalemsp.wceruw.org/files/research/Products/partnership_literature_review.pdf

Curriculum Corporation (2006). *National statements of learning: Mathematics*. Carlton South, Australia: Curriculum Corporation.

Education Queensland. (2007). *Numeracy: lifelong confidence with mathematics. Framework for action 2007-2010*. http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/area/literacy/docs/numeracy.pdf

Goldring, E., & Sims, P. (2005). Modeling creative and courageous school leadership through district-community-university partnerships. *Educational Policy, 19*(1), 223-249.

Goodlad, J. I. (1991). School-university partnerships. *The Education Digest, 56*(8), 58-61.

Grundy, S., Robison, J., & Tomazos, D. (2001). Interrupting the way things are: Exploring new directions in school/university partnerships. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 29*(3), 203-217.

Peel, H. A., Peel, B. B., & Baker, M. E. (2002). School/university partnerships: A viable model. *The International Journal of Educational Management, 16*(6/7), 319-325.

Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) (2008). *Queensland curriculum, assessment and reporting framework. Mathematics ways of working*. Retrieved 12/1/13 from http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p_10/qcar_el_maths_wow.pdf