

**MAC00046F**  
**AARE ANNUAL CONFERENCE**  
(University of Sydney, December, 2000)

***Interrogating Collaborative Research- Who is Inside and Who is Out?***

**“Is there a future for collaborative research?”**

Ian Macpherson, Tania Aspland (School of Professional Studies) and Ross Brooker (School of Human Movement Studies), Queensland University of Technology.

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper reports an iterative series of reflective conversations involving the three of us who have engaged in a number of collaborative research efforts (mostly within a critical collaborative Action Research approach) in the last decade of the twentieth century. As we continue our work into the twenty-first century, we reflect on our efforts and ask WHAT we have learned about doing collaborative research and HOW we have arrived at these learnings (or knowledge) about collaborative research. We agree that our efforts have produced understandings and skills about establishing research partnerships and negotiating research agendas. We would even go so far as to say that we have made advances about the collaborative ways research data can be analysed and interpreted. However, we raise serious questions about the feasibility of maintaining and sustaining research partnerships through a fuller and more complete research cycle which includes applications of analyses and interpretations in local practice on the one hand, and advocacy within systemic and policy contexts on the other. The purpose of the paper, then, is to present a descriptive narrative, along with a critique, of our emerging knowledge about the WHAT and HOW of collaborative research. The question posed in the paper’s title provides a focus throughout the paper; and a vehicle for addressing the overarching title and theme of this symposium.

**OUR PERSPECTIVE(S) ON COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH**

Collaborative research is placed within a view of critical collaborative action research developed by two of us. We describe it as follows:

*... it is research which has an emancipatory intent of empowering its participants, not just to understand their social reality within their school settings but to change it in ways that are personally meaningful at differing levels to all participants. We propose that critical collaborative action research of this type may be characterized in the following ways:*

- *collaborative – practitioners and researchers engaged in collaborative action work together as a group continually defining and redefining the purposes of the research*
- *critical – underlying assumptions and beliefs are acknowledged; curriculum trends, policies and practices are seen to be problematic and contestable; and further action is tied to critical*

*frameworks which focus on social justice and empowerment for all;*

- *action-oriented – demanding direct involvement and influence from the real world experience of practitioners where the problems of practice are framed, possible solutions are determined, solutions are enacted, and results are reviewed, reflected upon and reconstructed;*
- *honest – generating high levels of trust and relationship building amongst all participants;*
- *contributory – roles are negotiated, not imposed, and responsibilities are clearly defined and self-determined;*
- *communicative – interaction among group members occurs;*
- *real – realistic expectations are set regarding time-lines, and what is possible in particular contexts;*
- *equitable – power and authority over design, process and outcomes are shared;*
- *meaningful – teachers are valued as persons, not as research objects, they are actively involved in the research process, they can tell their story;*
- *representative – acknowledgement of the professional, social and emotional needs of the teachers takes place;*
- *sustained - time for reflection and reconstruction is an integral feature of the process; and*
- *transformative – empowerment to make change happen and not just to explain or understand it is of utmost importance ...*

*Critical collaborative action research has the potential for teachers to feel empowered as curriculum practitioners and leaders in their respective professional work contexts:*

- ***empowered*** *to contest current trends, policies and imperatives at national, state and systemic levels which are seemingly centralizing control over curriculum decision-making;*
- ***empowered*** *to collaborate with significant others in planning for transformative action at local and broader levels of context; and*
- ***empowered*** *to implement and be accountable for their actions*

(Aspland, Macpherson, Proudford & Whitmore, 1996:101-3).

These ideas were further developed in a chapter of a book published by Routledge in 1998. Two of us were part of the authorship of this chapter which identifies ideas about collaborative inquiry and about future collaborative inquiry and action. For example, the chapter states:

*... The sorts of characteristics about critical collaborative action research outlined earlier cannot be assumed – they have to be worked on consciously and deliberately, and they must permeate all aspects of coordinating and participating in the project...*

*It takes a long time to establish a collaborative working relationship...  
We are aware of the need to sustain the learning partnership by paying attention  
to such details as principles and procedures which will facilitate and strengthen  
our partnership and hopefully avoid (or at least mitigate the effect of) tensions  
and dilemmas which are inevitable in any relationship.*  
(Macpherson, Aspland, Elliott, Proudford, Shaw & Thurlow in Atweh, Kemmis &  
Weeks, 1998:156-8).

The principles and procedures mentioned in the quote above have been further developed in relation to reporting practitioner research (a form of collaborative research) and to engaging in case study research (where, again, collaboration was a major feature) – See Brooker & Macpherson, 1999; Macpherson, Brooker & Ainsworth, 2000). Collaborative research, then, for the purposes of this paper is set within the perspectives articulated in the above references. The authors’ conversations about collaborative research are framed by these perspectives.

The perspectives presented above build a framework within which to consider the question: Is there a future for collaborative research? In considering this question, further questions rather than answers emerge. Among these further questions, are those which relate to the overarching title and theme of this symposium. It is one thing to grapple with the issues of who is inside and who is out when establishing collaborative research relationships and agendas; it is another thing to acknowledge and address (or action) the issues associated with the sustainability of such research efforts and with a maintained authenticity of both the relationship and the agenda for ALL participants.

### **APPLYING THE PERSPECTIVES IN AN ITERATIVE SERIES OF REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS**

The mode of inquiry used for developing this paper is one associated firstly with the development of a largely descriptive account of already-existing documentation in research reports, conference papers, journal articles and book chapters about the authors’ involvement in collaborative research efforts. In essence, the previous section of the paper contains this account. The emphasis in this account, we should add, is on the methodological aspects of the research (as they relate to collaborative research particularly), rather than on the substantive foci of the research efforts (which largely had to do with curriculum leadership as defined in our book (Macpherson, Aspland, Brooker & Elliott, 1999; Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Elliott, 1999).

Secondly, the inquiry moves into an analytical mode (based on an iterative series of reflective conversations, using the perspectives outlined above as a framework for interrogating and critiquing the descriptive account.

Thirdly, it should be noted that both the development of the descriptive account and the pursuit of analysis/interrogation/critique occurred collaboratively and critically. Such an approach was most useful, for example, in our addressing the ways in which we analysed data, and drew implications for both policy and practice (See Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Elliott, 1999; Brooker, Macpherson & Aspland, 2000; Macpherson, Brooker

& Aspland, 2000). Here, the collaboration went beyond ourselves to include research participants in the field as well as a range of colleagues, locally, nationally and internationally.

(It is at this point in the paper that the three of us engage in a short conversation about the descriptive account, the analytical mode and the critical element. Points which arise relate to our ongoing commitment:

- to search for ways in which collaborative research efforts are authentically empowering for ALL participants;
- to articulate ways in which collaborative research efforts can be taken from the local to the global (from the inside out) and have a real impact on both policy and practice; and
- to identify ways of embedding and sustaining collaborative efforts in our professional practice and research cultures).

### **SUMMARISING ... FOR NOW**

The point of view that our conversations to date have elicited is an inside-out rather than an outside-in point of view. While we have not directly addressed who is inside and who is out, there is no doubt that our perspectives imply our concern to celebrate collaborative research efforts which include rather than exclude. Our point of view, at this stage, then, contains the following ideas (some of which are elaborated in inside/outside terms to illustrate our concern):

#### ***In terms of empowerment,***

- collaborative research is not easy – for example, whose needs are being served and whose research agenda is it to be (or, in other words, who is inside and who is out?);
- it takes time- for example, trust does not happen overnight and negotiation is a complex process (or, how does the inside/outside divide disappear?);
- it is a challenge to facilitate and manage – for example, who takes the leadership role? (or, how does a facilitative view of leadership contribute to power-sharing rather than to a continuation of a powerful outside dictating the terms of a less powerful inside?);

#### ***In terms of impact,***

- it raises questions about what sorts of research processes (including the analysis, reporting and application of data) are appropriate – for example, what might be appropriate from a research point of view might not be feasible in the day to day reality of a school setting;
- it remains contestable in terms of its applicability in contexts beyond the local and specific – for example, what notice will policy makers take of a study completed in a few local settings;

- it continues to be a minefield of dilemmas regarding ethical matters such as confidentiality and intellectual property – for example, how anonymous can local settings be in forms of reporting, who owns the outcomes of the research and who has the right to report and to whom?

*In terms of sustainability,*

- it presents an enormous challenge about how to embed and sustain it in professional work contexts – for example, what happens when funding from a research project ends

The policy contexts within which most of us work these days focus very heavily on the importance of partnership and collaboration. Such a focus is seen in terms of what schools are expected to do in relation to working with their communities in such areas as curriculum decision-making; and in terms of what University personnel are expected to do in looking for research partners and then seeking sources of research funding collaboratively.

This is the wider context within which we engage in collaborative research efforts. With such a context in mind, we contend that the descriptive account, along with its analysis/interrogation/critique, provide a useful platform for exploring the matters raised in the point of view above. Why? - Because WHAT we have come to know about collaborative research and HOW we have come to know it, is generative of an ongoing conversation – a conversation which has the potential to deepen our understanding of what collaborative research is and how we might do it better as we move into the twenty-first century. In addressing the question posed in the paper’s title, we have come to a position that it not so much a question of whether collaborative research has a future; but more of a question of how our current “What” and “How” (along with our critique and reconstruction of it) might shape that future.

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