Resolving the dilemmas in collaborative research:  
Supporting a gifted education initiative  
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an ongoing collaborative research project with a primary school, which has as its major goal the development of a gifted education programme. The project commenced in mid 1998 when the school Principal approached the researchers for help in the implementation of the programme. The researchers adopted the principles of participatory action research to guide their interactions with the school and through this approach intended to support the school in its stated objective. The development of the programme was part of a systemic wide initiative in gifted education. The staff of the school had agreed to support the programme from its inception. After eighteen months of collaboration, the researchers have attempted to evaluate the impact of their collaboration on the development of this programme and, in the spirit of participatory action research, examined their own practices. A number of events have emerged which has hindered effective collaboration. An understanding of these events and their consequences has been developed through an analysis of two dimensions of collaboration – the extent to which teachers have developed a knowledge of the programme and the principles of gifted education and the extent to which the teachers have adopted a professional approach to change. The collaboration had raised a number of dilemmas concerning the relationships between the researchers and school administration, the teachers and each other. Each of these will be explored to determine the appropriate course of action that will follow.


Introduction

In this paper we describe our experiences in facilitating curriculum change in a primary school through an action research project. We were invited by the Principal to support the implementation of a new programme that would establish West Hollow School (a pseudonym) as a leader in the education of gifted children. In this project, a number of concerns has emerged over the eighteen months. We examine the origins of these
concerns, their influence on the effectiveness of collaboration, and the dilemmas facing us as action researchers in continuing the project.

Schools are complex and dynamic social systems each with its own history and culture, which impacts on preparedness to cope with change. Attempts to change schools from a top down approach have been generally unsuccessful (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994). Change threatens the status quo and challenges the comfort zone of all staff. However, changes in practice need to be valued and implemented critically if reform is to be accepted and sustained. Teachers need to recognise their professional role as collaborators within a community of practice if genuine reform is to be implemented in classrooms (Middleton & Hill, 1996). Underpinning successful change is a sense of shared ownership and possession of a common vision of where the school is going with its new programme. The Principal of West Hollow anticipated the complexity of change and constraints existing within his school and hence sought our support at an early stage in the introduction of the new programme.

This paper focuses on our role as action researchers and the dilemma of academics working in schools to facilitate change.

Theoretical framework

Two dimensions inform the analysis of our role in the collaborative project. First, in this context change involved the introduction of a programme for the education of gifted children. This was to be a whole school programme, supported and specially funded by the education system. An expectation existed that West Hollow School would become a leader in this area with the responsibility to support professional development in the region, to become a centre of best practice, and to become a site for research in gifted education. Consequently, staff needed to be aware of the issues in gifted education, confident with their ability to learn, and to become proactive participants in the programme. Second, a co-ordinated school wide approach was required to develop a "West Hollow" model of gifted education. West Hollow is a semi-rural school in a low socio-economic environment surrounded by a number of small schools that were expected to benefit from the programme. Strategies and programmes had to be identified and adapted to the local context. The capacity of teachers to be professionals willing to undertake action research, to become reflective and to co-operate in a whole school approach was on the line. Issues in each of these dimensions will be explored.

Initially, the school had applied to be part of the programme because key personnel were undertaking graduate studies in the area. However, gifted education is a domain that generates considerable angst among many teachers. Advocates of gifted education argue that gifted children are exceptional children, each with his or her own innate specific capacity to excel in domains commensurate with intellectual capability. Parents, advocates and policy makers continually encourage schools to acknowledge the special needs of gifted children and to provide appropriate educational programmes that provide challenging and intellectually worth while experiences. However, socio-political influences have impacted pervasively on gifted education in essentially a hedonistic Australian culture (Gross, 1993):

Australia has been moving towards a view of giftedness as universal. In Australia the parameters of giftedness have not only broadened; they have stretched to a point which the majority of educators and psychologists working internationally in the field would consider to be quite untenable. (p. 42)

Reconciling a public perspective with a professional responsibility is difficult in practice. Even among teachers a range of views exist about the significance of gifted education (Table 1).
Consequently, in all but the most rare school and classroom, gifted children are left to cope without the encouragement and deliberate intervention that they deserve. It is not surprising that in programmes where children are removed from the regular classroom and provided with some intervention that they report in stark contrast their in classroom and out of class experiences (Stanley, 1991). Other factors also contribute to the difficulty of establishing a co-ordinated approach to gifted education.

Table 1

**Attitudes to Special Provision (McLeod & Copley, 1989)**

1. Those who care passionately and believe that gifted children should receive special treatment, their existence and identifiability being taken for granted.

1. Those who react with horror at the prospect of additional resources being lavished on children who, by definition, are already over endowed.

2. Those who believe that society has a responsibility to assist all individual children to realise their own unique potentials.

3. Those who are totally indifferent or unaware that there are issues to be decided.

Confounding a clear understanding of the nature of gifted education is the diversity of opinion and beliefs about intelligence, identification of giftedness and strategies to provide an appropriate curriculum. Many teachers become enamoured with the appeal of certain persuasive advocates and hence zealously and uncritically adopt one strategy or "activity" as an add-on initiative. This approach does not provide a comprehensive gifted programme. At the core of curriculum reform is the development of defensible interventions that produce results for the education of gifted children across their years of schooling. A further prevalent viewpoint among teachers concerns the notion of effective teaching practices. There is broad acceptance that the needs of all children must be catered for and hence particular teaching behaviours will automatically achieve positive outcomes for all students. Furthermore, many of the contemporary strategies advocated in effective teaching were pioneered in gifted education. Thus teachers implementing these strategies can claim they are implementing a gifted programme and may indeed be seen to be by outside observers. Whether individual gifted children are extended by these strategies is rarely assessed. Thus for change to occur in West Hollow, the need for most staff to develop a shared vision of gifted education and to become experts was mandatory. A series of steps or phases in this process would involve initial information and awareness of principles of gifted education, a preparedness to adopt an open-minded view, further development of an understanding of strategies and finally to develop a proactive leadership role.

The second dimension concerned the development of a sense of professionalism. Despite schools being frequently referred to as communities, they are more like multicellular colonies with teachers working "co-operatively" together but often through the orchestration of the Principal and key administrators rather than through collaborative or collegial harmony where each cell is sensitive and supportive of the needs of others. Metaphorically schools are commercial or industrial enterprises where each employee plays a part in the "education" of children rather than a synergistic organism dedicated to the common goals, namely the social and cognitive growth of children. This fundamental difference has been noted (Middleton & Hill, 1996):

> In an industrial pattern, people are shaped by the organisation. In a learning community, the organisation is shaped by the people.
If sustained change is to be genuinely achieved, all stakeholders with a vested interest in education need to engage in self-exploration of their beliefs, assumptions and develop genuine attempts to form collaborative communities. However, the achievement of this goal is seen to be problematic (Anderson, 1998). Uhl and Squires (1994) noted that schools attempting to create a collaborative culture often encounter problems where collaborators fail to translate their experiences to others; models do not match experience; and participants engage in organisational politics. Collaboration requires organisational and inter-organisational processes where resources, power, and authority are shared in order to achieve common goals. Thus, participants need to be empowered as professionals to engage in effective negotiation, implementation and evaluation of action. Carr and Kemmis (1983) describe professionalism in the following way:

...that the methods and procedures employed by members of the profession are based on theoretical knowledge and research; that the members of the profession have an over-riding commitment to the well-being of their clients; and that individually and collectively, the members of the profession reserve the right to make autonomous and independent judgements, free from external non-professional controls and constraints, about the nature of particular practices or courses of action to be adopted in any particular situation. (pp 189 - 190)

In becoming professional, although knowledge gained through experience is important, this recipe-type or even craft knowledge is insufficient and the teacher has to draw on a body of systematic knowledge requiring personal professional development initiatives (Houle, 1980, p45). However, because knowledge-based skills are exercised in non-control situations, it is essential to the professional to have the freedom to make his or her own judgements with regard to appropriate practice. The same principles apply to the school as a whole. The challenge was to enable West Hollow to become a community with shared visions of professionalism and a disposition to be reflective practitioners at an individual and whole school level. Becoming a reflective practitioner would be characterised by recognition of responsibility of being active investigators willing to share strategies, support colleagues and take a leadership role in developing the school programme.

Collaboration

The beginning

The researchers were approached shortly after the school had been advised that its application for special funding for gifted education was successful. Previously, both researchers had worked with primary and secondary schools individually or as a team to support the implementation of programmes in gifted education, mathematics education or science education. Previous models of support had ranged from one-off professional development workshops and seminars to 10-week long programmes of face-to-face contact with students in which strategies were modelled for teachers. The researchers were familiar with the initiative under which West Hollow was funded and a key education system officer brokered contact between the Principal and researchers.

Under the central initiative, individual schools were funded to develop models of gifted education to meet their specific needs and to capitalise on local expertise supported by a central office Project Officer. West Hollow School catered for 340 children from pre-school to grade 7 and had a staff of 27 teachers, including a Principal and Deputy Principal. The school is situated in a rapid growth area about an hour’s drive from a large metropolitan city where the University is located. Whilst initially a school catering for a small farming community, it is now the major community focus for a burgeoning housing development for
mostly low-income families. Funding was provided to support the appointment of a half-time Programme Manager to lead the project. It was expected that this person would be an experienced teacher with knowledge of gifted education and the enthusiasm to develop the programme. In the case of West Hollow, the teacher who developed the initial proposal on behalf of the school, and who was already known to the researchers, qualified for this role. However, she was undertaking post-graduate studies in gifted education, had other commitments and consequently was unwilling to accept the Programme Manager role. The Programme Manager who was appointed was enthusiastic about the task but had less formal knowledge of gifted education. A small number of other teachers had some interest, experience or elementary qualifications in gifted education practices.

Initial strategies

Generally, postgraduate students who frequently are practising teachers initiate school-based research. Irrespective of the paradigm of research, the beneficiaries are usually the academics and teacher/researchers through publications, career advancement, and growth in individual understanding or advanced qualifications. The students, school and colleagues are rarely advantaged although, the administration may gain some kudos on behalf of the school or system.

Professional development is also problematic. The in-service model has been heavily criticised by both practitioners and researchers. The in-service approach is based on a deficit model where teachers are seen as objects and not as engaged subjects, and often the result is a reinforcement of the status quo and schooling as usual (Lieberman & Miller, 1990). Essentially, the in-service model is a top-down, paternalistic, externally imposed approach that results in little or no fundamental institutional change. Participatory action research (PAR) was seen as a potentially effective strategy for supporting the teachers and school by creating a culture of support for teacher inquiry through study groups, support networks, group curriculum writing, research projects, and other professional development activities responsive to immediate needs (Carr & Kemmis, 1983).

By approaching the collaboration through PAR the researchers acknowledged the distributed expertise of participants (Atweh, Weeks & Kemmis, 1998). The researchers recognised that the status quo would need to be challenged through action, reflection and collaboration. However, establishing collaboration characterised by open and non-recriminating dialogue was recognised as fraught with difficulties (Watters, et al, 1998). Participatory action research needs to be built on collaboration that acknowledges the contribution of expertise by all — distributed expertise — and listens to the voices of all participants. Such discourse is not babble but genuine dialogue (Clark, et al., 1996). This dialogue and the necessary openness do not manifest themselves spontaneously. Opportunities need to be established for the acknowledgement of multiple agenda and the growth of a mutual understanding of the roles, assumptions and knowledge of the participants.

Clark, Herter and Moss (1998) argue that dialogue is a central feature of collaboration because it fosters mutual professional development and "a more equal participation in conceptualising and carrying out the community’s purposes". Central to non-recriminating dialogue is building trust and developing understanding of others’ perspectives and agenda. Participatory action research also provides support for reflective implementation and theory testing as a process in professional knowledge growth. We believed that participatory action research enables teachers to reconcile their intuitive beliefs and experiences with theoretical perspectives and thus justify their practices (Hoban, 1997). Complementing their reflective analysis, contact with outside experts or practitioners ensures the body of educational
research becomes available to teachers as sources of new ideas from outside their range of experiences and hence further stimuli for action.

The first twelve months

The first three months of the collaboration involved three visits to the school. An initial briefing and planning meeting was held involving the Programme Manager, Principal and Project Officer. At that meeting the assumptions of participants including the researchers were articulated. The Principal's agenda focussed on a series of specific objectives. He was keen to ensure that the school community could identify the important skills, understandings, competencies, and shared vision needed to implement a differentiated curriculum. His initial concern was with strategies for identification of gifted children. Longer-term concerns involved supporting and monitoring the developing Programme through discussions with teachers in a "critical friend" mode. The extensive professional development experience of a number of staff who had attended conferences and seminars was evident.

In response, the researchers focussed on establishing a dialogue among teachers and themselves in the second visit. A full-day visit that involved professional development presentations and facilitated focus groups in which teachers were able to elaborate on their beliefs about gifted education. This dialogue enabled staff to engage in self-exploration of their beliefs, challenge assumptions, and develop shared view of gifted education. These focus sessions were tape-recorded and key concerns, issues and claims identified. Surveys and anonymous open-ended questionnaires were also used to elicit information about teachers’ concerns.

In the third visit to the school, the views and concerns of teachers were tabled and discussed enabling further exploration of assumptions. The school administration implemented a consultative process to support the construction of a draft "definition" of a gifted child by all teachers. After considerable discussion and negotiation a final wording was proposed and accepted by the staff. Evaluations of this process indicated full satisfaction by staff. The researchers believed that this process had initiated a climate of dialogue and a perception that they were acknowledging and valuing the staff's views while providing critical support. These views were reinforced by evaluations of the first year of the project undertaken through interviews with teachers twelve months later. This process was seen as vital in establishing a vision. Those teachers who were already enthusiastically committed to change came to see alternative perspectives and acknowledge different experiences. Those who were sceptical or even antagonistic appeared to undergo some transformation. Indeed one "critic" who viewed the whole process as top-down bureaucracy began to reflect more deeply about the issue of gifted education commenting that some of the discussions had been "philosophical" and "has given him ideas to think about."

The next phase involved the researchers and Project Officer leading a full-day programme of inservice and planning. Workshops were implemented that addressed general issues concerning gifted education and specific tasks were developed by teams as projects for teachers to implement in differentiating their curriculum for mathematics. These projects were to be implemented in Term 1.

The initial January planning sessions had been useful in that it committed a number of teachers to act by implementing small projects. Visits to the school by the researchers in the next six months were less frequent due to their commitments elsewhere. A key visit occurred in May when one of the researchers attended a reporting day. Analysis of interviews and notes taken during the day revealed that a small core of six teachers claimed they were enthusiastically engaged in trialing initiatives and had benefited from a number of professional development workshops and the collaboration with the university staff. They
valued the opportunity to share ideas and learn from each other in an environment where there was freedom to voice concerns. At the other extreme there appeared to be a small number of teachers who were co-operating without being proactive in trialing or exploring new approaches. However, they expressed a preparedness to continue working towards the development of the gifted programme. Many of the remaining teachers were still feeling apprehensive about their ability and were seeking further support.

However, it was also emerging that during this period tensions had developed in the school over the function of the Programme Manager. While individuals were attempting to implement projects, the overall co-ordination and support for this was limited. Teachers claimed resources were not being distributed and there was little recognition of their attempts to implement new approaches. The school was indeed behaving as a “multicellular colony” rather than a community focussed on and facilitated to achieve a common goal. Accompanying this tension were signs that while some teachers were engaging in trialing new ideas, most were not.

Eventually, the Programme Manager was directed to other duties and the Principal attempted to assume this role. The situation was further confounded by the appointment of a new Deputy Principal who was then directed by the Principal to be the Programme Manager. These actions generated concerns with the Project Officer and the education system. The researchers’ response to this was to communicate a formal report highlighting a number of concerns and recommendations for action (Table 2). This precipitated a critical meeting between the Principal, Deputy, Project Officer, a senior education officer and the researchers. At this point further funding of the programme was problematic. The researchers were now confronted with their first major dilemma. The school was accountable for the funding it received and thus the macro political context was exerting an influence that threatened the autonomy of the school in the development of the programme. There were also micro political considerations emerging from personality and roles of key participants within the school. Attempts to facilitate the development of a community with a common goal were being thwarted by both considerations.

Two further visits in September and November were conducted in order to engage in dialogue with individual teachers and to provide support for these teachers. The researchers were interested in observing classroom practices and share ideas with interested teachers. Four classes were observed in the first visit and strategies discussed with teachers. In the second visit more time was spent talking with teachers about their experiences. On both occasions, however, frank discussions were undertaken with the administration in order to resolve some of the perceived problems identified by the Principal and Project Officer regarding direction of the programme. Recommendations following the September meeting were formally communicated to the school. These were shared among participants and indeed communicated by the school to the education system.

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>• Lack of confidence by teachers</td>
<td>• Collaborative development</td>
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<td>• Initial absence of sharing of</td>
<td>of a Plan</td>
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Table 2

Concerns and recommendations
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<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Focus on curriculum initiatives</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Fragmented approach to programming</td>
<td>• Strategic professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lack of identification of gifted children</td>
<td>• Role of Program Manager</td>
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<td>• Manager’s role and function</td>
<td>• Outreach programme</td>
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<th>September</th>
<th>November</th>
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<td>• Manager’s role unclear</td>
<td>• Validating identified children and planning for these children</td>
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<td>• Professional development modules and interactive diaries (relevance, need and likely success)</td>
<td>• Issues of conflict or poor communication within the school</td>
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<td>• Action by teachers in implementing initiatives with identifiable outcomes</td>
<td>• Documentation of evidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Timelines and direction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Modules being developed for PD</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Inward looking teachers unprepared or unwilling to share</td>
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The effectiveness of collaboration

A number of important issues can be considered in determining the effectiveness of collaboration (Anderson, 1998). These include the range of stakeholders involved in collaboration, the sphere of collaboration, local support and conditions for collaboration and goals of collaboration. The role of external stakeholders is also influential in the outcome of collaboration. The extent to which these have been addressed will be examined.
Who participates?

Collaboration requires personnel who are in key positions to implement change to be involved. The participants in this project so far have included the Principal and teaching staff of the school, the Project Officer, and the two researchers. However, it has been a deliberate policy to exclude the local community for historical grounds related to previous negative experiences. From this perspective the collaboration does not include all stakeholders. In the short term this may be necessary but if the longer term success of the programme is to be ensured authentic collaboration will need to include the community (Anderson, 1998).

Participation in which spheres?

The sphere of collaboration helps to define the scope of intervention and support. It is the focus of the collaboration. In school-university collaborative situations there are a number of spheres that can be explored. Collaboration could have been implemented at policy level with the Principal, Project Officer and Programme Manager. The approach that was adopted involved an attempt to collaborate with classroom practitioners in supporting them in developing knowledge of gifted education. The focus on this dimension was to some extent at the expense of a focus on the development of professionalism. It was perhaps naively assumed that the teachers would engage in reflective practice or at least that the Programme Manager and administration would encourage this process. Future directions may need to focus on both dimensions by working with teachers within classrooms to model practice and instigating more formal research-oriented practice.

What conditions and processes should be present locally?

The Researchers, Project Officer and administration have a cordial and open working relationship. Issues are discussed and ideas reconciled. Formal reports have been seriously considered and acted upon. Relationships with the Programme Manager have been more problematic as the incumbent occupant became embroiled in the local politics. The resolution of this problem offers an opportunity to develop strong links to the new Program Manager who has shown a strong desire to collaborate and consult with colleagues both within the school and in other schools with gifted programmes.

Participation towards what end?

Through joint planning, action and reflection the intent was to enable each participant to identify, experience, and reflect on their own professional development needs. Teachers communicate and share much in schools but very rarely do they share ideas about how to teach or observe colleagues' teaching. Being prepared to share ideas is a quantum leap driven by a clear picture of what goals they are trying to achieve and a belief that this is a worthwhile goal over which they have some ownership. It is not evident that the school has developed a clear goal and can identify as a school with the philosophy and direction of the funded initiative. Interviews with teachers conducted after eighteen months of the project suggest that the teachers who are reporting that they are committed are also saying that they were always committed. The initiative and collaboration may have made them more aware of the existence of gifted children and helped them to redefine their perspective on giftedness but they were always practising "effective teaching" that met the needs of all children.

What conditions and processes should be present at broader institutional and societal levels?
West Hollow School committed itself to change by supporting the planned introduction of a programme of gifted education to the school. What negotiation and dialogue occurred at that point in time is not known. What has emerged is the alliance between the school and the education authorities to implement a programme. Accountability and responsibility are key considerations in the ongoing development of this programme. The educational authority has provided professional support in the form of a Project Officer and networking. It expects in return an account of change. In this relationship, history plays an important role. Teachers are weary of change where imposed programmes have come and gone as political fads. Workloads are increasing and teaching is becoming a process of survival. Demands for change, the introduction of new syllabuses, literacy and numeracy standards, benchmarking can be seen as indictments that teachers are not doing their job. Teachers may react negatively or be resistant to change because the need for change implies that “students are not receiving the best education because teachers and their teaching is inappropriate or inadequate” (Sikes, 1992, p. 37). Where there is almost universal support for programmes that involve numeracy and literacy, there is circumspect support for programmes that address one particular sector of the school population. Systemic and social pressures in this context are not favourable to change unless that change can be seen to be of benefit to the school, individual teachers and students.

The future of authentic collaboration

The collaboration with West Hollow challenged our assumptions about research, collaboration and the purpose of schooling. In the contemporary research climate, the capacity to do research is becoming more dependent on developing liaisons with industry. For educational research, this implies the need to develop collaborative relationships with schools or educational systems. Genuine collaboration with outcomes that actually attempt to improve practices is clearly difficult. When the objectives of collaboration are not being achieved what are our responses? In collaboration there are multiple relationships at the core of which is a sense of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). To what extent and what priorities do these relationships take.

The researchers and the school

The school is a dynamic social system bonded by a common goal and led by a Principal who appears to have developed a friendly, supportive and open relationship with his staff. He has clear objectives that he wants to achieve but is reliant on advice from others as to the best options to follow. The situation is especially so in the development of the gifted programme. Within the school that advice has been fragmented with the former Programme Manager adopting one line of action and others adopting a different position. Thus the principal relied on external advice as much as internal. There has been a climate of trust and the collaboration with the Principal has been has been frank and forthright. However, as the programme seems to be in stalemate we are torn between continuation of the support or withdrawal and recommendation that the programme be abandoned.

The researchers and the staff

The West Hollow Project has been an attempt to develop and support authentic participation in reflective practice by teachers. The essence of collaboration is shared control and non-recriminatory dialogue. Professionals have the capacity and responsibility to make autonomous and independent judgements about their discipline (Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Houle, 1980). Hence professional development is more than just a technical process of knowledge and skills development and involves a reflective process in which the professional developer and the professional engage in mutual discourse to examine the assumptions underlying their respective practices. Professional development is a process of
growth as a person. It is also a hermeneutic process in which ideas and beliefs of the professional developer and the professional are mutually interpreted. In order to achieve effective collaboration there needs to be mutual trust and acceptance of the skills of all participants. We are concerned that the level of trust and acceptance of the researchers by staff is minimal. A professional relationship between the staff and researchers has not developed. During our many visits to the school we have rarely been asked to provide informal advice or assistance. There has been an expectation of formal presentations or that we were there to "evaluate" and "check-up" on what staff were doing. This attitude was developed despite many attempts to explain our role. However, it also was revealed in more recent discussions that staff changes and poor communication within the school might have contributed to the teachers' perceptions of our role.

A related confounding issue is that teachers are not confident in what they are doing and are reluctant to expose that lack of confidence to perceived experts. It is our contention that the Programme Manager plays the role of intermediary in supporting classroom teachers to develop their sense of confidence and self-efficacy as practitioners in gifted education.

The researchers and the educational system

The researchers support a broad goal namely the development of gifted education and in achieving this goal have developed cordial and mutually beneficial relationships with the education system. They have provided effective feedback and advice on a number of matters and have supported the system in practical ways. A conflict arises when a belief develops that the project is not achieving its goals. The researchers can accept responsibility for their parts in that process but also have an obligation to limit further waste of funding. It is a significant dilemma as to whether the researchers break the trust of the school and report on the effectiveness of the programme or continue to urge and advise the school in the face of little advancement.

The researchers themselves

Our individual perceptions and concerns have been articulated to each other and to the school through reporting mechanisms. The collaboration has led to enriched understandings of the researchers' own academic roles, assumptions about practice and priorities for the project. Sometimes our priorities and expectations of outcomes differed. There are three types of action research, technical, practical and emancipatory (Carr & Kemmis 1983). The phases of our project have, in fact moved through each of these types of action research. Carr and Kemmis have argued that only emancipatory action is real action research. To engage in emancipatory action research, we first needed to deal with the technical and practical problems. Our views differ as to where we are in this journey. Insights into these views are recorded here in the form of independently written perspectives to which we each responded. This debate emerged and was recorded during a debriefing we held on returning from the last visit to the school.

Researcher one’s reflection on the status of the project

*Working with West Hollow was expected to be a positive experience because it would give me an opportunity to become more aware of the problems and concerns that teachers have in implementing strategies in gifted education. I assumed that because the school had, as a community, committed itself to developing these strategies there would be many examples of teachers implementing strategies to study. It would have been very simple, and less stressful, if I had followed a research methodology that involved non-participant observation. However, as I wanted to have some impact on gifted education...*
education, I rejected this model in favour of a PAR approach with which I had had some previous success. Mobilising the teachers and the school to do what I think they said they originally wanted to do was far more problematic and to date I am left with a sense of frustration that so little has happened. I am not convinced in retrospect that the teachers really knew what they were letting themselves in for when they agreed to become a centre for gifted education. The school is in an interesting socio-economic district, has undergone major changes in population and seems to lack local community support. It just seems as if there is too much going on for the teachers to take up the challenge of developing a gifted programme.

I see the project as having a long way to if there is to be developed an effective approach to gifted education. I see limited evidence that there are global strategies in place and an impact on individual children in need of challenge. Getting the programme to an acceptable level will be a long haul and I don’t think the external education system that provides financial sources is prepared to wait that length of time before anything effective happens. I think the situation can improve but this will occur slowly. What is crucial is the mobilisation of a critical mass of teachers who are committed or doing things. I think there is the foundation for that critical mass and I believe that the new Programme Manager has the personal support, initiative and credibility to develop the programme if she has the full backing of the administration. Regrettably, I don’t think anything has happened in the last year in professional development or anything else, that has really changed teachers’ knowledge or perceptions of gifted education. What concerns me about that is there has been enormous opportunities for teachers to capitalise on the efforts of the Project Officer, the researchers and other professional development events.

I am also concerned about our credibility and relationships. By taking a role of critical friends we have been prepared to listen, comment and provide advice. We have attempted to reassure individual teachers about their programmes and to encourage them to share their experiences. However, I sense that teachers see us as “evaluators”. Whether this is because of poor communication from us, the administration or former Programme Manager does not matter now. Our challenge is to reverse this perception by some credible actions. There is conflict in our responsibilities to the school and relationships with the education system. Our brief has not been to evaluate the programme for the system yet we know a great deal about what is happening at grass roots level and feel torn between a commitment to support the school and an obligation to the system to identify wasted funding. However, I am also conscious that the system has funded a number of schools. If an independent observer or collaborator had insights into these other situations would they find similar concerns?

As a collaborator with another academic whose time and energies are limited, I am concerned that this project has distracted that person from more profitable and rewarding enterprises. The project has made me cautious about future involvement in collaborative research with schools.

Researcher two’s response to researcher’s one’s reflections
Whilst I agree with the comment concerning the teachers’ lack of “time”, there is an issue of responsibility. This school accepted funding to develop gifted education. Due to the limited funding available, in reality this also meant that in funds were unavailable to another school that may have better utilised the available resources. There does seem to be a critical mass of teachers who are recognised for their particular curriculum innovations, for example, the use of contracts, and willing to share their practices with other. This gives cause for optimism, however, when some of these same teachers argue that the professional development and support provided through this project has not resulted in any changes in their classroom practice the optimism seems misplaced.

Researcher two’s reflection on the status of the project

I was interested in the gifted education project at West Hollow for two key reasons that relate to gifted education and change processes in schools respectively. First, I am highly committed to providing quality educational experiences for gifted students. This project provided a means to substantially enhance a number of teachers’ awareness of the educational needs of gifted students in a supportive environment. Additionally, through the participation and anticipated actions of classroom and specialist teachers there was the potential for these teachers to provide direct benefit to the gifted students they taught. Furthermore, through the outreach component of the project there was an opportunity for teachers to share exemplary practice with colleagues at other schools, which in turn would benefit larger numbers of gifted students. Second, schools are facing ongoing pressures to reinvent themselves and respond to changes, such as recognising and responding to the diverse needs of their students, including gifted students. Though continued involvement in various curriculum initiatives and professional development programmes, it is evident that many teachers are reluctant to change their practices citing a lack of administrative and professional support as critical reasons. Due to the funding of this project, the commitment of the administration and the teachers themselves, this project appeared to have the necessary support and practitioner endorsement to provide for an optimal outcome in gifted education practices throughout the school. Hence, my involvement in this project was fuelled by a high interest in gifted education and change processes in schools, but also predicated by an expectation of thoughtful responses and planned actions from teachers.

The paper identifies some of the ongoing difficulties experienced at the school. These difficulties, including the attitudes and efforts of a number of teachers, and to some extent the administration, have resulted in a tension between my interest in monitoring the change processes in schools and my commitment to gifted education. Whilst the school’s responses to the opportunities provided through this project has given an insight into the validity of “support” as a key factor in the change process, there is considerable disillusionment about the school’s awareness of, and capacity to provide adequately for gifted students.

This tension has existed from the early days of the project but more recently has increased substantively with indications from some teachers that they have done very little - if anything - for gifted students after more than 12 months of support. My initial expectation of the teachers was simply that they would trial and reflect on strategies that would be of benefit to gifted children.
Given the limited funding for gifted education, it seems futile to continue to support and invest in a programme that has limited likelihood of improving the quality education for the gifted students in the school. A concern is that funding for future initiatives in gifted education may be adversely affected by the lack of progress at this school. If it was up to me, I would not continue to fund this project next year until some of the goals of the last twelve months are achieved. However, if there was a demonstration of practical outcomes further funding could be re-instituted. Rather than continue to fund this school, it seems more appropriate to divert the support and financial resources to another school where teachers have demonstrated some practical signs of commitment to gifted education.

Researcher one’s response to researcher two’s reflections

My colleague’s frank revelations in many ways confirm my sense of achievement in this project. Patience is a virtue but at the same time when a commitment was made, opportunities afforded and support at all levels provided the lack of action is a real concern. I do not concur with the action of withdrawing funding in the immediate future. I believe that such action sets an expectation that something “flashy” and “public” needs to be achieved in a short time when the necessary changes in curriculum practices may require some fundamental shifts in beliefs and basic professional skills that take time to achieve. I believe that this process has helped the collaboration by establishing clear communication about expectations and provides a base for our possible future involvement at West Hollow.

Summary and Conclusions

The analysis presented in this paper occurs at a timely phase in the collaboration and opens up further dialogue among the participants. After over twelve months of the schools’ change programme, it is appropriate to stand back and evaluate what has been achieved. Our dilemma is where we want to go next. Our options are:

- Accept the change is problematic, slow and painful and that the project has not really begun in the sense of genuine action research.
- Bailout – a metacognitive reaction acknowledging that there has been a high investment for little yield (Lubart & Sternberg, 1995)
- Change focus – the focus in collaboration has been balanced towards supporting the development of knowledge about gifted education with the assumption that teachers are professionals with a concern about their own professional development. There has also been an assumption that the Programme Manager would be pursuing a programme of reflective practice.
- Compensatory strategies – the trust and professional relationship between staff and researchers appears limited. To confront that perception and to provide credible models it might be desirable that the researchers take an active modelling role. The sharing of experience by implementing strategies with children in classrooms may change of the balance of relationship.
- Change liaison roles – collaborate with the Project Officer. The Project Officer is the official support person and has the responsibility of supporting the programme. Our engagement may be confounding in the minds of teachers the exact roles of key players.

At this point in the project, we are entering a phase of reflection and review. Action research is intentionally personalised, idiosyncratic and contextual. Through an emphasis on critical
evaluation of practice, action research capitalises on the shared concern of practitioners from a variety of backgrounds who are committed to improving practice and understanding the process of practice (Whitehead, 1988). The strength of action research as indicated by Whitehead lies in the creative and critical dialogue that develops between members of a community of practice. Critical dialogue with the school and participants would seem to be a high priority at this point in time. We do have the basis for dialogue with the administration, Programme Manager and Project Officer. Understandings of our personal beliefs and motivations about the project as individual researchers have been well articulated. Dialogue with teachers and the relationship with the education system still need development.
References


