



Expecting too much from collaborative projects: revealing false assumptions

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Abstract

In the past ten years the author has worked as a university participant in a number of collaborative projects between schools and universities that were expected to result in educational improvement. These include the Innovative Links Project (1994-1996), the National Middle Schooling Authentic Assessment Research Circle (1997), the School-based Research and Reform Project (1998 - 2000) and the Learning to Learn Project (1999 - 2001). Each of these projects had a range of expectations of school and university participants in regard to their roles, relationships, activities and outcomes. In all cases, some expectations proved difficult or impossible to meet in practice.

This paper reports some of the findings of research into the perceptions of school and university participants in the Innovative Links Project, and draws on the author's experiences in the others, to show that some project expectations were based on a number of false assumptions about the personal, structural and cultural conditions that impact on participants' professional lives. It argues that it is this disparity between the actual conditions and the assumed conditions that makes it so difficult for participants to meet some of the expectations of collaborative endeavours. The paper concludes by posing a series of questions that could be used when planning collaborative projects to more closely align expectations with the realities of participants' professional lives.

Background

The 1993 Teaching Accord in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Education Union & Independent Education Union, 1993) committed all funding for professional development in education to programs promoting partnerships that involve teacher organisations, education authorities and universities. Since then there has been a proliferation of collaborative research and development projects involving universities and schools aimed at achieving significant educational improvement in both sectors.

The pressure for teacher educators and teachers to work together for positive change has been just as strong in North America, and Europe. Examples can be seen in the increased school involvement in the design and delivery of teacher education courses in Britain (McIntyre, Hagger & Burn, 1994; Totterdell and Lambert, 1998) Portugal (Alarcao, 1995) and Canada (Sheehan and Fullan, 1995), and in the growth of Professional Development Schools in the United States in which teacher educators, teachers and student teachers engage in collaborative professional development activities (Center for Educational Renewal, 1994; Turner Field, Hoffman and Cohen, 1999). In Australia, the pressure is as strong as ever. For instance, in reporting the outcomes of his recent review of education in New South Wales, Ramsey (2001, p24) concludes that 'teacher education in the State's universities does not generally operate within models which make strong connections with schools, with a consequence being that traditional practices are insufficiently challenged in both'. He goes on to recommend closer partnerships between universities and schools in the design and delivery of their programs.

Proponents of school/university collaboration argue that it can improve learning opportunities for teachers, student teachers and teacher educators (Yeatman and Sachs, 1995; Turner Field et al, 1999) and lead to reciprocal development in both schools and teacher education programs (Center for Educational Renewal, 1994; Turner Field et al, 1999). Sachs (1997) highlights increased relevance of educational research as a further benefit of greater school/university collaboration, as well as the potential to break down isolation and positively change the climates of schools and universities.

There is growing recognition, however, that professional development and educational reform through school/university collaboration can be adversely effected by the conditions that exist in the participating institutions. These include personal conditions such as past experience and personal beliefs and values (Goodsen, 1992), cultural conditions related to shared 'values, beliefs, habits and assumptions and ways of doing things' (Hargeaves, 1994, p. 241) and structural conditions in the form of 'rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships' within a workplace (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 242). For instance, Goodlad (1990) and Gore (1995) point to conditions in universities which discourage teacher educators from more actively involving themselves in professional learning through closer links with schools. These include the low esteem or priority of teacher education programs within universities, especially programs with school-based field experience, and the lack of rewards for academics engaged in practical school-based activities compared to research, consultancy and publication. Issues around the different valuing of practical and academic knowledge by teachers and academics (Totterdell and Lambert, 1998), the distribution of power amongst participants (Dawson, 1995) and the negotiation of mutually beneficial goals (Feldman, 1993) are also cited as sources of potential difficulty.

It is clear that 'much remains to be learned about the nature of partnership in school contexts, about the respective roles of the partners, and the conditions which lead to the most effective and productive partnerships' (Sealey, Robson and Hutchins, 1997, p. 81). Senge (1992, p. 243) suggests that one way to further understanding about particular issues or practices is 'being aware of our assumptions and holding them up for examination.' This paper brings together these two important aspects of 'conditions' and 'assumptions'. It examines university participants' perceptions of the conditions they experienced in a school/university partnership project in South Australia, and compares and contrasts their perceptions to the assumptions about conditions that under-pinned the project expectations.

The Study

The Innovative Links Project was an action research based professional development project, initiated in Australia in 1994 as a National Professional Development Program. The project was funded on a year-by-year basis until early 1997. Schools involved in the project worked with academic associates, using collaborative action research to implement programs of school reform aimed at improving teaching competencies and learning outcomes for all students.

Over the three-year life of the project in South Australia, six schools (two primary schools for students aged 5 - 13 years and four secondary schools for students aged 13 - 17 years) and seven teacher educators (including the author) were involved. Two of the schools were in country locations. The teacher educators were drawn from the University's two schools of education and when the project began they were spread across three metropolitan campuses. Each teacher educator had a history of working closely with schools through the practicum, consultancy and/or collaborative research projects and each worked closely with one of the participating schools.

This study was largely qualitative in nature and used an interpretative methodology which attempted to make sense of the subjective meanings of participants (Neumann, 1997). However, it contained a quantitative element in the form of a survey of all participants (see below). It was conducted over the final eighteen months of the project. Data were collected through:

1. intensive observation and interviews in the school for which the author was the academic associate. These focussed on the ten teachers who were involved in the project. The author kept a journal over this time which also provided a source of data
2. a survey sent to all staff in the six participating schools towards the end of the project, with follow up interviews with six purpose selected informants in each school. The questionnaire required respondents to indicate on a four point Likert type scale ('not at all', 'a little', 'to some extent', 'to a great extent') their agreement with statements about various aspects of the project. It also contained space for written comments. Of the 207 questionnaires distributed to teachers, 108 were returned (52%).
3. three semi-structured interviews conducted at regular intervals throughout the final twelve months of the project with each of the university participants. All interviews were taped and transcribed..

Statistical data from the questionnaire were tabulated using SPSS to provide frequencies of particular responses. Qualitative data were coded and categorised using QSR NUD*IST 4 (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pic, 1997) in order to identify emerging patterns and themes. Data analysis revealed a number of key themes related to participants' perceptions of the assumptions about conditions under-pinning the expectations of the project and the conditions they actually experienced.

Expectations of the Innovative Links Project

The overall aim of the Innovative Links Project was 'to provide professional development opportunities for teachers working in partnership with 'academic associates' from the university sector' (National Teaching and Learning Consortium, 1994, p. 1). In summary, the specific expectations of school and university participants were that they would:

1. use action research to implement programs of school reform;
2. develop critically collaborative relationships;
3. engage in reciprocal learning leading to improved educational programs in schools and universities; and
4. develop stronger links between schools and the university.

The rest of this section of the paper examines each of these expectations in terms of its implicit assumptions about the conditions needed for implementation. The perceptions of the participants as reported in the survey, the interviews, and the author's journal writing, are used to examine the validity of each assumption.

Use action research to implement programs of school reform

The expectation that participants would use action research to implement programs of school reform assumed that they:

- were committed to school reform;
- valued action research as a process for school reform;

- had or could quickly acquire the necessary expertise to conduct action research; and
- had the time and energy to conduct action research.

The data revealed that only the first of these assumptions was valid to any great extent. Across both school and university participants there appeared to be a high level of commitment to school reform. The survey of school participants revealed that 49% agreed to a 'great extent' that they had become involved in the project because they 'wanted to improve aspects of the wider school environment for teaching and learning' while a further 38% agreed to 'some extent'.

Interview comments from the university participants, such as the following, indicated that they too had a strong interest in school improvement:

If you want to test your ideas and your notions about the way things might proceed at either secondary or primary, it's good to try and implement them with like-minded colleagues working in those areas. (University Participant, Interview 1)

Perhaps the most problematic assumption was that school and university participants would place equal value on action research as a process for school reform. In reality, while most university participants had a strong commitment to reform informed by the wider research literature and rigorous action research and documentation processes, many school participants were, understandably, focussed on solving immediate practical problems. As one teacher put it:

I guess initially I was ... not sceptical but very keen to make sure that it wasn't just a matter of you know reading articles and writing things. I wanted it to be practical. (School Participant, Interview)

These differences became evident in some teachers' reluctant responses to professional development activities planned by university participants. For instance one university participant found that:

...some of them were originally hesitant to do any work in between workshops because they're so busy, so [they] wanted to use the workshop time to do some reading as well and writing. (University Participant, Interview 1)

Another reported that in his school there had been:

... a reduced commitment to the actual action research and in talking to people almost an uncertainty about the usefulness or validity of that tool as a research tool. (University Participant, Interview 2)

A third wrote in her journal about the unrealistic nature of some of her initial expectations of teachers:

Overall, one thing that came out of this meeting for me was the enormous task action research is for teachers. Asking them to meet regularly, plan and implement data collecting, analyse data and then write a report for other teachers is the equivalent to a mini research-based thesis, yet they are doing

this for purely professional reasons and get no credit in terms of an increased qualification, more pay or credit in an academic course. (University Participant, Journal)

That participants had or could quickly acquire expertise in action research also proved to be an assumption that was largely false. Only three of the six schools had any previous experience in using action research to implement change so there were many school participants who looked to the university participants for support to quickly learn the process. This was, in turn, problematic for four of the seven university participants for whom this form of research was a relatively unknown process:

(I felt) uncertainty about whether I was well versed in action research myself.
(University Participant, Interview 1)

One university participant who was familiar with action research, found that trying to quickly induct teachers into the process caused the unwelcome outcome that they became overly concerned about 'getting it right' which had an adverse effect on the

quality of the professional dialogue in their meetings. She commented in her journal:

I felt concerned that a lot of last term was spent in trying to sort out the 'what' and 'how' of action research questions and data gathering techniques, and that there was little time or opportunity for reflection about what we were learning about the construction of success or failure in our teaching.
(University Participant, Journal Entry)

It was clear from the survey of school participants that over the life of the project action research was not widely practised in the schools. Only 20% reported using action research to a 'great extent' to trial changes in teaching practice, and even less (18%) that they used it to trial changes in the wider school environment. A slightly higher proportion (25%) indicated that to a 'great extent' they had 'developed an understanding of action research and its use in teaching'.

The data from both school and university participants revealed that one of the major difficulties teachers experienced in trying to implement an action research approach was finding the time and energy in their already hectic working lives. 60% of survey respondents indicated that to a 'great extent' lack of 'time to engage in research, reading, writing and meetings' was the condition, which most hindered their professional development through the project. Survey and interview comments such as the following provide some insights into why time for research was so problematic for classroom teachers:

I'm a family Life Key teacher, I'm on the Gifted and Talented Committee. I am the Social Committee. What else am I doing? Oh, Innovative Links ... Harassment Officer, behaviour management, and that's all I can remember off the top of my head. (School Participant, Interview)

I think the time involved ... It takes a bit of time to get your head around (action research) and ... it's a very busy place anyway. So there always seems to be pressure to add more into your day and ... although people were released often enough you wonder what the kids are doing and whether their needs are being met as far as actually delivering curriculum. (School Participant, Survey)

The second comment refers to a problem that was shown by the data to be wide-spread amongst school participants - that even though funding was provided to release teachers to engage in action research, many teachers felt so guilty about leaving their classes that they were reluctant to access release time. Comments such as this one were typical:

I feel really guilty that that (Innovative Links) takes me out of the classroom. More so with my year twelves because they've got their PES exams coming up and they know that if I'm out of the classroom that they've missed a double or they've missed a lesson. So I've tried really hard not to have any time off at all lately. (School Participant, Interview)

Overall, the research showed that despite the efforts made by university participants to support teachers to adopt action research, many did not accept or practise it as an approach to trialing educational changes in the classroom or school. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) this is hardly surprising. They cite serious obstacles to redefining teaching as a form of inquiry including 'teacher isolation, a school culture that works against raising questions, a technical view of knowledge for teaching and the negative reputation of education research'. It is likely that some of these influenced teachers' attitudes in the Innovative Links Project, together with conditions such as lack of expertise and time and a valuing of practical activities over more theoretical ones.

Developing Critically Collaborative Relationships

School participants were expected to work collaboratively with others in the school, the university colleague attached to their school and with other school and university participants through the Roundtables. University participants were expected to play the role of 'critical friend' to school participants and each other, and school participants were also expected to play this role for each other. Implicit in the expectation that participants develop these critically collaborative relationships were the assumptions that they:

- were willing to develop collaborative relationships;
- understood what it meant to be critically collaborative;
- were willing to use critically collaborative strategies.

Once again the research showed that only the first of these assumptions was valid to any great extent for both school and university participants. The survey indicated that across the six schools the majority of participants were very interested in working collaboratively with colleagues. When asked about their reasons for involvement in the project 49% agreed that they were 'keen to work with like-minded colleagues' to a 'great extent' and a further 28% agreed to 'some extent'. In interviews some participants reported that they felt less sure about collaborating with university colleagues, especially in the initial stages of the project:

Some of the session, when I reflect back they were really good, but I'd go with fear and trepidation at some of these ... because I'm not one of these people that uses words this long and some of (the university colleague's) language I just didn't understand but he could rephrase it and put it in ways we could understand.) (School Participant, Interview)

When interviewed all university participants indicated that the chance to collaborate with both university and school colleagues was one of the main incentives when deciding to join the project. However, although eager to work with school colleagues several expressed some anxiety about negotiating a mutually acceptable role in the school's work:

I think for me a challenge has always been trying to work out for myself what my role is and ... establishing that in the schools, and it comes from certain feelings of uncertainty. (University Participant, Interview 3)

Going in there as a university person was a bit difficult for me because they had a certain perception of me as ... someone with expert knowledge when that wasn't the way I wanted to go in there at all. (University Participant, Interview 2)

Although most participants were committed to and had experienced collaboration within their settings, they were less clear about what it meant to perform the role of a 'critical friend' within collaborative relationships. Some university participants had formed their own interpretations of the concept of 'critical friend' from earlier work with teachers and student teachers, while to others it was new terminology. In the initial processes of getting the project started they made no real attempt to work out a shared understanding of what the role of critical friend might entail, although there was a generalised agreement that it meant providing a useful outside perspective. Some university participants were particularly interested in critical reflection as defined by Smyth (1989, p.4) as reflection on 'the way schooling contributes (or does not as the case may be), to the creation of a less oppressive, more just, humane and dignified society'. They interpreted the role of 'critical friend' as one of challenging school participants to use critically reflective processes including the questioning of assumptions, values and current practice from an equity perspective, the use of an action research-based approach to reform and the keeping of reflective journals.

Initially most school participants were unsure about what was involved in collaboration that includes an element of critical reflection. When university participants tried to introduce a more critical focus in discussion groups some found that teachers were uncomfortable with opening up their practice for critical scrutiny. One university participant attributed this to the culture of support that was the norm in his school:

It's been a really salient lesson to me about the very practical difficulties that teachers have maintaining that critical perspective, and I've learnt a lot and I'm a lot more tolerant now of the agendas teachers run ... and the nice arrangements they have within schools to support each other and to reinforce what they do. (University Participant, Interview 2)

The keeping of reflective journals was another tool for critical reflection that university colleagues tried to introduce with little success. They believed that regular documentation in reflective journals was one process that would help teachers to take a more critical stance towards their research and reform work, but many teachers did not see writing as a useful tool. Only 7% of school participants reported that they had written in a reflective journal to 'a great extent' and the following comment is typical of many teachers' feelings about writing:

I'm not a big journal writer. I carry lots of things around in my head. (School Participant, Interview)

For university colleagues it was important learning about what kinds of reflective strategies work best for teachers and forced them to turn to other more acceptable strategies:

I'm really looking at dialogue as a form of reflection because I don't find writing works so well for teacher. (University Participant, Interview 2)

Despite the fact that some school participants were uncomfortable with some of the strategies used in a critically reflective approach, over 47% reported in the survey that they felt they had improved their ability 'to critically reflect on their practice' to a 'great extent'. Even more (55%) indicated that to a 'great extent' they valued the chance to have a 'useful outside perspective' on their work through having a university colleague in a 'critical friend' role, as well as 'access to strategies for critical reflection on practice' (41%).

In summary, the expectation that participants in the Innovative Links Project would develop critically collaborative relationships was only partially realised in South Australia. This appeared to be largely due to uncertainty about what it meant to be critically collaborative combined with the comfortably collaborative nature of the culture in most schools, in which support took precedence over challenge. Hargreaves (1992, p. 228) has referred to this phenomenon as 'bounded collaboration' - collaboration 'which does not reach deep down to the grounds, the principles or the ethics of practice.'

Improving educational programs in both settings

The school reform programs implemented in the Innovative Links Project were intended to improve teaching competencies and learning outcomes for all students in schools (National Teaching and Learning Consortium, 1994). There was also the expectation that university participants would become 'a conduit for learning about school practices, issues, and concerns by other teacher educators from their own university' (National Teaching and Learning Consortium, 1994, p5), presumably to bring about some corresponding improvement in teacher education programs. The expectation that the project would lead to improved educational programs in both settings assumed that participants would:

- share their learning from collaborative research and development with colleagues in their respective settings;
- use the learning from collaborative research and development to improve programs in schools and the university;
- be able to determine that improvement had occurred.

The assumption that participants would share their learning from the project with colleagues proved to be problematic in both schools and the University. One of the initial intentions of the project was that participating schools would involve the majority of their staff in the action research and reform process, so that learning would be shared across the whole staff. The survey revealed that this did not occur in practice with less than a quarter of respondents indicating that they had been involved in the project to a 'great extent', and more than 30% reporting that they were involved 'not at all'. Of eighteen respondents who had joined the schools in 1997, towards the end of the project, roughly 40% reported that they had no awareness of the project, while 50% had 'a little' awareness. It was clear that in most schools participation and learning was limited to a particular group of staff and that communication strategies to inform non-involved or new staff were inadequate.

The university participants also reported that there were barriers to communicating about their learning with each other and with non-involved colleagues. These included separation through working on different campuses, too many competing demands on available time due to the increasing workloads caused by funding cuts and staff reductions and the 'isolationist' and competitive culture of the university. These non supportive conditions meant their available time was used to work with the schools, rather than to meet together regularly to engage in the collaborative dialogue, research and documentation that would have enhanced their own learning from the project and communicated it to a wider audience. All university participants expressed their regret about this in comments such as:

I guess one of the sad things ... (is) that we haven't got together very often as a collaborative group to share lots of things that we're coming across and how we're understanding what we're doing, (University Participant, Interview 1)

We were too busy doing other things usually. And that relates back to our workload. (University Participant, Interview 2)

A further obstacle to sharing learning from the project with non-involved teacher educators was the absence of an existing structure, such as regular Faculty wide seminars, in which this could occur. University participants found they did not have the time or energy to structure these opportunities for themselves. This meant that any expectations of benefits in the form of non-participant staff's understanding of educational reform were not realised.

When it came to sharing learning with school colleagues, the focus for the university participants was very much on sharing 'expertise' about action research, critical reflection and school reform, rather than reflecting on and sharing learning about ways of improving their own teaching and educational programs. Interviews showed that this was seen by some school and university participants as a shortcoming in the way that collaborative learning was structured in the project:

I think there was a lot of evidence and focus on the work of reforming teacher practice and reforming education from within the school environment and ... I think we missed some opportunities for looking at faculty reform. I understand that we're all one, we're all part of the same movement and the same business. Our core business is the same. And I think we could have worked with that more, I would have liked to have seen the university colleagues writing about the impact of the project on their work. (School Participant, Interview)

I think (reflecting on our learning) would have been really powerful for us as Uni colleagues working together and secondly to be able to say back to the schools we met. 'This is what we're finding out,' so that we did get that on-going two-way dialogue. (University Participant, Interview 3)

Although the opportunities for collaborative learning proved to be disappointingly scarce, university participants were able to identify ways in which their learning from the project improved their work as teacher educators.

I guess for me there has been big outcomes in terms of my confidence about being able to work with teachers as opposed to work with student teachers. (University Participant, Interview 1)

One [outcome] is that feeling of authenticity in my position, that ... as well as teaching about curriculum development I'm actually working with teachers in curriculum development, and so it's like I said before, it's adding real integrity I think to my courses because I can call on examples all the time. (University Participant, Interview 1)

They also cited improved understanding of teacher development, change processes, project facilitation and school reform in areas such as middle schooling, teachers' work, school context, reflection and critical reflection, and project facilitation.

Both school and university participants were able to identify some positive changes in schools from the research and development work in which they engaged. Most university colleagues saw the most significant change as occurring in the area of teacher professional development as can be seen in the following comments:

In terms of teachers taking charge of their own professional development within the context of the school, it's been very successful. (University Participant, Interview 3)

So the obvious professional development outcomes for teachers as a school are that they have been able to create a model for professional development which is self-determined, to put it into practice and seek the support they needed. (University Participant, Interview 3)

School participants reported that, at the classroom level, change occurred to a 'great extent' in the 'sharing of ideas and expertise with colleagues' (32%), relationships with students (23%) and making learning more supportive (31%) and relevant (24%) for students. At the school-wide level participants thought that change had occurred to a 'great extent' in 'involvement in professional development by staff' (35%) and in practice related to their particular focus area for reform (23%). However, only a few respondents (1%) thought that there had been school wide changes in teaching practice (although 59% of respondents indicated that this had occurred to 'some extent').

The survey revealed that there were a range of conditions that school participants perceived as hindering professional development and change to a 'great extent'. These included lack of time (30%) and energy (22%) and some resistant staff (14%, but 35% cited this as an inhibiting condition to 'some extent'). The interviews with school colleagues also identified high staff changeover as a hindering condition in some schools.

Comments from some university participants showed they also had doubts about the extent to which significant change had occurred as a result of the project:

I guess what I'm saying here is that for the time, effort, energy, money that has gone into some aspects of the project, particularly in the schools, there seems to have been, in my opinion, very little significant outcome, other than at the most humanistic level of feel good stuff. (University Participant, Interview 1)

I guess we're getting close to the bottom line now as to just what sort of impact it's had on particular individuals and whether it's sort of played itself out in terms of student learning outcomes. But it's very difficult for me to be confident to say that quite a number of teachers at (the school) have been moved quite significantly. (University Participant, Interview 3)

One of the difficulties acknowledged by both school and university participants was that of determining whether or not significant change had occurred. As one university colleague put it:

That's something I've had to come to grips with I think is recognising ... you can't measure outcomes necessarily by any observable change in practice, that if you've got changes in the way people think that might take quite a long

time to actually be able to be seen in practice. (University Participant, Interview 2)

Overall, the research showed that the participants believed that the Innovative Links Project was largely focussed on school participants' learning, and that any outcomes for university participants' learning were purely incidental. Feldman (1993, p. 342) identifies this as a common problem in school/university partnerships and attributes it to the tendency for such partnerships to focus on the 'problems and concerns of classroom teachers' forcing university researchers into the role of the 'benevolent educator who must altruistically serve those who are in need - school teachers'. He suggests that the solution be for school and university participants to clearly identify their 'separate specific goals' at the beginning of collaborative endeavours.

Although significant learning appears to have occurred for some individuals and groups in each school, most schools were not able to achieve school-wide change in the limited time frame of the project. This is not so surprising when considered in the light of Fullan's and Hargreaves' (1991, p.xi) view that 'educational reform has failed time and time again' because 'the focus has not been on the total school and the total teachers as these relate to the learning of students'. They maintain that for real change to occur there must be changes in the basic working conditions of teachers. Project participants identified a range of conditions that impeded school-wide change and it was clear that these were not addressed in the life of the project.

Developing Stronger Links Between Schools and The University

The expectation that participants' involvement in the project would strengthen the links between schools and the University assumed that they:

- had the time and opportunity to form close relationships;
- would develop a higher regard for each other as a result of working together;

As reported earlier, in most schools only a small number of staff were actively involved in the project. This meant that university participants had the opportunity to form close relationships only with these key players, while many other staff members remained largely unaware of any kind of school/university collaboration. The opportunities for university and school colleagues to work closely together were also limited by the hectic nature of their respective working lives, the restrictive time-tabling of teachers commitments in schools and, in the case of the two country schools, distance.

Despite these constraints both school and university participants felt that the relationships they were able to establish promoted reciprocal respect. 43% of the survey respondents indicated agreement to a 'great extent' that one of the outcomes was a 'closer relationship between the university and the school', while in interview university participants made comments such as:

I would have regarded all of the teachers I came into contact with as being highly professional. (University Participant, Interview 1)

[An outcome is] really breaking down the barriers between the schools and universities - letting the schools know that in universities there are still people who are in touch with teaching. (University Participant, Interview 3)

An on-going concern for some university participants was that they found it difficult to determine what constituted an appropriate level of involvement in their school's research and reform processes. While wanting to form close links with the schools, they were aware of the dangers (identified by Gitlin, 1990, cited in Feldman, 1993) that they could create an unhealthy dependency in school participants or push their own ideologies. They found they needed to engage in a delicate balancing act between supporting and leading the reform process, and at least one participant was unsure about the extent to which this was achieved:

I guess I have been saying that maybe the process has been controlled too much by me but it may not be the case. (University Participant, Interview 2)

From the survey responses it would appear that they did get this balance right in that only a tiny number of school participants thought that 'university colleagues pushing their own reform agenda' was an inhibiting condition to a 'great extent' (2%) or to 'some extent' (2%).

On the whole, the expectation that collaboration between school and university participants in the project would strengthen links between the university and schools was achieved. It took the form of close relationships between university participants and the research leaders in schools which promoted a greater level of mutual understanding and respect. This in itself was a significant outcome as reported in another national evaluation of the project:

'ILP (Innovative Links Project) is worthy of note in that it has succeeded in forging new types of professional relationships between hitherto fairly separate players, and had tapped into a desire to innovate within the education industry.' (ACIIC Roundtable Portrayal Evaluation Team, 1996, p. 21)

However, it became clear that, even within the three-year time frame, it was unrealistic to expect all teachers in a school to engage with their academic associate because of the constraints of disinterest, time, workload, staff turnover and, in some, cases distance.

In summary, the research into school and university participants' perceptions of their experiences in the Innovative Links Project showed that there was considerable discrepancy between the assumptions underpinning the project expectations and the conditions that existed in participants' working lives. In particular this discrepancy appeared in regard to a range of:

- personal conditions such as the lack of previous knowledge or experience of action research or critical reflection, and, for teachers, guilt about time away from the classroom
- cultural conditions such as predominant culture of isolation and competition in the university and, in schools, the valuing the immediate and practical over the theoretical, and comfortable support over critique and challenge;
- structural conditions such as the rigidity of school time structures, the intensification of teachers' and university participants' workloads arising from staff reductions, cost cutting and greater administrative demands, distance for those in the country schools and separation on different campuses for the university participants.

Adverse conditions such as those above meant that both school and university participants experienced considerable frustration and stress in trying to meet project expectations and found it difficult to determine whether their considerable time and effort had resulted in any significant educational improvement.

Experiences in More Recent Projects

The author's experiences in more recent projects suggest that the problem of a discrepancy between actual and assumed conditions was not specific to the Innovative Links Project. Having learnt from that project she and her colleagues were able to negotiate some more supportive conditions for the university participants in subsequent projects. However, in each one there were still expectations that were problematic in the light of the real conditions under which school and university participants were working. For instance, in the Middle Years of Schooling Authentic Assessment Project there was an expectation that over a six month period the university and school participants would conduct collaborative action research in an aspect of authentic assessment in order to develop curriculum materials for use at a national level. One of the most problematic assumptions behind this expectation was that the school participants would have the time, interest and ability to document their research to the level of quality required for national publication. In reality, it became necessary for the university participants to undertake a major role in writing, editing and quality control, which in turn lead to tensions to do with issues of vulnerability, trust and ownership in their relationships with school colleagues (see Johnson, Peters & Williams, 1999).

The School-based Research and Reform Project (1998 - 2000) began with the expectation that schools who won funding would undertake action research to implement significant school-wide reform. In doing so it made many of the same assumptions as the Innovative Links Project and participants encountered similar difficulties in meeting expectations. An assumption that was particularly fraught was that school participants would value research equally with reform. In practice, most schools came into the project having identified reforms they were eager to implement, but were far less interested in rigorously researching the impact of the reform. This meant that the Project Manager and university colleagues found themselves playing the uncomfortable role of 'research driver', using the regular Roundtable meetings of school representatives to constantly push the need for rigorous planning, data collection, analysis and written reporting.

Finally the Learning to Learn Project (1999 - 2001), a project aimed at improving learning experiences for students and teachers, recognised the important role played by school leaders in supporting successful change in schools. Project developers included a non-negotiable expectation that the principals of participating schools would attend regular 'Learning Circles' in which they would share their learning about leading the change process in their schools. This assumed that principals would value the opportunity to learn collaboratively and would make the time to attend the Learning Circles. While this assumption was correct for the majority of principals, there were a number who, having won the funding, delegated leadership of the reform process and attendance at the Learning Circle to other members of staff. In doing so they distanced themselves from the change process in their schools, and gave the management of it to staff members who did not have the power to make the kinds of decisions needed to implement significant change. It was noticeable that in schools where this happened progress was slower than in those where the principal took a leadership role.

Conclusion

If the four projects discussed in this paper were typical of school university collaborative projects generally, then it would appear that in project design there is a recurring problem of setting unrealistic expectations for participants. It would also appear that the burden this places on participants adversely affects their ability to achieve positive educational change. There are no simple solutions to this problem because recent funding cuts are ensuring that the conditions in schools and universities are becoming less supportive of collaborative research and professional development. However, there must be some advantage in project developers trying to achieve a closer match between expectations and the conditions under which participants work. To this end, the following questions may be of use in the planning process:

- How can participants be involved in negotiating project expectations?
- Once expectations are negotiated, what are the assumptions about prevailing conditions that under-pin them?
- To what extent do the assumptions match the reality of the conditions experienced in participants' lives. For instance:
 - Are participants committed to educational improvement?
 - Are they participating voluntarily?
 - Do they believe that the proposed activities will be worthwhile?
 - Do they have the knowledge and skills to participate in the proposed activities? If not can they acquire them in the time-line?
 - Are they prepared to work collaboratively with other project participants?
 - Does the workplace culture support the kinds of activities suggested in the project?
 - Are outcomes able to be achieved in the time-line?
 - Do participants have the time to be involved in project activities? Alternatively, can funding provide release time for participants?
 - If release time is provided will participants be prepared to access it?
 - Will the involvement of some create additional workload for those not involved?
 - Are communication structures in place that will facilitate the sharing of learning with non-participants?
 - Is distance going to interfere with some participants' equitable involvement?
- Where the assumptions underpinning project expectations do not match real conditions, how can the expectations be changed or the conditions made more supportive?

Unfortunately many projects are funded by systems on the basis that they meet certain non-negotiable expectations. However, rigorous attention to questions such as those above in the planning stages may enable some adjustments to be made that will make the chances of successful participation and significant educational improvement more likely.

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