

## ***Problematizing research about partnerships in curriculum leadership***

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## Abstract

*This paper is based on a year-long study in which four school sites theorised their development of outcomes-based curriculum frameworks at the local level. A number of lessons learned emerged from this study, among them, the importance of collaboration with partners both within each of the schools and their local communities and within the system and the wider professional community. There is research evidence which suggests improved learning outcomes through collaborative efforts. These efforts are characterised as partnerships in curriculum leadership.*

*This paper, then, proposes a theorised position about partnerships in curriculum leadership. A number of levels at which partnerships in curriculum leadership occur are identified and elaborated. Methodological possibilities for empirically-based research about partnerships in curriculum leadership across these levels are then considered.*

*The problematising relates to a decision-making base for choosing methodological approaches that are appropriate for such empirically-based research. A blending of phenomenography and case study within a broader Action Research framework is proposed.*

*The paper sits within the conference theme in that it develops on the assumption that partnerships as a phenomenon is something that is obviously valued in much of the futures-oriented rhetoric about education. However, what is problematic and uncertain is how partnerships in curriculum leadership are defined and operationalised beyond the rhetoric of policy documents and vision statements. There are also implications for considering the quality of partnerships in such a diversity of contexts and levels. The problematising regarding methodology is an element of this "problematic uncertainty".*

## INTRODUCTION

The paper sits within the conference theme in that it develops on the assumption that partnerships as a phenomenon is something that is obviously valued in much of the futures-oriented rhetoric about education. However, what is problematic and uncertain is how partnerships in curriculum leadership are defined and operationalised beyond the rhetoric of policy documents and vision statements. There are also implications for considering the quality of partnerships in such a diversity of contexts and levels. The problematising regarding methodology is an element of this "problematic uncertainty".

The paper is based on a year-long study in which four school sites theorised their development of outcomes-based curriculum frameworks at the local level. (It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to report this study in detail - this is done elsewhere and a website address will be provided in the paper session.) A number of lessons learned emerged from this study, among them, the importance of

collaboration with partners both within each of the schools and their local communities and within the system and the wider professional community. There is research evidence which suggests improved learning outcomes through collaborative efforts. These efforts are characterised as partnerships in curriculum leadership.

This paper, then, proposes a theorised position about partnerships in curriculum leadership. A number of levels at which partnerships in curriculum leadership occur are identified.. Methodological possibilities for empirically-based research about partnerships in curriculum leadership across these levels are then considered.

## **A THEORISED POSITION ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS IN CURRICULUM LEADERSHIP**

A range of studies provides evidence of improved learning outcomes in schools through collaborative efforts between the school and its community. For example, Fedje (1994:310) describes the formation of a partnership of teachers, parents, counsellors and community leaders to create and implement a special curriculum to address the needs of children facing emotional hurt through family bereavement and dislocation. The positive outcomes of the program are demonstrated in improved academic achievement and the enhanced capacity of children to form sustained and healthy relations with others in the school community and family (Fedje, 1994:311). School management, curriculum development and teaching/learning experiences are greatly enhanced by the collaborative involvement of principals, teachers, parents and students (Macpherson 1996, 1998, 2000; Macpherson et. al. 1999). While there is evidence that some collaborative arrangements have resulted in enhanced outcomes at the school level, there is little understanding about how this occurs. As well, there is little known about the particular arrangements that lead to more effective outcomes and how school/community partnerships can be effective outside the school context, particularly in the broader arena of systemic policy formation.

The term that is usually used in various policy documents to refer to collaborative arrangements in school contexts is "partnership". Various ways of conceiving the term partnership appear to exist. For example, a partnership is sometimes understood to be a group working towards common agreed goals pertinent to the needs of the school/community context in which the partnership is set. In some contexts partnerships may be thought of in terms of cohesion, uniformity and single purpose established with a limited frame of operation. Further, a partnership may be conceived as a small group involving the principal, teachers and parents. A more complex conceptualisation of partnerships involves multiple relationships amongst a range of stakeholders (including school personnel, parents, business people, community leaders and political groupings) constructed about ideas that are internally contested. In such a case, ideas of multiple identities within social and cultural formations of partnerships and the issues of internal politics are likely to be particularly significant. Thus, there are different ways in which stakeholders experience and think about the phenomenon of partnerships in school settings. This notion of differing conceptualisations of partnerships is central to the shaping of, and outcomes from, the study.

While there is a limited and isolated set of findings about school partnerships (see section below) there is no theoretical approach or model that brings the ideas together. This research will do this by identifying the various ways in which stakeholders experience the phenomenon of partnerships in a range of

school/community settings. By mapping and understanding such meanings, school/community partnerships will be more effective - in both their own school context and in the wider arena of systemic policy negotiation. The research will analyse the issues associated with school/community partnerships and subsequently, through the theory provide a platform to consider how to take a proactive role in their formation and advancement.

There is a growing awareness of the significance of partnerships in school contexts across the globe (Blunkett, 1997; Downes, 1998; Finkelstein, 1998; Hong Kong Education Department, 1997; Maclure, 1998; McLaughlin, 1997; Stokes, 1997). As the new millennium begins, most education systems are anticipating a range of educational challenges which schools must face in order to respond to contemporary social trends. Education Queensland's discussion paper (1999:24), *The Next Decade 2010*, is typical of responses to these trends by education systems in that it identifies the importance of curriculum in meeting the long-term learning needs of individual students and their communities. Such discussion papers raise specific questions concerning appropriateness of curriculum content for students, instructional methods and means of assessment and reporting (Macpherson, 1999:1-3). They also focus attention on the capacity of learning experiences to prepare students for the world of work. *The Next Decade 2010* stresses that schools must provide education that equips students with the "skills, attitude and knowledge" needed to take up active roles in their communities and pursue successful working lives (Education Queensland, 1999:1). In order to ensure that public policy initiatives produce the most appropriate curriculum and effective teaching/learning experience to facilitate these outcomes, policy makers throughout Australia emphasise the importance of input from students, parents and the broader community (ACSA, 1994:38-39, 1998a:13, 1998b:11, 1999). The Queensland response is typical in that it identifies an undercurrent of the importance of partnerships within systems and calls for a commitment to stronger partnerships between schools and the wider community but typically it stops short of identifying how to proceed. We argue that this is because shortcomings in current research.

While there are examples of effective partnerships between principals and teachers on the one hand, and parents and students on the other (Aspland et. al., 1996; Brooker et. al., 1998; Brooker and McDonald, 1999; Brown et. al. 1994; Covaleskie, 1994; Elliott et. al., 1999; Goodman, 1979; Hargreaves, 1996; Keedy and Drmacich, 1991; Macpherson and Brooker, 2000; McConnell, 1991; Mellencamp, 1992) there is scant knowledge of more broadly-based partnership types and how they are conceived by stakeholders. There is no research articulation of such a range of conceptions of partnership.

Some empirical studies show partnership members working together to resolve a variety of quite specific single issues (Macpherson et. al., 1998a). For example, there are descriptions of literacy and numeracy initiatives (Mertens, 1995; Rosean, 1993) and some discussion of support programs for students with emotional difficulties (Fedje, 1994) and drug dependency problems (American Association of School Administrators, 1991). A large proportion of studies discuss collaborative actions that aim to increase the involvement of children of non-English speaking background, and those with disability, in the life and operations of mainstream schools (Asselin and Mooney, 1996; Bermudez, 1994; Boscardin and Jacobson, 1997; Hernandez, 1993; Pease and Copa, 1992). Mertens (1995:416-417) investigated the operation of the IMPACT program in the UK that combines classroom curriculum with special learning activities that utilise parent participation in the home to develop mathematics skills. The results show, on average, that students in the program perform better than

students in the regular curriculum. Collaborative relations, especially those that extend beyond the local school setting, require participants to develop skills and specialised areas of knowledge in order to have maximum effect in policy decision making. Such a requirement is fraught with difficulty because there is not adequate research evidence to inform a comprehensive understanding of the nature of partnerships.

Keating (1999) and Craig (1999) indicate the importance of partnerships with community and local involvement in vocational curriculum. Effective vocational curriculum, capable of assisting students to make the transition from school to work, is more likely to be developed locally, where it can reflect the inputs of local business and community again there are no guiding principles.

The above analysis demonstrates that school/community partnerships, including those involving teachers, students, parents, local business and community leaders, can be successful in improving teaching/learning, resolving local social problems such as drug dependency and family crisis, and enhancing youth employment opportunities. While these examples show partnerships at work in their local settings there is no apparent evidence of what makes them successful. Further, there is little consideration of how the scope of effectiveness can move from that of the local school and community environments to central policy-making forums where curriculum and associated issues are decided (Macpherson et. al., 1998b; Macpherson, 1998).

In summary, although there is much discussion about the importance of this process, the most fundamental questions remain unanswered. For example: Are sustained and effective partnerships the result of particular school cultures and community spirit? If so, what are the dimensions of such cultures? Are the dimensions that make partnerships effective at the local level the same as those that enable them to shape systemic policies? What are the various levels at which partnerships operate? Can partnerships be effective in advancing the interests of those involved beyond their local settings in central policy forums?

While we believe that partnerships as a phenomenon is a good thing, there remain those uncertainties which raise questions such as those above. Our theorised position about partnerships in curriculum leaderships, is, therefore, at best tentative.

Nevertheless, we have identified a number of levels at which we would like to use these questions to explore partnerships in curriculum leadership. These include (and the list is tentative and incomplete):

- Level 1: Partnerships operating within schools and school districts
- Level 2: Partnerships involving schools and school districts along with their communities
- Level 3: Partnerships involving 1 and 2 and professional systems and bodies
- Level 4: Partnerships involving 1 and 2 and Universities
- Level 5; 1, 2, 3 and 4 in wider-scale dissemination and advocacy
- Other levels: ?

We are seeking to understand people's ideas of what they consider to be productive partnerships for quality learning outcomes and to use these ideas as a platform for action to enhance learning outcomes. The next section of the paper explores ways of doing this.

## PROBLEMATISING METHODOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

To date, our research into curriculum leadership has adopted an approach that is critical and collaborative (Aspland et. al., 1996. See also Kemmis & Grundy, 1997; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Rist, 1998). The outcomes have been used as a basis for ongoing theorising and practice that have been monitored and reviewed for their implications at the levels of policy and practice.

It would appear that the methodological challenge we are facing requires a problematising of our research approach and an identification of an approach that will facilitate a more in-depth theorising about partnerships in curriculum leadership.

Firstly, it seems necessary to engage in policy analysis as a means of developing a critical view of how partnerships are portrayed in the current policy documentation. While there are several approaches to policy analysis, that of Ham & Hill (1993) is being adopted as it takes account of the cultural complexity in which education is embedded and focuses on value positions. Policy formation occurs as the result of a web of complicated events, the results of which are expressions of value positions in the documents. We hope to explore policy documents and to elicit contextual factors (eg. What events lead up to the development of the policy?); content of the policy (eg. What is the rationale? What are the aims, goals, intended outcomes?); implications for enhancing teaching and learning (eg. What are the structures for curriculum decision-making?); and implications for partnership development (eg. How is policy likely to influence the decisions made?). Through such analysis, we hope to derive a set of tentative propositions about partnerships in curriculum leadership.

Moving on from these propositions, we would expect to identify stakeholders' conceptions of partnerships in the school/community settings. The methods for investigating the conceptions of school community partnerships held by stakeholders will be based on the principles of phenomenography. This approach is chosen because we believe that partnerships are conceived in a finite number of qualitative ways and that the key to the development of more effective partnerships is the recognition of the differences between these conceptions (Marton & Pang, 1999; Svensson, 1991, 1994). Therefore, the empirical act of research will be to formulate the "categories of description" that describe these conceptions or "ways of experiencing" partnerships held by those who engage with them (Marton, 1996). Each conception of partnerships is structured by a particular combination of world-view, experience and accompanying "logic" (Marton, 1994). Thus, the central research task will be to gather and analyse data that enable this logic to be articulated. In this way the "outcome space" will constitute the research product (Marton, 1994).

In accordance with the research method of "discursive phenomenography", advocated by Hasselgren & Beach (1997), data will be collected through narratives and conversations with a relatively small number of people across the various levels of partnerships to elicit the theoretical constructs about school/community partnerships within a school district. The purpose of these conversations is to move from "conversation, transcription, compilation, analysis" to describing the actual "conceptions" of partnerships held by stakeholders (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997). Once initial conceptions of partnerships have been identified, a survey instrument will be constructed and distributed to a wider number of stakeholders. The purpose of the survey will be to enhance the authenticity of the research, confirming the identified networks on a hermeneutic spiral.

Starting, then, with policy analysis and moving on to phenomenography (with its outcome space), we would expect to have an informed platform for engaging in a series of case studies of partnerships in curriculum leadership within each of the levels which we have currently identified. (We realise that other levels of partnerships may emerge). The cases will have a reconstructive action orientation (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997; Bruce, 1998).

Problematizing methodological possibilities has, therefore, led to a deliberately-chosen pastiche of approaches. The challenge is to sustain a rigorous credibility between our research purposes and our research practices.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We return to where we began!

This paper sits within the conference theme in that it develops on the assumption that partnerships as a phenomenon is something that is obviously valued in much of the futures-oriented rhetoric about education. However, what is problematic and uncertain is how partnerships in curriculum leadership are defined and operationalised beyond the rhetoric of policy documents and vision statements. There are also implications for considering the quality of partnerships in such a diversity of contexts and levels. The problematizing regarding methodology is an element of this "problematic uncertainty".

There is no doubt that we have uncertainties both conceptually and methodologically about researching partnerships in curriculum leadership; but we cannot stop by returning to where we began! The way forward is to invite you to reflect and comment upon what we have presented.

Thus, we invite you to critique our theorised position about partnerships in curriculum leadership. Are the questions we pose, and the levels of partnerships we propose appropriate?

We also invite you to critique our pastiche of methodological approaches? How do they sit, for example, with our research purposes of using:

**Policy analysis** in analysing current policy documents with a view to identifying the ways in which the phenomenon of partnerships is articulated in those policies;

**Phenomenography** in identifying the various conceptions of partnerships held by stakeholders in a range of school/community contexts; investigating the relationship between such conceptions and particular social, political and cultural contexts in which they are constructed; articulating a theory of school/community partnerships and their constructions with a view to assisting schools to engage in productive partnerships involving stakeholders and operate in a broad context to enhance future teaching and learning; and

**Case study** in applying and testing an emergent theory of school/community partnerships at a number of school sites.

Please maintain a conversation with us after the session. Contact details are provided on the title page.

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