Overcoming the PBRF agenda: Fostering a collaborative research partnership with academic-practitioners.

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A collaborative paper:

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Overcoming the PBRF agenda: Fostering a collaborative research partnership with academic-practitioners.

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Abstract
This paper explores the methodological research issues associated with collaborative research between academics and academic-practitioners. At the time of submitting this abstract the study is in the preliminary stages, thereby at this stage it is an in-progress paper. It reveals some of the interesting tensions and jubilations of creating a genuinely collaborative research team working on a Ministry of Education contract on multiple research sites. The team was facilitated by a relatively novice university academic and a group of ten motivated, but highly over-worked academic-practitioners and school leaders who conducted the research within their own institutions. The overarching goal was to foster a genuinely collaborative research partnership with all involved. Themes explored in the research included how to enhance the use of technology to avoid too many face-to-face meetings; the pragmatics of trying to co-ordinate the research when the facilitator changed institutions; the ways developed to best support those conducting the research, and the strategies used to try to complete the project within the short timeframes allowed.

Introduction
Perhaps at the outset the title of this paper requires some explanation. The aim of the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) is to enhance both the level/quality and quantity of research conducted in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The aim of this title was partially critique the processes the PBRF has imposed on tertiary educators/researchers which demand attracting external funding, escalating workload pressures by supervising increasing numbers of postgraduate students (and tighter monitoring of completion rates for theses) and the ever mounting pressure to publish outputs. There is much to critique about the PBRF but this is not the specific purpose of this paper. However, whilst at one level this particular ‘research output’ might be graded by ‘external’ ‘peer’ reviewers (the process of quality assurance) as meeting the Tertiary Education Commission’s (TEC) definition of research, being:

… original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It typically involves enquiry of an experimental or critical nature driven by hypotheses or intellectual positions capable of rigorous assessment. It is an independent, creative, cumulative and often long-term activity conducted by people with specialist knowledge about theories, methods and information concerning the field of enquiry. (Note: The term “independent” here should not be construed so as to exclude collaborative work.) Its findings must be open to scrutiny and formal evaluation by others in the filed, and this may be achieved through publication or public presentation (TEC, 2004: 22).

In terms of a score-card approach, on the positive side, this ‘research’ may potentially score some ‘points’ as being a reflective, critical investigation of the ‘practice’ of research; some of the co-researchers have knowledge of theories and methods and broad knowledge of practice and pedagogy, this has been a collaborative endeavour and it is being delivered in a ‘public’ forum of researchers. Alternatively, on the negative side: the research has not been subjected to rigorous peer review and does not appear as a referred paper; some of the co-researchers were relatively novice researchers. Furthermore, whilst one of the co-authors will be graded within the three PBRF assessment categories (research output, peer esteem, and contribution to the research environment), the two others, not working in the tertiary sector will not.
As a research paper which outlines the processes of the conducting ‘a particular piece of research’ the reflections and narratives of three of the co-research team are explored. How will the PBRF panel assess its worth? This is an uneasy question in a PBRF environment – where research ‘counts’. However, the purpose of this paper is to outline the way in which a collaborative research project was conducted which attempted genuine power-sharing partnerships, co-researcher(s) status, and professional and collegial interactions between academics and academic-practitioners. The research sought to ‘overcome’ a number of potentially negative barriers: the perceived distance from practice of some educational researchers; and making sure the participant schools were not being researched ‘on’ in a top-down, external ‘outside expert’ way. There was also a conscious decision to ‘overcome’ some perceptions that ‘practitioner’ research is not rigorous or ‘valid’, and more importantly, the widely held, yet apparently ill-conceived misconception that research on and in educational practice was not judged as high as other types of research by PBRF panels.

With this as a background to the philosophy underpinning the project, the research was undertaken to accommodate several imperatives: firstly, to work closely with a group of senior practitioners in a shared research endeavour. Nearly half of the co-researchers had been former postgraduate students of the principal researcher, thus we were able to draw on a network of known academic-practitioners. A second, and related aim, was to foster a closer collaboration between the academy and practice. The third inter-related aim was to mentor, support and enhance the research skills of all involved in the project. This last aim satisfied both the personal ambitions of the co-researchers, and also somewhat conveniently could be classed as a form of research ‘training’ and building research capability – thus supporting the TEC’s aims.

It should be noted at the outset that this paper does not outline the findings of this study (this is done in another of the co-authors publications, see Smith, 2004), but considers the process and methodological issues associated with undertaking this research. Before the major sections of this paper a brief review of the literature on practitioner research is outlined, to contextualise and also to add theoretical dimension (and thereby authority and authenticity) that this is a ‘researched’ research paper.

This paper consists of four major sections, the first highlights some of the positive aspects of this collaborative research such as connecting other professionals and utilising strengths. The second section provides a converse position to the earlier part by revealing some of the more negative or as we have termed them ‘challenging’ aspects of this research, for example the time commitments, the variation in the quality of data collected and writing skills of some of the co-researchers. Section three explores some of the interesting issues raised in the research process for example ethical considerations of the contractor and ‘contracted’ and the dichotomy between competition and collaboration. In the fourth and final part we reflect on what might improved the research process.

A very brief literature review

*Theory interspersed with commentary from our practice*

Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) advance practitioner research has a long and varied tradition. Furthermore, they argue the case for ‘teachers as researchers’, and drawing on other literature proclaim that educators may prefer to be more actively involved ‘in’ the research than being researched ‘on’. This was definitely the case in this research, as each member was a co-researcher and in seven schools the data collection and analysis was undertaken by the academic-practitioners. In the remaining three schools the co-researcher outlined their perspectives in interviews or by email correspondence. Coleman and Lumby (1999: 8) in the UK contend that not all practitioner research is undertaken by practitioners alone and that external partners may be involved – often in partnership with a local tertiary provider in partnership. This was a collaborative partnership between the principal researcher and the ten case study schools in the research.

Yates (2004: 166) suggests visibility of research is an important consideration (for practitioners). Furthermore, she argues ‘research cannot be judged (taken up, approved, initiated) by practitioners as good research if the practitioner or practitioner community has not heard about it’ Yates (2004: 16). It
has always been the explicit and on-going goal of this research team to publicise and disseminate our research findings widely. To be useful to ‘inform’ educational practice we have, or are in the process of publishing our findings in a range of media in both practitioner-focused and academic avenues both nationally and internationally.

Wellington (2000: 20) argues that an idea which has received wide recognition in education in the UK context is the notion of ‘practitioner research’. Furthermore, he asserts that whilst this type of research has a number of advantages, it may also pose certain problems or difficulties. These potential benefits and difficulties of practitioner research are summarised in table 1 below.

As can be observed in table 1 whilst there are some obvious benefits involving academic-practitioners in research, there are also some disadvantages and constraints. As a research team we were mindful of both the favourable aspects and some of the pitfalls of this research approach.

Table 1: Practitioner/insider research: potential advantages and problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential advantages</th>
<th>Possible problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior knowledge and experience of the setting/context (insider knowledge)</td>
<td>Preconceptions, prejudices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved insight into the situation and people involved</td>
<td>Not as ‘open-minded’ as an ‘outsider’ researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier access</td>
<td>Lack of time (if working inside the organization) and distraction/constraints due to being known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better personal relationships, e.g. with teachers, pupils</td>
<td>‘Prophet in own country’ difficulty when reporting or feeding back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner insight may help with the design, ethics and reporting of the research</td>
<td>Researcher’s status in the organization e.g. a school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity</td>
<td>Familiarity</td>
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</tbody>
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(Source: adapted from Table 2.4, Wellington, 2000: 20)

This simple table potentially provided both a cautious organisational guide for the research as well as a template to initially evaluate our research reflections against. In the following sections evidence of some of the dimensions outlined in the table are discussed. Ultimately the research team thought the insider (practitioner) approach to be a sound methodological model and the advantages clearly outweighing the potential problematic areas. In terms of the principal researcher the insider knowledge provided by the academic-practitioners was invaluable and access to sites of co-research more easily obtainable than as an external or ‘outsider’ researcher. In terms of methodology there was no pretence at ‘objectivity’ in the research, we all acknowledged our subjective positioning within it. The combination of having co-researchers with insider knowledge and experience and an ‘open-minded outsider’ researcher (in Wellington’s terms, see table 1) was a strength and advantage of this research team.

The next major section highlights the positive aspects of conducting this research.

The positive dimensions of our collaborative research

The positive aspects of our collaborative research project can be encapsulated in two themes: connections with other professionals and the utilisation of strengths in order to maximise efficiency and effectiveness.
Connections with other professionals

Addressing Isolation

Collaborative research can address the isolation that sometimes occurs in schools. The notion of reinventing the wheel frequently echoes inside the walls of schools. Utilising resources (human and physical) from other schools to provide a basis for practice in your school environment can be enormously effective and efficient. Involvement in this research enabled schools to connect and share their practices. It brought together a group of schools to explore a specific issue, in this case international students.

Marketing methods, retention, and transition practices between schools differed considerably, this in itself opened up a wealth of information for other schools to critique their current practice and explore options for future practice. Alternative perspectives were presented. Two schools had chosen not to have international students and the reasons for this was outlined. Issues that were highly important in one context were considered less so in others. This was particularly apparent when considering the implications of international students for the Maori community. One school has less than one per cent Maori population while another had 55 per cent.

A significant outcome of collaborative research is that it broadened the perspectives of all researchers. It required us to explore an issue in depth in our own context but to consider the issue also through a wider lense.

Networking

As a result of the collaborative approach, the principal researcher was able to access school principals’ networks. There is a plethora of best practice and a wealth of knowledge readily available in the education community. Through collaborative research, and using practitioner researchers’ contacts, the principal researcher was able to identify additional schools and deputy principals and principals to participate. Agreement to be involved was generally not difficult to achieve as a known colleague approached people. In this way the principal researcher was able to profit from already established professional relationships. These points are clearly linked to the positive aspects outlined in table 1, for example easier access and the personal relationships between those involved in the project.

Academic-practitioner researchers were able to extend their networks. A number of schools continue to keep in contact and the connectedness has extended beyond the realm of international students.

A different level of involvement

There were varied opportunities for schools to participate in this research. Each week numerous questionnaires are received at schools, requesting information for some form of research. In essence the school is being asked to provide data. One significant difference in this collaborative research project is that there is school involvement throughout the research process, from the research design to the conclusions and recommendations (again a point raised in table 1). This is advantageous for all parties: the principal researcher is almost assured of a high return rate throughout the data collection phase; the principal researcher can benefit from the initial analysis by the practitioner researchers; the data collection tools can be piloted efficiently; the recommendations can be critiqued to reflect the ‘real’ world rather than a purely ‘theoretical’ one. Furthermore academic-practitioner researchers can be supported in learning how to ‘problematise’ issues, develop questions, collect data, analyse data, draw conclusions and form recommendations – this can lead to further school-based research.

In essence there is reciprocity for all when academic-practitioner researchers are involved throughout the research not just seen as data collectors.

From the co-authors’ point of view this was a successful project during on a number of the potential advantages of insider research, but also able to link to the academy through the support and guidance of the principal researcher.
Utilising strengths

The principal researcher

The principal researcher provided: facilitation skills; a theoretical perspective; templates; and skills in analysis and synthesis of data. Each of these is outlined in more detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

Facilitation skills were pivotal to the success of the collaborative research project. If collaborative research is to be considered the principal researcher needs to realise that valuing the contributions of other co-researchers is imperative. This was one of the strengths of our experience. There was no manipulation of our contributions by the principal researcher. The format and organisation of information was changed, but the content of the report remained true to the academic-practitioner researchers’ contribution.

Flexibility was offered. Schools could select a level of involvement. Prompts were provided (politely) when tasks were due. Help was always only an email or phone call away. The workload of school leaders was respected and demands placed upon our time were realistic.

The principal researcher was able to bring to the project significant theoretical knowledge. This was particularly important in the design of the research project. Ethical considerations, research methodology and the research methods were reached in an informed way thanks to the principal researcher. Whilst we had involvement throughout whole process, it should be noted that the academic-practitioner researchers’ knowledge some of these areas were variable.

Most of the school-based co-researchers could be described as novice researchers. While many had a rudimentary understanding in designing a research project, it was enormously advantageous to have at our disposal someone with additional experience in these matters. To be frank, the ethics application was not an aspect that the academic-practitioner researchers provided a lot of input towards, despite there being an opportunity to do so.

The principal researcher provided a template for the co-researchers to use when writing up their case studies. This was gold. The principal researcher found this useful as it provided some consistency and rigour in the responses. This made is easier to collate and synthesise. The co-researchers found it useful as there was a framework that prompted responses. It was a supportive tool that guided, but did not restrict responses.

Arguably one of the more difficult and time-consuming tasks was bringing together the case studies and providing draft conclusions and recommendations. The principal researcher had a pivotal role in this part of the research. Liaising with the contractor and reaching agreement as to the contents of the final report was not for the faint-hearted.

Academic-practitioner researchers

The co-researchers provided: data; a context specific analysis of the data; on-going critiquing; and a practical perspective to this research.

The school-based researchers assisted with the acquisition of data. There was involvement at all levels of the data collection process from the design of the questionnaire to the analysis of the data in their school (this was seen as a strength, see table 1).

One of the strengths of collaborative research is the opportunity for data to be analysed within specific contexts. It ensures that a deeper and more accurate understanding of the issues is realised. An example: A large number of teachers stated concerns at how our school facilitates the transition of international students. In isolation this piece of data could lead towards specific recommendations in order to improve our practice in this area. However, the school-based researcher knew that international students were not identified as such and that many of the teachers who had responded
with concerns had in fact never taught an international student. There had been the assumption from many staff that most of our 69 Korean students were internationals, however in reality only nine were international students. Very different conclusions and recommendations would result from this piece of data given the context in which it was given.

Constantly the co-researchers were invited to critique the report as it was taking shape. This ensured that the academic-practitioners’ perspective(s) were not lost during the synthesis of the information contained in the school reports. The recommendations were presented for discussion prior to the submission of the final report. Consensus was not reached but that was not the goal, rather a diversity of views was presented.

These positive outcomes occurred as a direct result of all researchers’ genuine commitment to the process. Whilst this research was both an enjoyable and learning experience for all the co-researchers and the all reported the positive aspects having an effect on them personally and professionally, the next part of the paper outlines some of the challenges and interesting dimensions which resulted from conducting the research.

**The inherent challenges and interesting aspects of our collaborative research**

The inherent challenges of embarking on a collaborative research project can be perceived as a negative or alternatively as an ‘interesting’ experience by the active participants. The way individual participants experience this research approach can be affected by their involvement in previous advanced academic activity with its associated rigour, or by the level of knowledge, interest and experience relating to the topic under investigation.

**The ‘challenging’ dimensions**

*Meetings at a distance*

Because of the tight-timelines for completion of this project (which are more fully discussed in the next section) and that the co-researchers were extremely busy people, the research was structured around being able to ‘meet at a distance’. The main forms of communication were emails and telephone calls between the research team. This approach was taken mainly for pragmatic and cost-related reasons. Because all the academics-practitioners were either principals or deputy principals, thereby having extremely busy schedules every weekday and most evenings too, it was impossible to facilitate face-to-face meetings whereby the whole research team could attend. Furthermore, given that the ten schools in the study are scattered around the four cities making up the greater Auckland metropolitan area this would have involved significant travel for all.

Whilst some of the research team met face-to-face on a number of occasions and the principal researcher visited all but one of the schools, most communication was by email and data-sharing of word files. This was a satisfactory approach for most of the co-researchers, especially those not involved directly as case study schools in which the major data-gathering was questionnaires to mostly teaching staff. In terms of the research process feedback was asked for at regular intervals by the principal researcher (especially at important parts of designing the research, questionnaires and templates for the written school case study reports). Given the nature of the workload of the co-researchers and their level of commitment to the project, some responded efficiently and quickly, whilst others were slow to reply, requiring lots of follow-up emails and phone messages.
In terms of consultation and feedback the three co-authors of this paper\textsuperscript{1} valued networking through interacting face-to-face, as the three of us would have liked more meetings in this mode, to debate the issues and to explore the diversity of the variances of opinions on some issues. However, we also agree that the final report submitted by the research team reflected the wide collection of perspectives from the different co-researchers (and we saw this as a strength of both the multifariousness in the research teams composition and the differing positions they adopted on international students).

\textit{Size does matter (the size of the sample group): some challenges}

Many of the participant co-researchers found the time commitment involved in this project to be challenging in terms of their workload. This was magnified by the need to complete the process within in a very short time-frame.

Co-ordinating the ten schools selected to participate in this project proved to be an organisational ‘nightmare’ for the principal researcher (and co-author of this paper). He suggested that a smaller project team may have been able to provide sufficient data for the purposes of this project, and yet on the other hand believed that the schools that did commit to support the project provided an interesting ‘balance’ of school type, location and socio–economic status background and number of international students hosted in their institutions.

The possibility of repeating this project with a smaller, less diverse group of schools could have meant that data may more than likely have been geographically localised, and therefore more ‘exclusive’ in context. The result of a smaller sample group may not have provided sufficient possibilities for the contrasting view-points.

Challenges faced by the principal researcher included the need to make connections within the final report using data that varied in quality and depth due to the differing writing abilities of the participant co-researchers. Those co-researchers who had, or were continuing to be actively involved in advanced personal study tended to show greater levels of ability to not only meet the timeline commitments but to also provide data that was more easily interpreted, or directly transferable into the final report.

The principal researcher found that the personal time commitment required for him to meet the very tight ‘research-to-report’ time-frame requirements for completion of the project, placed him under undue pressure. This pressure in many ways may have been transferred onto participating co-researchers. The overall impact of the short, yet ‘imposed’ project time-frame may have had the effect of impacting on the quality of feedback and data provided by practicing school leaders. All participants struggled to balance the need to be involved in this project with personally determined levels of professionalism, and also maintain the functions required of them to effectively mange their own ‘at school’ workloads. This point fits within the ‘possible problems’ outlined in table 1 (being a lack of time).

The principal researcher may have experienced or perceived the wide range of levels of participation of various co-researcher as ‘differing levels of commitment’. Co-researchers however, were more able to moderate their participatory levels once the combined research data from all participants began to take the shape from the draft, to the final report. As the collaborative team were able to view the development of the final report ‘on line’ and then in ‘face-to-face’ debrief/discussion sessions, many perceived beliefs, potentially held by all participants were able to be clarified and any misunderstandings could be dealt with.

As a collaborative project the academic-practitioners insights, knowledge and assistance with the design, implementation and reporting of the project were invaluable and advantageous (see table 1).

\textsuperscript{1} In the case of one of the co-authors Lara, her and the principal John McGowan had a co-researcher arrangement in their school. They jointly shared responsibility for attending the research meetings, collecting and analysing the data and writing their school’s research case study.
Some of the more interesting aspects of this project

Time, trust and talking/taking risks!

A point of interest in this study was the wide variance in levels of involvement the case study schools had with the international fee paying student market. Schools varied widely in terms of the numbers of International Students (IS) they had enrolled (ranging from 0 – 41 students in 2004). One could justifiably question the way schools were selected by the international students’ parents in choosing to enrol their child/ren where such extremes in enrolments and locations were evident (ten schools from four cities within the Auckland region). A related point of interest that potentially relates to a reason for the numbers of IS enrolled in schools is in terms of a school’s location. Academic-practitioners involved in the project identified that the parents of IS perceived that location of a school was directly linked to the quality of education provided. For example North Shore or Eastern schools were preferred to schools in the West or South of Auckland because of the higher socio-economic environments in which they were situated. Location may also be perceived by parents of IS as providing an element of increased status to their family.

The collaborative research project, on the other hand, provided many benefits to all participants in that process in and of itself, provided the co-researchers involved in the ‘business’ of hosting fee-paying international students the opportunity to meet and network with other deputy principals and principals. This situation was unique in that the leaders of potentially competing markets were brought together in an interesting and exciting way to collaborate in a project they believed may inform and possibly even improve their individual school’s economic/systemic outlook as providers. All those involved in the research saw value in the process.

Trust proved to be almost uniformly inherent in this process between most, if not all, the co-researchers. A fact, not to be minimised, is that trust was in part a guiding principle in the overall design of this collaborative project as generated by the principal researcher. As the concept designer, mentor and driver of the project, the principal researcher tended to generate high levels of trust within and around the team.

The potential dichotomy of ‘competition’ versus ‘collaboration’ seemed to sail into insignificance as all the participants contributed what they could, in the most acceptable ways they could. The generous and accepting approach taken by the principal researcher engendered a strong non-competitive team approach that resulted in some ongoing networking links and interesting professional support mechanisms.

Who owns what? (An ethical conundrum)

An interesting and contentious issue that arose during this research project was that the ‘ownership’ (or contractor) of the project changed part way through. The principal researcher/research team was challenged by the new ‘owner’ of the final report to alter the findings of the report. The fact that the research project was a collaborative effort provided some protection to the principal researcher in that concurrence of the full research team to alter its findings would be necessary before any such changes could be made. The team was not happy for any changes to be made to the findings as they stated, ‘The findings are the findings’ and should not be able to be manipulated because the new ‘owner’ of the final report did not like what it had to say. The research team acted with professionalism and integrity to the participants and the ‘data’ they had collected.

Although the principal researcher was potentially at risk in this endeavour, as the ownership of the project changed part way through, the safety net and support of the collective team provided him with a sense of authority and control. Conversely, quite possibly a solo (single) researcher may potentially be more easily manipulated or ‘coerced’ into complying with a new owner’s request to alter a research project’s findings without the support of a cohesive team to help state a strong mostly negative response to such a request.
A point of interest is highlighted here too in that it is most unusual to transfer the ownership of a commissioned research project to another group during or after it has been contracted out, and in this case completed, signed off and paid in full. One must question the clarity of purpose for the original research to be commissioned, and the initial motivation of the contractor.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) set the original contract and as the research team worked through the process they became more aware that the interests between the MoE and the school differed. Team members saw that the information being gathered could be used for different reasons. Clarity needs to be sought about why this contract was set and what the MoE hoped to find as a result. For the MoE to transfer ownership of the project part way through raised interesting ethical issues and challenges for the research team. The principal researcher and research team and were bound by strict academic ethical and professional codes. However, it would appear that neither the MoE, the new ‘owner’ of the research (Education New Zealand) were constrained by the same ethical dimensions as the ‘contractees’ (research team).

The inherent challenges that developed as this collaborative project evolved became points of interest and therefore less problematic. The collective ability, intelligence, support, interest and commitment of the co-researchers proved to be the methodology and moderation mechanism by which solutions to difficult and potentially damaging issues were managed.

The final major parts of this paper outline how we as co-authors have reflected on the process and outcomes of the research and what we might do differently for future research.

**Where to from here? – Improving the process**

As reflective research practitioners we have considered a number of issues which if we were redesigning the project we might do it in a dissimilar way. These are outlined below (in no order of importance).

*Undertake a less ambitious project*

We were all relatively ‘novice’ researchers (even though the majority of the co-researchers had postgraduate qualifications and research experience). In hindsight the project was too ambitious for the short time-frame available. The deadline for the research proposal was late January 2004, the ‘contract’ (letter of agreement) signed in nearly the third week of February, the draft report required by the 9th of June and the final report due 23rd June 2004. Thus the whole process from signing the agreement to completion was approximately five months. Within this period the principal researcher changed tertiary institutions, which caused some minor delays. Furthermore, being ethical researchers the project was scrutinised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), thus compounding the delays. All the co-researchers were in full-time employment, thus the research was an additional workload burden on top of their regular professional duties. The tasks for each of the co-researchers within their schools whilst negotiable and rather structured, they were also incremental and relatively time-consuming. In terms of restructuring the project we have outlined some alternatives which we believe may have strengthened the research.

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2 At the time this co-authored paper was written, there is still a ‘stand-off’ position between the research team and new ‘contractor’. The research team are awaiting a reply from the contractor about how to progress the problematic issue of publicising our research which has been partially ‘critical’ of the contracting agency.

3 However, the ‘original’ funder of the research project did extend the timeframe and final report to mid July 2004.
Reducing the size and scope of the study
While it would have reduced the diversity of the project in terms of the range of schools in terms of location, SES decile and most importantly the numbers of international students, we would recommend in hindsight a smaller project with fewer schools involved. Having to facilitate and coordinate a research team of eleven co-researchers in ten schools was an extremely difficult and time-consuming activity for the principal researcher. The co-authors thought four schools would be a reasonable number for intensive case studies analysis. Furthermore, we recommend that rather than a single co-researcher at each of the institutions that there be two school co-researchers. This was the case of one of the schools in the present study, and the co-authors noted it was a very successful strategy and that each could focus on their particular strengths. By having two co-researchers in the schools this would mean that they could distribute roles and that one potentially would be available to attend face-to-face meetings, it would mean internal support for the co-researchers, and also be a safeguard in case one became ill, or left the school during the research. Furthermore, it would also enhance the research capacity of the institution and potentially get more buy-in from staff.

Increase time-frame of the study
The research team were under considerable pressure to complete this project within what turned out to be rather unrealistic time-frames. In terms of increasing the utility and feasibility of this study much longer time-frames would be required at least another three months. By the time ethics approval had been granted it (in late April) this left only approximately six weeks to collect all the data from each school and analyse it and then synthesise all the findings into a comprehensive draft report. As a research team we believe we did an admirable job of completing the project within the time period, but it could have been more extensive and slightly more polished with more time.

Funding the project
The project was seriously unfunded for what the Ministry received as an extensive final report. The co-researchers considered this project sufficiently robust and important that they devoted significant amounts of time and energy into it. All co-researchers received little remuneration in terms of the time supplied, thus it was the goodwill and professionalism of the research team, not the money involved that drove the project. If we were to embark on such a project in the future it would have to be significantly better funded.

How was learned and useful to the academic-practitioners?
The networking aspects resulting from this were widely discussed and positively reported by the research team. Furthermore, it provided the co-researchers with an opportunity to be genuinely involved in a collaborative research project, in which they were able to inform their staff they were part of the process, not having an external researcher conduct research ‘on’ them. The co-researchers reported that they were able to use the case studies to have proactive and stimulating discussions with staff about the impact of international students on their schools and communities.

In all the seven case study schools (where data was collected directly from staff) multiple copies of the final report have been distributed for staff to read. In all of these schools verbal feedback has also been provided to the participants, mostly via the co-ordinator of the research in that school. Offers were made by the principal researcher to do this, and some schools took up this offer, but in others the task of timetabling this within a busy staff-meeting schedule proved to be too difficult, and other co-researchers felt comfortable to provide feedback to their staff themselves. However, the co-researchers were also mindful of one of the possible problems of the difficulty in reporting back findings to ones own institution (see table 1). Thus the co-authors of this paper struck a novel solution of overcoming the ‘prophet in own country’ difficulty by offering to report back the findings to each others’ schools (thereby further cementing on-going networking).
Conclusion

Much has been learned by the co-authors of this paper through both the research itself, and also resulting from co-writing this paper (again collaboratively) and it has been an empowering process for the three of us. In acknowledging our colleagues the collective wisdom and experience of all the co-researchers became a powerful catalyst for this interesting, yet challenging project to reach a cohesive and successful conclusion.

This collaborative approach to research in an educational context has provided a high level professional development opportunity for all participants. The project has also added new knowledge into the ongoing debate about how primary schools in New Zealand can add value to the international student market. More support and encouragement by the MoE and central government needs to be directed towards the primary school sector as it tries at times, against all the odds, to be entrepreneurial in expanding their individual school’s funding and cultural riches.

The research process was extremely valuable as a collaborative enterprise, it overcame the perception of some practitioners feeling ‘outside’ the research and being researched ‘on’ rather than researched ‘with’ or ‘alongside’. Furthermore, it fostered breaking down the distance between the academy and educational practice, and it is the express wish of the research team that the outcome of the research will be useful for informing practice and policy. Throughout the collaboration much was discovered about mentoring, building research the capacity of practitioners and insider knowledge of the diverse practices which exist within and between schools. Finally, we need to reiterate this project was always underpinned by a commitment to practice, however how it rates under a PBRF-regime in this current version (a conference paper) we will only know when it is assessed in the second round scheduled for 2007.

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Further reading on practitioner research


References


