Dynamics of Power and Participation in School/University Partnerships

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ABSTRACT: This article suggests that instrumental impulses within current educational policy limit the capacity of school and university research partnerships to address educational inequalities. Drawing on our experiences within a research project intended to improve student writing outcomes within a low income multi-cultural secondary school, we argue that in order to transcend their limitations, school and university research partnerships would benefit from making explicit their socio-political context. Currently the work of both schools and universities is situated within a dominant discourse of neo-liberalism that privileges the exchange of knowledge, in economic terms, within global, national and local contexts. Within this political economy it becomes risky for both schools and universities to engage in an exchange of knowledge beyond the instrumental. However, we suggest that in order to gain from a shared commitment to addressing educational disparities, partnerships must be formed through recognition of the power dynamics of both participation in and contestation of university and school knowledge. We test some rules of engagement through the construction of this article.

KEYWORDS: school/university partnerships, educational research political economy of schooling.

INTRODUCTION

Like other nations concerned with participation in an increasingly globalised world, one of New Zealand's responses to developing the capability of its citizenry through public schooling has been the proliferation of university/school research partnerships. These form a *modus operandi* for reducing educational inequalities and addressing student diversity. Significant research monies are directed into the development of research partnerships through the brokerage of Ministry of Education funded interventions such as the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI).

Currently there appears to be an uncritical emphasis on the benefits rather than the challenges of school and university partnerships that fail to acknowledge the differing exchange values of school and university knowledge and while the rhetoric surrounding such partnerships suggests their value lies in mutual benefit for all parties concerned, we

argue that attempts of both teachers and researchers to address issues of social inequalities are complicated by their location within economies of knowledge which, in the current neo-liberal era, attributes greater value to knowledge than has traditionally been the case within the field of education.

The dominance of this economic relationship can result in compromises that militate against critical engagement with the challenges presented to schools and researchers alike in their attempts to reduce educational inequalities. Notions of collaboration, trust, respect and power sharing used uncritically in studies that address social justice issues provide little assistance in negotiating such complexities (see Bishop et al, 2003; McNaughton et al, 2004; Oliver, 2006; Timperley & Robinson, 2002) and any tensions in the research processes are largely rendered silent. We suggest that closer attention be made towards the operation and exchange of knowledge within partnerships in order to provide a means of negotiating the challenges that are almost certainly bound to emerge when the exchange value of university and schooling knowledge differs so greatly.

In this article we draw on our own experience of a research partnership between a low decile[1] multi-cultural secondary school we call 'Kakariki College', and a university School of Education. The study was originally conceived by the school, and proposed as an opportunity to raise student achievement through developing a whole-school writing strategy and accompanying professional development programme. The university was approached by the school in order to develop the research methodology for the project, but with the involvement of university researchers, the school's agenda shifted focus, as outsiders' perspectives were brought to bear on the challenges the school faced in improving student writing.

We analyse the process of negotiation between university and school members as the scope and structure of the project was developed and the ground of the research partnership was established. Whilst the partnership was founded on a shared commitment to widening the social participation of students in a low decile school, it continued to be a fragile and delicate entity as relationships between partners were shaped by the contestation of knowledge. Even in the context of this article, the different knowledge bases of each of us provide different capacities and capabilities to construct an authoritative academic argument. Thus Ruth and Kathleen's (university researchers) combined voices predominate here,[2] and interpret and frame Sue's (former teacher at the school) commentary.[3] However, what is at stake for both sides in the partnership, i.e. effecting more equitable social outcomes for students, proves too great to disregard. In the ongoing process of addressing these issues, the project continues to confront challenges and provide the participants with ways of negotiating them.

Central to this work is an investigation of the dynamics of our research partnership that makes explicit and acknowledges the different knowledge bases within the project, and examines how our interactions are located within local, national and global economies. Power circulates within each of these economies in a dynamic that closes and opens possibilities for the exchange of knowledge. Through explicating relationships of power, we consider the possibilities of creating a much more uncomfortable and challenging space that acknowledges the competing knowledge bases that schools and university researchers

and schools bring to a research partnership. We suggest that it is helpful to frame research and school partnerships as a problem to be negotiated rather than a 'marriage of true minds' (Davies, Edwards, Gannon & Laws, 2007; Stronach & McNamara, 2002). Our approach provides opportunities to examine the effects of power in action as it circulates between agents. We also raise possibilities for strategic intervention in that process and, perhaps, make possible the production of different outcomes.

For Kathleen and Ruth, good education is a transformative practice. Despite living in a time that challenges the hope of critical, and indeed, post-critical educationalists, we retain a belief in the potential of education to effect social change and achieve more equitable social outcomes. The purpose and practice of education is always subject to wider social influences. However, in the current age possibilities may appear limited in number and effect. International comparative studies illustrate large disparities in student achievement (Alton-Lee, 2004); teachers and schools are held publicly accountable for these disparities, while it appears that in many places they are permitted less and less freedom to address them (Powell & Barber, 2006). Much has been written on constraints to educational possibilities afforded by the current regime of a global system of capital, sustained through social stratification and cultural reproduction, and its underlying neo-liberal ideology (Robertson, 2000; Apple, Kenway & Singh, 2005). Whilst these structures may appear entrenched and immovable, to view them monolithically obscures their constitution from social dynamics, or discourses, and the hope that they may be reconstituted.

In an editorial of the inaugural issue of the journal *Pedagogies,* Allan Luke (2006) challenges teachers and researchers to enter into the reconstitution of regimes by attending "… more closely to everyday life in the classrooms" (p. 2):

> The actual socio-cultural, cognitive and intellectual work of teachers and students is and should be a focal area of research and development, description and illustration, expansion and innovation, and, thereby, debate and reform (Luke, 2006, p. 2).

He suggests informed analysis within schooling and classroom contexts is necessary to negotiate the complexities of working towards social justice within contexts of swiftly changing knowledge and its associated turbulent power dynamics.

There are parallels between Luke's challenge and Foucault's (1991) proposition that in the case of regimes such as neo-liberalism and globalisation, understanding the effects of power can be best understood by mapping the ways in which regimes of power are constituted and enacted in the sites furthest away from the seat of government. Mapping the enactment of the 'power plays' in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1980) within the micro context of schools and classrooms can make visible the differing positionalities and cultural norms of the participants, and the influences of macro neo-liberal discourses that they are situated within. Such understandings may enable us to look beneath the seductive unity of a cross-institutional research partnership and at the dynamics that actually construct it (see Boyask, 2006; Davies et al, 2007; Giroux, 1988; Kaur, Boyask, Quinlivan & McPhail, 2007; Quinlivan, 2007). The process can also provide an opportunity (albeit in retrospect) for acknowledging power differentials, and perhaps finding ways to negotiate

the tensions that may inevitably emerge over the course of building research partnerships between schools and universities within neo-liberal times.

"PARTNERSHIPS ARE SUCH SLIPPERY THINGS"

Our research project began with an expression of interest to the Teaching Learning Research Initiative's (TLRI) national programme of educational research, publicly funded by the Ministry of Education and administered by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER). In its mission statement this programme was established with the aim of creating research partnerships that will "... maximise the value and usefulness of research" (TLRI, 2006).

However, as Stronach and McNamara (2002) claim in a discussion of problematic research partnerships, partnership is a political "weasel word". Whilst this mission changed in 2008, collaboration and partnership remain enshrined in the TLRI aims. For example, the TLRI aims to "enhance the links between educational research and teaching practices – and researchers and teachers – across early childhood, school, and tertiary sectors" (TLRI, 2008). There has been little from the TLRI attesting to the differing exchange value of the partner's knowledge, and what remains is an assumption of mutual benefit obscuring the complex politic that occurs in the interaction of institutional knowledge cultures, and how these are both represented and enacted through interpersonal dynamics.

The project was a school initiative recognised by TLRI reviewers as a valuable endeavour requiring a more coherent research focus. More direct involvement of the university led to the development of a research design that intended to address the needs and interests of both parties. The aim was for the project team, originally comprised of school personnel (Joseph, Sue and one other)[4] and two university researchers (Kathleen and Ruth), to draw on action research methodologies in order to engage a core group of 10-12 teachers in professional learning. This would be by research of the teaching practice and research interests of four Year 10 teachers (English, social studies, science and physical education), the experience of their students and their location in wider schooling practices. It would be used for the development of a whole-school professional development programme in subject-specific writing literacy.

The initial pilot study working with the four Year 10 teachers was situated within a six-year longitudinal project designed to expand the project within the school. However, a range of tensions emerged between the researchers and school leadership. These tensions were over differences in interpretation of the baseline data findings and the project's operation within a school culture made turbulent through its social location and without a permanent principal's direction in the early stages of the project. Consequently, the decision was made by the school not to proceed with the longitudinal project.[5]

Both Kathleen and Ruth had previous experience of university/school research collaborations. At the outset this project appeared markedly different from their previous experiences because of what appeared to be the ownership of the initiative by curriculum leaders, school management and teachers within the school. There appeared to be a strong commitment from the school to the project because they had posed the initial problem. However, as educational academics (Ruth working on the research design and advised by

Kathleen) they felt it was their role to enter into the school's framing of the problem and stretch it from within. Extending the school initiative meant that it could better accommodate Ruth and Kathleen's knowledge of the complex issues affecting student writing literacy in a low decile school, while still directly addressing the immediate needs of the school. Whilst expanding the problem in this way comes from Kathleen and Ruth's research interests in addressing social inequalities through critical and post-critical theories of education, justification also comes from the orthodoxy of New Zealand schooling policy.

Recent educational initiatives, such as the *Schooling Strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2005) and the TLRI itself, support the transformation of schooling practice in reference to research knowledge. Responding to global discourses of evidence-based practice, New Zealand policy-makers advocate for collaboration between teachers and researchers so that teachers base their classroom practices on "what works", enter into professional learning communities alongside researchers, and may develop nationally- funded research partnerships (Alton-Lee, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2005; TLRI 2006).

In a discussion on the Singapore model of evidence-based policy, Luke and Hogan (2006) applaud the "realist" approach taken by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, claiming that its evidence-base is not subject to "ideological rectitude" and works against normalising discourses as it searches for "... contextually effective, appropriate and locally powerful examples of 'what works' " (p. 5). By expanding norms to include localised solutions to educational dilemmas, Luke and Hogan's position suggests that the core work of educational research is to find ways of stretching existing educational structures and relationships to address social issues.

This was the intention of Ruth and Kathleen in the development of the research partnership. Models of partnership that operate on an assumption of a working consensus are limited in the kinds of transformations that they can bring about, unless operating under ideal conditions where knowledge is constructed through authentic, open dialogue between equivalent partners (see Avis, 2005; Davies et al, 2007; Kaur et al, 2008). Working in low socio-economic schools highlights disparities between partners that are effects of the economic structure of global capital, and developing knowledge and practice that can make a difference appears all the more challenging in the light of inequalities of this magnitude (Powell & Barber, 2006).

However, these are also the contexts of greatest need, and as educational researchers and practitioners working together to address the needs of students in a low decile secondary school, we demonstrate an ongoing and long-term commitment to developing a research partnership that maintains the hope of achieving better social and academic outcomes within our institutional structures. As we reflect on the process that we have been engaged in, and interrogate our data, Kathleen and Ruth wonder whether tension and conflict, as much as compromise and consensus, are integral to educational research partnerships that genuinely address social inequalities (Taubman, 2006).

Framing research partnerships as a complex and often contradictory phenomena provides an opportunity to explore and examine the discursive understandings underpinning the bodies of knowledge brought by each of the participants to the project. Far from being equal and neutral, the knowledge bases that are brought to the partnership table by both

universities and schools are situated within dominant discourses. These can operate to both inhibit and enable what might be possible in terms of both understanding and shifting educational practices within schools.

OWNERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP: THE CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

Educational researchers concerned with issues of social justice and emancipation draw attention to the fact that issues of politics and power are deeply embedded in the enactment of educational research (Fine, 1994; Fine, Weiss, Weseen &Wong, 2000; Giroux, 1998; Gitlin, 1994; Ladwig & Gore, 1994). These scholars suggest that open acknowledgment of power differentials and the positionalities of participants, along with researcher reflexivity and reciprocity, can go some way towards mitigating these challenges. However we would suggest, along with Davies et al (2007), that dominant neo-liberal and global discourses of the current era act as significant constraints to opening such educational possibilities through collaborative endeavour (see also Avis, 2005). The limitations inherent within this macro context are felt especially acutely within the micro context of low decile and ethnically diverse schools such as Kakariki College, since staff and students are negotiating on a daily basis the results of social and educational inequalities and their material effects on students' lives.

A group of staff within the school wanted to participate in a project to improve student writing outcomes. As with Sue, who initiated the project, they recognised Kakariki students' under-achievement in writing in relation to national standards and wanted to do something to address the issue. As she explained to Ruth and Kathleen, participating in the research project was driven by a desire to "get the best possible deal for our kids." The school's concern and motivation align with wider governmental discourses that emphasise "Building a world-leading education system that equips all New Zealanders with the knowledge, skills and values to be successful citizens in the 21st century" (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Despite governmental rhetoric suggesting that all students should be able to reach their potential, as educational academics, Ruth and Kathleen were aware that the situation facing the community of Kakariki College is more complex. Working within a context of increasing social inequalities, low decile ethnically diverse schools are under pressure from governmental initiatives designed to raise educational achievement in ways that more privileged schools are not.

The following analysis of the negotiations of the TLRI research contract show how the knowledge bases of the school and the university intersected with dominant global and national neo-liberal discourses to severely stretch the collaborative nature of the research partnership. We begin with the 'courtship' phase of the research partnership where there appeared to be a mutual recognition of the strengths and abilities of both school and university partners as they worked together to revise and resubmit the research design of the project as was requested in feedback from the government funding provider (TLRI). We

discuss how our experience calls into question the development of school and university research partnerships as uncomplicated.

As we worked together in developing and shaping the research proposal, the challenges faced by teachers and schools working in low income multi-ethnic communities were openly discussed in project team meetings between the teachers, the school manager and university researchers. The researchers recognised that the school faced issues that many other schools rarely had to experience, acknowledging that their commitment to working towards addressing educational inequalities in low decile schools was a motivating factor in their decision to participate in the research project.

At that time there appeared to be a deep appreciation of the amount of time and open consultation that had gone into the reworked methodological design of the revised proposal. Perhaps, most significantly, Joseph drew attention to what he saw as a shared philosophical commitment to social justice and collaboration by the researcher and by many teachers working in low decile multi-cultural schools that went beyond expected job demands:

> Ruth
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> I wish to thank you personally for your considerable work preparing the proposal, both the weekend/at home stuff you have done and the guiding assistance I received from you in our meetings. Of course it's part of your job – it's what you do – but I get the impression that it's more than just a job to you, as it is for many teachers at Kakariki. We do it because we believe in it. I look forward to working in a team that displays such deep commitment. Thank You.
>
> Joseph (Personal communication, 31 August 2005).

The email shows a similar commitment from both the partners towards social justice and redressing educational inequalities. However, looking back, perhaps the emphasis placed by Joseph on framing the work of teachers and the researchers as a vocation, rather than as a job (Powell & Barber, 2006), provides some indication of future conflict.

Gaining the TLRI funding for the research project was a cause for celebration from the perspectives of both the school and the university. However, it was during the process of negotiating the contract that issues began to emerge that tested the initial goodwill and threw into sharp relief the disjuncture between the rhetoric and realities of research partnerships. Initial dialogue appeared to recognise and value the different contributions brought to the project by both the school and the university researchers. However, the material enactment of our practices in writing the research proposal appeared to reinforce our differences rather than our mutual intentions.

After some discussion with university advisors Ruth proposed to the school members of the project team that since the contract and financial management of the research project was being undertaken by the university, the contract should be held between them and the TLRI. Given that the infrastructure of the university is well equipped to deal with research

projects, and has mechanisms in place in the event of conflict between the parties to the contract from the university perspective, this seemed reasonable. However, after lengthy consultation with the school's financial managers, the school proposed instead that they become joint parties to the contract with the University of Canterbury, with co-directors from the school management and the university researchers managing the funds.

While the government body that administers TLRI funding (the NZCER) agreed to this, both they and university lawyers suggested that such an arrangement would be difficult to operate as the areas of responsibility are blurred. Issues at stake concerned legal liability for responsibilities such as undertaking the research, altering research methodologies, the writing of milestone reports and publications and media responsibilities. All of these activities are core features of academic work and tasks that academic researchers have the expertise and space to undertake. As an NZCER representative suggested to us while these issues were being negotiated with the school, universities are better equipped and resourced to undertake such tasks than schools:

> Dear Ruth
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> As yet we haven't had any contracts directly with schools ... It is easier (from our point of view) to get a final report out of a university than a school, as universities have more resources available for report writing ...
>
> Regards
> Shamian Quaintance (Personal communication, 1 December 2005)

The possibility of the lead contract being held by the university with the NZCER, and both the school and the researchers being co-leaders of the project, was agreeable to the school. However, the school felt aggrieved that despite having been assured that they were entering into a partnership with the university, the legal contract reflected that such an arrangement would result in the school being positioned in an inferior rather than equal position. Despite the rhetoric of equal partnership as promoted by national initiatives such as TLRI, within a the neo-liberal climate that privileges efficiency, university expertise in undertaking research and meeting project obligations has a higher exchange value than that of the school knowledge. Such ideological constraints undermine notions of equal partnership that are promulgated by the TLRI (Davies et al, 2007). Joseph's email to Ruth reflected these concerns:

> Ruth
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> Sue and I have discussed the contract issue and I have talked with [TLRI]. Sue and I are happy to have Cant signing the contract alone, with you and she being joint project team leaders as under clause 2. We have a concern that we must address very clearly tomorrow. This concern is that the project began as a school idea from Sue to a specific set of circumstances. We then thought we were entering into a partnership with the university. However the university has said that at the base of it all, at the legal level of the

contract, it is not a partnership. We, the school, will be sub-contracted. Will we, the school, have any control or will we end up being rolled on other issues? So, we have concerns that I hope we can air and resolve tomorrow.

Thanks – Joseph (Personal communication, 1 December 2005)

The sense of powerlessness expressed by Joseph in the positioning of the school in a lesser role to the university appears to reflect what he understood to be the operation of a sham, rather than an authentic partnership. The contract decision then operates to reinforce the inferior value of practice knowledge of teachers and schools compared with the academic knowledge and research skills of the university. Joseph's fear appears to be that the contract decision would set the precedent for other issues, allowing the university to exercise power in dictating future terms of the partnership to the school. While his concerns appeared to Ruth and Kathleen at the time to undermine the work they had already done in building a partnership with the school, given the turbulent and rapidly shifting nature of the school culture at the time the contract was being negotiated, his fears were understandable.

As the school's project leader and participating researcher, Sue suggests that the tensions that emerged from school and university contract negotiations signalled some fundamental dilemmas for the school. She explains:

> If, at a contractual level, the locus of power and control was vested more in the university than the school, to what extent would genuine collaboration be possible? For the school, no such research partnership with a university had previously occurred. The school began to question the extent to which the university was committed to a reciprocal sharing of power, and whether tensions about the contract might represent something of a 'shafting' of a low decile school by a high status organisation. To understand this more fully, the context in which the school was operating at this time must be mentioned. Under board-initiated statutory management, the school had endured a very public airing of internal difficulties and distress. A seemingly constant parade of media articles highlighted the school's problems and reinforced a sense of powerlessness among staff; the school felt brutalised, besieged and under-valued. Further demoralisation occurred with the publication of a league table that ranked the school very low in academic achievement, and a high stakes external audit that extended statutory management of the school for a further year. The appointment of a new principal, though, heralded the prospect of a better future for the school. Set against this context, then, contract negotiations with the university forced the school to consider whether it would be possible to accommodate diverse and competing understandings of genuine partnership regarding power and control of the project.

From the perspective of Kathleen and Ruth, the tensions that underlie these concerns reflect the school's situation within an economy of schooling, where there is conflict between the public accountabilities schools face regarding curriculum and assessment, and the capacity of a low decile school to meet them. The understandable vulnerability that

the school experiences in relation to its positioning within wider neo-liberal discourses of marketisation results in a wariness about entering into a unknown relationship with researchers and surrendering to them power to dictate teacher practice and represent it within the public domain. Sue's commentary suggests that what the school regarded as the representation of an unequal distribution of power within the contract may expose the school to further critical scrutiny and in doing so re-inscribe feelings of powerlessness that had previously been experienced by the school. In other words, if the school wanted more money for such a professional development project, it would have to go through the university.

Issues around the quality of relationships that were possible between the school and the university were also raised in the contract negotiations. Sue continues from the perspective of the school:

> The second dilemma facing the school was the extent to which a perceived power imbalance might influence relationship building between the school and university in terms of trust, respect and goodwill. In the face of contract negotiation tensions, how confident could the school be that it was safe to develop relationships that demanded high levels of trust and respect with the university?

From the school's perspective, as Sue explains, there is a high premium placed upon the value of respectful relationships and consensus within the stressful culture of a low decile multi-cultural school:

> For schools in general, and low decile schools in particular, the importance of healthy and constructive relationships at macro and micro levels cannot be overstated. On their own, of course, they are not enough, but with them, it is much more possible to build genuine partnerships in school reform and improvement. The extent, then, to which information could be shared with the university, and also be fairly understood and represented by the university, became an issue for the school. At its heart, the issue was about trust, the central ingredient of relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, the school began to question the degree to which the university understood this central reality of partnership.

For Kathleen and Ruth such reactions cause us to ponder the extent to which a 'genuinely equal' partnership is possible between the school and the university, given the premium given to critique within academia, and the contrary desire for consensus within the turbulent culture of a low decile multi-cultural school. Given the differing exchange value between university and school knowledge is genuine collaboration possible? The school desired an equal and mutual partnership characterised by trusting and respectful relationships between what they considered as equal partners. However, the researchers possessed skills and attributes in terms of critical and theoretical analysis, research expertise and research project management experience that, within a research context such as TLRI, positioned them as having a higher exchange value than the school (Davies et al, 2007). As Avis (2005) suggests, any consensus is limited by the less than ideal conditions within

wider economies of knowledge where different bodies of knowledge are constructed as unequal.

While the school cast doubt on the ability of the researchers to develop a trustworthy relationship with their institution over the process of the contact negotiations, the university researchers also felt similarly devalued in terms of their expertise and skills. An email sent by Ruth in response to Joseph's concerns also highlights issues of trust, and reiterates her commitment to the notion of building a partnership with the school. She also stakes a claim for the value of academic and research expertise and knowledge. Ruth writes:

Hi Joseph

I have been very much aware that this was Sue's initiative and have tried my utmost to include her interests throughout the time I've been involved in this project. I still think it's extremely important she has a significant role and have suggested this to her myself. That, and the fact that I am very committed to the idea of a research partnership, is also why I tried my hardest to accommodate the concerns you've raised. ... But I think at the guts of this issue is trust – and I think I can understand some of why you might not trust us on this issue given the context of the school, but obviously we're going to have to trust each other if this partnership is going to work. Otherwise, I'm afraid I'm prepared to walk away from it. I also think that the fact that this funding is for research should not be forgotten ... if you think about this portion of funding as predominantly research funding for the research focus and not the whole project, then I think it does need to be managed by people with a commitment to and expertise in research. ... As I said to you when you expressed some concern about the amount of the [researcher] salaries in the budget when I was preparing the proposal, I am not prepared to do research that is not the best possible research I can do, and as an academic I would be concerned if I didn't have control over that – it's the nature of the business I'm in. Hopefully we can resolve some of this tomorrow. Looking forward to the interviews.

Ruth (Personal communication, 1 December 2005)

In the email Ruth asks Joseph to value and respect the contribution of academic knowledge and research expertise brought to the research project by the university researchers, and to respect the traditional control and autonomy researchers need to exercise as part of their role. She goes so far as to suggest that if academic knowledge is not valued, then she is prepared to discontinue her participation in the project. While the university researchers held the notion of autonomy and academic freedom dear to their hearts, so did the school. The school, perhaps understandably given recent events, fears that the dominance of university knowledge might mean that the school's original intention, which was to raise student achievement in relation to writing, ran the risk of being compromised by what the school framed as academic beliefs and knowledges. Sue expresses concerns of the school as she explains:

If perceptions were that the university was in a more dominant position than the school, to what extent might project direction, management and evaluation be dictated by, and distilled through, the filters of university ideology, knowledge and expertise? Throughout this period, the school maintained a clear internal focus on the purpose of the project: to explore ways of improving student writing so that achievement might be raised. Stripping away all the tensions that surrounded contract negotiations, there remained an overriding concern that the singular and exciting potential the project represented might not yield the particular benefits for students that the school was committed to achieving. From the school's perspective, risk to project ownership, management and evaluation equalled risk to positive outcomes for students. Putting this in the vernacular, and at the risk of sounding somewhat naïve, we just wanted the best possible deal for our kids and for our school.

Dominant neo-liberal discourses that emphasise achievement and competition mean that the stakes for a low decile multi-cultural school participating in a research project to raise achievement in relation to student writing are indeed high. While the school's approach to raising student achievement was framed within dominant neo-liberal discourses that privilege efficiency and instrumental practice, as university researchers Kathleen and Ruth were more interested in addressing issues of educational inequality in such a way as to value the cultural location of students through the venue of raising student achievement in relation to writing (Bishop & Glynn, 2003; Comber, 2001; McNaughton, 2002; Moje et al, 2004).

The epistemological bases of both school and university partners have clashed several times over the course of the research partnership in regard to these issues. From the perspective of the university researchers, the question of what it means to raise achievement in relation to student writing highlights the contested nature of literacy, and how writing achievement is a marker of academic achievement within the context of a low decile and ethnically diverse school (Boyask, Quinlivan & Goulter, 2007). It also involves engaging in critical analysis which takes into account the disjuncture between the intentions of nationally mandated literacy programmes and their enactment in the classrooms of Kakariki College. So while both the school and the researchers had a common commitment to addressing student achievement in relation to writing literacies, we came at the issue from very different perspectives, and these differences caused a great deal of tension between the partners.

In the short term the contract negotiations were resolved with the intervention of the Head of the School of Education. A cover sheet was inserted at the front of the contract's Appendix acknowledging the partnership of the secondary school and university school of education in this project and signed by school members of the project team and the university researchers. The contract remained between NZCER and the university, with a subcontract written with the school. Despite the eventual compromise reached in this instance, attempts to mesh the sub-plans (Davis et al, 2007; Stronach & McNamara, 2002) of our two knowledge bases, has proved to be a challenging and ongoing undertaking.

The tensions and conflicts that we experience in the partnership in one form or another appear to be an integral feature of the work we are undertaking to redress educational inequalities for students working within the culture of a low decile multi-cultural school in a neo-liberal context where the stakes for students, teachers and indeed researchers are high. We would suggest such concerns are further fuelled, within the cultural context of a post-colonial country such as New Zealand, where pragmatism and action can be valorised at the expense of critically and theoretically informed analysis and thoughtful action. In this environment theory and practices are commonly artificially constructed as in opposition to each other (Brown, 2005; Horrocks, 2007; Simmons, 2007).

THE POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSFORMING THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT OF A UNIVERSITY/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

Over the course of writing this paper Kathleen, Ruth and Sue have had the opportunity to explore, understand and contextualise a range of tensions and conflicts that have taken place over the course of the research project. The processes that such an undertaking involves have enabled us to understand the extent to which the conflicts in some ways reflect our different positions within the wider neo-liberal knowledge economies that we are situated in. Kathleen noted that the writing process has proved to be somewhat transformative in terms of understanding her own and each others' positionalities differently. More significantly, the willingness to engage in the writing process has enabled us in some ways to reconnect with our mutual intentions and recognise and value the strengths and expertise that the research partners bring to the table.

From the perspectives of Kathleen and Ruth, making deeper sense of the conflicts that have arisen throughout the course of the research project have enabled us to value and respect the commitment that multi-cultural low decile schools bring to their work with students and acknowledge the significant challenges that they face. The recognition of these complexities highlights the important role that school and university partnerships can play in working towards addressing the substantial challenges schools face.

While critical engagement may be the stock-in-trade of an academic's work, Sue points out that within the sometimes besieged context of a school culture such as Kakariki College, sometimes criticality has to be sacrificed for the overall benefits of staff cohesion and because people have to keep working together for the benefit of the enterprise:

> You can perpetuate a situation within a school because you are constrained by the degree of the expertise and knowledge within the school. Goodwill can prevent critical engagement because you need to be able to survive reasonably well within a low decile secondary school, and so there's a huge need to have a reasonable level of cohesion. Some times in the interests of safeguarding cohesion some people have to sacrifice the degree of criticality for the perceived good of the whole.

Sue goes on to suggest that one of the contributions that university researchers bring to a research partnership is the opportunity for situating the daily work of teachers within low decile secondary schools in wider social and economic contexts. She suggests that the informed analysis and critique provided from an outside gaze can make possible different ways of understanding and working on the challenges presented to schools:

> Being able to look at school problems from a more global perspective is very valuable because you tend to get enmeshed in the immediacy of day-to-day problems and it is really difficult to develop a critical gaze that enables you to look at the same problems through different eyes.

Perhaps, most significantly, Sue points to the possibilities that school and university research partnerships hold in terms of working together to effect better learning outcomes for students in low decile schools. As she explains, the presence of the research project in the school represents the shared hope of both researchers and teachers that teaching practices can result in better learning for students:

> The continued presence of the project in the school signifies a real sense of optimism that progress can gradually be made toward ameliorating outcomes for students. What both teachers and students need is a sense of some hope that things can improve, that we can teach more effectively and students can learn more effectively – raising the quality of what is happening in the classroom. I personally think that aspect is shared by the researchers. We have some commonality there.

In this article Sue has endeavoured to represent both her own perspective of the project and that of the school. It needs to be acknowledged that while the writing of the article represents shifts in the authors' thinking about the challenges faced over the course of the research project, the school management did not share in this process and may understand the tensions differently.

CONCLUSION

Feminist and critical educational research paradigms have emphasised the importance of acknowledging and attempting to address power differentials when undertaking research to address social inequalities in educational contexts for some time. However, these approaches do not fit comfortably within the predominantly instrumental culture of schooling and school-based research. While we recognise the difficulties that criticality presents to teachers and schools, we maintain that without this criticality, participatory and collaborative approaches to school research are unlikely to genuinely reconstitute oppressive structures or transform teacher knowledge and practice.

At the core of the TLRI's mission is the development of research evidence and capability on the basis of partnerships between researchers and practitioners (TLRI, 2008). It is the intention that research projects will contribute value along all three dimensions: research, practice and strategic (or policy) value. What is apparent through our situation within this initiative is that in the process of developing partnerships the epistemological

bases of each of these dimensions come into conflict. If researchers and teachers submit to the authority of the TLRI accord, and attempt to work within its parameters, the knowledge and practice of both teaching and research are inevitably transformed so that they may interact, if not with equivalent value, then at least in equivalent currency.

In the schooling policy context where teachers are legally accountable through assessment, performance review and curriculum, and researchers are working in increasingly competitive research funding environments, the currency of exchange appears to be outputs, namely strategies addressing "what works". To extend this exchange beyond the instrumental is risky for both teachers and researchers, because it requires a willingness on both parts to engage with ideas that sit outside the dominant economic exchange of knowledge, and consider ways of understanding and constructing knowledge that challenge this dominant order and each other (Davies et al, 2007). These risks become inflated when operating from the margins of disciplinary practice e.g. within contexts of significant economic disadvantage. Given the economic inequities in knowledge, status and financial might between the two partner institutions, perhaps it should have been less surprising that conflict has been a marker of our partnership.

Along with Avis (2005) and Davies et al (2006), we suggest that it is valuable to recognise and understand the ways in which institutional cultures are constituted differently from one another. For research projects conducted within low decile schools, the effects of differences in the exchange value of university and schooling knowledge will be felt most acutely. Engaging with the critical knowledge bases of university researchers may appear to be just too risky for schools on the margins when the knowledge of most value is efficiency and expediency. However, without consideration of the structural and ideological limitations of such collaborations, it is idealism rather than realism that underpins evidence-based policy initiatives, resulting in compromise as the tacit agreement of research partnerships.

We suggest that a means to negotiate this dilemma is for researchers to enter into conversations with schools about the ways in which particular schools and universities are positioned within a neo-liberal context. For researchers attempting transformative work, it may not only be useful to acknowledge that partnerships are inevitably unequal, but perhaps if those inequalities are acknowledged, the tensions and conflicts that arise within partnerships can provide opportunities for understanding and valuing the differing perspectives that both schooling and academic knowledge bring to the table (Gilbert, 2005).

This article provides an example of how we have negotiated these challenges, i.e. through recognising differences between the positions and understanding of both parties to the partnership and, through dialogue, attempting to understand the alternative perspective. However, Kathleen and Ruth have also self-consciously situated these differences within the broader socio-political frameworks that make up the tool-kit of critically informed university academics. It was always intended that this article was designed for an academic audience. We contend that there are other venues where it may be appropriate for teachers to speak on our behalf.

Our research partnership continues to be buffeted by the dynamics of power that have threatened its existence, yet something has enabled it to persist. Undertaking a

structural analysis and engaging in dialogue between research partners has enabled some transformative effects. Through participation and engagement that acknowledges the differing exchange values of school and university knowledges, there is the potential to examine power fluctuations and mitigate their negative effects. Some success in establishing a partnership has been achieved amongst the authors of this article and amongst the teachers and school leaders we worked with over the course of the TLRI project (see Boyask, Quinlivan & Goulter, 2007).

The continuing dialogue between us and a joint commitment to an ongoing research collaboration fuels our hope of continuing to engage in the admittedly challenging work of effecting change within schools. As both the school and the university researchers learn from what has happened we can see the importance of acknowledging the differing exchange value of the knowledge that each of us offers, while also valuing each others' perspectives. We would suggest that much is at stake if schools and researchers do not attempt to traverse this ground.

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NOTES

1   In New Zealand, schools are ranked into deciles 1 to 10 according to the socio economic status of the community from which the children are drawn, with 1 the lowest. The school in our research partnership is a decile 2 school, placing it near the bottom of the scale.

2   Kathleen and Ruth's voices are combined, not to indicate a unified voice, but b cause they have both had opportunities to overwrite each other.

3   Sue's contribution was arrived at through Kathleen writing Sue's oral commentary. The three authors have discussed the possibility of Sue taking leadership in other venues that more closely align with her expertise.

4   Joseph (pseudonym) was a member of the senior management of the school with the responsibility for professional development. Sue, when she was at the school, was the Head of the English Department. The other member of the project team was a classroom teacher with responsibility for the facilitation of an existing professional development programme within the school.

5   Since this decision, the school and the university partners have worked together to re-build their partnership and learn from their experiences over the course of the pilot study.

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