

Full circle: Stakeholders' evaluation of a collaborative enquiry action research literacy project

GAIL FOREY

The Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

ARTHUR S. FIRKINS

The Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Sydney

SIMA SENGUPTA

EMPOWER Mentoring and Consultancy, India

ABSTRACT: This paper reports on school-university collaboration during an action research project, which aimed to build a writing pedagogy for students with Learning Disabilities in the trilingual, biliterate educational context of Hong Kong. The project was established through interpersonal relationships built from the ground up between stakeholders from a university department and a secondary school. The informal social networks were the locus of innovation and creativity within the project. This paper examines four broad dimensions of collaboration: the relationships created, the resources shared, the action taken and the pedagogy created. We discuss these dimensions of collaboration from the perspectives of the stakeholders. We found that each stakeholder aligned their motivations and expectations with other stakeholders to achieve the common goals of the research and consequently we call such alignments of interests "research networks". Finally, we suggest that "research networks" constitute an important, yet overlooked component of action research.

KEY WORDS: Cogenerative research, action research, university-school collaboration, stakeholder evaluation, institutional collaboration, research networks.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a collaborative action research project between a school and a university in building a writing pedagogy for students with Learning Disabilities in a trilingual, biliterate educational context (trilingual, as Puthongua, English and Cantonese are three languages used, and biliterate, as the students are expected to read and write standard written Chinese and English). We have two aims, to describe how the research was established through informal and formal networks of stakeholders, after which we focus on stakeholders' evaluation of the action research project through a description of the collaboration achieved. First we will establish the context with a discussion as to how we understood collaborative action research and a discussion of the Hong Kong education context that informed and shaped the project (see Firkins, Forey, & Sengupta, 2007, for a full description of the project).

COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

Action research in educational contexts is a research method, which integrates both action and reflection, so that the knowledge gained in the inquiry is directly relevant to the issues being studied and ultimately contributes to improving the quality of

pedagogy. The validity and value of the research findings are tested *in situ* within actual practice and can directly impact on systemic change at the school level. It is typically designed and conducted by practitioners, who methodically collect and analyse data to improve their own practice and to enrich an area of identified pedagogical concern. In action research, organisational stakeholders often collaborate with professional researchers in defining objectives, constructing the research questions, learning research skills, pooling knowledge and efforts. This type of collaboration can be beneficial to both participating institutions, but can also reveal some difficulties across the different dimensions of the collaboration, such as sharing resources, participating in the project and maintaining relations.

For the project reported in this paper, collaboration and action were built from the “ground up”, between the various actors who had a stake in the research. We have labelled these actors “stakeholders”. Quite often university-school collaboration is evaluated only on the direct outcomes of the research and neglect how and why the collaborative relationship was established and what additional value it added to the research. The purpose of the present study is to reveal the latent aspects of collaboration, which have only been addressed in a limited number of other studies (for instance, Feldman, 1999; Frankham & Howes, 2006; Mitchell, Reilly & Logue, 2009).

This paper therefore describes the nature of relationship that occurred between the two institutions. We focus on the interpersonal nature of networking and on relationship-building as a key element in collaborative research, and evaluate the project from the perspective of each stakeholder group who were the parts of the relationship. We identify both the positive and negative outcomes of the inter-institutional relationship from each of the stakeholder's perspectives.

COLLABORATION

In the context of a school-university partnership, action research can take on a team approach, with features typical of collaborative inquiry. Collaborative inquiry has been characterised by Sirotnik (1988) as a process of self-study, generating and acting upon knowledge, in context, by and for the people who use it. This kind of collaboration can incorporate quantitative, qualitative and critical methods and the core objective of the partnership is that it is collaborative among the stakeholders, critical and directed at action (Harrington, Gillam, Andrews & Day, 2006). For our project, we defined a stakeholder as a participant who stood to benefit in some form from the outcomes of the research. Greenwood and Levin (2003) refer to stakeholder-centred collaboration as cogenerative enquiry, because it is built through research-stakeholder collaboration. For our project we assumed four characteristics of cogenerative inquiry identified by Greenwood and Levin, as outlined below:

1. Cogenerate knowledge through collaborative communication processes in which all participants' contributions are taken seriously.
2. Treat the diversity of experience and capacities within the local group as an opportunity for the enrichment of the research/action process.
3. Produce valid research results.
4. Aim to solve real-life problems in context-centered ways. (Greenwood and Levin, 2003)

Cogenerative collaboration goes further than simply doing the project and achieving the research outcomes (see Somekh, 2006; Somekh & Zeicher, 2009). We regularly referred back to Greenwood and Levin's four characteristics of cogenerative enquiry as principles to guide our collaborative project. In keeping with the first, we endeavoured to identify all of the stakeholders in the project and invited wide participation. All of the ten English teachers in the school were active participants in the project and provided input into designing an appropriate programme and feedback on the implementation, including making necessary changes. The team held several meetings with parents to gain their insight into their children's learning and also to feed back the results of the project. The school principal was an active member of the team and also made many positive suggestions. Participating students evaluated lessons and activities and were invited to many introspective observations and suggestions on what activities and lessons they enjoyed and possible improvements.

In keeping with the second characteristic, not all stakeholders agreed, and we attempted to use critical feedback and the diversity of age, experience, culture and expertise as a valuable resource in the project. In keeping with the third characteristic, the project generated valuable and valid results, which were used to inform literacy programmes across the school and made available to similar schools in Hong Kong (see Firkins & Forey, 2006; Firkins, Forey & Sengupta, 2007). Finally, in keeping with the fourth characteristic, the project was focused on addressing a real pedagogical problem as well as a real-life issue, that is, how to address the literacy learning of low-proficiency students, many of whom had a learning disability (Firkins, 2004).

In addition to the four characteristics of generative enquiry identified by Greenwood and Levin (discussed above), we found that it is possible to identify more latent outcomes of the collaboration relationships, such as relationship forming, activity, development of programmes, and resource-sharing. These are outcomes that are often difficult to measure or clearly identify, yet clearly give the project cohesion. We refer to these outcomes as the "latent dimensions" of collaboration. The remainder of the paper focuses on discussing these less visible, yet highly important benefits of collaboration.

THE HONG KONG CONTEXT

It is important to introduce the setting to understand the processes we describe and the importance of fostering a dynamic, action research culture. A brief look at educational reform in Hong Kong helps to establish the context. The educational context of Hong Kong is characterised by continuous educational reforms, which frequently rely on overseas experts applying practices established in other educational contexts, which may be considerably different to the existing context of Hong Kong (see for example, Morris, 1995; Carless, 1997). Hong Kong school-teachers are continually faced with new policy initiatives. In the last decade, radical innovations have been introduced by policy-makers at a steady pace (see, for example, Hamp-Lyons, Hood, Sengupta, Curtis & Yan, 1999; Carless, 1997). However, as Morris (1995) suggests in the quote below, these initiatives are not always positive and have often been problematic.

The very limited success of a wide range of highly desirable innovations arises primarily from the failure to treat implementation issues as important in policy decisions....Consequently, teachers find themselves with policy initiatives that are not practical, as they do not take into account key variables such as the repertoire of teachers' skills, the resources available, the expectation of pupils and parents, and the requirement of public examinations. (Morris, 1995, p. 135; similar ideas are expressed by Luke, Freebody, Lau & Gopinathan, 2004)

It is our view that “parachuting” in experts and/or programmes and implementing piecemeal pedagogical policies without accounting for contextual differences may be a factor in the failure of educational reforms and for the minimal outcomes, despite an extensive resource investment by the authorities as well as by schools and teachers. Within such a context, as researchers, we are strongly committed to informing practice through research drawn from a broad range of sources. However, we argue in this paper and elsewhere that change, reform and improvement should occur in a pragmatic manner (see Firkins, Forey & Sengupta, 2007). Pragmatism seeks to link theory and praxis, the core of which is connected to action outcomes that involve manipulating material and social factors in a given context (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 147). We argue that cogenerative action research presents vast opportunities to link research with practice, which accounts for the context of actual practice – where teachers are involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation of the reforms.

Involving stakeholders such as parents and teachers, even in a small-scale school-based collaborative action research project, is not always as easy as it sounds and consequently may deter the initiation of this type of project. It requires a great deal of thoughtful planning, time for reflection and a concerted effort to engage all the actors. We started with the belief that the outcome of such an investment has long-term beneficial effects.

THE PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEM

At the time of conducting the research, the school in question was classified by the Hong Kong Education Manpower Bureau as a “Skills Opportunity School” (SOS), a term used to refer to a special-needs school. The university is charged with teacher education and offers programmes for pre-service and post-service teachers. The university has an established profile in education research.

The pedagogical problem identified by the project stakeholders was the development of literacy, specifically writing skills in low-proficiency language-learners and students with Learning Disabilities (LD). Our study therefore aimed to explore how a collaborative approach between a university and a school could improve the teaching of English literacy in a second language context to students who are Low-Proficiency Language-Learners or identified as having a LD (Wong, Chan & Firkins, 2006; Firkins & Forey, 2006). We defined low-proficient English-learners as students who experienced difficulty in English language learning as identified by their class teacher, school examination results, or through formal psychometric testing in the case of students with LD (see Firkins, 2004).

In addition, we aimed to develop and test a writing pedagogy, which could be used to develop each student's writing and be useful to teachers in the classroom, particularly in a Hong Kong educational context (see Wong, Chan & Firkins, 2006). The pedagogical aspects of this study are reported in depth by Firkins, Forey & Sengupta (2007). Good practice would suggest that students with LD should receive instruction in small classes, using specialised materials and highly structured pedagogies (Engelman & Carnine, 1982; Firkins, Forey & Sengaputa, 2007). However, the reality of the current Hong Kong education system means that there is limited, if any, special provision for LD students, class sizes are large and the system is examination-oriented with minimal accommodation for individual differences (see Lin, 2001; Firkins, 2004). In the project, all of the stakeholders, some not from Hong Kong, had considerable experience working within the Hong Kong educational context, carrying out research in this context and/or were local teachers immersed in the Hong Kong system. Each stakeholder had particular insights into what pedagogical approaches might "fit" within the school and be successful with LD students.

In the process of implementing this project, we realised that it was not simply the pedagogical approach that is likely to be responsible for change, but also the wider actions that initiate and drive change within the institutional framework. We therefore decided to explore the utility of the collaboration itself and the process of informal networking, with questions around data reflecting the collaborative discussion involving perspectives of all the stakeholders. Although there are many accounts of action research in "action" however, rarely do these accounts focus on how the stakeholders evaluate the research process and the outcomes achieved by the process itself (Moore, 2004).

In the remainder of the paper, we identify what we refer to as research networks, which are networks of stakeholders. With data from interviews conducted before and after the research as well as data collected throughout the process of the research (for example, research team meetings, e-mails exchanged, classroom observation) we show how the research was evaluated by all the stakeholders: school principal, teachers, students, parents and university lecturers. We concentrate on the key tensions, contradictions, commonalities and the way stakeholders' talk about the research and the outcome of the process. In presenting this evaluation, we are aware of the fact that such evaluations are rarely value-free and are influenced by a range of social and personal factors.

RESEARCH NETWORKS

In the literature (for instance. Thornley, Parker, Read & Eason, 2004; Greenwood & Levin, 1998), we identify a common belief that universities empower schools through partnership. However, these accounts "clean up" what is an evolving reality in order to present an intelligible version of what happened between the institutional partners, the outcomes actually achieved, and how the partnership contributed to achieving these outcomes (Howes, Frankham & Farrell, 2004). Erickson (1982) suggests that teachers and researchers need to see the context of a school through an anthropological lens, particularly when looking at pedagogical practice. Erickson proposes the division of context into both the macro-institutional and the micro-interpersonal.

The establishment of our project reveals a networked approach to cogenerative research, suggesting that the locus of innovation is found in the network rather than the individual stakeholders (Powell, Kput & Smith-Doerr, 1996; Coghlan, Coughlan & Brennan, 2004). Looking at our project from this perspective, collaboration attained potential institutional benefits only after significant informal engagement at the interpersonal level between each of the research networks to the point of establishing a cross-institutional research team and institutional ratification in the form of research funding and approval from each of the institutional administrations.

Collaboration can be seen as a process of incorporating several interrelated researcher networks, each initiated on the basis of some form of mutual interest. Collaborative enquiry can be characterised as the process of combining these networks together through common goals and objectives towards the creation of a possible research framework. In the case of our research, this was achieved through informal and formal contact between academics and teachers with common pedagogical interests. The networks through which our project was built can be seen as collaborative in the sense that they developed from a common interest in a particular educational problem, yet at the same time each stakeholder's network had essentially differing motivations. The networks were built over an eighteen-month period.

The initial network (N1) involved a research-active Assistant Professor and her post-graduate student conducting graduate research into the problems encountered by LD students within a second language-learning environment. The second network (N2) included a teacher from the school working with low-proficiency language-learners, who was initially brought into the network in a consultative capacity, therefore creating the project two months later. These two key networks gave birth to the idea of the collaborative research project in which a third Assistant Professor, with some expertise in action research was brought in, establishing a third network (N3) some four months after the initiation of (N1). The fourth network (N4) was established through the inclusion of the school principal and the English panel chair from a secondary school with a significant proportion of students identified with LD. who were interested in establishing a research project within their school some six months after the establishment of (N1). The fifth network included participating and other interested teachers (N5) some eight month later. At this point, it was decided to submit a proposal for a seed grant from the university to begin a small-scale, collaborative, action research project, which was successful some twelve months later. Finally, the sixth network constituted the participating students (N6) after the grant application was successful some fourteen months after establishing (N1). Finally, a part-time research assistant was employed (N7) some fifteen months after the initiation of N1. An eighth network can also be identified after the project began, with the inclusion of the participants' parents (N8), some eighteen months after the establishment of (N1). We found that the nexus of collaboration can be found within the process of building these networks, often through informal means.

Although it was rare for the whole cluster of network to meet together as a unified group, each network convened as necessary and communication flowed throughout the networks identified, for example, the school principal, participating teachers, the English panel chair and the research assistant represented. As collaboration was built

at the interpersonal level through the gathering of stakeholders, we suggested that stakeholders play a prominent role in the evaluation of the collaborative project.

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIPS OF COLLABORATION

We evaluated the collaborative aspects of the project using an unstructured interview technique and analysed the data using a grounded theory approach by coding and grouping the significant themes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this paper, we draw on data from nine 45-minute interviews. For the purposes of our analysis, we have divided the stakeholders in our project into two categories according to their affiliation. School-based stakeholders included the school Principal, the two English teachers, the fifteen students and parents. The university-based stakeholders included the two Assistant Professors. The research team conducted the interviews both prior to beginning the project to identify expectations, and at the end of the project to gauge each stakeholder's notion of outcomes. Prior to conducting the research, signed consent was sought from all involved – students, parent, teachers, researchers and the Principal.

Data were collected in both English as well as Cantonese, which is the mother tongue of the students, parents, principal and teacher involved in the project. Data collected in Cantonese were translated and transcribed into English. The interview data reported below does not show the name of the speaker and is simply indicated by a generic term such as “parent 1” or “student 2”. Collaboration and relationship-building emerged as a key theme within the stakeholder interviews. We hypothesised that establishing relationships was a latent aspect of the collaboration considered important by the stakeholders. We focus our discussion on this theme and support the issues identified using vignettes from the interview data, indicated as quotes.

The relational dimension

A key component of collaborative inquiry is the relational dimension between the stakeholders of the project as the building and sustaining of relationships are critical (Smith, 1988). From the relational dimension, we started with the belief that both the University and the School had equal opportunities to learn from and empower each other. At the university level we attempted to ensure that there was an institutional commitment to a direction that incorporated the four values outlined below.

1. *Accepting a broader than usual view of scholarship.* We believed that together with the teachers in the school that we would be able to gain significant insights within the realms of useful academic inquiry.
2. *Valuing conversation and inquiry-related teaching and learning.* We believed that we as academics, involved in teacher development, could benefit from a wider discussion of theoretical issues with practitioners.
3. *Acknowledging the importance of collaboration and involvement of the school.* We believed that it was very important for a tertiary institution to develop links with the community and be grounded in the application of pedagogic theory.
4. *Affirming mutuality and parity of authority.* All stakeholders' views, concerns, comments and input were seen to be as equitable as possible, while acknowledging the power differentials such as that which occurs between a parent to child, a principal and teachers and an assistant professor to a research

assistant. In addition a default reverence could be detected from teachers and parents towards the status of the university.

The power differential is indicated by one of the assistant professors, who draws attention to the teachers looking to her as an “expert” even though she wanted the teachers to “be the main initiators and decision makers” (Quote 1, below).

Quote 1: It is easy to consider action research in theory, but I found the actual doing of the research with teachers far more complex. The teachers kept looking to me as the expert, but I wanted the teachers to be the main initiators and decision-makers. I think it is difficult for universities to give up that they have all the knowledge or for schools and teachers to accept that their ideas are worthwhile and are also legitimate. (Assistant Professor 1)

The relationship is referred to by the research assistant (see Quote, below). The research assistant alludes to the differences in expertise and knowledge possessed by teachers as professionals and the university academics as teacher trainers, signalled by her statement “I am not a teacher.” For instance, “I have never had to control behaviour or motivate the students.” In addition, the research assistant refers to the tendency of the teachers to “defer decisions to the research assistant and university”, demonstrating a lack of confidence to make decisions on her own. What is key in terms of collaboration is the research assistant’s observation that “after I was also working in the classroom and running some sessions we worked together”, indicating that the research assistant only gained credibility in the eyes of the teachers after she worked directly with students.

Quote 2: I know a lot about research techniques and the literature, but I am not a teacher, I have never had to control behaviour or motivate the students. I don’t face these problems the teachers do, so we had to work together to implement the programme. It was hard until the teachers also made decisions. They expected me at first to put the programme together, but after I was also working in the classroom and running some sessions we worked together. (Research Assistant)

Similar commitments were needed at the school level and these commitments needed to incorporate the following four points we summarise below.

1. *Enable planning, both the logistics of running the programme and recruiting the participants.* This process required greater teacher time and support from the school psychologist and social worker (refer to Quote 3).
2. *Encourage participation by all English teachers.* This process involved the establishment of feedback mechanisms on the progress of the research.
3. *Receive support from the principal and school administration.* It would be impossible to continue without the support of the administration.
4. *Engage in a process of pedagogical change.* This involved the use of an action research design, where teachers both directly and indirectly could suggest and reflect on writing practice (refer to Quote 4).

Quote 3: This was valuable for us teachers because we never get to do research. It was different from ordinary teaching. It took time up but it counted towards our mandatory professional development hours. (Teacher 3)

Quote 4: The teachers we at first not happy, it seemed like extra work, but they started understanding action research and added more of their ideas. I think they liked the idea by the end and I notice they used many of the materials and ideas in their own classrooms. (Panel Chair)

The power differential and the working reality of the relationship between the collaborating institutions was also evident in the balance of control over activities, resources and outcome measures, all of which can be viewed as the resources of research. Differing measures of outcome used within the two collaborating institutions can impact on the relationship (Catelli, Padovano & Costello, 2000). From the University's institutional perspective, the principle outcome measures were the number of related: conferences, journal articles, funding grants awarded and the impact on other academic duties and courses. For instance, the research assistant refers to this by saying "this research has aided me to put together some ideas for my own post-graduate research project"(Quote 5) and confirmed by an Assistant Professor: "We have been able to write papers for both academic and professional journals as a result" (Quote 5, below). From the schools' perspective, improving students' marks in English, achieving curriculum change, writing reports to funding organisation and the amount of teacher time used were all key indicators of success. Furthermore, the Assistant Professor stated an outcome that was of benefit to teacher training: "I think the project is also good for us to feed into our teacher education programmes" indicating that collaborative action research of the type undertaken in this project can have latent benefits to teacher training programmes (Quote 6).

Quote 5: This research has aided me to put together some ideas for my own post-graduate research project. I have read literature that maybe I wouldn't have looked at. (Research Assistant).

Quote 6: We have presented findings at conferences in conjunction with teachers abroad and in Hong Kong. I think the project is also good for us to feed into our teacher education programmes. We have been able to write papers for both academic and professional journals as a result. (Assistant Professor 2)

Although research is the core activity of a university, this is not necessarily the case of the other collaborating institutions. The core activity of a school is pedagogical outcomes for students. O'Connor and Sharkey (2004) point out that there is a systemic problem when research is not seen as the core activity of daily practice, despite the rhetoric from schools and universities. The biggest obstacle was the heavy demands on teachers' and academics' time and the status of teacher research as a legitimate professional activity within schools and the perceived value of this type of research within university departments. However, there are also benefits, such as indicated in Quote 7 by Student 4, who suggested that the programme was interesting and increased interaction with his mother. In addition, the programme provided training for teachers in action research (Quote 8) and increased the range of ideas that could be incorporated in school programmes (Quote 9 and Quote 4 above). A significant benefit to the school was indicated by the head of the parent committee who observed that: "The university has a resource of knowledge and information we now have access to as a result of this project" (Quote 10). The school also found a way to encourage teachers to participate by accrediting hours as part of mandatory in-service training (refer to Quote 3, above).

Quote 7: I liked the activities and there were more people doing them with us. The activities were fun. I think it was good for me and my mother was interested and asked me what I had done. (Student 4)

Quote 8: These students are difficult and they also are stressed about learning English. It's important for the school to show parents and the board we are trying to do something. This project was something we could show, and I think my teachers received a lot of training in action research that we can carry on doing and the students come to the programme. (Principal)

Quote 9: I think we have many more resources and ideas that can be used in afterschool English club and also in our English programmes. We also have a better idea as to how to teach literacy skills to these weak students. (Teacher 2)

Quote 10: The university has a resource of knowledge and information we now have access to as a result of this project. The parents also can get some more information and hear more about how to help these students with learning problems with English and reading. (Head of Parent Committee)

From a pedagogical perspective, we needed to consider the extent to which the collaborative project would be different from programmes normally carried out by the school. Indeed this was a common question asked by both students as well as parents. This concern created a need to define and justify a space for pedagogic research. By defining this space explicitly as research, indicated by, "I think by saying it is research gave some kind of mystery or made it different" (Quote 11), we created the opportunity to compare, contrast and analyse the pedagogic practices introduced within the project and the general English language pedagogy of the Hong Kong classroom (see Quote 12). The division and explanation in the variation of the two pedagogic practices opened space for further investigation (see Wong, Chan & Firkins, 2006). For example in the regular English programme there is no space to consider a genre approach to writing, or to introduce methods of teaching more suited to students with learning problems. In addition, the action research allowed the school to develop this specialised area of pedagogy.

Quote 11: I think by saying it is research gave some kind of mystery or made it different. When we were carrying out our sessions, it was in a regular classroom and the teachers and students were the same. The only difference was me being there, helping, observing and running some sessions. (Research Assistant)

Quote 12: What we need to know is how will this project be different from what the school already offers to students and what will the students get from it. (Parent 11)

The actions undertaken in the research were the point of engagement for all the varying stakeholders and were focused on the design of the actual programme that was provided to the students as well as the research itself. Action was dependent on relationship establishment. Teacher 4 indicates how the programme was different from regular English classes and his/her own active part in its development (see Quote 14). Action included the teaching sessions with students, interaction with the research assistant, research team meetings and all features related to the planning and implementation of the project, including the development and production of materials which were used in the programme as well as extending to the collection and analysis

of data. The action dimension also involved the scheduling of intervention sessions with students and the collection of data, the videoing of teaching sessions and collection of interview data. Feedback to the stakeholders was part of the action dimension, as was the discussion of any problems, difficulties or changes (see Quote 14).

Quote 13: The sessions with students were different to our normal teaching, the students were focused on making things and then writing about how they made them. Speaking and writing were integrated, not separate as in our normal lessons. (Teacher 4)

Quote 14: The programme generated a lot of data, so I had to actively go to the school and interact with the teachers and students. I met with the research assistant every few days. The feedback sessions to teachers and parents I thought was very productive. (Assistant Professor 1)

REFLECTIONS ON THE COLLABORATION FROM THE DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

We were interested in how each stakeholder group assigned relative importance to each of the four dimensions of cogenerative collaboration discussed above. The Principal of the school expressed at the beginning of the project that he himself would be playing a supportive role through the project as “he’s not the expert” and “didn’t know much about the area of work”. He would rely on the expertise from the university and the English teachers at his school. When asked about his expectations for the project, he said he hoped several parties could benefit during the process of the project (refer to Quote 15, below).

Quote 15: I hope teachers can experience how a research project is carried out, [...] from the research findings, what kinds of methods we could use, and for students, I don’t expect them to have any improvement immediately, I hope they can be more motivated and through the collaboration with outsiders, they will learn how to appreciate the extra time the teachers spend in helping them. (School Principal)

The Principal reiterated in a later interview that he was not “looking for results” as he believed raising students’ interests and motivation to learn English was an important objective of the project, more important than improving examination results. In the context of Hong Kong, he was referring to need to counteract the exam-oriented culture of the Hong Kong education system (Lin, 2001). In evaluating the collaboration, the Principal also stated:

Quote 16: For the teachers they have had professional development and developed the basis of organising reading and writing for these students, they can cooperate with the university to work out appropriate exercises and activities. Furthermore, the working relationship has become closer between colleagues in the school. At the student level, it has increased their opportunities to read and write English. They also feel that the school is helping them and they treat this programme more seriously. (School Principal)

In the above observation (Quote 16), the Principal alludes to a benefit of collaboration identified by Smith (1998), that is, that the quality of teaching improves through

closer collegial relations – that it builds relationships within the teaching staff. This view can be situated across our four dimensions, particularly the relational dimension of collaboration. In addition, it was his view that the cogenerative research resulted in substantially more discussion and intervention in connection with a common group of students and provided opportunities for teachers to move beyond the often closed worlds of their own classrooms and resulted in considerable activity and action for these students. The Principal's support for this project gave the necessary institutional framework to carry forward the project. The principal's concerns also embraced the resource dimension, specifically related to the continued funding of the project and assistance from the university.

The second group of stakeholders was the parents of the school students. There was a general impression among teachers (and the Principal) that parents could provide only limited help to their children and they would not be very interested in a special research project. The English teachers at the school commented that teaching was the responsibility of the teacher and that parents were “working parents” with limited time. This is reflected in the Quote 17 below. The teacher suggests that parents have limited understanding of how to help their children who have a LD.

Quote 17: may not have the ability to teach the students because either they are not educated enough or they don't know the ways to teach LD children. (English Teacher 3)

Thus, parents were not seen or assumed to play an active role in the project. However, during the parent focus group meeting held at the early stage of the project, some parents shared their personal experience of supporting their children, for example, creating an English-speaking environment at home, playing computer games together and designing some word-games for the children. In addition, parents expressed a desire to be active in their child's learning by asking for advice concerning what they could do while their child was participating in the project and how they could support English language development. Parents as stakeholders were also central in identifying writing as an area of difficulty for students and a possible area of focus for the research (for example, Quote 18)

Quote 18. He's not afraid of speaking, if a native speaker talks with him, he still manages to answer yes or no or some sort of reply. If he doesn't know, he would say he doesn't know. But when it comes to writing, he definitely can't do it. (Parent 1)

Parents expressed what they hoped would be achieved through the research, for example, “I hope in this club, he can regain confidence and develop some interest in English.” Parents placed a high value on English, despite recognising that their children experienced difficulties in language learning (indicated in Quote 19).

Quote 19: I think it's important; my son's Chinese isn't too good either. Having good English will give him opportunities in developing his career. (Parent 3)

Parents also indicated that they attempted to help their child with their homework, but in most cases lacked the ability to do so (see Quote 21). However, a number of parents indicated how they attempted to find other ways to create an English environment at home, for instance, exposure to English television available in Hong Kong (Quote 20).

Quote 20: I have tried letting my child watch English television programmes, I found that he paid attention to what was said and he could understand it. The only programme he has problems with is news broadcast. (Parent 7)

Quote 21: There are a lot of difficult words, I don't even understand them myself, and the speed of talking is also fast. Actually, those cooking programmes are much better. (Parent 4)

Parents also suggested that the involvement of a university was beneficial, as they perceived that their child would receive more resources in terms of expertise and materials (refer to Quote 22).

Quote 22: I am happy that the university can help the school. My son said that they came each week and the activities were very interesting. He seemed to want to talk about this programme more than his regular English classes. (Parent 5)

Other parents also commented that they believed the project aided teacher and pedagogical development at the school (Quote 22, above). For example, one parent believed that because of the project teachers could get better help. "I think the university can help the children and teachers with materials and books" (Parent 2). The parents were very positive about the collaboration and action taken by the school. The benefits for the school and teachers could be clearly seen by the comments from their local community. The data indicated that parents were more focused on the resource and action dimensions of the collaborative relationship.

The third group of stakeholders were the students who participated in the action research. All students participating in the project had been diagnosed with a Severe LD. In order to obtain a more homogeneous group of subjects, a screening process was carried out to ensure that the participants did not have behavioural problems and that they were not classified as having "mental handicaps". Fifteen students aged between twelve and fifteen participated in the project. The main problems these students experienced, as noted by the Principal, the teachers and the parents were that:

1. Their short-term memory was very weak, resulting in a short attention span.
2. Their ability to think logically was impaired, and for students with dyslexia, extreme difficulties were identified with both reading and writing in Chinese and English.
3. Their ability to organise writing coherently and cohesively was weak.
4. Their motivation to learn and be involved in activities was poor.

These problems were expressed by parent 7 (Quote 23, below).

Quote 23: I think my child has not had any success since studying in primary school so he's not confident in his own learning. (Parent 7)

Though debilitated by their learning difficulties and learning experiences, in the context of the present study these students were seen as motivated learners. When asked what they expected to learn in the project, the students' comments could be summed up by the following quote from student 1:

Quote 24: I want to improve my English, [...] I hope I can read English books, [...] I want to speak better English. (Student 1)

It seemed that students perceived the project as one of the many English programmes available to them through the school, and the collaboration relationship with the university had little impact on the students' own views of the project (Quote 24). Parents also reported that in some cases their children would self-initiate strategies to improve their language learning, such as watch the evening news and weather on the English Television channel. Parents reported the actions they took to simulate an English environment within their largely Cantonese speaking homes. Generally, the views of the students and parents during their encounter with the research project were very positive and reflected a focus on the action dimension of the collaborative relationship.

Teachers represented the fourth group of stakeholders. Two teachers from the school were involved in the project, and one of the teachers is the co-author of this paper. Both teachers were responsible for conducting the teaching sessions of the project and one acted as the liaison between the school and the university. They met with the research team at regular intervals to plan and review the project. In addition, they reported back to the school on the progress of the project. Through collaboration with the university, these teachers hoped to be able to "discover new ideas" that could be used in teaching LD students, and that "the university staff could transfer knowledge and theories relating to action research and genre-based teaching" (Quote 25, English Teacher 1).

From the teachers' interview data, the findings suggest that the teachers found the collaborative experience extremely positive. The data suggests that the project opened a pedagogic space for development, re-introduced action research, and action research was seen as a positive model in their professional development. One of the English teacher's comments (Quote 26) sums up the feeling of both teachers:

Quote 26: I felt I was challenged to think of new ways and approaches in running the teaching sessions for students. I also felt I understand more about literacy and also research methods, which after university I haven't used that often. (English Teacher 2)

The English teachers had an opportunity to be apprenticed into the research process and also to contribute to the development and implementation of a writing theory for LD students (Quote 26, above). This is important, because rarely do teachers have the opportunity to learn the "trade" of research under the guidance of experienced researchers (Firkins & Wong, 2005). The collaboration of the University was not without its problems, as the teachers commented that the status of the University not only supported the project but also would be noticed should it be withdrawn (refer to Quote 27 and Quote 28).

Quote 27: When the University became less visible in the research process and more of the work was carried out "behind the scenes" the interest of other teachers and the school in continuing [the project] became a problem. The project became like a regular teaching session. Other teachers couldn't see the difference. (English Teacher 1)

Quote 28: The parents only saw the project as being worthwhile because of the University's involvement. So I think "status" had much to do with the support we received. I don't think we would have got such a good response without their [the University's] support and this might be a difficulty in undertaking similar projects in the future, without their support. (English Teacher 2)

The teachers' comments (Quote 27 and 28) draw attention to a significant challenge in the perception of school-based research. Teacher-based research does not have the same institutional status as mainstream education research and may not be supported either institutionally or with resources (Firkins & Wong, 2005; Gore & Gitlin, 2004). The teachers were focused on all four dimensions of the collaboration.

The Assistant Professors and the research assistant represent the fifth stakeholder group. The principal investigator and the co-investigator of the project (two of the co-authors of this paper) were two Assistant Professors in the English department of a university. They were seen by all the other stakeholders as experts in the disciplinary field and in research practice. They developed the theoretical framework in collaboration with the teachers, and provided theoretical input where needed, along with the logistical and research direction of the project. Both Assistant Professors commented on the beneficial effects of the way in which the project provided them with an "avenue to the classroom" and the "opportunity to revisit theories" from a practical perspective, as indicated in Quote 29 (below).

Quote 29: I got a chance to work with a real group of practitioners and understood the more practical concerns that I had overlooked as a university researcher. The practitioner perspective helped make this project situated in the realities of the school. I, as a teacher educator, did have school experience, but schools are changing rapidly and thus participation in this project allowed me to rethink my understanding as well as reflect on the challenges of teaching English within the lower-ability banding context. (Assistant Professor 2)

Again the Assistant Professors also expressed concerns about their involvement in the project. In general their concerns were more related to the resource dimension, that is, not having enough time to participate fully, the difficulties of distance and available meeting time between the team and the pressure to produce papers and reports. Both expressed their regret that they wished they had more time "to participate in a fuller manner in the study". In addition, for one Assistant Professor, the collaboration also raised questions and doubts about the relevance of theoretical models and the relevance of their application for the Hong Kong LD classrooms. In other words, across the dimension of action, theory and practice engaged with each other and accorded an opportunity for a full exploration of an applicable pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

Implicit in the data we find that the university involvement provided academic and institutional status to the project. This indicates some form of added value to teacher-initiated research. It is also clear that the knowledge gained by each of the stakeholders who were part of the process was a significant advantage of cogenerative research. Some key tensions were also evident. These were mainly related to time pressures and different "productivity measures", which are institutionally imposed on

the stakeholders. From the Principal's perspective, it was necessary to continue to build the profile of the school and attract students, and the research project proved to be a positive public relations initiative for teachers and parents. The parents were seemingly impressed by the proactive nature of the English teachers. The teachers were able to participate in professional development and improved collegial communication. The teachers themselves believed that participation in research created a pedagogic space for innovation, and that it was beneficial for their own professional development. The academic researchers were able to reflect on theoretical models and to gain access to educational practice at the "chalk-face". Moreover, the academics in collaboration with the teachers were involved in publishing papers and receiving further funding for research which, within the tertiary institutional context, is an important measure of research output. At the interpersonal level, the project grew and was maintained by the informal networks, which gave it its strength. Finally, as in all collaborative research, it was resource intensive, requiring a large commitment of time, energy and resources both physical and financial. It was therefore vulnerable to loss of funding.

In summary, our evaluation of the collaborative action research project supported our belief that both schools and universities empower each other and open pathways for learning through researching if the participation occurs across dimensions similar to the four we have identified. It also demonstrated that innovation, when grounded in stakeholders' perceptions of needs, is often subjectively assessed as effective. However, the interviews also showed that such a project is likely to have questionable value unless participants from both the school and the university are willing to invest a great deal of time and resources – time that is always in short supply and resources that need regular injection of hard-to-get funds.

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