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# **Disruptive, Responsive, and Empowering: School-University Partnerships Designed to Improve Student Learning Outcomes**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a school-university partnership project that aimed to bring together the diverse expertise of university researchers and school-based practitioners to address the problem of low literacy educational attainment levels in a cluster of schools in a disadvantaged region in Queensland. In particular, we focus here on the talk of school-based researchers about their work of supporting teachers in learning to gather and use data for their own professional development and student learning purposes. Contrary to the state government's current trend towards additional outside testing and the use of 'flying squads' of external experts to deal with 'problems' of low achievement levels in Queensland schools, our analysis suggests that the partnership work with teachers in schools is a complex process that involves the creation of long-term relationships that build on mutual trust and respect and achieve the disruption of teachers' everyday teaching routines by introducing learning opportunities that are flexible, responsive and, most importantly, give greater agency to the teachers. These suggestions will be elaborated in the paper by bringing examples from the researchers' work and by analysing their reflections.

## **Introduction**

In the current neo-liberal age of accountability, schools are under constant pressure to perform and improve (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). Increasing research evidence indicates that student learning is linked with staff learning (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2006) and that teacher professional learning may lead to significant school improvement, particularly in relation to improvements in students' levels of achievements. Research shows that teachers' professional capabilities (Skilbeck & Connell, 2005) and classroom instructional factors (Glasswell, Parr & McNaughton, 2003) play important role in raising and maintaining high student achievement levels also in schools in disadvantaged communities. Nevertheless, evidence also indicates that the issue may be more complex in these schools and several other factors, including school leadership (Hartley, 2004) influence the potential of schools to make a critical difference to student and school performance.

Earl and Timperley (2009) argue that enhancements in teaching quality are best achieved when teachers engage in professional learning conversations that are grounded in relevant evidence and when teachers are willing to use that evidence for their own professional growth. In addition to their work, other studies have highlighted the importance of skilful facilitators in creating conditions where critically reflective conversations on teaching can emerge and be sustained (see for example Lai & McNaughton, 2009; Lasky, Schaffer, & Hopkins, 2009; Little & Curry, 2009). Our discussion in this paper seeks to contribute to this literature that examines what it means for external agents to work with teachers in supporting them to develop skills for evidence-based learning conversations. In particular, we focus here on the talk of school-based researchers about

their work of supporting teachers in learning to gather and use data for their own professional development and student learning purposes.

Our discussion in this paper is divided into four sections. The first part of the paper places the reported study into the wider context of global and national testing regimes and the second part provides a brief overview of the partnership project. In the third part of the paper we concentrate on the work of the school-based researchers. First, we describe how researchers sought to engage teachers in activities of data gathering, reflection and goal setting, and then we turn our focus towards the reflections of school-based researchers about the ways they worked with teachers. In the concluding section of the paper, the researchers' reflections about building mutually respectful and trusting relationships and working in a responsive and flexible way with teachers will be linked back to the existing body of research literature on facilitating data-driven learning conversations.

## **Background to the Research Project**

Australia has followed the path of other countries such as the UK, US, and New Zealand in developing a program of high stakes national standardised testing. NAPLAN, National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy was introduced in 2008 to the Australian public by the then Federal Minister for Education, as an instrument capable of capturing valuable information across the whole national schooling system, which could then be analysed to ascertain why particular schools were performing better than others in delivering high quality learning outcomes. It was also suggested that NAPLAN data would identify which groups of students needed additional resources to improve learning outcomes (Exley & Singh, 2011).

The results of the first round of NAPLAN testing indicated that Queensland students, especially those at Years 3, 5 and 7, performed at significantly lower levels than students in any other state or territory, except for the Northern Territory, on nearly all aspects of the tests (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2008). While the Year 9 Queensland students almost reached the national average, the performance at Year 3 was significantly below the national average in all aspects of the test. The results also showed that “girls outperformed boys in most areas of literacy and that boys performed better in numeracy. Similarly students in non-government schools generally did better than government school students and non-A&TSI students achieved higher averages than A&TSI students” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2008). The Queensland response to the reportage of the first set of NAPLAN results was immediate and reactionary. According to Exley and Singh (2011: 246) the Queensland response included:

[i] commissioning a report ... on the best course for future action for improving Queensland's performance; [ii] mandating that students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 practise NAPLAN 2008 for the purpose of getting 'used to the new type of test' (Bligh, 2009); [iii] writing to parents/carers of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to encourage them to work through the online version of NAPLAN 2008 with their child (Bligh, 2009); and [iv] sending a 'flying squad of teachers and principals into the worst performing of its primary schools in an effort to lift numeracy and literacy standards in the state' (Fraser, 2009).

A long-term outcome of this initial response has been the introduction of a new teaching and learning audit process in Queensland state schools. The audits examine schools' performance in eight areas of teaching and learning: Improvement Agenda; Data Analysis; Learning Culture; Targeted Resources; Teaching Team; Curriculum Delivery; Differentiated Learning; and Effective Teaching, and have been described by Education Queensland as their “single-most effective school improvement tool” (Chilcott, Helbig & Vonow, 2012). In 2010 all 1257 state-run schools and outdoor education centres were audited, with 460 of those schools re-audited in 2011 (Chilcott et al., 2012.).

It is this push towards more testing and auditing and the introduction of outside experts who have the skills and tools to identify and fix the problems of low educational achievement in schools that we want to critically engage with in this paper by drawing on the work of school-based researchers. In contrast to this trend towards further external auditing and accountability, with additional outside testing regimes, the researchers we interviewed talked about the teachers' struggles in trying to use and make sense of increasing volumes of current data sets being produced in schools. Furthermore, their reflections suggest that partnership work with teachers in schools is a complex process that involves the creation of long-term relationships that build on mutual trust and respect and achieve the disruption of teachers' everyday teaching routines by introducing learning opportunities that are flexible, responsive and, most importantly, give greater agency to the teachers. In the remainder of the paper these suggestions will be further elaborated, but first, a general overview of the project will be provided.

## Overview of the Project

The research project reported in this paper emerged from concerns about the low educational achievement scores of students in the local region, affirmed by the NAPLAN results. The region where the 12 schools are located can be described as a place of low income and high unemployment and home to large concentrations of recent refugees, working class poor, non-English speaking migrants, and Indigenous and Pacific Islander peoples (Singh, 2006). Studies over the past twenty years have described the schools in the region as struggling to deal with seemingly intractable issues of low educational achievement (Singh, 2006).

The general aim of the partnership project was to bring together the diverse expertise of university researchers and school-based practitioners to address the problem of low literacy educational attainment levels in the local region. The specific aim of the research project was to build and test a model of schooling improvement based on a continual cycle of professional learning and innovation over a three-year period. To sustain change, the project's goal was to foster the development of an adaptive teaching force with specialised expertise in learning diagnosis and instructional design in each school and across the whole cluster of participating schools (Glasswell, Davies, Singh & McNaughton, 2010). Central to this mission was the collaborative work between university researchers, regional education administrators, school principals, lead literacy teachers, classroom based teachers, parents, students and key agents and agencies in the local community (fast food outlets, local library, religious groups).

Further discussion about the activities and outcomes of the project is provided elsewhere (Glasswell et al., 2010; Glasswell, Colwill & Singh, 2011). In this paper we concentrate on exploring the work undertaken by school-based researchers (SBR) in this partnership project. We use the term school-based researcher to describe the role taken by a cohort of five staff in the overall project. Given the context of concerted pressure on school principals, teachers and teacher educators to demonstrate improvements in student learning outcomes as evidenced by gains in NAPLAN test results, it was necessary for the project to assign a cohort of staff to each of the 12 schools. These staff were (i) experienced teacher practitioners; (ii) experienced in-service teacher educators; and (iii) skilled at classroom-based research. They were expected to spend considerable time in each of the schools working with teachers in data generation and analysis around student learning, and curriculum and pedagogic innovations. Each SBR worked with a cohort of approximately 17 teachers.

In what follows we give examples of the way school-based researchers worked with the school staff. First, we discuss some of the data gathering and analysis tools and activities that they used in order to give teachers the means to understand their students' and their own professional learning needs. We then complement these examples with researchers' reflections about the ways in which they sought to work with teachers. This part of the analysis builds on data from semi-structured

interviews that sought to understand how SBRs positioned themselves in relation to their partners in schools and how they thought about their role in this kind of partnership work.

## **Exploring the Work of School-Based Researchers**

The partnership work evolved through cycles of activity each consisting of three phases. During the first phase, the researchers were each assigned to several schools where they worked with teachers and principals to design fine-grained models of data collection and analysis about student learning. The second phase of the cycle concentrated on building teacher capacity for implementing teaching innovations. Here the activities of the researchers and teachers shifted from analysing and challenging existing routines to discussing professional development needs to design effective learning environments for students. This phase involved one-on-one meetings between the SBR and individual classroom teacher to analyse standardised diagnostic test as well as other data on student learning, and think through what instructional strategies might work to improve student learning. SBRs took responsibility for offering a collection of resources, and it was the teacher's responsibility to work out which resources could be adapted, modified to the needs of students and specific contexts. In addition, whole teams of teachers within a school met during breakfast meetings with the SBR to go through professional development activities. These breakfast meetings were collaboratively planned and designed by teachers and the SBR. In the final stage of the cycle the student achievement data and teacher professional development activities were linked, as the schools and teachers put in place and evaluated the effects of instructional innovations in literacy instruction they had designed with their partners. The completion of this third phase marked the beginning of the new cycle of the project.

## ***Disrupting Everyday Routines***

Each activity introduced by the research team aimed at challenging, disrupting and improving the schools' everyday classroom practices or pedagogic routines in order to improve student-learning outcomes. The data collection and analysis activities introduced by the researchers were disruptive, first, in that they challenged/contested the type of data generated by the national testing system, and the usefulness of this data to diagnose student learning gaps and therefore assist teachers to systematically design and deliver effective curriculum. Secondly, they were disruptive in that it placed ownership of data generation and analysis about classroom practices in the hands of teachers, rather than an outsider 'flying squad'.

One of the data collection tools introduced to the principals and lead literacy teachers by SBRs, was a classroom observation schedule, called Learning Walk (TeachScape, 2012). Learning Walks were conducted as a regular feature of professional engagement for the school's professional learning community. The key task of principals and lead literacy teachers using these observation schedules available on mobile devices such as iPad or iPhone was to gather data that the whole school community could use to reflect on curriculum, instruction, learners, and the classroom environment. Their role was to be data gatherers and initiators of discussion, rather than classroom critics. In this way they were 'custodians' of the data for the school community in that they would gather data in line with the community's goals for reflecting on classroom practices and that they would manage the collation of the data. Their job was not to present analyses and set goals, but to present the evidence for all to discuss and negotiate interpretations and future directions. The Learning Walks cycle was built to be iterative in that each round of data collection, reflection and goal setting informed subsequent data gathering, reflection and goal setting. In this way, teachers developed and controlled the long-term problem solving processes that were needed to improve school effectiveness from within.

In addition, schools used learning diagnostic instruments such as Tests of Reading Comprehension (ACER, 2003) three times each school year to gather information about students' individual learning needs. In the process of each round of data collection, teachers met individually with researchers to make sense of data, examine patterns in student achievement within their classes and consider opportunities for their own professional learning that might in turn lead to improvements in student learning outcomes (Glasswell et al., 2011). These face-to-face meetings between individual teachers and researchers became one of the central spaces of reflection created in the partnership for the schools' professional learning communities. Teachers also met together in year-level teams and as a whole school middle years' team, to engage with and make sense of data for all students in all classes. In addition, teachers met regularly to reflect on current literacy instruction and discuss innovative pedagogies that could lead to improvements in student learning. These professional learning activities were designed to develop each teacher's capacity as well as develop a team approach to solving problems in each school site (Glasswell et al., 2010). Unlike the 'flying squad' approach of decontextualized classroom audits and nationally administered high stakes literacy and numeracy tests, the data collection strategies used in the project were crucial to building a professional learning community.

All these activities aimed at disrupting teachers' everyday classroom practices, while also empowering them and teaching them new skills for data gathering and analysis. Researchers' reflections allow further unpacking how they sought to create these empowering disruptions in schools.

### ***Building Mutual Respect and Trust***

... it's coming in and saying I am a teacher just as you are a teacher, however, there's a pile of experiences and there's a pile of expertise that I bring to you today that I'd like you to have a listen to and that I'd like you to consider. (Rose<sup>1</sup>, school-based researcher)

All SBRs we interviewed talked about the need to foreground their identity and experience of being a teacher in order to work with classroom teachers in schools. When describing her relationship with the teachers Lisa said, that it had taken her six to 12 months to get to the point where teachers did not anymore think that in learning conversations they will be "*judged on how well I'm teaching the classes*" and that now their relationship is "*almost like a friendship, you know. So they trust me enough to be able to come and see me at an outside forum without any angst about their expression of anger or hurt*". Rose further suggested:

The fact that you come in with a badge that says I'm from [the University] and I'm working on [the project] doesn't really cut it with teachers. **They need to know who you are and they need to see your work and they need to have shared your narrative.** So when I go in and present and I do that professional development work, it provides the **opportunity for me to share my narrative as a practitioner.** [...] **First and foremost I'm a teacher** and I've continued to go back into the classroom and to work with them. [...] So now we're starting to build some of that familiarity that says yeah, okay, I'm willing to drop my guard a bit with Rose. **I know some of her story, now I'm prepared to share some of mine** and I might be ready to change my practice.

Julie also said that gaining teachers trust was the biggest challenge for her, while the biggest achievement was seeing "*the growth in teachers to actually be reflective of their teaching practice*"

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<sup>1</sup> All personal names have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

*and to be more open and willing and not actually take it as a negative criticism but to think okay, so this is what the data is showing me: that I have a need to do this in my teaching. How do I – what's the best way for me to address it? What strategies do I need?"*

All the researchers thus acknowledged that the first important step in their work with teachers was building a mutually trusting and respectful relationship that formed the basis for having reflective data-driven learning conversations. They all thus seemed to be saying that they had to build a common ground with teachers through something that was familiar to them and they felt comfortable with – their teacher identity and experience – in order to build a basis from which to introduce something different and unknown – student performance data and their abstract knowledge about how to use that data – to the situation. The new had to be embedded and linked to the familiar so that it would not seem threatening, strange and irrelevant and so that it could be taken seriously.

These accounts are not surprising given the punitive state context of ‘flying squads’ of audit teams to monitor classroom instruction, and media discourses blaming teachers for poor learning outcomes. Building trust in the partnership project took considerable time and energy, and the SBR were crucial to this work. They were positioned in the schools, rather than the university context, and spent considerable time getting to know teachers, learners, and the local school community context. Crucially the SBRs were not a ‘flying squad’ of university-based researchers, swooping in to collect data for academic papers without contributing anything back to the local school community. Instead, their aim was to empower teachers by showing them how to take ownership for data collection and analysis and for their own professional learning.

### ***Professional Dialogues, Innovative Designs***

... it's a two-way thing where sometimes they will say, well that's not going to work here or this. So it's not that I have a preconceived set of, say, researched derived outcomes. I put, I think coming back to what I perceive to be really important, which is to customise and to be responsive to what the teachers are saying. (Mary, school-based researcher)

Although researchers reported spending a significant amount of their time supporting the collection, analysis and usage of student performance data, they also acknowledged that the main aim of their work was to support teachers as they applied the ‘research findings’ to innovative ways of improving instructional practices. In their view their discussions with teachers about the data had to always link back to the classroom instruction and its improvement. In other words, if they were initially aiming to move from concrete routine classroom practices to understanding and using data, then their final aim was to return to the level of concrete solutions that the teachers could utilise in their classrooms.

The researchers also recognised that developing instructional innovations was the most complex part of their activities (Glasswell et al., 2011). They argued that the movement from data generation, analysis to rethinking, replanning curriculum and pedagogy meant that the discussions turned out to be sometimes difficult and uncomfortable both for teachers and for researchers. Building an atmosphere of trust and respect helped researchers to overcome some of the fears and worries the teachers had, but so did the usage of such strategies as ‘taking small steps’, ‘keeping it real’ and ‘responding to the needs’.

For example, Julie said, *“it's like with anything. You always start with the positive and then bring in the suggestions”*. Modelling and encouragement appeared to be the main techniques that she used, for *“all I need is one thing that I can say I really like what you're doing there. Why don't you go with that but try this as well and just see whether this will work for you?”* Lisa said that when

offering advice, she always tried to take the perspective of the classroom teacher, because: *“you need to be able to understand and articulate whatever research it is in relation to reading comprehension for the classroom teacher who is exceptionally busy and is not necessarily prioritising it in the same way that you're prioritising this topic”*. Rose said that she always tried to keep things as real and concrete as possible and when she really wanted teachers to have a handle on something, she got *“down and dirty”* with them. She also said that in her work *“it all depends on who it is that's sitting opposite you”* and explained that when she designed and delivered professional development in schools then *“the thing that's consistent is that we respond to need and that you work with schools where they're at, as opposed to working on a formula”*.

All these examples indicate that researchers had to be highly responsive, flexible and truly respect the knowledge and experience of the teachers in order to support their learning. That is, the knowledge about literacy that researchers introduced to the learning situation had to appropriately speak to the teachers' classroom knowledge and experience if it was to make any difference to their classroom practices. Researchers had to listen to the teachers and also rely on their own experiences as teachers to understand how new knowledge can be anchored to teachers' existing understandings and practices. They had to be able to translate their research knowledge to the language that was useable in teachers' everyday practice. But equally, they had to do more than just move from one type of knowledge to another. This was not simply a translation of research into practice; rather it depended on the SBRs and classroom teachers moving flexibly from data analysis to innovative design, and from innovative design to further data generation in a continuous and sustainable partnership.

The researchers' accounts thus once again highlight the need for empowering disruptions that are respectful of teachers' perspectives and give greater agency to them, instead of outside 'experts'. These accounts also highlight is the need to move away from 'one-size-fits-all' professional learning programmes to improve teaching practices and towards tailored and customised 'just-in-time' professional learning activities that are useful in specific schools and for specific teachers.

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have sought to contribute to the literature that emphasises the importance of evidence-based professional learning conversations in teacher professional learning and school improvement (Earl & Timperley, 2009). We have described the work of five school-based researchers working on a university-school partnership project, in an effort to understand what does it mean to support teachers in becoming reflective practitioners, capable of collecting and using data for their own professional development and to improve student learning and achievement in low socio-economic school communities.

We do not claim that the partnership project, or the SBR managed to lift literacy achievement levels in these schools to above the national average. Clearly, teachers' instructional work in classrooms is only one component of the 'complex puzzle' to challenging educational disadvantage. The most recent report of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2011: 191-192) still highlight the problem of educational disadvantage, indicating that:

[c]hildren from remote areas, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and children of Indigenous background have tended to perform less well on measures of educational achievement [...] (i) there are slightly more non-English language background students among the very lowest achievement bands, and (ii) students whose parents have not completed school and/or are not in paid employment face the greatest challenges, both in achieving the national minimum standards and in achieving higher levels.

What we have tried to illustrate in this paper, is that teachers can make a difference in disrupting educational disadvantage, through their collective effects of analysing student achievement data and designing instruction that matches students learning needs. Indeed, the cluster of schools involved in this partnership project was recognized for the significant gains in student learning achievement. We are not attributing these learning gains simply to the work of the SBR, or indeed the wider university-school partnership project. Clearly the schools in this cluster were involved in multiple projects and initiatives to bring about improvement. However, the principals, lead literacy teachers and classroom teachers involved in this project, did talk about the significant difference that this university-school partnership, and the work of SBR made to sustaining dialogue and discussion about student achievement data, instructional designs/pedagogy, and the application of research/theory.

Although we have been able to give only a limited insight into the partnership work of teachers and researchers in this short paper, our analysis does indicate that it takes considerable time and energy to introduce the practices of gathering and using data for student and teacher learning purposes into schools. As the researchers we spoke to suggested, growing volumes of data can seem rather threatening to teachers who do not necessarily have the time and skills for accessing and using it. Developing skills that allow reading data and linking it back to teachers' everyday teaching practices is thus crucial if the national testing programmes are to have any impact on student learning outcomes. Furthermore, as our analysis indicates, because the process of taking ownership for the data and using it for one's own learning can be rather challenging, it is best supported not by outside experts or 'flying squads' who pass by, but rather by those who take time, who care to become familiar and who really listen.

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