Teachers and Teaching

Creating and translating knowledge about teaching and learning in collaborative school-university research partnerships: an analysis of what is exchanged across the partnerships, by whom and how

Vivienne Baumfield \textsuperscript{a}; Marie Butterworth \textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} University of London, UK \textsuperscript{b} Heaton Manor School, UK

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Creating and translating knowledge about teaching and learning in collaborative school–university research partnerships: an analysis of what is exchanged across the partnerships, by whom and how

Vivienne Baumfielda* and Marie Butterworthb
aUniversity of London, UK;  bHeaton Manor School, UK

Whilst there is a growing body of literature on practitioner research and the role of collaborations and partnerships that include universities in that process, there are relatively few studies examining the role of the university in any depth. We reflect on 12 years of working in school–university collaborative research partnerships through an analysis of the exchanges between teachers and academics as documented by interviews, case studies and project reports. We draw upon a sample of 90 teachers in 51 schools covering all phases of compulsory schooling. Focusing on the exchanges between the university and partnership schools, we extend the idea of radical collegiality to encompass teacher to academic dialogue in the process of mutual transformation. We contribute to the development of greater conceptual clarity regarding school–university research partnerships and their potential to contribute to the creation and translation of knowledge about teaching and learning. The interplay of the project as the context, the role of enquiry and the development and use of tools by the participants is outlined and a model for understanding the dynamics of school–university partnerships proposed. We suggest that the project as a space- and time-limited context inclusive of partner institutions may have the scope to reconcile the tension between an impetus for exclusive bonding and the flexibility of bridging across structures in social networks. We conclude that the model of the exchanges between partners is fruitful in unravelling the relationship between theory and practice in the pursuit of knowledge about teaching and learning.

*Corresponding author. Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK. Email: v.baumfield@ioe.ac.uk

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The context for the development of school–university research partnerships

University researchers working collaboratively with practitioner researchers in schools in partnerships have been characterised as participating in a form of ‘precarious organisation’ in which marginality is both a source of strength and tension (Miller, 2001). We reflect on 12 years experience of working in collaborative partnerships in the UK within the framework of a School-Based Research Consortium funded by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), collaborative teacher research scholarships funded by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), a Department for Education and Skills Leading Edge partnership and a national school-based research project funded by the Campaign for Learning. Evidence to illustrate each case study is drawn from retrospective analysis of the products of each project including reports, teacher interviews and the individual research enquiries of 90 teachers in 51 schools covering all phases of compulsory schooling. Conceptual analysis of the form and content of the exchanges between teachers and academic researchers informs the discussion and extends the idea of radical collegiality (Fielding, 1999) to encompass teacher to academic dialogue and exchange. In so doing, we contribute to the development of greater conceptual clarity so that the potential of school–university research partnerships can be evaluated and understood.

Schools and education departments in universities have traditionally been connected through a number of activities which can be grouped around three broad areas: initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD), consultancy and research. However, in all three areas there has been a gradual shift in emphasis so that the focus is on partnership and collaboration rather than assuming that theoretical knowledge is exclusive to the university sector. Currently, there is support for a common vision of good professional development, which respects and builds on the knowledge and expertise that teachers already have and recognises their intellectual leadership capacity (Zeichner, 2003; Frost, 2005). Recent policy initiatives in England such as the TTA School Based Research Consortia (SBRC) initiative, Department for Education and Skills Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS) and the National College for School Leadership’s Networked Learning Communities (NLC) have been designed to promote closer integration of research and practice through teacher research. The impetus for these changes has been, predominantly, the need to raise standards in teaching and learning by promoting the closer integration of theory and practice coupled with the perception that university departments of education had failed to create and disseminate either usable knowledge or foster good practice (Hargreaves, 1996; Hillage et al., 1998).

The concept of the teacher researcher is not new; the importance of teachers engaging in pedagogical enquiry was advocated by Dewey (1904) at the beginning of the last century when he counselled that teachers should continue throughout their careers to reflect on practice and integrate their observations into emerging theories.
of pedagogy and so become both consumers and producers of knowledge. However, unlike the architects of some recent policy developments, Dewey did see a role for academic researchers in the facilitation of the integration of theory and practice by encouraging concentration on the processes of learning. Contemporary education researchers see teacher research, with its potential to redefine the knowledge base for teaching, as a challenge to the hegemony of the university and stress that teacher researchers will transform rather than simply add to what is already known about teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Furlong, 2000). Despite the early recognition and widespread agreement on the value of school-based teacher research, much remains to be done in understanding the nature of teachers’ experiences and the research contexts conducive to professional growth (Zeichner, 2003).

Whilst there is a growing body of literature on practitioner research and the role of collaborations and partnerships that include universities in that process, there are relatively few studies examining the role of the university in any depth despite the fact that published accounts of partnerships are, in the main, written by academics (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In a key study in the USA, Miller uses the analogy of an amoeba to convey the need for a school–university partnership to embody change and responsiveness whereby a nucleus of core values integrates the ‘organism’ in such a way that it can survive by having sufficient fluidity and flexibility to respond to changes in the environment whilst retaining its identity. She emphasises the importance of the development and use of tools of reflection and enquiry that guide educator conversation and action across the partnership so that one of the indicators of success is that:

A shared vocabulary for talking about teaching and learning is taking hold within both school and the university, and the need for dedicated time for collegial conversation, review and critique, and reflection is becoming acknowledged as well. (Miller, 2001, p. 117)

Focusing on practitioner enquiry in the university context has been described as ‘working the dialectic’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004) in that the enquiry of practitioners not only makes their own knowledge and practice problematic but also that of others as relationships to knowledge and action are challenged and transformed. Cochran-Smith and Lytle are alert to the criticisms of practitioner enquiry in terms of its status and validity but approach the issue as one of understanding how the relations of power in schools and universities are brought into question. As they point out, there is a link between stances on what counts as research and what counts as knowledge and who counts as a ‘knower’ that is not always explored:

This desire to locate our work at the intersection of two worlds deeply informed and continuously called into question our perspectives on collaboration and power, voice and representation, culture and difference, and the inter-relationship of inquiry, knowledge and practice. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004, p. 633)

In the UK, James and Worrall (2000) present a case study of a university–school partnership sustained over 10 years, in which they emphasise the organic growth of the joint activity which has encompassed all the types of university involvement iden-
tified by Day (1999) in his review of teacher professional development: client-centred degree programmes, non-accredited in-service programmes, collaborative action research and partnership consultancy. The activity in the partnership follows a progression from curriculum development to action research and then a focus on the student voice that is consistent with the experience of other partnerships and is suggestive of a specific trajectory for school-based research. The partnership demands a high level of flexibility and this requires a commitment to spending time on fostering and sustaining the personal relationships that enable the partnership to prosper:

Negotiation was ... essential and depended crucially on mutual understanding of different needs and purposes, and willingness to give and take criticism as part of the development process. Possibly this kind of open relationship, which is inevitably personal as well as professional, can only be achieved over a considerable period of time. (James & Worrall, 2000, p. 95)

The tension from the university perspective is articulated in the closing question posed by James and Worrall; investing time in the development of the partnership is personally and professionally rewarding for the individuals involved but the cost may be too high if the resulting activity does not impact positively on the key performance indicator for HEI staff in the UK, which is research as judged by the academic community through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Central to this concern is the need to continue the debate regarding forms of knowledge within the different constituencies and across the partnership; significant contributions to this debate in the UK context have been made in advance of the next round of assessment of research in education (Furlong & Oancea, 2005) and in a special issue of the Cambridge Journal of Education (Brown, 2005; McIntyre, 2005; Ruthven, 2005).

Concurrent research in the UK (Baumfield, 2001; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2004) emphasises that if university–school research partnerships are to be viable then there have to be mutual benefits, reciprocity and a genuine coalition of interest. Whilst this is an obvious statement to make, it describes a situation that is difficult to achieve given the protean quality of partnership and the fact that amongst the partners there will be different understandings of research, its purpose and role, and not necessarily any single shared understanding of the concept of a school–university research partnership. McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins (2004) have outlined six models of the school–university partnership whilst acknowledging that the reality is in practice both messier and richer than any typology allows. In each model, the focus and scale of the research in school is different and consequently the demands made on the university and the nature of their role shifts. The typology identifies key conditions and actions for useful school–university partnerships including the management of time as a resource, the central importance of relationships and roles based on trust, the recognition of issues around ownership and accountability. They conclude by acknowledging that some fundamental shifts and changes in the structures, roles and relationships of both universities and schools are demanded.

Partnerships, collaborations and networks are popular with policy makers as they can be a means of delivering more with less by making better use of existing
resources and adding value by bringing together complementary services; they can also foster innovation and synergy and be emancipatory in the formation of new relationships and systems of working. However, as a recent study of partnership in the public sector in the UK highlights (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998) tensions arise where there is a lack of common purpose and where questions of who has power, who gains and who loses are left unanswered or even unasked. The key challenge for partnerships lies in managing the interaction of the different modes of governance, what has been described as the ‘irregular heartbeat’ of a partnership organisation, which at some points will generate competition and at other points collaboration, in the service of public interest. This article examines what was exchanged within each partnership, by whom and how in order to chart the progress of school–university research collaborations towards the development of mutuality, reciprocity and a coalition of interest. We draw upon the archived data in order to conduct a retrospective analysis of documentation across the projects and it is not possible to give all the details of the evidence collected within each partnership in this article; further details can be found in the project reports and articles which are included in the references.

Vignettes of school–university partnerships illustrating what is exchanged, by whom and how

The North East School Based Research Consortium (NESBRC)

The North East School Based Research Consortium (NESBRC) was one of four national consortia funded by the TTA and the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT). The goals of the consortium initiative were (1) to encourage teachers to engage both in research and with research and evidence about students’ achievements; (2) to increase the capacity for high-quality, teacher-focused classroom research by supporting teacher involvement in the development of research proposals for external funding and (3) to develop long-term, medium-scale data sets to provide evidence about what teachers and pupils do and how that affects pupils’ achievement (Cordingley & Bell, 2002). The terms of the initiative required consortia to be made up of six schools, a Local Education Authority (LEA) and a Higher Education Institution (HEI) partner. In addition, each consortium had a designated TTA link officer. The focus of the projects within each consortium, however, was flexible and negotiated between the participants prior to submitting the bid for funding. The initiative was funded for three years from 1997 to 2000. The roots of the consortia can be traced back to the tradition of teacher research championed by Lawrence Stenhouse in the UK (Stenhouse, 1975) although this was not necessarily explicitly recognised by its promoters and built upon a previous TTA initiative to fund Teacher Research Grants (Cordingley, 1997). However, the initiative was located within a heated national debate questioning the quality and relevance of much existing academic education research. The TTA was linked to controversial contributions to this debate and was proactive in campaigning for teacher research as part of a research
The NESBRC consisted of six secondary schools, three LEA partners (because of the geographical spread of the schools) and the University of Newcastle; our focus was the investigation of the impact of thinking skills approaches in the classroom (Baumfield, 2001). Each school appointed a teacher to act as school research coordinator to oversee the research into the impact of thinking skills in each school and worked closely in partnership with a member of the university who acted as a critical friend during the production of the annual case study report. The university-based staff were also ITE tutors and so had close links with the schools in this capacity. Cross-consortium meetings were held once per term and there was an annual residential; in addition, schools hosted occasional events based on key research themes as they emerged, such as cross-subject comparisons of classroom talk.

Exploring the form and content of the exchanges that took place in the consortium by examining the documentary record of meetings, case study reports and interviews contribute to our understanding of distributed leadership for research in the development of professional learning communities at the level of practice (Baumfield, 2001; Baumfield & Butterworth, 2005a).

If we begin with the more tangible exchanges and focus first on what the schools received from the university, analysis of the minutes of meetings and the field notes of the university critical friend indicate that promoting links with other schools and support for developing efficient networks is prominent. Universities have a profile across a region and academic staff develop national and international links with schools either directly or through contact with other academics and their networks of schools enables them to make connections and facilitate contact between practitioners. Encouragement for practitioners to move beyond their own school context was also facilitated by the university through promoting attendance at national and international conferences and access to relevant academic publications. The fact that the key university links were with researchers who were ITE enabled existing relationships with schools to be exploited. The initial introduction to the thinking skills pedagogical strategies and their underlying rationale was from the university to the schools via workshops and publications aimed at a professional audience; however, the action research carried out by teachers in schools required the refining of strategies in specific contexts and so formed an exchange from the schools to the university. The development of new strategies through the subject networks aligned to the consortium became a series of mutual exchanges in meetings and led to new publications co-authored by university staff and teachers and in some instances by teachers independently (Butterworth & O’Connor, 2005). Initially, exchanges in which practitioners in school informed university staff were primarily concerned with the knowledge of what has been described as the ‘texture of what happens in schools’ (Baumfield & McLaughlin, 2006).

Aspects that whilst tangible are less easily quantified, include evidence from the consortium of a shift in the focus of attention for practitioners from teaching to learning and whilst this began with the university partner taking the initiative in the
workshops and in designing the pro-forma for writing up the classroom-based research, as the project case studies developed the data produced by the schools became the vehicle for mutual exchanges of perspectives and interpretations that became increasingly robust as the relationships between the partners in the consortium were established and trust developed. Agendas and notes from cross-school workshops and the annual residential also illustrate this gradual shift in focus. The sharing of perspectives was further enhanced by joint presentations at conferences where the emerging understanding of the consortium members was calibrated against the responses of peers from the wider practitioner and research communities. Finally, we also find teachers reporting positively on the affective and conative aspects of being involved in the consortium in their annual case studies and in interviews conducted by a research associate not connected to the project and the external evaluators. Not only do participants comment on their increased self-confidence but they also refer to their enthusiasm for and enjoyment of teaching and learning and indeed this forms the core of the compelling idea that underpinned the collaboration (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). It is driven by the increased access to pupils’ feedback resulting from the use of the pedagogical tools (Baumfield, 2006) and results from the mutual exchanges that form the co-enquiry of teachers and university researchers. The external evaluation of the TTA initiative concluded:

In practice the Programme created an environment in which it was possible to develop new research relationships across a range of partners, rather than merely transfer the locus of research (from universities) to schools. (Simons et al., 2003, p. 350)

**National Union of Teachers (NUT) teacher research scheme**

In collaboration with the University of Newcastle, the NUT Professional Development Programme offered scholarships to teachers from primary and secondary schools across the country working in pairs to investigate the implementation of thinking skills in the classroom. The scholarship programme was, for the university, the deliberate scaling up of the work of the NESBRC to see if the benefits identified in that project could be replicated through a more dispersed model embedded within the culture of CPD rather than within an externally funded research project. Thinking skills as a field of enquiry was an attractive option for the NUT as it had the advantage of being an area considered not to entail a deficit model of existing pedagogy. Such a focus enabled teachers to investigate the aspects of their professional practice in classrooms and to explore the implications of research findings by critically evaluating their claims through their teaching (Stainton & Bangs, 2001). Advice and support was provided by phone, email and fax during the research phases between seminar by the university, local Union staff and after the first year, mentor support was also provided by teachers who had successfully completed scholarships. Participants interviewed some time after they had completed a scholarship identified a number of positive outcomes for their own professional development: they had extended and developed their teaching skills, particularly their pedagogical content knowledge (Schulman, 1986); improved retention in that teachers who had been on
the verge of resigning were now more motivated; new opportunities within school and across schools to work with colleagues and lead in-service education (INSET) sessions; and promotion (Baumfield et al., 2002). The case studies completed by each cohort of teacher researchers gave evidence of the focus on thinking skills providing powerful pedagogical strategies (Leat & Higgins, 2002) seen to be catalytic and supportive of changes in classroom practice. As such, they exemplify a shift in the relationship between research and practice as identified in the school improvement literature (Hill, 1998).

Analysis of the interviews along with the documentary record of email exchanges, face-to-face meetings and the final case studies indicates that direction of the flow of exchanges was mostly from the university to the schools and focused around guidance on research methods as the university scaffolded the process of enquiry and to a significant degree that support took the form of reassurance that the enquiry could and would yield valuable outcomes. The university also fulfilled the role of mediator between the particular context of the teacher and the wider research field. From the teachers the university gained information about how the thinking skills strategies were deployed and the impact they had across phases of education and in different school contexts. Mutuality in the exchanges within this initiative was in the area of accreditation and the development of understanding of the role of teachers and the university in CPD. Interestingly, this is an example of mutuality being promoted via a mechanism that might be supposed to be more likely to confirm the hegemony of the university over the teachers’ interests. However, the seeking of accreditation by the teachers for their school-based research led to radical changes in the structure of masters’ provision in the development of the Practitioner Enquiry M.Ed. and new forms of assessment; an outcome that has been found in other forms of school–university partnership (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Baumfield & McLaughlin, 2006).

The Learning to Learn (L2L) project

The Learning to Learn Phase 3 Evaluation is a research project funded through the Campaign for Learning and facilitated by the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT) at Newcastle University. (Unlike the other examples included as vignettes, L2L is at the time of writing not yet concluded although it is in its final year.) Teachers in 33 primary and secondary schools in three Local Education Authorities in England are involved in the project, representing a wide range of socio-economic contexts across England. All of the schools have implemented interventions under the umbrella term of Learning to Learn (L2L); a term that draws on ideas of metacognition, thinking skills, self-regulation, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Within the project teachers are completing cycles of action research to investigate innovation under the heading of learning to learn. The university supports and facilitates the research through providing research training, mediating tools and feedback structures across the distributed network. Teachers were invited to explore the different approaches they understood as being encapsulated by the Learning to Learn heading within their school or classroom. This introduces a level of unpredictability for the university
An analysis of what is exchanged across the partnerships

researcher; however, this transfer of the locus of control regarding the focus and direction of the research to the teachers is paramount in achieving the project aims (Higgins & Leat, 2000) and is also overtly linked to a model in which teachers adopt cultural tools (Boreham & Morgan, 2004) linked to research and embed them within their practice of learning and teaching. University support is provided in the first instance by a senior research associate in the role of project manager and through a password-protected website dedicated to the project, each school also has a link to a member of CfLaT who acts as a critical friend. The case study reports completed each year by the schools also serve as an important means of exchange across the partnership. Face-to-face meetings take place via the regional INSET days and the annual residential bringing all the participants together. The website is used to gather data using online data collection tools and all the participants have been interviewed at the end of each year; we have also been developing a range of semiotic tools (Baumfield, in preparation) to support and investigate the processes of teacher enquiry.

The university has been instrumental in framing the nature of the support for the teacher research and the main flow of the exchange has been in providing research tools and advice in the process of constructing the case studies. However, as the project progresses we can see that the exchanges become more iterative as the process of enquiry develops and teacher confidence grows. Teachers report that the role of the university is critical in helping to keep the enquiries on track and in providing clarity but they do not regard university staff as the key decision makers in the project (Wall et al., in preparation). However, it is still possible to see differences in orientation with schools providing rich localised information about the school context and the university making the connections to the wider world through the links with relevant research and publication (although there have been some joint publications of case studies in academic and professional journals).

Leading Edge Action Research Partnership

The Leading Edge Action Research Partnership (LEARP) involves seven secondary schools in three LEAs in the northeast of England and covers a wide geographical area. Leading Edge Partnerships are a scheme set up by the Innovations Unit of the Department for Education and Skills to:

... provide capacity for practitioners to work together in order to tackle some of the more intractable challenges facing the educational system in the drive to raise standards. (http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/leadingedge/)

Funding for distribution across the partnership of an agreed programme of activity is awarded to a school that fulfils certain performance measurements and is designated as the leading school. The focus of the activity is designated as being on ‘locally determined learning challenges’ and there is a particular focus on partnering schools struggling to raise standards and working in areas of social deprivation. LEARP aimed to form a learning community around three strands of research and development activity:
Leadership research—essentially to explore the conditions, culture, systems and support necessary to create enquiry-based learning communities and organised around the question ‘What is best practice in developing and sustaining a learning community in a school?’

Teacher research—focused on enquiry into different aspects of teaching practice and impact upon learning, with the aim of learning about pedagogy as well as research processes. This strand was to look at the question ‘What is the impact of innovative approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom?’

Student research—in principle, working to the same priorities as teacher research but from the student perspective and organised around the question ‘What helps us to learn in school?’

It was intended that the strands of research would be pursued within and across schools so that, in time, a research and development ‘tartan’ was created. Schools would identify the particular projects within the strands in line with the fundamental principle of the partnership that any activity was to be driven by the real interests of the participants. The commitment was that each participating school would contribute to the learning community through the research strands; how they would do this would vary from school to school and was likely to shift during the life of the project. We had learned in the NESBRC that if development was to be sustainable it needed to take account of the opportunities and constraints of different contexts and rates of development (Baumfield & McGrane, 2001; Temperley & McGrane, 2005). The project funded a link person in each school and in the university and set up a website for the sharing of information and some online data-gathering.

In the first year of LEARP, there was an active teacher research group in which it was possible to see the development of critical discourse (Frost et al., 2000) with the university acting as a convenor and facilitator of the group. As with the other examples discussed here, there was an exchange of expertise and insight in which the university provided a structured context for the enquiries and links to the wider research context and literature and the teachers gave insight into the key issues and concerns from the perspective of a practitioner. However, it proved difficult for this cohort of teachers to maintain this strand as a consequence of the different levels of experience and awareness within their school contexts, and whilst teacher research continued it was not co-ordinated and the exchange of tools and perspectives from the university to the schools and from the schools to the university that developed in other projects was impeded, although this did happen more informally between teachers whenever circumstances allowed. The leadership strand did not develop an enquiry focus and there is no record of any substantive interaction or exchange between this group and the university. Student research proved to be the most productive strand and it is here that there was the most active series of exchanges between schools but also between the schools and the university who provided tools for the enquiry and trained the students in research methods. There are a number of possible reasons for this being the most successful aspect of LEARP not least of which is the interest for teachers in students, their learning and the fact that teachers are
attuned to student feedback which is so central to their lives as practitioners (Baumfield & Butterworth, 2005). It may also reflect the current emphasis on student voice in the professional literature and government policy and which is very much evident in documentation from the school inspection service OfSTED as was suggested by a respondent in a teacher interview.

Summary

In the case of the NESBRC and the student research strand of LEARP, the factors we have come to see as important in school–university partnerships coalesced as the project as a context, the enquiry and the tools to instigate and support enquiry came together and created the conditions for co-learning. Table 1 represents our estimation of the relative strength of these factors in each of the vignettes examined.

Creating the conditions for co-learning: contexts, enquiry and tools

Whilst all of the partnerships involved collaborative enquiry between pairs or groups of teachers within or across schools, not all of the partnerships were equally productive of co-enquiry between the university and the school-based researchers. We think that the critical factor here is the extent to which the project was framed in such a way as to pose questions that were of mutual interest to all participants and where there was sufficient uncertainty or ambiguity to instigate the need to exchange ideas and interpretations between the different constituencies. Interestingly, there would appear to be an element of compensation in play with regard to the kinds of tools that are developed within the project and particularly by the university partners so that enquiry is framed either by a focus on pedagogy or on research. Future analysis of the roles of partners in school–university partnerships might benefit from exploring the dynamics in terms of Bernstein’s concept of classification and framing processes but we are not able to take that analysis further at this stage (Sadovnik, 1991). Where

Table 1. Creating and translating knowledge about teaching and learning in collaborative school–university research partnerships

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there is evidence of emerging mutuality it would seem that the distinction between tools for pedagogy and tools for research recedes as this dichotomy is challenged by the development of the shared intent in a way that Dewey would have anticipated. Each of the projects outlined in the vignettes had positive outcomes and this raises questions regarding the extent to which the development of mutuality is a necessary or desirable condition.

Analysis of teacher perceptions of the role of the university drawn from the accounts of collaborative school–university research partnerships indicates that they value the access to research experience, the opportunity to make links with other practitioners and the prestige of working with a university. The positive effects on teachers’ sense of agency are also conveyed in their accounts and there is evidence that this is sustained beyond the life of the project (Baumfield & Butterworth, 2005). However, there are indications that the university could be cast in the role of serving the learning and development of teachers without necessarily accruing the benefits concomitant with the establishing of a coalition of interest and participation in collegial conversation, which Miller (2001) considers to be an indicator of success for school–university collaborations. In the vignettes of partnerships, we can see different degrees of mutuality being achieved and we suggest that it is in the coming together of the project as a context, the focus of the enquiry and the development and use of tools that the key to understanding the differences lies. Situations, such as the NUT research scheme, in which the project context is weak or where the impetus for shared enquiry and use of tools is not strong, such as the leadership and teacher research strands of the LEARP, are less productive of mutuality than those where affordance for the development of integration is stronger. It is when mutuality in the exchanges is strongest that the process of co-enquiry and co-learning beneficial for the university as a partner is most evident. In our reflections on the nature of the school–university partnerships in which we have been involved over the last 12 years, we have come to think of the collaboration as a process of learning both from each other across the institutional boundaries but also together within the context of the project which forms the space for our joint activity.

Figure 1 is the representation of our collaboration and the exchanges that we think take place within it; this version is a snap-shot in time and reflects our current thinking. It serves as a semiotic tool for understanding within an iterative process of interpretation in which both university and school-based colleagues are participants and as such will continue to develop. It has been suggested (Wall & Hall, 2005) that the process of learning in school–university partnerships takes place across a permeable membrane and this leads to the question: what causes the movement across it and if it is analogous to osmosis, how are the areas of concentration formed and how do they change? We would suggest that it is the enquiry that drives the process; as problems are posed and solutions sought then expertise is located in different people and in different places within the partnership. Equity lies in the mutual interest created by the project context which sets conditions, creates opportunities and limitations to which all the partners are subject. Tools can form both the catalyst for enquiry and
also the means of acting upon and interacting with the situation in order to find an answer and a warrant for further action and enquiry.

**Conclusion**

Through this retrospective analysis of the nature of the exchanges between the partners in school–university collaborative research partnerships, we have constructed a model for understanding the dynamics of the interplay between the project context, tools and the enquiry process. We suggest that the state of ambiguity as new roles and relationships are negotiated is an essential stage in the development of genuine mutuality when working in school–university partnerships and individual participants may be more or less comfortable with this situation. The different strategies for dealing with this can be interpreted in terms of seeking to work in a way that promotes bridging across the different points of contact and activity or working towards bonding participants together. Literature on social networks (Putnam, 2000; Thompson, 2003) categorises bridging as a form of activity in which the ties are weak and the aim is to be inclusive through accommodating broader identities and the wider diffusion of ideas; such networks support innovation. Bonding, on the other hand, seeks stronger ties and a closer identity which leads to more exclusivity and whilst providing
solidarity requires specific reciprocity. The project as a space- and time-limited context inclusive of partner institutions may have the scope to reconcile both aspects of this dynamic so that coherence need not limit change.

The tendency to consider collaboration and partnerships for the creation and translation of knowledge as unequivocally valuable and commendable has been challenged recently (Orland-Barak & Tillema, 2006). Although Orland-Barak and Tillema are focusing on communities of teachers predominantly as opposed to school–university partnerships, they pose four questions that are relevant to our particular context. The first question is deceptively simple, ‘Has learning been the result of working together?’ It is a timely reminder that collaboration may have benefits but need not necessarily create appropriate conditions for learning, and they go on to identify three conditions that they consider necessary for knowledge production: shared understanding of the problem; a willingness to change one’s perspective; a commitment to participate in the dynamics of the group. The model presented in Figure 1 seeks to demonstrate how all of those characteristics can be met by a school–university partnership based on enquiry, which is driven by learning so that,

Learning, ... , was not a matter of sharing relevant academic knowledge but rather of reciprocal exchange of ideas and practices brought about by participants’ willingness to be self-critical about what the group was creating. (Orland-Barak & Tillema, 2006, p. 6)

The second question posed addresses the issue of whether collaboration in a project can create adequate opportunities for learning in the workplace. We have emphasised the importance of the project context which can break down the barriers between institutions but at the same time this may not readily produce outcomes that contribute directly to the everyday work context of participants (Kelleher, 2003). Our experience endorses that of the initiatives reviewed by Orland-Barak and Tillema by stressing the importance of shared intent and common interest in enquiry and the explication of beliefs within a critical community. It also means equal weight should be given to the translation of knowledge as to activities designed to create new knowledge. If this is achieved, then the third question, Is it local or distributed knowledge?, can be answered by denying the dichotomy as contextualised knowledge is articulated across the community. Perhaps the most pertinent and challenging question for our particular circumstances is the final one: how would reciprocity and mutuality be of help in knowledge construction? We have stressed mutuality as being essential if the university partner is to benefit fully, but Orland-Barak and Tillema remind us that it may be both a source of strength and of weakness, or at least that striving for mutuality could result in superficial compliance.

Whilst we believe this model to be based on a pragmatic epistemology (Dewey, 1904, 1910; Biesta & Burbules, 2003) and so fruitful in unravelling the relationship between theory and practice in the pursuit of knowledge about teaching and learning in partnership, much still remains to be examined and understood regarding the relationships between the factors, their valency and the dynamics of school–university partnerships.
Notes on contributors

Vivienne Baumfield is Reader in Pedagogy at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Marie Butterworth, a deputy headteacher with responsibility for continuing professional development, has worked with Vivienne Baumfield for a number of years and they share an interest in the role of enquiry in professional learning.

References


An analysis of what is exchanged across the partnerships