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Supporting action research/learning in schools through academic partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This paper details a study tracking three academics as they worked as partners to 11 schools undertaking the NSW Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) program through a school based action research/learning approach aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. Action research/learning is a popular strategy used by teachers and schools to develop insights and understandings to make their work more professional and improve their teaching. It has the potential to empower teachers and lead to changes in teaching practice and school reform (Ewing, 2004). Throughout the project the academic partners conducted their own action research study as a means of recording this process from both their and the teachers' perspective with the aim of analysing the impact of their role on the evolution, progress and outcomes of the projects. This paper uses data collected from a questionnaire which was administered to teachers pre and post projects and personal reflective journals completed by the three academic partners throughout the duration of the projects. Results indicated the outcomes for the academics were collaborative skills, self efficacy and a sense of achievement through the relationships and research skills developed in the school-based settings and with colleagues. The schools cited specialist knowledge, strategies and resources together with the leadership provided by the academic partners as vital to the success of the school projects and professional development achieved. Limitations encountered will also be discussed.

BACKGROUND

The study, described in this paper, concerns a group of three academics from a large urban university who were invited by the NSW Department of Education & Training (DET) to act as academic partners to a group of schools who were funded to undertake QTAL program projects. The NSW Quality Teaching model had been released in the previous year with information sessions relating to the rationale, structure and use in school and classrooms provided to teachers in all government schools. The role of the academics was to support the school identified and nationally funded projects aimed at assisting the implementation of the Quality Teaching model in individual school and classroom settings.

It has long been accepted that the quality of education not only depends on the content of systems, school programs and infrastructure provided to support them but equally important is the quality of the teaching which occurs in the classrooms (Rowe & Rowe, 2002). Over the past years international studies into school effectiveness have tended to focus on the 'impact administrative and social organisational features of schools have on how teachers conduct their work and how they teach while identifying that teachers' pedagogical strategies influence students' learning' (Rowe, 2004, p.6). Australian studies have highlighted that "teaching is the key" (Zbar, 2003, p.218) and the main factor that makes a difference in schools is the teaching that occurs in each classroom (Ingvarson, 2001, 2002, 2003; Rowe, 2003).

One of the important factors in this quest for quality teaching in our schools and the enhanced student learning outcomes and improvements in educational provision delivered, is the need for “teacher-capacity building” which is providing the skills to continue to develop and improve via both planned professional learning and collaborative support for teachers (Rowe, 2003, 2004, 2005). The Australian Government has taken on this challenge and developed an approach titled *Teachers for the Twenty-First Century Initiative* which is aimed at improving teacher quality and increasing the number of highly effective Australian schools to maximise student learning outcomes. The result has been the federally funded Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme (AGQTP).

In NSW Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) initiative was an extension of the AGQTP 2003–04 activity, Action Learning for School Teams. It provided an opportunity to support additional NSW Government schools or cluster of schools to engage with the NSW model of pedagogy as described in the NSW DET discussion paper, *Quality Teaching in NSW public schools* (2003). The pedagogical context for the activity sought to ensure that the focus of the projects remained on teachers’ day-to-day classroom practice. The activity provided a ‘learning edge’ to the school projects as teachers became familiar with the language and concepts of the NSW model of pedagogy and its potential to improve their professional practice. The 2004-2005 program involved 109 teacher coordinators and 50 academic partners who participated in 50 funded QTAL projects across NSW schools. Not only were these projects designed to focus on the *Quality Teaching* framework but they were designed to use school-based action learning/research as the model for professional development for the schools involved in the projects. This collaborative professional development approach incorporates the role of an academic partner to assist teachers to work with others in their schools over a period of time to examine their practice and reflect upon their methods and classrooms.

There has been little systematic research into the development of professional knowledge for teachers through action research or into the role academic partners can play in facilitating this process (Ponte, Ax, Beijgaard & Wubbels, 2004). Action research is a strategy teachers can use to develop insights and understandings to make their work more professional and improve their teaching practice. It has the potential to empower teachers and lead to changes in teaching practices (Ponte et. al., 2004). It has been used since the 1950’s and its purpose in schools has primarily to improve and change teaching practice, support school reform and promote professional development. To achieve these outcomes common assumptions including the emergent and cyclical nature of action research, the value of collaboration and critique, and the potential of action research to create change, underpin the success of this process (Christenson, Slutsky, Bendau, Covert, Dyer, Risko, & Johnston, 2002). Action research requires teachers to reflect on their own practice by systematically gathering information and then using the insight and data gained develop ways to improve their practice. Action research uses dialogue with teachers or students, observation and analysis of facts about a situation to plan, implement and then evaluate (Elliott, 1991).

Action learning shares many of the same values and goals as action research and the terms are often used interchangeably as they are both based on the principle of learning through experience and collaborative inquiry (Bunning, 1997; McGill & Beaty, 2001; Stark, 2006). The main difference is that action research is the research method where action learning is a process of learning or development which may or may not involve formal research (McGill & Beaty, 2001). In this study the action learner groups undertook action research as a means of collaborative workplace learning, through which people learn with and from each other and had the assistance of an academic collaborator. This use of a mentor or academic partner, appears to be the difference between the use of action research, which does not mention the importance of this ‘mentor’ in the research cycle, and action learning which emphasises this support from a facilitator.

Action research and action learning are now being used by schools across Australia to provide learner-centred professional learning opportunities as well as the development of learning communities (Ewing, 2002; Senge, 2000 as cited in Ewing, 2004). This approach to professional development has been supported by the findings of research by Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002) who found that if professional learning is to occur teachers need to be provided with the opportunities for

support in realistic contexts with the view of “teachers as learners” within schools as “learning communities” (p.949). This was further supported by Ewing (2004) who analysed the findings of pilot projects conducted for AGQTP in NSW schools and concluded that schools acting as learning communities achieved successful reform by encouraging reflection and on-going professional learning (Ewing, 2004).

The traditional approach to teacher professional learning has used a ‘deficit model’ approach (Guskey, 1986) based on outside ‘experts’ giving isolated sessions or one-off inservice courses which rely upon the participants being able to reproduce or apply their newfound knowledge and skills to their individual school and class context. This approach has been shown to have limited impact on teacher learning or professional development (Ingvarson, Meirs, & Bea, 2003; McRae, Ainsworth, Groves, & Zbar, 2000). As a result there has been a recent shift from this training model to a new approach where teachers participate “as active learners shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in both programs and practice” (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p.984). Groundwater-Smith (2005) states that the philosophy underpinning the AGQTP approach is founded on the “belief that the value of learning-more-about-teaching should not be seen as an imposition but arises out of a wish for professional fulfillment as practitioners as they go about the matter of investigating innovation and change” (p.21). This, together with understanding how teachers learn and the contextual and personal factors that impact on their learning, all support the need for an action research/learning approach.

Action learning has been used as a form of professional development where teachers can develop, implement and describe the effects of a plan of action and evaluate and reflect in order to improve teaching and learning. It is seen as qualitative and participative research. The problem selected should be significant to team members and there should be opportunities for team members to work in partnership to solve problems, or alternatively for individuals within the team to take an area from within the selected focus area to investigate and develop suggested strategies for improvement which are brought back to the team. This collegiality supports this form of professional development now being promoted in schools as it recognises that teachers are professionals with a significant knowledge base which can be shared for the benefit of all. The cyclic approach provides teachers with opportunities to control their own learning and decide on their own pace within the cycle, as well as decide on the strategies that they will select.

School-based action learning encourages and relies on the support from a facilitator, or academic partner. The academic partner or facilitator can take on a number of different roles within the project including resource suggestions, team member management for maximum involvement and participation, as well as the encouragement of social interaction and provision of appropriate input on projects where and when necessary (Western Australian Department of Education, 2005). The academic partner, however, comes into the partnership as a stranger and has to build a professional and individual relationship in a short period of time. To achieve this academic partners need to work with teachers “helping them to build new ideas and possibilities from research and learning processes.” (Ewing, 2004, p.4). Gore (1995) as cited in (Kemmis & Mervyn, 1998) asserts that for genuine partnerships to be formed a number of general principals should be adhered to including democracy in the partnership, trust, communication and joint responsibility in planning as well as involvement in planning from the beginning. The QTAL project was devised as a program that gives teachers and schools ownership of their specific project and their learning, which in turn (it was hoped) leads to a more committed staff (MacBeath & Mortimore, 2002). It was the aim of the QTAL projects to ensure the academic partner supported teachers as learners. “If external ‘experts’ are to be useful in this context they work with teachers, recognising the teachers’ knowledge and helping them to build new ideas and possibilities from research and learning processes” (Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson, & Manuel, 2004, p.2). This paper will investigate if this can occur and whether action research/learning is a useful and viable form of professional learning.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to analyse the role and impact of an academic partner on the evolution, progress and outcomes of action learning projects as a form of professional learning in schools. The specific aims of the study were to:

- A. identify the level of understanding of the Quality Teaching model and action research/learning of teachers in the project.
- B. explore the role of an academic partner in action learning projects.
- C. examine the value of an academic partner in action learning projects as a form of professional development.
- D. Evaluate the outcomes of action research/learning projects as professional development.

METHOD

This study involved three academic partners working individually with a school or set of schools in different educational and geographic settings over an eight month period. The study comprised of a group of thirty five teachers who taught at eleven schools including a large city secondary school, a small country primary school and a group of nine primary schools who were feeder schools to a large secondary collegiate comprising of two comprehensive junior secondary schools and a senior college located in a city. Although the schools had different projects which were designed to meet their individual needs, they were all using the same theoretical framework of the NSW Quality Teaching model and methodology in the form of action research/learning to accomplish their goals. Each school or set of schools had the equivalent of a minimum of five days of time available to them from an allocated academic partner to use in a way that best suited the individual needs of the school or group of schools.

The instruments used to collect the data for this study were a questionnaire which was administered pre and post project and personal reflective journals completed by the three academic partners throughout the duration of the projects. The questionnaire used both Likert scale and open ended questions to seek participant teachers' demographic information, knowledge of the NSW Quality Teaching model, knowledge of action research/learning, role of the academic partner, value of the academic partner, role academic partnerships play in professional development, personal and school/cluster outcomes of projects. Analysis involved the calculation of frequencies for the Likert scale items and themes were identified from the extended response items in the questionnaire.

A personal reflective journal format with guiding questions (Appendix 1) was developed from an existing model of learning diaries used at the University of Newcastle to assist student teachers to reflect on their teaching (Grushka, Hinde-McLeod, & Reynolds, 2005). Each academic partner completed a reflective journal before and after each school teaching/learning episode throughout the length of the projects. It should be noted that the journal format allowed them to consider the technical/practical aspects of both the individual session that they were about to encounter or encountered and the entire school project and the personal aspects of their involvement in the each session in the projects. Analysis of the data from the journals occurred through collation of entries and subsequent organization into major themes that emerged from the pre and post session reflections. These themes were weighted according to frequency and quantity of written reflections (Table 1).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Demographics

The academic partners worked with a total group of thirty five teachers including both classroom teachers and school executive members with 69% of the group aged over forty years. The gender mix of the group was 52% male and 48% female and although the group had some early career teachers, 68% of the participants had more than 16 years individual teaching experience and 71% of the participants had been teaching at their present school for more than 10 years. These results indicated the teachers involved in the study were generally experienced teachers who had been teaching at their school for an extended period of time.

Understanding of Quality Teaching and action research/learning

At the beginning of the AGQTP projects the majority of the participants agreed that they were familiar with, and understood the Quality Teaching model. They believed it could improve their

teaching and although most were currently using aspects of the model in their teaching they were keen to explore ways to use it further to enhance their teaching practice. They were, however, less informed about action research/learning with only 35% indicating an understanding of what the process involved. 45% saw it solely as undertaking reflection or assessment of a problem or their teaching with 20% indicating complete lack of knowledge of the process. The results of the post project questionnaire indicated that although most participants in this study undertook a induction or information sessions on the process of action learning and the Quality Teaching model and they had taken part in the resulting projects 15% were still unable to give a very clear explanation of the process or demonstrate an accurate understanding of the main concepts or stages involved. This was demonstrated by some of the post-project questionnaire responses by teachers in the study who stated they understood action research/learning to be:

'I am not sure, but I think it is recording personal reflections and journals of a change in behaviour'.

'Noting learning in a log, recording specific lesson observations with the "how to" observations'.

'Continuing research'

'Meeting with others to analyse school and teaching problems'

There were those who however, had a very clear idea of the process as demonstrated by the following responses:

'It is a cyclical process whereby teachers identify a topic/issue they wish to investigate or improve, collect evidence, act on that evidence. Participants then reflect on their actions and evaluate and make changes if needed or start the process again'.

'Start with identifying a problem or a need to improve some part of your teaching. Work with a committee or group to find solutions or new ways to do it. Begin the process and if it is not working reflect and revisit the problem then do it another way with modification. Involve others in the process'.

The role of the academic partner in action research/learning

As the requirement to have an academic partner was a mandated requirement of the project and in most cases the academic partner was unfamiliar with the school and teachers there was a certain amount of apprehension by all parties. Analysis of the journal entries records the comparison of emphasis on themes by each academic as measured by the amount of text written (Table 1).

Table - Major journal themes of academic partners during the project

	Partner 1	Partner 2	Partner 3
Most written	The nature of professional development for academics	The nature of professional development for academics	What is academic credibility?
	The role of a leader in such joint projects	What is academic credibility?	The importance of good communication
Least written	Collaborative skill building for teachers and academics	Collaborative skill building for teachers and academics	Collaborative skill building for teachers and academics
	The importance of good communication	Catering for individual capabilities	The nature of professional development for academics

It can be seen by this measure alone that the academic partners were primarily interested in establishing their credibility and working on their own professional development in order to advance this credibility. Related to this theme is the role of the leader in this project, establishing the various

roles and responsibilities seems to have taken up a lot of the reflective time and once this had been resolved, then considering the unique academic contribution that can be made. Some of the reflections related to this role of leader were expressed in the journal reflections as follows:

'There are lots of expectations of me' (Partner 1)

'I still wonder if I am doing action research' (Partner 1)

'I spoke to teachers and I thought I sold myself quite well. I tried to allay fears that I would take over' (Partner 3)

'Try not to be cast as an irrelevant expert' (Partner 3)

'How do I get them to evolve their own professional development? (Partner 3)

'I don't like being the fountain of all knowledge on Quality Teaching, and metalanguage and Maths - all too much. Maybe I'm just not suited to this (Partner 3).

'I think the project seems ambitious for the whole school. I would suggest that a couple of faculties only be targeted to ensure success' (Partner 2)

'I think I need to be clearer on the Action Learning ideas held by the DET - maybe do some more reading to ensure the project achieves this format and aim' (Partner 2)

'A good personal exercise in how I can use generic skills' (Partner 2)

Partner 3, who had a number of school settings and a larger group of teachers to work with, wrote more about the importance of good communications than the others but that would seem to be appropriate. It can be seen by reading that partner's journal that establishing academic credibility and responsibility was at danger from lack of communication more so than with the other partners who had less variety of contexts to deal with. Partner 3 reflected:

'Being an academic partner is not just a person who can walk out but a continuing role. You really have to work hard at it and I think I am trying too hard to be everything to everyone' (Partner 3)

'They are not really clear about what they want and I am not sure what they want' (Partner 3)

'I think we were all unsure about how to do this' (Partner 3)

'Liaison is an issue. Expectations - breaking the ice with so many different players lots of different expectations of me. It is hard to get a feel for the audience' (Partner 3)

'I haven't been to many individual schools. They haven't approached me yet. How do I reach out to them? And where do I get the time? (Partner 3)

The teachers in the schools initially perceived the role of the academic partner as to provide support and guidance to ensure the project outcomes were achieved by assisting in planning, providing advice on gathering evidence and validating methods used. They identified expertise and knowledge of the Quality Teaching model as important along with providing resources and ideas from recent research.

In the post project review the teachers identified the major roles undertaken by the academic partners as providing advice and professional development to assist the understanding and implementation of both the Quality Teaching model and action research/learning process. In addition the academic partners were required to provide background information and research ideas. There was a general feeling in the primary schools in particular that the academic partners' role was to organize or oversee the whole school project and to assist the project leader to keep up the momentum, enthusiasm and encouragement for the project. The academic partner provided

expert input in different Key Learning Areas (KLAs) such as English and Mathematics with a focus on aspects of the Quality Teaching model. This approach is identified in the following responses to the post-project questionnaire when teachers were asked what the role of the academic partner was in the project:

'To drive/oversee the project, help the team leader and keep on us all on the task'

'To provide expert advice on approaches to manage the project'

'As a witness into the achievements/dilemmas faced in my class'

'To provide us with advice on understanding and implementation of the Quality Teaching model'

'To promote enthusiasm and keep our project moving along'

A different role emerged for the academic partner in the secondary school. The partner was required to design instruments to provide data to support individual school projects by analyzing student learning styles and student perceptions of teachers' implementation of the Quality Teaching model. This provided the school executive team with a starting point to develop the school learning communities each with a different project aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning in the school. The academic partner assisted in providing professional development for the school staff on the action learning process, however, after that was completed managing of the projects and their design was then undertaken by the teachers and groups from the school. The academic partner was asked to contribute to the final report and attend a follow up conference to speak about the projects undertaken in the school. The following are examples of the pre-project questionnaire responses from secondary teachers when asked what the role of the academic partner was in the project:

'Develop an understanding of the action learning process and to ensure it is adapted in a way that is relevant to the school'

'To provide us with background information on the Quality Teaching model and the latest research on student learning and teaching strategies to assist us'

'To help provide an understanding of the research and theoretical framework for the Quality Teacher Project'

'To develop and provide instruments and statistical data and analysis to support the project'

'To be an outside expert to gauge student learning and understanding for project'

The value of an academic partnership in action research/learning

Prior to commencing the project most teachers indicated in the pre-project questionnaire responses that the academic partner would play an important and valuable role in their professional development during this project. There were, however, some participants who were unsure and raised doubts about the academic partners' ability to give feedback and "to produce comfortable dialogue". The credibility of the academic was raised and the need for the academic to have had a solid teaching background highlighted by the teachers. The pre-project questionnaire responses indicated that half of the participants anticipated the academic partner would be extremely important to the project by giving direction, clarity and being available as a mentor to the project. Some of the other teacher comments from the pre-project questionnaires related to time spent and support and understanding given as the following comments indicate:

'Their usefulness depends on the amount of time they are able to spend with us and how it is spent'

'They will be helpful if they are available as an ongoing mentor (non disappearing)'

'Hopefully they will provide an independent, supportive voice for our journey'

'They will be valuable if they do not impose and are able to understand the demands of a classroom teacher and a busy school'

The results of the post-project survey provided a more positive although varied response to the value of the academic partner in assisting the professional development of the participants. Although the activities undertaken by the three academics varied from whole group presentations to individual informal discussions and the provision of resources and reading materials, the post-project responses indicated that the academic partners played an important and very useful role in the projects. Valuable tasks mentioned by the teachers included provision of greater depth of understanding about the Quality Teaching model, instruction on latest teaching ideas, strategies and alternate ways to approach an issue or problem, keeping the school teams focused and helping to guide the direction of each project. It was mentioned by a participant that they could have been more useful if they had been more aware of the academics' possible role. The following are examples of the post-project questionnaire responses from teachers when asked about the value of the academic partner to the project:

'I think the academic partner support was essential to the relevance and long term success of the project particularly the initial research phase as the academic partner provided the staff with the understanding of the action learning process and the data to begin to develop our projects'

'A friendly and approachable person who gained credibility with the staff and offered excellent ideas and support'

'She was able to provide greater depth of understanding by clarifying terms and giving our projects direction and motivation. She also provided resources which were very relevant and useful'

The outcomes of action research/learning projects as professional development

Prior to the project the teachers saw the outcomes from the project for the school as the improvement in communication between staff to share ideas and expertise as well as improving teaching, learning and ultimately student outcomes. Individual teacher outcomes were seen in terms of providing time to reflect and discuss teaching methods and to develop collegial planning. The personal outcomes anticipated from the project were the improvement in teaching skills through a deeper understanding and the implementation of the Quality Teaching model.

The results of the post-project questionnaire indicated the teachers found participation in the action research/learning process provided an opportunity to reflect, analyse and plan the process of Quality Teaching across the whole school. Moreover, this process provided staff development for all teachers and encouraged a professional collaborative team approach for sharing, discussing and observing teaching practice. It provided a whole school focus and "an ownership of change in the classroom and school by the staff". From a personal point of view all participants presented a positive response indicating improved knowledge about the Quality Teaching model increased professional awareness, specialist knowledge in certain KLA's such as Mathematics and a greater understanding of how students learn. The provision of time to reflect on and develop their own teaching was seen as a valuable outcome as well as the opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues on improving their teaching. The following are examples of the post-project questionnaire responses from teachers when asked the outcomes of participation in action learning process and the project:

'The school has an ongoing benefit in that there is and will be greater professional trust and sharing of knowledge and constructive criticism using a common language of the Quality Teaching model. It has created a greater sense of professionalism in teachers' views of themselves and their work'

'I think the most important outcomes are a wider spread understanding and acceptance of Quality Teaching; a greater sense of ownership of change in the classroom and schools greater understanding of how students learn and how teaching can change to reflect this'

'The process has set up a new way that professional development will be carried out in our school. We hope to continue the process for many years to come. It allows professional development to be moulded to suit individuals or group needs specifically to this school. Overall it has raised the profile of Quality Teaching model greatly across the whole teaching staff and ultimately got teachers to think about the quality of teaching being delivered at this school'

Participation in the projects also had important professional development outcomes for the academic partners who, although feeling rather unsure and reflective of their capabilities when first undertaking the partnerships, gained much from their involvement. Their early journals reflected their need to align their capabilities with the expectations of their project teams and the importance of establishing their credibility and getting to know their team members and school contexts. The following comments came from the early journals:

'She warned me that the staff members are experienced and some teachers were sceptical of QT and me coming. Not sure how I will be received.' (Partner 1)

'I feel a little of an outsider being told what is required of me. Not really a partnership' (Partner 1)

'I feel I know enough about the QT model but do not have many ideas of the processes for each dimensions' (Partner 2)

'I am unsure about my credibility with the school and will need to establish this as soon as possible' (Partner 2)

'I feel like a bit of a fraud. I am neither the super teacher who knows all the tricks as far as teaching all this OR the super academic who knows all the research!!!' (Partner 3)

'I talked to the teachers and I think I sold myself quite well. I tried to allay fears that I would take over' (Partner 3)

As the academic partners' involvement in the projects progressed they gained many personal outcomes including improved collaborative skills, self efficacy and a sense of achievement. From a professional viewpoint the partners gained leadership and communication skills along with an excellent opportunity to both use and develop new research skills in a school-based setting. Again the journals reflected these developments with statements such as:

'This skills I have developed fits in with my interests in Quality Teaching and Action Research and will help me in future projects' (Partner 1)

'This has been a great experience for me - experience in consulting a number of schools and projects and increasing my knowledge of Quality Teaching to help with PhD ideas' (Partner 1)

'I think this project has helped me to use my research skills and get me into a school setting and challenging ideas' (Partner 2)

'It has been a useful activity for me as it allows me to see how a school can promote educational change and reform' (Partner 2)

'I felt involved and researching. Away from admin.' (Partner 3)

'I have quite a lot I can work with so all the bits and pieces are starting to come together a bit' (Partner 3)

There were, however, some problems and difficulties encountered in the study by the academic partners. The partners attended a seminar/workshop day which outlined the action learning/research approach required by the QTAL program and they met their school representatives for the first time. There was no other formal training or ongoing support which led to the academic partners seeking and sharing ideas from each other, often unsure of their role expectations and if they were offering the best assistance available. Time was also a constraint

which impacted on the academic partners' effectiveness in each project. As this was a task undertaken in a voluntary capacity and in addition to the partners' usual teaching load face to face contact time was often limited. The project had a nine month time frame which meant projects were implemented quickly and would have been advantaged with more planning time and a longer implementation phase. Two of the partners worked with schools located one and two hours respectively away from the university and the other was required to travel between nine schools which, although closer to the university, did not allow maximum time with the teachers. All academic partners spent well in excess of the five days allocated for their involvement in the project and found it very demanding as the following journal quotes indicate:

'I feel exhausted after four planning sessions with a different content focus in each' (Partner 1)

'I am rather unsure of the task or the scope of this project' (Partner 2)

'School is not clear about what they want and I am not sure what they want either?' (Partner 3)
Being an academic partner involves personalities and relationship building procedures. It is a challenging role to say the least!! (Partner 3)

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that academic partners can have an important and significant role in assisting teachers to undertake action research/learning in schools as a form of professional development. The schools undertaking the projects saw a need for change and improvement in their teaching and learning and found the action research/learning process a valuable means to achieve this. The academic partner supported a collegial environment where teachers reflected for, on and in action and worked and learnt with and from each other to explore possible ideas and solutions to issues associated with their teaching practice.

For the academic partners this presented an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills to mentor other educators in school settings and to work collaboratively with them in the process in order to meet their specific needs. Participation in these projects brought unplanned professional development outcomes for the academic partners themselves with increased reflective practice, academic renewal; enhanced self esteem; improved academic collaboration skills and the development of academic leadership as reported personal growth outcomes. This supports previous research by Huling & Resta, (2001) who cite the similar outcomes along with overall improved professional competency as the major outcomes of teacher mentoring.

The success of these projects supports the use of an academic partner in the action research/learning form of professional development in schools. The partners in this study played varied but important roles in the evolution, progress and outcomes of projects in the schools in which they worked. Despite the limitations and challenges encountered they undertook their own personal journeys as they developed acceptance, trust, openness as well as establishing roles of leadership, instruction, challenge and guidance in the partnerships they developed.

Whether this type of approach is viable as a long term professional development model is unclear and has been challenged by other researchers as the most effective method of professional development and empowerment (Stark, 2006). However, in this study most of the schools saw value in the collaboration, ownership and improved learning outcomes from using the action research/learning model for professional development and some report that they will continue to use it in the future. Those who chose not to did so because of the ongoing commitment of both time and funding required to allow collaborative planning and the unwillingness of teachers to use self reflection and inquiry as a form of professional learning. For the academic partners it proved to be a huge investment in time and resources which needed more initial training, a longer time frame and recognition from the university to be attractive as an ongoing activity. For many of the teachers involvement in the projects empowered them, made them aware of their expertise, extended and challenged their practice and reignited their excitement and enthusiasm for teaching.

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