An Australian view of the Academic Partner role in schools

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The role of 'academic partners' working alongside teachers is an increasingly complex and sometimes controversial one. This paper explores the role of academic partners in educational action research, reporting on data from a larger study conducted in NSW, Australia. Schools involved in the study had received targeted government funding between 2006 and 2010 to conduct school-based action learning projects employing action research. As part of the funding, the schools had been provided with external support from university-based Academic partners, who supported individual school teams in the completion of their projects. Here we focus specifically on the role of the 'academic partner'. Data were obtained via semi-structured interviews with academic partners themselves, with the project's State Coordinators who oversaw the project, and with teachers who had worked with the academic partners over the course of their school-based projects. Participants in the study identified significant benefits for both teachers and academics engaging in co-inquiry, but findings also suggest that the role of academic partner is increasingly complex, multifaceted and sometimes under-supported. When there is "good fit" between academic partners and schools and when structures are in place to support academic partners in their work, the academic partner role in schools can contribute to sustained educational change. In this paper we discuss the crucial antecedents, enablers and constraints that ensure that academic-school partnerships enrich learning for both academics and teachers, building mutual capacity.

Key words: academic partners; critical friends; collaborative professional learning; action learning; capacity building; school-university partnerships

Why is it that the great army of teachers of Australian school children do not come to our conferences? Is it not because we have concerns more profound or more esoteric than Australian teachers, but because our concerns are not (by and large) their concerns? (Kemmis, 1980, p.1)

Introduction

The enactment of school-university partnerships for action research and action learning is complex and often controversial. This paper draws on a study undertaken with schools in NSW Australia that explored the perplexing and challenging question of the impact and sustainability of collaborative professional learning (Beveridge, 2014). University-based academic partners were a mandated part of the government-funded professional learning program in which all schools within the study had participated. An unexpected major finding

was that academic partners contributed significantly to collaborative professional learning when there was mutual understanding of roles, effective communication between academics and schools, and organisational elements in place that supported the academic partners in their work. In this paper we explore enabling and constraining factors in relation to the role of the academic partner, in the particular context of externally funded, inquiry-based professional learning. We consider the enactment of 'academic partnerships', where university-based academics with relevant expertise support teachers engaged in collaborative professional learning initiatives such as action research or action learning. After a brief discussion of school-university partnerships for teacher professional learning, we provide an overview of the study, before turning to our findings. We argue that while academic partnership can involve the navigation of tricky terrain, the benefits of such partnership to both school and university-based colleagues can be potentially great, building mutual capacity and fostering transformative professional development. We explore the enabling and constraining conditions that, across four case study schools, gave rise to these findings.

The ever-increasing attention to notions of 'teacher quality' on both a national and a global level over the past two decades has been accompanied by significant investment in teacher professional learning and development on the part of governments, education systems, schools and teachers themselves. Consistent with neoliberal trends in education globally, however, this focus on 'quality' and 'development' has often been linked more to regimes of accountability than authentic teacher professional development. In Australia, for example, the burgeoning 'performance and development' (AITSL, 2012) movement and associated focus on 'evidence-based practice' (Hattie, 2008; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001), has arguably brought a greater focus on teacher accountability and competition rather than on support. Indeed, it might be seen to work against the imperative for teachers to develop a rich contextualised understanding of their practice (Kemmis, 2011) in favour of a

search for 'what works'. The research reported on in this paper suggests that forging academic partnerships between teachers and university-based colleagues may provide useful pathways by which teachers might both meet system requirements embedded in the 'age of compliance' (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009) and at the same time be supported in generative, meaningful professional learning.

Background: school-university partnerships for professional learning

Prior research suggests that school-university partnerships around teacher professional learning can hold significant benefits for both teachers and academics. Such learning partnerships are said to have the potential to break down professional isolation (Sachs, 1997; Brooker, McPherson & Aspland, 1999; Greeny et al., 2014) and foster the building of social capital through sustained professional learning across different school sites (Wyatt-Smith, Bridges, Hedemann & Neville, 2008). Skilled academic partners, adept at asking insightful questions, have been seen to stimulate ideas and actions that contribute to continually improving systems (Ewing et al., 2010). In the context of inquiry-based collaborative professional learning such as action research, effective academic partners have been found to provide "essential conceptual and procedural guidance" to teacher researchers (Aubusson, Brady & Dinham, 2005, p.78), supporting teachers to "systematically investigate issues that matter to them" (Groundwater-Smith et. al, 2012, p.14).

Beyond these established benefits, it is also well-documented that role expectations of teachers and academics are often at odds, reinforcing the need to establish clear understandings and expectations from both teachers and academics at the outset. Academic partners have pointed to a lack of clarity in their roles in schools in a number of studies conducted in Australia and elsewhere (Reynolds, Ferguson-Patrick & McCormack, 2013; Koo, 2002; Ewing et al, 2010; McCormack, Reynolds & Ferguson-Patrick, 2006). In a

Swedish study on the role of 'academic facilitators', Lendahls Rosendahl and Ronnerman (2006) found that expectations of teachers and their academic facilitators differed widely, negatively impacting on project outcomes. Furthermore, Johnson (1999) identified tensions due to the diverse expectations of schools in the Authentic Assessment Research Circle project in the US in the 1990s. The need for the establishment of clear goals when academics and teachers work together in action learning and action research was also identified by Kariagori, Nicolaidou, Yiasemis and Geoghiades (2015) in Cyprus schools. Additionally, in the UK, Greany et al. (2014) called for genuine partnerships between schools and universities, citing communication and systems barriers negatively impacting on university and school partnerships. This view echoes earlier work by Somekh in the UK who, in her influential paper published in *Educational Action Research* in the 1990s, identified the often problematic nature of relationships between teachers and academics, due to gaps attributed to power and cultural differences across institutions. Somekh encouraged both groups to seek to "inhabit each other's castles" (Somekh, 1994). Teachers often demand immediate answers to identified problems from academics, whereas academics in turn often see their purpose as to support teachers in devising their own solutions, in a 'critical friend' role (Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2012). Similarly, the goals of teachers and academics when they come together for professional learning are often perceived to be at odds (Gore & Gitlin, 2004). Teachers aim to strengthen their pedagogy and improve student outcomes when working with academics through "knotworking" (Engestrom, 2008; Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015) or intertwining the relevant threads of academics' practical and theoretical knowledge into their practice.

Academic partners may also have a broader overall goal of sharing their research through dissemination and publication. Publication is widely regarded as a critical part of academic work but is sometimes met with suspicion from teachers, possibly due to teachers

feeling that academics may not value their contribution to knowledge creation. The diverse range of interests, values and practices that the two institutions bring to shared professional learning potentially create new spaces in which academics and practitioners can respectfully and collaboratively move learning forward (Arhar et al., 2013; Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015; Max, 2010).

The perception held by some teachers that academic partners might be primarily driven by a need for publication when working in schools, was addressed by Greany (2010) who encouraged teachers to share their collaborative work through joint publication. Joint publication builds trust and new understandings, ensuring that all parties benefit (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2006; Greany et al., 2014; Heron & Reason, 1997). Teachers and academics working together can become co-creators of new knowledge through reflexive, dialogic processes and mutually supportive relationships. There are clear advantages for the broader educational landscape when shared goals are jointly established and knowledge created is widely disseminated, demonstrating a "win-win proposition" (Greany et al., 2014) that benefits both universities and schools.

Finally, while recognising the benefits of school-academic partnerships, some research raises questions about the constraints to authentic partnership inherent in bounded, funded professional learning projects. It seems that for such projects, "bordered by duration of funding, success or failure is determined by local circumstances and personalities involved" (Mockler, 2013, p.284). Accountabilities conditional on schools in meeting funding principles can result in a related lack of criticality as schools and academics strive to engage in co-research within the externally imposed parameters of project guidelines (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Kemmis, 2006, 2011).

Research Study

Background

The wider research from which this paper originates investigated the sustainability of collaborative professional learning in schools, up to seven years following their participation in a major collaborative professional learning initiative. All schools that received funding for a professional learning program known as Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) between 2006 and 2010 in Government schools in NSW, Australia, were invited to participate in the study. Schools were funded to implement collaborative professional learning that addressed identified local issues and built teachers' capacities to engage with the NSW model of pedagogy, known as *Quality Teaching* (Gore & Ladwig, 2006). Overall, 160 government schools of varying types received funding during the duration of the QTAL project.

There were two unique features of QTAL. The first was the use of a substantive pedagogic model as the focus for teacher professional learning, while the second was an explicit focus on action learning as a vehicle for teacher professional learning. QTAL is one example of a professional learning program that was based on identified effective professional learning principles, such as those identified by Loucks-Horsley et al., (1987), Bruce et al., (2010), Timperley (2011) and Gore et al., (2012). QTAL was collaborative; teachers worked in teams to identify and address issues of practice with a clear focus on improving student learning. They planned their projects using action learning processes, based on their identified school needs. Learning was cyclic and ongoing. Teachers were funded to allow release from class to collaboratively work on action learning projects. A distinctive feature of QTAL was that school teams were supported in their learning by university-based academic partners. The academic partners' role was to act as external mentors or facilitators of learning for the school team and support the team members with a

range of activities related to Quality Teaching and improving professional learning in the school. However, the specific roles and responsibilities of each academic partner were the subject of negotiation between each academic partner and his or her particular school (Bettison, 2003). A 'Memorandum of Understanding', including agreed principles of operation, a work plan and project timelines, was negotiated in each site.

Four rounds of QTAL funding were offered from 2006 to 2010, and school-based projects were between six months (2006) and two years (2010) in duration, so the action learning projects continued for a sustained period of time. Other studies have examined the impact and sustainability of this particular program (Ewing et al., 2010; Beveridge, 2014; Aubusson, Brady & Dinham 2005). However, none previously has focused on the role of the academic partner through multiple lenses, from the perspective of teachers involved in the program, state coordinators and the academics themselves.

Methodology

The study consisted of two phases. In the first phase an initial survey of the 160 schools that received the targeted government funding was conducted, primarily as a vehicle for selecting case study schools on the basis of maximal variability (Cresswell, 2008). The second, main phase of the research included interviews, school-based observations and document study in four case study schools. The study was approved by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee and the NSW Department of Education via the State Education Research Applications Process, and all schools and individuals were allocated pseudonyms in the reporting of the research, as per the ethics protocol. Initially, the academic partner role was not a particular focus of the research – only two of the 30 survey questions and none of the semi-structured interview questions specifically referenced the academic partner role –

however, the significance of the academic partner emerged somewhat unexpectedly over the course of the study.

Two primary schools, Cesta Public School and Widdon Public School, and two secondary schools, Turley High School and Collum High School, were selected as case studies. Cesta Public School is a primary school in a large country town, 50 kilometres west of a major urban centre, with a student population of approximately 310 across Kindergarten to Year 6. Widdon Public School is a small country school, situated on the outskirts of a large regional centre, with approximately 165 students. Turley High School is located in a semi-rural area with a student population of approximately 1020 students, and Collum High School is located on the western edge of a major city, with an enrolment of approximately 735 students. For each school, an array of interviews was undertaken with teachers previously involved in QTAL projects and currently involved in collaborative professional learning, and also with the school's allocated academic partner. The researchers attended professional learning meetings and gatherings, collecting observational data, and schools were also invited to submit documentary materials that would help the researchers to form a holistic 'picture' of the school with relation to professional learning. Multiple case study techniques were used to identify patterns across sites.

Field notes, interview transcripts, and other texts were analysed using NVivo 10 software. Prior to analysis, interviews were fully transcribed and participants conducted 'member checks' to ensure that they provided a reliable record. Transcripts were entered into NVivo and text was coded and analysed to identify emerging themes and make links between data sources. The main overall themes identified in the qualitative research were listed and described with text examples in an NVivo Codebook (see Appendix 1 for an extract).

This paper draws primarily on data collected via the semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and academic partners in the four case study schools, with some reference to the data collected via the initial survey of 160 schools. Four key themes emerged from our analysis of the data in relation to the role of the academic partner, relating to the negotiation of expectations, two-way learning between academics and teachers, enablers of the relationship, and constraints to academic partnerships. We provide an overview of these themes exploring their provenance and implications, finally reflecting on the benefits and challenges of academics working in schools as revealed in the research and the potential of academic partnerships for building mutual capacity.

Findings and Discussion

Negotiation of expectations

A key theme identified in the research related to the importance of role negotiation for successful school-university partnerships, although there was some variation in how this was achieved in the different schools. Lack of clarity of roles has been an identified issue in a number of studies relating to academics working in schools in the wider literature (Reynolds, Ferguson-Patrick & McCormack, 2013; Koo, 2002; Ewing et al., 2010). Three of the academic partners interviewed felt that the Memorandum of Understanding that they negotiated with schools was essential in ensuring that schools had realistic expectations of what academic partners could and could not achieve in the role.

> From the point of view of the school and the academic partner, what's really important is a contractual arrangement. (Academic Partner, Collum High School)

The fourth academic partner negotiated only a verbal agreement with her school, although she observed that this worked effectively in terms of explicitly articulating the terms of her engagement:

> How did I negotiate my role? We just sat and talked. They had carefully thought out what they wanted in their project and they knew what to expect of me. Therefore I fell into line with what they wanted and this is what we did. (Academic Partner, Turley High School)

It was reported that the relationships between the academic partners and school project teams were positively influenced by their initial Memoranda of Understanding, agreements that clearly articulated the roles and responsibilities of all team members.

On the other hand, two of the academic partners expressed a concern that some teachers viewed them as 'outside experts' and 'team leaders', rather than as partners in learning and critical friends, their intended role. This tension over expectations was clearly articulated by the academic partners at Collum High School and Widdon Public School, who were both keen to ensure that, from the outset, the local knowledge that teachers brought to the team was privileged during the project.

> There are some people who are still seeing academic partners as the outside expert. There are still academic partners who think they're going to go in and provide all the solutions. If you don't understand that fundamental, absolutely basic issue, and get people to understand it; you've got a whole problem. (Academic Partner, Collum High School)

> When discussing what my role would be, we talked about what the academic partner role might look at in the school. I could offer expertise in facilitating the process… however I wanted to draw out the considerable expertise of the staff…and I wasn't going to be a person who just walked in and told them what to do. (Academic Partner, Widdon Public School)

Contiguous to the importance of collaboratively deciding on roles and responsibilities for schools and academics when engaging in co-research, is the identified need for teachers at the local level to maintain ownership of the learning. Academic partners ensured that project ownership remained with school teams by taking on a facilitative role, assisting school teams in achieving their goals and respecting the local knowledge that teachers contributed to the group, both individually and collectively.

> Part of it is respecting what everybody in the group knows and realising that by pooling what everybody knows we're going to be building on the knowledge that is developed. That is the whole rationale for action learning. It is recognising it's the people in the context at the centre of the issue [who] know the most, not an "outside expert". (Academic Partner, Collum High School)

All four academic partners acknowledged the crucial importance of schools maintaining ownership of their projects and explicitly negotiated the respective team roles and responsibilities, such that any knowledge that was collectively generated remained in the school after the academic partner moved on, aiming to strengthen sustainability from the outset.

Two-way learning

A second main theme identified in the research relates to the benefits of schools and academics working together for professional learning. Although 'two-way learning' is also related to the prior theme of role negotiation and project ownership, this theme specifically addresses the particular and unique benefits that each group, teachers and academics, accrues through engaging in co-inquiry. Academics working in schools have traditionally been described as occupying a space between two worlds, "inhabiting the hyphen" (Humphrey, 2007) or "dancing in the ditches" (Reynolds, Ferguson-Patrick, & McCormack, 2013, p.

307). In this study, academics reported many advantages of working in schools that complemented their university roles. They saw the implications of political decisions impacting on schools and the resultant pressures that teachers face in their daily professional lives, engendering empathy and deep understanding that could enrich their work as university-based teacher educators.

> I think the academic partner role from my perspective is that I learn as much as they do. I learn different things. I learn about schools, and that's critical for anybody working in teacher education in university…I learn about the pressures they're under, the compliances that come at them thick and fast … something that helps me continue to be a good academic. (Academic Partner, Widdon PS)

Academic partners who had not been in schools for a while benefitted from the window into the current workings of schools that the project provided which, in turn, built credibility and currency with their students in initial teacher education courses at university.

> It's a real partner process I think. If I had my way, I'd have everyone in the Faculty of Education playing that role [academic partner] somewhere. It would be great if we could somehow enforce that because it would make for better teacher educators. (Academic Partner, Widdon PS)

This view was reinforced by the State Coordinators, who were well aware of the benefits of currency afforded university-based academics in their work as academic partners:

> They [academic partners] can actually say to students, "Well, I was in a school a couple of weeks ago, and what they were talking about were these issues", and the students think, "Oh, this academic's not in an ivory tower. This person's really in touch with schools". (State Coordinator)

A Team Leader at Cesta Public School shared how their academic partner helped them to better reflect on their learning by using data more efficiently to drive their project.

Probably at the beginning we didn't put the reflection into our action learning. The academic partner was good at reminding us to do that. Even though he was only coming in now and then, he would be the one to say, 'Let's reflect on what we've done so far'. He put together a few useful surveys for us that told us about how the staff felt we were going in a number of areas. (Team Leader, Cesta Public School)

The academic partner at Collum High School described his ongoing focus of assisting teachers to realise that they were the ones who had the knowledge and access to a range of data about their school and students. This "insider" knowledge would help them to improve their practice, emphasising the importance of academic partners respecting the knowledge and skills that teachers have in the local context (Smith, 2006).

It's all about… the philosophical and epistemological basis of action learning… respecting what everybody in the group knows and realising by pooling what everybody knows we're going to be building on the knowledge that is developed. That was the whole rationale for action learning. It is recognising that it's the people in the context at the centre of the issue who know the most. (Academic Partner, Collum High School)

This particular academic partner supported the professional learning team to engage in authentic evidence-based practice, or what others have termed 'data-driven professional learning' (Fullan, 2005; Poerkert, 2012, Wyatt-Smith, et al., 2008). He saw his role as ensuring that school teams based their learning on a range of data, including student work samples, peer-lesson observations and feedback as well as student summative and formative assessment data. The academic partner supported the school team in targeting the professional learning that addressed the student learning needs in the school.

If you go into an action learning session without evidence that people are going to look at during that session, all you get is that low-level professional discussion -- a whole lot of generality. (Academic Partner, Collum High School)

Professional learning based on critical reflection, collaborative decision making and a range of data is a powerful motivator which influences teachers to query their dispositions

and change their classroom practice, building capacity and potentially leading to data-driven, individual and collective school improvement (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2008). Common to these four academic partners was both a desire for, and demonstrated effectiveness in, supporting teachers to engage at this level.

The research clearly identified that schools and academics benefitted from co-research, but in different ways. Academics learn first-hand about the impact of policies, programs and curricula on teachers and schools. Teachers learn about ways to strengthen their pedagogy through drawing on research in addition to reflection on their practice through the academic partner's critical yet supportive lens, through 'knotworking' (Engestrom, 2008; Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015) or intertwining theoretical and pragmatic knowledge. The research also suggested specific enablers that strengthened and enhanced the school-academic partnerships.

Enablers of the relationship

A Widdon Public School team member shared that their academic partner was highly regarded in the education sphere, "a known expert" who caused her some initial discomfort during classroom visits that stemmed from a "fear of being judged". Over time, a climate of open communication, professional trust and sharing was established between the academic partner and herself, and other team-members.

> The process that we focused on was sharing and being able to speak about our successes, failures, what concerns we had, and having the academic partner to assist. She was a 'known expert'. Having someone so well-known there with you in the classroom was daunting at first, but when you got to know her it was like having this wealth of knowledge there at your fingertips. Having an academic partner was fantastic because you had someone 'on tap' who was focused on helping. (Team Member, Widdon PS)

A school culture lacking in professional trust may inhibit the adoption of potentially transformative professional learning strategies (Bryk et al., 998), such as the development of academic partnerships between universities and schools. Identified school-level factors that build professional trust include designated time for teachers and academic partners to meet and jointly plan, leadership support, funding for teacher release, and resources that remove structural obstacles and support school change processes (Martinovic et al., 2012; Argyris, 1999). In the research, most interviewees articulated high levels of professional respect for their academic partners, often based on their ability to engender professional trust, teacher confidence, and collegial support. Argyris (1999) in his widely cited work on organisational learning, identified mutual dialogue and reflective practice as powerful enablers that enhance an organisation's capacity to learn.

Communication between the academic partner and school professional learning teams in the research took many forms, the more common being face to face contact during team meetings, email, discussion boards and phone contact. There was general consensus that effective, ongoing communication was essential for the smooth running of projects. The team leader was a crucial link in ensuring this effective ongoing communication.

> The whole team knew exactly where they were up to in the project …this level of organization ensures that things are happening on schedule, and keeps the project on-track…important for the smooth running of the project. (Academic Partner, Turley High School)

The crucial importance of ongoing, effective communication between the school and the academic partner was evident when team leaders left the school, and other team members were not able or willing to step up to fill the role, depriving the academic partner of their established communication link with the school.

My main contact person went on long service leave and there was no-one ready to step up to replace them. They are pivotal in the organisation of it. When she left there wasn't anyone who took her place. This was a problem. The lines of communication need to be there, carefully delineated. The person you're going to liaise with needs to be there the whole time. You really need two people in case one disappears. (Academic Partner, large city secondary school, phase one survey data)

In contrast to the lack of effective communication between the academic partner and school team described above, Widdon Public School teachers reported a school climate of professional confidence, group cohesion and sharing, deepened through the involvement of their academic partner. This was highlighted when the team leader suddenly departed the school for a time, and another team leader willingly stepped up to replace her. The team described a collective responsibility to their colleagues and the successful completion of the project that they articulated as 'We're all in!' This collective statement was evidence of a shared vision in the school, the existence of a collaborative school culture, and the development of a supportive professional learning community during and following their participation in the professional learning project.

The professional learning team at the same small primary school, Widdon Public School, attributed the collaborative school culture to a large extent to the academic partner's input and guidance in the action learning process of teachers learning with and from each other, demonstrating the ongoing and collaborative nature of action learning. Action informed reflection, and in turn was informed by it, in an intended critical and reflexive process. In other words, "the action changed as a result of the learning that, in turn, led to further learning" (Dick, 1997).

The importance of the academic partner fulfilling the role of the 'external knowledgeable professional', supplementing local expertise was highlighted as teachers recognised that they did not always have the skills needed to address emerging local issues. This situation was evident at Turley High School, when teachers were faced with the need to

implement a number of new curricula consecutively, and they identified that they lacked the expertise required in the school to effectively do so.

> Researcher: You said your school is rich with tacit knowledge. But, what happens if the particular skills that you need are not in the school?
> Deputy Principal (Turley High School): That's where we go out and get them. We're currently introducing the new syllabus documents…we've had to outsource here. The consultant we chose has spent time here already. She's done research on this campus. She's worked out what we need, and where our staff are at.

School leaders at Turley High School were careful to ensure that those knowledgeable professionals who were invited into the school to support professional learning understood the school's needs and the unique school culture. This helped to ensure that coherence was maintained with existing programs and the wider education field. In this case, the external knowledgeable professional brought a broad educational perspective, proven expertise and "outsider knowledge" (Bruce et al., 2010; Fullan, 2005).

The need for consistent and established communication between academic partners and their school teams was identified as a fundamental strength and also a potential weakness in building school-academic partnerships. Martinovic et al., (2012) attributed a range of enablers and barriers to successful school-university partnerships: support from school leaders, time to jointly plan, in-class coaching, and building professional learning communities. In our research, the professional community was the most frequently named enabler.

Constraints to the relationship

Some of the surveyed schools reported that they did not have a positive experience with their academic partners, and cited communication difficulties as the primary reason why the partnership did not meet their expectations. A few teachers suggested that some academic

partners may have been challenged by "putting their theoretical ideas into practical use" (Wells, 1999, p.4) with the school professional learning teams, an example of the widely-cited "theory-practice divide" (Horsfall, Byrne-Armstrong, & Rothwell, 2008; Laverty, 2006; Scott, 2010).

> It turned out that she [Academic Partner] was very academic and that they [the school team] … could hardly understand what she was talking about. (State Coordinator).

The State Coordinator identified that some academic partners were perceived by teachers as being more 'theoretical' than 'practical', a stance that teachers reported to be unhelpful in finding ways to change and improve their practice in classrooms. Somekh (1994) identified a "discourse gap" which can render research inaccessible to some teachers, suggesting a possible need for academics to modify their language and gently induct teachers into new discourse communities to ensure effective communication when building partnerships with schools. Somekh (1994) suggested that schools and the academy inhabit separate 'castles' and are often at odds due to multiple realities, which is problematic when building trusting relationships across institutions.

Some survey respondents reported a negative view of the academic partner role, and felt that their allocated academic partner contributed little to the success of their project. A number of remote schools also commented that access to the academic partner was limited due to distance, time involved in travel, and a resultant lack of accessibility, and this was confirmed by the State Coordinator.

> It was hard to get academic partners into some schools due to distance. (State Coordinator).

Most surveyed schools indicated that they did not continue to pursue the academic partnership following the cessation of project funding, with comments suggesting that the

academic partner role was valued to varying degrees by different schools. Some respondents

maintained that the skills and experiences that each Academic partner brings to the position

will determine whether the role is valued in a particular school, and academic partners need

to be carefully chosen to match the needs of individual schools and their projects. In this

project, state coordinators matched Academic partners "based on the geographic and learning

needs of the [particular] project" (Bettison, 2003, p. 9), with varied results:

> The academic partner role was mostly good but there were some issues… along the way
> there were a number of academic partners we had to change, who said they had expertise
> in areas that they really didn't have… In their defence, teachers can be critical
> sometimes. (State Coordinator)

Survey responses from a minority of schools reported that the allocated academic

partner did not meet their specific requirements, emphasising the importance of schools

having a voice in the selection of academic partners. This might help to ensure that there is

coherence between school goals and the skills and experience of allocated academic partners,

an identified antecedent for successful partnerships (Ewing et al. 2010). Furthermore,

Mockler (2013) argues that local circumstances and individual characteristics of academic

partners could influence the success or failure of projects, an issue highlighted by a small

number of participants in our study, and revealed in the initial survey data:

> We only had one meeting with our academic partner and this was, by far, the most
> disappointing part of the project. She knew nothing and was not really interested in being
> involved. (QTAL teacher, rural secondary school, phase one survey data)

As stated above, schools were allocated academic partners by the State Coordinators,

based on schools' nominated project focus, location and the (self) reported expertise of

academic partners. Overall, the selection strategy worked as reported by the State

Coordinator, "however, there were some issues…". Mixed feedback from schools suggest

that it may have been more useful for schools to choose their own partners, as the "situatedness" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of professional learning in schools is well-recognised, and schools themselves are best placed to identify their specific learning needs. In other words, consideration of the local context is important for professional learning to be effective (Jurasaite-Harbison, 2009; Riveros, 2012). If schools could choose an academic partner who they feel matches their particular context and needs, the likelihood of the academic partnership succeeding from both perspectives is increased.

All but one of the academic partners in the case study schools commented on the current systems constraints of working across universities and schools, and how their work in schools seemed to be increasingly undervalued in the university context, which sometimes deterred academics from taking on academic partner roles.

> There are a whole lot of complex issues from the point of view of being an academic partner in schools, from a university perspective. Increasingly universities do not honour or reward academic partnerships…In the academic realm there are four areas where you can be acknowledged for your contribution. One is for your teaching and you get assessed through student feedback. The second is research higher degrees and publications, third is leadership within the university and the final one is community links [where the university partner role lies]. Community links have faded over recent years. (Academic Partner, Collum HS)

One academic partner reported that awareness of the role needed to be promoted at the university level so that Academic Partners were acknowledged by universities for the work that they did in schools. He suggested that academic partners would benefit from formal acknowledgement from university management that in turn may encourage more academics to pursue partnerships with schools. In the current higher education climate in Australia, it was perceived that there exists little incentive for academics to form partnerships with schools.

The academic partner at Turley High School shared her anguish when she attempted to sustain her role post-project, because she believed it to be an important and mutually beneficial one. She succeeded for a while, however she "couldn't keep it up" due to her "snowballing university workload". As a lecturer in initial teacher education, she believed that the academic-schools link "was not nearly strong enough" and it was "absolutely crucial" that academics partner with schools so as to better understand the practical application of education policies and practices, in order to best prepare students in initial teacher education courses for their future professional lives.

An additional constraint identified by academics was that schools were not always realistic in their expectations of academic partners. It was pointed out by one academic partner that teachers need to understand the complexity of the role as academics attempt to balance their core business at university with their additional roles in schools.

> Yes it's very common… Some schools assume that I'm an academic and my job in education is to assist in educating their people whenever and however they would like …the warm fuzzies should be enough. (Academic Partner, large city secondary school, phase one survey data)

Additionally, the mandated payment of academic partners for their services in the QTAL professional learning project caused a number of issues from the academic partner perspective. Although they were paid a consultancy fee for their services for five days total work, including non-contact time, Academic partners reported that many additional days were spent planning and researching prior to their face-to-face contact. A number of academic partners felt that some teachers believed that they were over-paid for their services but their reality was that much more time was expended preparing and researching for the teams than the days spent in schools. All academic partners interviewed stated that they spent

much more time than the allocated five days in planning, implementing and evaluating the project with school teams.

> They [the school teams] were very aware how you got paid $5000 for five days work however that's not what you worked for the school. I did the five days at the school but then I spent 15 days working on the project at home to be prepared to go in and work with the teachers on the project. (Academic Partner, large city secondary school, phase one survey data)

In this study, teachers consistently placed high importance on the ability of academic partners to support schools in using educational theory pragmatically. They highlighted the need for schools to have agency in the selection of academic partners, in order to ensure alignment with local project needs and school culture. Academic partners reported that universities do not consistently value the work that academics do in schools and, likewise, schools do not always make realistic demands on busy academics who are struggling to juggle multiple responsibilities across institutions. These factors were identified as key constraints to the formation of successful school-university partnerships. These factors privilege fit and expectations rather than the more commonly named barriers workload/ lack of time, money for training, and teachers not being familiar with the language of the academy (Martinovic et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Our research suggests that academic partnerships for professional learning hold the potential for positive benefits to both school-based and university-based educators. It also suggests that that the role of academic partner is an increasingly complex one that in order to be effective, requires negotiation to ensure clarity of purpose, structural support, and a "good fit" with the particular school. For academics, the role can lead to greater understanding of the

contemporary workings of schools, teaching, resources and curriculum that reportedly afford them a degree of social and cultural capital, enriching the quality of initial teacher education courses in universities and future teachers in our education systems.

The academic partners interviewed in the research overwhelmingly indicated that they learned as much as teachers through their involvement in professional learning projects in schools, but "different things". While three of the four academic partners interviewed noted that their partnership work was not always valued by their universities in the way they would have liked it to have been, it is salient to note that in the years since the QTAL project, both school systems and universities in Australia have made moves to more explicitly value the kind of school-university partnerships embodied in the academic partner relationship (see, for example, NSW Government 2013). The focus on 'end-user' and stakeholder engagement currently favoured by the Australian Research Council (2016), for example, suggests that academic partnerships might provide academics with a valuable means of demonstrating the impact of their work on schools and teachers.

For teachers, the support of academic partners potentially provides many advantages. The academic partners in the study supported teachers in using action learning to address locally-identified issues. Academic partners worked side-by-side with teachers to interrogate their practice through collaborative and reflexive processes, with the focus on teachers researching their practice in the 'laboratories of their classrooms' (Stenhouse, 1981). The QTAL project, as noted above, drew on a substantive pedagogic model, the Quality Teaching framework, and on action learning, and thus there was an emphasis on both process and content. The academic partners in the case study schools were united in aiming to ensure that teachers 'owned' their professional learning projects. Following Senge (1990) and Costa and Kallick (1993), their role was primarily one of support, to the dissatisfaction of some schools who requested that academic partners "take a more hands-on role" (Ewing et al., 2010 p. 51).

Academic partners interviewed were steadfastly focused on schools maintaining ownership of their projects and to this end they intentionally negotiated their respective responsibilities at the outset, in doing so acknowledging that "teachers themselves are the best-placed drivers of reform" (Mockler, 2013, p.283).

Of the four case studies in the research, two schools chose to continue a similar professional learning model that they adopted during QTAL, post-project. Widdon Public School employed a literacy coach who joined the school following the completion of its project. The literacy coach assumed a role similar to that of the previous Academic partner, with impressive and sustained improved student outcomes that staff attributed to the continued input and support of an external knowledgeable professional. Additionally, Turley High School employed an external knowledgeable professional to facilitate the school's new curriculum implementation, acknowledging that teachers within the school did not have the skills that they needed and required support from an external source.

School professional learning teams that are supported by university-based academic partners, acting in the role of 'critical friends', have much to offer both academics and teachers, by building individual and collective capacity across schools and universities, through mutual understandings and shared experiences. Professional learning partnerships between teachers and academics are one means by which the two "castles" (Somekh, 1994) of schools and the academy, might connect, which is increasingly identified as desirable (Kemmis, 1981; Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Macintyre, 2005; NSW Government, 2013). Working in partnership can build understanding across institutions of respective roles and, in particular, the ways in which issues facing education are mirrored across schools and universities. In the quotation with which we began, Kemmis (1980) challenged us to think about common ground between academic researchers and teachers, noting that "our concerns are not (by and large) their concerns (p.1)." It is only by bringing schools and universities

together that we can identify and address shared issues from multiple perspectives and support each other in moving forward in our respective and our related work. This research suggests some means by which this engagement might occur.

Our data highlights what while genuine partnerships are potentially difficult to achieve, they can be of great benefit to both teachers and academics. What is required is a clearly articulated, shared understanding of the parameters of the academic partner role; and procedures to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge. It is through this work, through the eyes of a 'critical friend', that teachers can gain a deeper understanding of their practice and insights into continued professional growth and improvement.

> We need to stop doing things to teachers and students and start learning with them. The rich dialogue that takes place when university researchers and teacher practitioners come together to learn from one another … is a two way street…and makes for a very exciting experience. (Martinovic et al., 2012, p. 385)

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Appendix 1: *NVivo Codebook [excerpt]* (Beveridge, 2014, p. 269)

…Themes were classified according to the number of times they were identified in the data. Those themes identified in the research with more than 20 references, in order of most referenced themes, were:

1.   **The role of the academic partner in CPL**

Description: Any comments by interviewees about the academic partner role.

Text example: "I think the AP role from my perspective is I learn as much as they do. I learn different things, but I learn as much. As an academic in schools I learn about schools, and that's critical for anybody who's working in Education". (Academic Partner, Widdon Public School)…