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## **Building learning partnerships between schools and universities – an example from south-west England.**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we examine the efforts of a University in south-west England to develop long-standing relationships with some partnership schools into a richer association modelled on university practice schools. These are used widely in countries such as Finland, Japan and Hungary, and offer trainee teachers high-quality practica with expert teachers while providing opportunities for university staff to keep their practice up to date and to collaborate in school-based research. Using the research approach of 'Appreciative Inquiry', which builds on the strengths of a social system to shape future sustainability and development, we focus on the experience of three partnerships. In each school a University-based Researcher-in-Residence was paired with a partner teacher or senior leader. We draw on the notion of a 'third space' to examine the ways in and the extent to which the partners in each school have created a non-hierarchical space for collaborative working.

### **Introduction**

The context for this project was to develop the long-standing relationship between a university in the South-West of England and a number of its primary (i.e. for children aged 4-11) partnership schools into a richer association. The aim was to model this deeper university-school association on university practice schools (UPSs), which are used widely in such countries as Finland, Japan, Czech Republic and Hungary (Burghes, 2011). On the one hand these are regarded as a means of developing initial teacher education (ITE) students' theoretical understanding and practical application in tandem; 'to develop an ability to conceptualise and theorise practice, and the other way around, to make theories practical' (Malinen et al, 2012, p.577). Their function in this context is to offer students their first observations of expert teachers and their first (and sometimes subsequent) teaching placement (practicum); these schools have a high number of expert teachers and mentors, who can support students as they progress through their training. On the other hand, regular school-based work such as demonstration lessons enables university staff to keep their own practice up to date, and offers the opportunity to collaborate in experimental and/or research projects that are hosted in these schools (Burghes, 2011, p.49).

In this article we focus on one particular aspect of this developing university-school partnership; the Researcher-in-Residence model. In this case the University project aimed to provide a catalyst for school-based research and development in three particular ways:

- Schools and their teachers would work with researchers to provide a test-bed for innovations and new approaches to teaching and learning, incorporating evaluation on these initiatives and collaboration over revision of approaches and materials. Theoretical underpinning for research activities would generally be provided by researchers with up to date knowledge in their field, and University and school staff would collaborate in devising, implementing, monitoring and evaluating these activities.
- There was an expectation that school staff will be engaged in practical classroom-based research and that they may undertake higher degrees in the University.
- Partly to disseminate results of research undertaken within these schools, University and school staff would engage in local and regional teacher continuous professional development (CPD), with the emphasis on practical implementation of strategies and direct classroom evidence for the efficacy of these strategies.

In what follows we examine the context for developing school/university partnerships, and discuss the notion of a ‘third space’ in which practitioners and university staff can meet as equal partners. We then describe the ‘Appreciative Inquiry’ approach to our research, which focuses on the project’s strengths to inform future implementation. Next we discuss the notion of the third space in relation to our data. Finally, we consider ways for the project to progress in the future.

### **Project context: building University-school partnerships**

In practice, these ambitious aims for school/University partnerships would also address two particular policy directions. The first was the concept of the self-improving school system, outlined as a formal policy aspiration in the 2010 White Paper in which it was argued that the primary responsibility for school improvement should rest with schools (DfE, 2010, p.13-14). Different publications show that research needs to play an important part in this process, with BERA/RSA (2014, p.11) arguing that ‘teachers’ research literacy and opportunities for engagement in the research process’ are closely linked to improving teaching quality and student outcomes; the authors argue that research offers evidence for practice, inspires innovation and provides a way of building sustainable relationships between staff in different schools and universities. Cordingley (2015, p.240-1) suggests that engagement with research encourages (among other things) a commitment to professional learning, use of specialist expertise and an understanding of why practices do or do not work in different contexts, thereby supporting practitioners to develop theory and practice together. Similarly, Sorensen and la Velle (2013), in a special issue related to the abandoned attempt to introduce a Master’s of Teaching and Learning in England, pointed out the limitations of ‘top-down’ initiatives, suggesting that initiatives generated and sustained at grass-roots levels were more likely to be effective than those imposed by national policy. Evidence from these publications shows that a research-rich environment in both schools and initial teacher education bring can bring benefits to all involved – the aim of our particular initiative.

Since the initial policy publication, and in line with international efforts for educational practice to be research-informed, the UK government has been promoting evidence-based practice in education through what Cain (2017) has described as a variety of ‘push’, ‘pull’ and ‘mediating’ measures. ‘Push’ measures include an Educational What Works Centre – part of a What Works Network – that has set up an evidence base of research accessible to teaching practitioners and school leaders, with the aim of informing educational decisions<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/about/what-works-network/>

Financed by governmental as well as non-governmental funding, the education network was set up by the Education Endowment Foundation and the Sutton Trust, and has an accessible database of evidence summaries<sup>2</sup>. It was augmented in 2016 by a Research Schools Network that aims to promote evidence-based teaching through large numbers of schools building affiliations with other schools in their region<sup>3</sup>. ‘Pull’ measures include Teaching Schools’ obligation to demonstrate engagement with research and, more arguably, the Carter Review (2015) of ITE, in which there is reference for the need for teachers to be able to use research to inform classroom practice. ‘Mediating’ factors include the ‘Open Access’ policy, which ensures that research reports are freely available online (Cain, 2017, pp.611-612). Together these policy directions, of making schools increasingly responsible for their own CPD while encouraging them to engage with educational research, have opened opportunities for renewed forms of school-university collaboration. It is also possible that these opportunities have been given further impetus through subsequent funding reductions for schools, which have reduced the available budget for teacher CPD (e.g. Passy et al, 2017, pp.70-72).

The second relevant policy direction has been the move towards increasing levels of school-based ITE which, in turn, has diminished the role of universities in teacher accreditation (Godfrey, 2017) and reduced their funding (Gilroy, 2014). Ellis (2012) suggests that the combination of the financial crisis, austerity politics and the shift in emphasis of ITE location has combined to make it likely that university education departments will become ‘economically unsustainable’ (Ellis, 2012, p.155) over the longer-term, and we have seen radical reductions of staff numbers and some departmental closures in the recent past. One result could be that education departments in England are obliged to find new sources of and/or augment their established income streams, and increasing the number of research students, creating opportunities for CPD delivery and attracting funding for innovations that have already been piloted in schools all have the potential to generate revenue in the longer term.

The move towards more school-led ITE means that the nature of partnerships between HEIs and schools is changing, particularly in relation to the identification and initiation of partnership arrangements within a geographical location. Schools offering school-based ITE are responsible for selecting partners to co-deliver training programmes. The shift towards school-led ITE has led to reductions in HEIs’ core student numbers, which they have sought to balance by increasing the number of school-based trainees who attend university for part of their course (Saito, 2012, p.24). Where there are multiple possible HEI partners, however, universities need to make themselves attractive to local schools offering school-led provision, perhaps by offering something which schools cannot provide themselves, such as research expertise. Partnership and collaboration between university education departments and schools, however, is not a straightforward process. Writing about university-school partnerships in ITE, Zeichner (2010, p.90), for instance, writes about the ‘central problem’ of the ‘disconnect’ between university and school-based components of ITE programmes in the United States. Others show how these sentiments are echoed in England; in their review of ITE in England from 1974-2014, Murray and Passy (2014, p.496) write about the ‘misleading but oft quoted’ binaries of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in ITE and teaching practice. They also argue that the current model of ITE, which now offers prospective teachers a more ‘practical’ and relevant training experience, may not encourage a critically informed approach to primary teaching that engages with educational theory and research (ibid. p.503). They

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<sup>2</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/scaling-up-evidence/research-schools/>

comment on the increased politicisation of teacher education (ibid. p.496), on the increased pressure on teachers as the system has become more target oriented and performance driven (ibid. p.498), and on the 'culture of compliance' among students and teachers (Alexander, 2010, cit Murray & Passy, 2014, p.501) as the demands of the teaching job have increased in the twenty-first century.

None of these structural challenges are likely to support an open and enquiry-based culture in schools (see also BERA/RSA, 2014, p.11), and this may be exacerbated by what Godfrey (2017) describes as a 'top-down' approach to schools' engagement with educational research. He argues that the education What Works Centre privileges research from randomised control trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses, and that this, in turn, could have a deleterious effect on school-based education:

The privileging of certain types of research evidence (particularly meta-analyses and RCTs) could have negative consequences. One of these is the tendency to simplify, quantify, and tame the complexities of the education system in order to impose control on those involved in it (Biesta, 2010a). Policy makers may desire simple 'evidence-based' judgments about where to direct scarce resources for maximum effect. The direct impact of this is for research to be encouraged to produce prescriptions about 'what works' based on narrow conceptions of school effectiveness (Biesta, 2007) (Godfrey, 2017, pp. 436-437).

In addition, he argues that there is:

... a top-down model of knowledge production that promotes a disempowering prescription to practice. Teachers are not just being told to listen to evidence, they are being told which evidence to listen to and which to ignore (Godfrey, 2017, p.442).

This combination of structural challenges and perceived hierarchy of evidence meant that we needed to encourage an innovative and flexible approach with our schools, in which they were equal partners and in which collaborative decisions lay at the centre of the relationship. We wanted to ensure recognition of the different funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) brought to this project by school and university staff, an approach that is often employed in the context of the classroom but is equally applicable to collaborations between school and university staff. We believed that, through developing a deep understanding of the nature of each other's contribution and the specific environment in which each worked, we would develop mutual respect for the distinctive knowledge bases brought by the different individuals and be able to develop a sustainable way of working together to mutual benefit. The idea of 'hybrid' or 'third' space encapsulated the nature of the collaboration that we wanted to create. The concept of a third space stems from hybridity theory, which acknowledges that people draw on different discourses to make sense of their worlds (Lynch, 2015). Moje et al (2004, pp.43-44) argue that there are 'at least' three views of a third space: as a way to build bridges between marginalised and academic discourses and settings; as a way of navigating different discourse communities; and as a space in which different and possibly competing ideas are brought together to challenge dominant discourses. We considered all three views; we were aiming to build non-hierarchical links between schools and universities, to navigate different and at times competing discourses about the educational process, and in the fullness of time once partnerships were established

to challenge and be challenged by the ideas that we would introduce and meet. In short, we wanted to co-create a ‘democratic and inclusive’ space (Zeichner, 2010, p.89) in which university staff and teachers were equal participants.

Our system was to pair volunteer University staff as Researchers-in-Residence (RiRs) with individual schools that had expressed an interest in the project. Fifteen pairs were set up at the beginning of the academic year 2016/7, and it was left to each pair to determine the nature of their relationship, the type(s) of project(s) they wanted to develop and the frequency with which they would meet. Some University staff were experienced researchers, while others were at the start of their university career; some had been teachers and others had not; some, but not all, were involved in ITE. The pairings were selected through a variety of criteria that included mutual research interests, geographical location of the school and previous professional relationships; a minority of pairings had established relationships, but most were starting new associations.

At the same time, we set up a research project to monitor and evaluate the development and efficacy of our RiR model, described in the next section.

### **Research methods**

The overarching aim for this research was to evaluate its implementation, with the research questions focusing on participants’ expectations, their views on ways in which the initiative was working (or not) in practice, and its successes and challenges. While it began as simple evaluation of what worked and what had not, the research has evolved into an Appreciative Inquiry focussing on school-researcher partnerships that have blossomed, rather than those which failed to thrive. Appreciative Inquiry is based seeks to find out from those involved in some joint enterprise not just what works, but what works well. The approach has a larger purpose than problem solving (‘first-order’ incremental change), instead seeking to understand and promote ‘second order’ change ‘where organizational paradigms, norms, ideologies, or values are transformed in fundamental ways (Watzlawick, et al., 1974)’ (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p.129). An Appreciative Inquiry builds on the strengths of an organisation to shape future sustainability and development (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987); inquiring ‘into the social potential of a social system should begin with appreciation, should be collaborative, should be provocative, and should be applicable’ (Bushe, 2011, p.87).

An inquiry normally follows four phases:

Discover: finding strengths - “the best of what is”

Dream: identifying opportunities and aspirations – what could be

Design: using understanding of strengths to develop strategies to realise the dream

Destiny: implementing these strategies sustainably, holistically and creatively.

The investigation described in this paper represents the first and second phases of the inquiry, namely to discover, from the perspectives of those involved in the work, the benefits and successes of working in this way, and dream about ways in which it could develop.

Examining the processes and outcomes of the RiR initiative would offer a clear understanding of the aspects that had been valued by the people involved, which could inform the design and help to implement strategies for the sustainable future development of this initiative.

The investigation included a literature review, baseline and end-of-year survey, and case-study interviews. The research team consisted of six permanent members of staff, of whom one was leading the project and five were involved as RiRs, and a Research Assistant who worked part time on a short-term contract; a small proportion of their time was allocated to this project. All team members contributed to developing the detail of the research project and the ethics documentation, and the Research Assistant completed the literature review with the support of another team member. Three team members have contributed to this paper.

The literature review, which included a search of grey literature (unpublished or published in non-commercial form e.g. student doctorates, government policy papers), explored different models used by other institutions with similar aims and is discussed in detail on the first project report (Passy et al, 2018). Next both RiR and school participant expectations for the project were investigated through a survey. For this we used an adapted version of the decision theoretical research model, in which respondents were asked to share their expectations, to prioritise them, and to imagine on a scale of 1-10 the likelihood that each expectation would be met. This approach allows subjective judgements to be combined with numerical data to evaluate the likely effectiveness of proposed projects (Waite et al, 2005, p.78). In this case, this approach had three aims: to discover respondents' hopes and expectations for the project before relationships had been established; to provide a foundation for the case-study interviews; and, with the repeat survey at the end of the first year, to see whether hopes had been realised.

Designing the survey, however, presented two particular ethical dilemmas. The first related to anonymity; on the one hand, we wanted to be able to compare the responses from the pairs of university and school staff so that we could track if/how these changed over the course of the year, which meant that we required the names of survey participants. On the other, knowledge of the research team members – some of whom were involved in departmental line management – might inhibit University staff responses in some way. Our solution was to ask all participants to provide their name, but to offer University staff the opportunity to express their views anonymously in an addendum to the first survey. This offered the space for staff members to provide comments on any aspect of the project that they felt unable to supply in the named-response survey. Two responded to the addendum, and in each case their comments were positive.

The second dilemma concerned sharing the views of school/University partners with each other. We aimed at a collaborative approach to the inquiry, in line with Appreciative Inquiry principles, but we recognised that school respondents may not be willing to share information if the partnership had been unsuccessful through personality or other sensitive issues; most participating schools provided placements for University ITE students, and would probably be unwilling to jeopardise this arrangement. We therefore asked school participants in the follow-up survey if they would be willing to share their responses with their appointed RiR, with other schools and/or be included in an anonymised form in any research reports; two chose not to share with their RiR and other schools. In both cases staff felt that their RiR had not engaged sufficiently with the project to make their participation worthwhile. RiRs were not asked this question, as there was an assumption that the research team would use the data sensitively to document issues related to the establishment of school-RiR pairings in reports rather than seek to blame; disseminating the project findings was an important part of the research, both within and between the different partnerships. Anonymity was promised to all in any reports and/or publications. The remaining ethical issues related to the right to

withdraw, data security and debriefing at the end of the project. The ethics documentation was submitted to and passed by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, and we could begin to collect data.

All RiRs and school lead participants were invited to respond to the first survey, either on paper at the time of the first University workshop on the project, or online via a link sent to their email address. Two follow-up emails were sent at fortnightly intervals to encourage participation. From the fifteen planned RiR projects, we received nine school and nine university respondents from ten different partnerships; surveys were returned from both school and University partners in eight partnerships.

At the end of the first survey, participants were invited to volunteer as a case study for phase two of the research, in which RiR and school staff partners would be interviewed. The aim of these interviews was to discover in detail the processes and negotiations involved in project implementation, successes and possibilities of their RiR project, to discover if/how the underpinning concept of creating a third space was working out in practice, and to reflect on how project strengths could help future implementation. Nine RiRs and six school staff responded that they would be willing to be interviewed in the summer term. However, in the light of busy school timetables at the end of the academic year and the staff restructuring that had been ongoing in the University from Easter, we settled on an opportunity sample of three school staff and their RiRs who attended the end-of-year project workshop at the University. Attendance at this workshop meant that the participating interviewees were likely to be supportive of the project and keen to reflect on strengths and future possibilities, which was in keeping with our Appreciative Inquiry approach; on the whole, those who were not engaging with the process, for whatever reason, stayed away.

Finally a repeat of the first survey was distributed on paper at the final workshop and via a survey link sent to participants' email address. An email reminder was sent a fortnight later to encourage responses. The aim of this survey was to ascertain the extent to which individuals' expectations had been met, challenges with establishing partnerships and project successes, and views on the viability of continuing with individual project partnerships and/or the project as a whole. This time six teachers and five University staff responded from seven partnerships; two project partnerships returned surveys from both RiRs and school staff.

### Data analysis

Table 1 below illustrates the sources of the data collected; one responding RiR worked with Castle and Northbrook schools at the time of the first survey, but just with Northbrook at the time of the second. All school partnerships have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

**Table 1: Overview of data collected**

Partnership / data collected	Staff survey1	RiR survey1	Staff survey2	RiR survey2	Interview
Abbey View	1	1		1	No
Valleyside	1	1		1	No
Northbrook	1	1 (also Castle)	2	2	Yes
Crownleigh	1	1	1	1	Yes
Daisychain	1	1			No
Treetop	2	1	1		No



<b>Castle</b>	1	1 (also Northbrook)	1		No
<b>Westtown</b>		1			No
<b>Oakdene</b>	1	1	1		Yes
<b>Talltrees</b>		1			No

The response to the survey data request was disappointing; we had anticipated the ability to track the (potential) development of a greater number of partnerships than the two (Northbrook and Crownleigh) from which we received a full set of data. However a number of partnerships failed to engage with each other for a variety of reasons that included lack of time, staff restructuring and failure to find a common meeting ground, and this is reflected in the small number of responses to the second survey. It limits the usefulness of the survey data, as we were unable to follow ways in which participants' interests and work foci may have shifted during the course of the first year of the project. For this reason, and following the spirit of our Appreciative Enquiry, we have focused largely on what we can discover from the interview data from the three partnerships who attended the end-of-year workshop. Table 2 below shows the details of these three partnership RiR projects.

Interview data were analysed thematically, focusing first on the objectives of understanding participants' expectations of the project, the ways in which the partnership may be developing and project successes and challenges (see Passy et al, 2018). We then interrogated the data for the aspects of a 'third space' suggested by Moje et al (2004); building bridges, navigating different discourses, and bringing different ideas together to challenge dominant discourses. While there was evidence for the first two, there was little for the latter; we might 'dream' that eventually partnerships will flourish in ways that challenge dominant discourses but the current 'culture of compliance' can make it more difficult to achieve. In what follows, we report on those first two aspects of a 'third space'.

**Table 2: School staff interviewee roles and focus of the partnership project**

<b>Partnership / project details</b>	<b>School partner role</b>	<b>No. of RiRs</b>	<b>Project focus</b>
<b>Northbrook</b>	School leader	2	3 projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of outdoor learning app (ongoing)</li> <li>• Children as researchers</li> <li>• Lesson study CPD for teachers</li> </ul>
<b>Crownleigh</b>	Maths coordinator	1	Raising levels of parental engagement/school's approach to teaching maths
<b>Oakdene</b>	School leader	1	Improving performance of pupils with SEN/D; developing a partnership between local early years provision to support parents and children through transition to school

### **Building bridges**

Moje et al (2004) refer to building bridges between marginalised and academic discourses, but we think of this as building bridges between two communities that can have differing views on research; while university staff are expected to be research-active (producers), this

is not necessarily the case for teachers, who are positioned largely as consumers. In addition Cain (2017) argues that teachers can have three problems with engaging with research: educational research is fallible; research may not relate directly to the context of particular schools; and both teaching and research are underpinned by values that may or may not align with one another (Cain, 2017, p.621). Equally, in our experience university staff can lose touch with what is important to schools, particularly if they have a heavy teaching schedule or if their research is focused on other aspects of education than school-based practice. An important foundation of the RiR project was to enable both parties to understand each other's position, both pedagogically and in relation to research; to build bridges of communication between each other that enabled future collaboration.

The survey responses showed increased school staff awareness of and engagement with the research process. In the baseline survey, two (of nine) responses mentioned research as part of their expectations from the project, whereas the follow-up question, 'What would you say are the top three things you achieved through participation in this scheme?' elicited eight (from twelve) responses that showed greater understanding of research, its use and its processes. For instance:

Research projects in progress working with [University]; staff developing research skills (senior leader, Northbrook).

Personal development of my understanding of research in general and more specifically in relation to primary maths (teacher, Crownleigh).

Greater reflective qualities; wider field of understanding (senior leader, Oakdene).

The interviews showed the different ways in which RiRs and school staff built their bridges of communication. The critical aspect of this process was the foundation of a professional connection between the members of staff involved. In one case the two RiRs allocated to the school (one of whom was interviewed) were able to build on previous relationships that had arisen from an ongoing international research project and from their long-standing ITE connections with the school. The relationship was supported by the school partner's view of research as an essential part of supporting professional development and providing ITE (or initial teacher training, ITT):

*The research, the constant CPD, the Master's stuff goes hand in hand with ITT. And the research is obviously a key part of that because if you're not reflecting on and challenging what you're doing as a practitioner, then ... how can you train the next generation of teachers?... To be a good teacher is not about doing this, this and this; it's about constantly evolving'* (senior leader, Northbrook).

This meant that the school was more than willing to engage with the project; as the interviewed RiR commented:

*'It's not just pushing at an open door, the doors have been thrown open and it's exactly what they [the school] want to be doing'* (RiR, Northbrook).

By the time of the interview, this partnership had three ongoing research projects within the school, the RiRs had run different CPD sessions connected with ITE, and they held a research forum on each visit, with the result that the project was *'quite high profile in the school'* (senior leader, Northbrook). This, in turn, had given the interviewed RiR a greater general understanding of the current situation in schools:

*'... you get the contact with the issues that are real to them [schools] instead of the sort of things that you get involved in thinking about if you're working at it because of a theoretical interest or because you found yourself doing some research because there was money in it, which isn't necessarily what schools are interested in. You find out what's really important there at the schools'* (RiR, Northbrook).

The other two RiRs felt that they established a *'connection'* (RiR, Oakdene) with their school partner through establishing their common interests. In Crownleigh both partners were maths specialists and both wanted to raise levels of parental engagement; the latter was an important area of the RiR's ongoing research, and she and her school partner worked collaboratively to experiment with ways to bring parents into the school and/or find accessible spaces in which the school and parents could communicate. The RiR also undertook CPD sessions in the school, on one occasion involving ITE students, which were regarded as:

*'... a massive success; the relationship [RiR] has got with all the staff has been really good. They can't talk highly enough of her ... she's very personable, friendly, approachable ... The maths day that the [University] students organised, they [students and RiR] team taught it; it was really successful'* (teacher, Crownleigh).

In the third partnership, the connection was found through what the RiR described as *'professional conversations that are, without realising it ... epistemological and ontological'* (RiR, Oakdene). During the course of their conversations, these partners established their common interest in supporting pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and respect for each other's expertise and approach, and from this the RiR's role developed into one that was similar to a school improvement partner:

*'... it really helps to have another person saying, 'What about this? What about that? Have you thought about this?'' ... We haven't felt that the University and [RiR] are coming in and preaching; it's very much organic, we're working together ... You know, I don't need a friend ... I need the University to come in and offer something to little Billy, Johnny and Mary. And I think they've done that'* (senior leader, Oakdene).

These three partnerships developed a constructive relationship that was founded in each case on partners' ability to communicate with one another, which enabled them to find a congruence in their values. This may have been helped by the RiRs' variety of roles within the school. Visits that have a number of foci encourage regular contact, enable partners to work together on different aspects of research and practice, and thereby offer the opportunity to develop a multi-faceted partnership in which both learn of each other's views and areas of expertise. As one RiR commented, *'You need to be going for more than one thing'* (RiR, Northbrook). The challenge was the time involved; all commented on the scarcity of time available, but equally believed that project successes in developing productive working

relationships *'far outweighed'* (senior leader, Oakdene) the project's logistical difficulties. An important part of this was that both partners felt their strengths were recognised by the other:

*'We're proud that we can say that we're a partner of the university because it's quite something to aspire to – that a university wants to be connected with you and you have actually earned the right to be connected to them'* (senior leader, Oakdene).

*'It's a bit of validation to hear him talking [about me] like that ... I was surprised when he called me a sharp blade'* (RiR, Oakdene).

If establishing a relationship of trust founded on constructive communication was the first 'bridge', building another to a third space in which both were contributing to equal collaboration required the sensitive navigation of different discourses – the subject of the next sub-section.

### **Navigating different discourses**

In this section, we think of different discourses as those that were current between and within the institutions involved rather than, as Moje et al (2004) suggest, between communities, and this was a challenge presented in each of these three cases. The most complex situation – and the one we focus on here, for reasons of space – was in Crownleigh, where the RiR found herself navigating pedagogical differences and managerial challenges. The first involved tension between the RiR's approach to learning and teaching and that of the school:

*'The school does teach very much in an instrumental way – just tell the children what to do, they learn it off by heart and then they do it'* (RiR, Crownleigh).

This was not the RiR's approach, seen in the description of her response to teachers' queries over the 'right' way to teach:

*I think they [teachers] see me as someone who knows ... so they all ask questions about, 'Is this the right way to teach it?'. And I'll say, 'Well, there isn't a right way or a wrong way; it's about your own philosophy of how children learn'* (RiR, Crownleigh).

Furthermore:

*They [teachers] are very driven by SATs [Standard Assessment Test] results ... And I'll try and convince them that, if you're really interested in the SATs, the children have got to understand what they're doing ... They're not happy with their SATs results, and yet they can't quite seem to let go of the way they do things* (RiR, Crownleigh).

In turn, this meant that teachers tended to have a pragmatic approach to the use of research:

*'It's not a research-active school ... there's a very strong feeling of pragmatism in the school; they're very, very short of money ... very short of time in which to get things done. It's quite regimented; maths, literacy, maths,*

*literacy, with a little bit of creative work ... They want practical tips, and they're happy that the practical tips are evidence-based' (RiR, Crownleigh).*

This important pedagogical difference was potentially difficult territory for the RiR, and she negotiated the situation through a softly-softly approach to introducing teachers to new ideas and practices. She developed a reputation within the school for knowledgeable practice by running research-based CPD sessions during the year that had been well-received, and this resulted in an openness to her ideas:

*'... the class teachers that I've worked with, they're very much open to thinking about new ways of doing things and will engage in discussion and will engage with ideas. How those ideas then manifest themselves in the classroom, it's quite early days' (RiR, Crownleigh).*

She then attempted to consolidate this openness by using informal conversations with teachers to introduce different research papers, aimed at widening their knowledge and introducing new ideas in a different way. After undertaking classroom observations for her own research, she reported that teachers would ask for her views on what she had observed:

*'... and we'll end up talking about different strategies for doing whatever it was what they were doing. And while we're chatting I might get a research paper up ... So it's a kind of very slow drip, drip, drip (RiR, Crownleigh).*

The result, so far, was that:

*'I don't think there's been a great shift in moving away from instrumental teaching to relational teaching ... They [teachers] are aware of new ways of doing things and I think they're slowly starting to think about them. So that's quite good' (RiR, Crownleigh).*

Her comment that teachers were *'starting to think about'* new ideas suggests her understanding of the pressure the school was under and of teachers' apparent reluctance to change pedagogy. At the same time, as we argued in the previous section, having different roles within the school helped to make this just one aspect of this RiR project; conducting her own research, leading CPD and working with her partner on parental engagement enabled this RiR to report that *'it's a really positive research project'* (RiR, Crownleigh). Her partner, too, felt that *'we've worked really well together'* (teacher, Crownleigh), particularly on the question of parental engagement – the second area of navigation.

In this instance, drawing on recent research (e.g. Carmichael & Macdonald, 2016; Ing, 2014), both the RiR and her partner teacher believed that engaging parents with their children's education is an important aspect of raising pupil attainment. They experimented with different approaches during the year, but – as the teacher commented, their efforts *'have slightly fallen flat at the moment. We are back to the drawing board'* (teacher, Crownleigh). The RiR, however, highlighted two aspects of the school culture; the need to make parents feel welcome, and the fundamental importance of support from the school leadership team:

*'The impression that I've been getting is that there is very little parental engagement in this particular school, and the engagement that there is with parents is not very positive and it's not very warm. And that's the school'*

*culture ... I'm not sure that she [teacher] is getting ... much support from ... governors, headteacher, senior management' (RiR, Crownleigh).*

Negotiating these different discourses about the position of parents in the school would be necessary to enable the dream of more parental involvement to become a reality. This presented significant challenges and, at the time of interview, the partners had not managed to find a solution. The RiR was nonetheless hopeful that they would be able to design strategies to address both sides of the issue at the same time:

*'It [engaging parents] is doable, but it's just finding my way through the maze ... If we can get this ... working in a more positive way, I think senior management are going to have to engage ... They're going to have to take notice!'* (RiR, Crownleigh).

These examples from this school partnership show how patience, flexibility and the development of professional trust between partners and understanding of each other's strengths helped them to work collaboratively within the different institutional discourses and tensions that they experienced. There were signs that they were creating a third space in which they were addressing what they both saw as a problem, and they seemed to be working together in a non-hierarchical manner. This appeared to be happening in Northbrook, too, where one initiative relating to peer observation was introduced by University staff but subsequently expanded by practitioners and then established as a formal research project with University ethical approval; research design was an important focus for collaboration and co-creation. Evidence for a third space was perhaps least apparent in Oakdene, where the RiR's efforts were focused on supporting and challenging school practice, but a developing early years project may offer an opportunity for a new type of collaborative work in the near future.

One observation might be that the success of these partnerships depends to a degree on the RiR's generosity with her time and energy. This was something touched upon by the senior leader in Northbrook, who commented that:

*'I'm conscious that the University has got to get something out of it. It's of huge benefit to the school, but we need to make sure that there is stuff that is publishable. Because ... at some point there's got to be some funding opportunities linked to grants ... to make it viable for the University ... I'm just conscious that there's got to be a financial outcome for the University'* (senior leader, Northbrook).

## **Conclusion**

Of the fifteen pairs set up at the beginning of 2016/7, six partnerships have continued into the 2017/8 academic year, perhaps confirming our suggestion at the outset of this paper that structural challenges to collaborative work can be difficult to overcome. However our research has taught us a number of valuable things that can help us to set up new partnerships that have a strong chance of developing into sustainable relationships between schools and the University. We also have a clearer idea of what can be achieved by a school-RiR partnership that is working well with plans to develop further.

The first is that there needs to be careful selection of partners at the outset. A common interest between the individual school and University partners (as in Crownleigh, where both

were maths specialists and Oakdene, where both had a long-standing interest in pupils with SEN/D) can provide a foundation on which the partnership can grow. As one of the interviewees pointed out, it is helpful to have more than one reason for the RiR to visit the school, as another immediate topic can be foregrounded if one aspect of their collaboration is on hold or progressing more slowly than anticipated. Exploring different aspects of school life as a joint project can also help to develop professional trust and respect as individuals learn more about the environment in which their partners work, while having the flexibility to adapt to unforeseen circumstances can generate a sense of deeper understanding. This can be seen most clearly in the partnership at Northbrook, where a long-standing relationship has deepened through the promotion of and engagement with research. It is also the case that longer established, already successful partnerships are more likely to want to engage in the positive approach of Appreciative Inquiry rather than more traditional ‘problem-orientation’ approach (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Another important aspect of the relationship is that of leadership support. While this is applicable to most school-based initiatives (e.g. Passy et al, 2017; Waite et al, 2016), it becomes critical in a project that has received no funding and has been dependent on participants making time for something that they believed in. Cooperrider & Srivastva, (1987) draw connections between particular approaches to leadership and a willingness to engage in an Appreciative Inquiry, stressing the importance of vision (imagining what could be), passion (articulation of significant and meaningful ideas) and integrity (being holistic, consistent and caring) Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017, p 145). These qualities support the possibility of a third space especially when school leaders act as ‘buffers between the setting and the outside world’, insulating staff from concerns about policy changes and the regulative gaze (Georgeson, 2017). Similarly, University leaders must ensure that staff are given the necessary time and institutional support to be able to commit to the time and energy needed for a project such as this, and that the project remains a high-profile aspect of the University’s work. If a partner from either side withdraws from the project, a potential replacement should be found as quickly as possible to facilitate continuity and retain integrity; partners should appraise their work together at six-monthly intervals to ensure that they are developing a sustainable *modus operandi*. There may be times when the partnership is held in abeyance, and partners needs to be flexible and understanding until such time as the work can re-commence. Adopting a positive approach appreciative of strengths and using imagination to dream of other possibilities can be inspiring and motivating, but time is needed to design and implement changes to make these new ways of working possible.

Finally, the individuals concerned need to be sure that they are willing to undertake this work – which, if well-managed, can have rich rewards for all. While this depends to a degree on institutional support, each partner needs to be sure of their motivation as well as considering carefully the potential aims of the partnership and how these might be achieved. This can be difficult in the context of a culture of compliance which privileges problem identification and targets for improvement so that practitioners become ‘imprisoned in a deficiency mode of thought’ Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017, p. 129). Learning Partnerships between schools and HEIs offer individuals from each sector the opportunity to realise, celebrate and built on their strengths and adopt a creative and collaborative approach to innovation that merges theory and practice into ‘a powerful and integral unity’ Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017, p. 135).

In countries where such learning partnerships are more deeply embedded in systems for initial and ongoing professional development, institutions have had time to build on the

systemic strengths to promote a professional learning culture: the openness of Japanese approach encourages practitioners to feel confident in sharing their teaching with others as a model to prompt reflection; the possibility of group placements in Hungary offers trainee teachers more time and scope for reflection; the role of mentor teachers and the high value placed on using and understanding research as part of a teaching qualification supports the close collaboration between education faculties and practice schools in Finland (Burgess 2012). Educators in other countries find out about these examples of what works well in established contexts and are inspired to devise their own collaborative approaches to teachers' professional development (Saito, 2012; Yurnetti, 2018). While being mindful that any such borrowing should be critical and informed by local contexts (Chung, 2016), future developments in our own project will benefit from being informed about what others have discovered and where their dreams have led them.

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