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A Paradox of the Field: Merging Multiple Realities and Moving Forward with School- University Partnerships

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Introduction

Without a doubt one of the most challenging aspects to being a school leader under current conditions is the continuous need to demonstrate school improvement. Whether in terms of student achievement, school climate, school/community relations, or even school lunch offerings the mandate remains the same: improvement is non-negotiable (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2005; Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008; McGuinn, 2006). At the same time, researchers of education at the university level are faced with an equally inflexible mandate, to find research-based evidence that their work supports the goals of school level improvement. This seeming overlap of goals would indicate that school/university partnerships are ideal scenarios in which both school leaders and scholars could benefit from working together. However, as ideal as the notion sounds, there are multiple obstacles from both the practitioners' and researchers' perspectives that prevent effective partnerships from coming into fruition. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

What are the benefits and challenges from both the practitioner and researcher perspective that affect productive school-university partnerships?

What are some strategies that could be used to strengthen school-university partnerships from both a practitioner and researcher perspective?

In an effort to answer these questions, a partnership was formed between the authors, a practitioner and a researcher, to provide a balanced per-

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spective and approach to this complex issue. This article will first present a brief history and overview of school-university partnerships then review the literature's stance on benefits and challenges associated with this type of partnership. The second section provides discussion about what these findings mean for the future of school-university partnerships followed by the authors' proposal for alleviating some of challenges through the use of an emerging methodology gaining ground in educational research.

A Brief History of School-University Partnerships

The history of explicitly defined school-university partnerships within the United States educational system can be traced back to the 1980's, specifically in response to the release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Callahan & Martin, 2007; Catelli, 2006; Matoba, Shibata, Reza & Arani, 2007). Catelli (2006) characterizes five identifiable waves to school-university partnership evolution. It is through this evolution that a paradox has been created as scholars and practitioners have worked towards understanding how to work with one another to create sustainable and effective partnerships. These waves include the first phase that focused primarily on the recruitment of poor and minority students into college followed by a second phase that targeted teachers with "emphasis...placed on excellence in instruction through more equitable and collaborative arrangements between college and school personnel" (p. 185). A shift in 1990 focused partnerships on greater institution and policy changes in an effort to reform whole education systems. The fourth phase, focused on more comprehensive partnerships that included community stakeholders as well as schools, emerged in the mid 1990's to tackle greater societal problems that affected education. By 2001 there were multiple events that led to the fifth and current phase of school-university partnerships. These include the passing of No Child Left Behind and the Higher Education Act, Section 207 which both focused on student outcomes and the preparation of quality teachers, as well as accreditation agencies shifting from process-oriented assessment to assessment of student learning outcomes and standards-based performances. Following 9/11 and the national events that followed, education became a stronger priority and greater numbers of people began to realize that it was going to take many partners and multiple sectors for educational goals to be achieved (Burton & Greher, 2007; Catelli, 2006; LeFever-Davis, Johnson & Pearman, 2007).

Benefits and Challenges

There are a multitude of studies that examine the benefits and challenges associated with school-university partnerships from multiple lenses. Borthwick, Stirling, and Cook (2003) examined ten partnerships to gain an understanding of the partner perceptions in terms of political elements that can hinder positive and sustainable partnerships. Firestone & Fisher (2002) explored school-university partnerships through a leadership perspective. Effectiveness of partnerships in professional development schools was the focus of the 2007 study by LeFever-Davis, Johnson, and Pearman. In order to gain a better general understanding of these, the authors reviewed the literature to determine shared elements across selected studies. These elements were then organized under three themes: participant perception procedural, and political.

Participant perception of benefits and challenges heavily outnumbered their political and procedural counterparts. One reason for this is that the typical school-university partnership is understood to be in the form of professional development schools that provide hands-on training for pre-service teachers. There was consensus among multiple studies that school-university-partnerships were beneficial for schools because they typically provided additional people to be in contact with students, decreasing the teacher to student ratio (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2003; Callahan & Martin, 2007; Ledoux & McHenry, 2008). University partners, specifically intern teacher candidates, have the opportunity to assist classroom teachers and provide increased opportunities for individual and small group intervention. Additional benefits include the increased opportunity for peer coaching and mentoring, an increase in professional development, the modeling of co-teaching practices (Ledoux & McHenry, 2008). Challenges from the participant perspective include time management, whether that is defined as time on task or time taken away from students for working with interns, taking a risk working with interns who have more than the usual struggles, and the classroom teachers' resistance to delegating authority and tasks to others (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2000; Ledoux & McHenry, 2008; LeFever-Davis, Johnson & Pearman, 2007). LeFever-Davis, Johnson, and Pearman (2007) also cites that university partners often have a limited understanding of students' needs within a particular school as being problematic with school-university partnerships. Additionally, Bullough et. al. (1999) notes that there are often superficial relationships between teachers and university partners that are not truly inclusive and treat classroom teachers as instruments rather than collaborators.

Procedural benefits and challenges centered on the areas of funding and implementation. The most commonly cited challenge, communication issues, has led to programs being implemented hastily, programs that were disruptive to the students, an unclear expectation about available resources. Also cited were the intensification of labor, and role ambiguity between school and university partners (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2007; Bullough et. al., 1999; Catelli, 2006; Dallmer, 2004; Firestone & Fisher, 2002). Benefits cited were increased access to additional funding and the on-site nature of school-university partnerships (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2007; Bullough et. al., 1999).

The political benefits surrounding school-university partnerships included the building of social capital for stakeholders, the breaking of barriers between K-12 and higher education, and the removal of the perception of universities as 'Ivory Towers' (Beaumont, 1998; Bullough et. al., 1999; Calabrese, 2006; Catelli, 2006 & Matoba, 2007). Challenges centered on the notion that it is difficult to fulfill the needs of all parties involved and that there is a lack of true collaboration where each partner is viewed as an equal in decision making (Burton & Greher, 2007; LeFever-Davis, Johnson & Pearman, 2007; Peel, Peel & Baker, 2002). This is attributed to the differing cultures between schools and universities and the fact that university partners tend to focus on whole school change while school partners tend to target specific areas (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2007; Dallmer, 2004). Shifts in political cohesion and opposition as partnerships progress and university focus changes often leave school partners feeling a sense of disappointment in the university partners (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman & Cook, 2007; Burton & Greher, 2007; Firestone & Fisher, 2002).

Discussion

What does this mean for the future of school-university partnerships? To answer this question it is necessary to look at both the stance in the literature in regard to the challenges and benefits of these partnerships as well as the reasons behind them. Callahan and Martin note "that a partnership consists of two or more parties that share common goals that cannot be reached by either party independently (p. 136). Within partnerships there are a number of strengths each party brings to the table. Ideally the partnerships are formed carefully enough that there is a balance of expertise and common goals that will make the partnership beneficial to all stakeholders. What can often happen, however, is that a partnership is formed in which the stakeholders have a general understanding of each others' perspectives but they do not recognize that each of them come with their own sense of reality as they enter into the partnership that fundamentally defines how the partner interacts within the partnership. To make the partnership truly beneficial, "roles, responsibilities, and realities must be examined, clarified, and restructured to accommodate the needs of all participants" (LeFever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007).

It cannot be ignored that the culture of schools is much different than the culture of universities. Effective partnerships must start with an open discussion regarding this fact rather than assume that the commonalities between the two will sustain an effective partnership. Catelli (2006) informs us that the barriers between K-12 and higher education have been slow to come down but it is questionable whether or not they must in fact dissolve entirely for partnerships to work. The argument could be made for the differences in cultures and the barriers between the worlds of schools and universities may be beneficial to both if each attempts to implicitly understand the goals and strengths of the other, partnership can enhance both school and university.

This understanding of each others' realities may mitigate political effects caused by the assumption of commonality one finds in school-university partnerships. Distrust is a common reason for many K-12 teachers to choose to not enter into a school-university partnership. Teachers cite that they feel that they are being used by the "university system" (Bullough et. al., 1999). Universities can also feel dissatisfied with the mentoring provided by K-12 teachers who choose to become a partner but do not adequately fulfill their obligation. Unfortunately, there can be times when a K-12 teacher chooses to enter this partnership without regard to the needs of the pre-service teacher. This mentor only uses the partnership to fulfill his or her own needs. Open communication is imperative to ensure that the process works for both sides. The university must clearly show its goals and purposes for research and for the learning of the pre-service teacher. The K-12 institution must also clearly explain how the addition of an undergraduate intern will be used to enhance the education of the public school students and train the future teacher simultaneously.

Putting all of this on the table is essential if the partnership is going to work. There certainly is so much more to the experience than training a new teacher. Public school entities will expect that the experience will provide professional development for participating teachers. The K-12 schools will also require that there is some measure of flexibility in how the pre-service teachers are trained. Accountability is at the forefront of many public schools and the addition of another adult into the classroom means that there will be additional outlets for intervening with students who need more support.

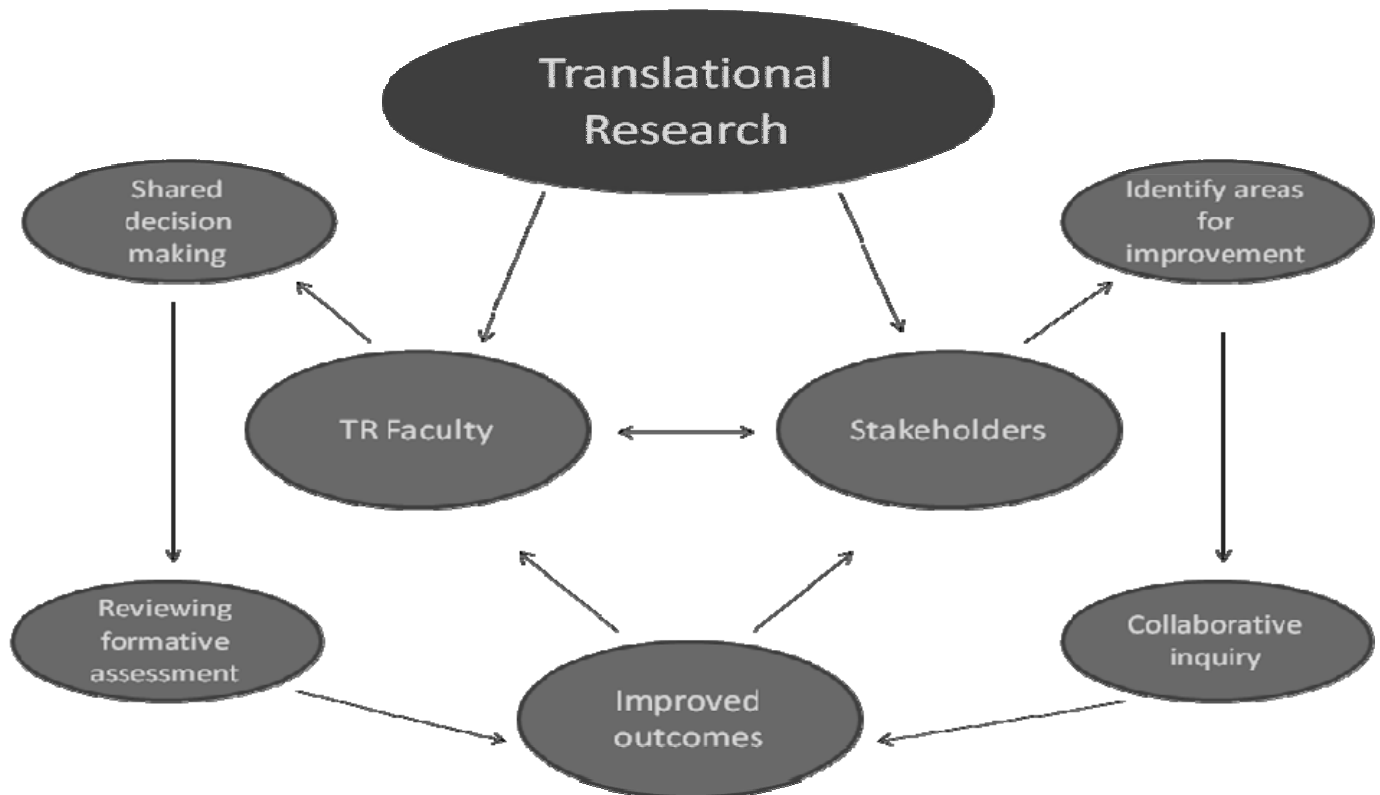
The university needs to know that research can be conducted within partner schools and classrooms. This is essential if college level instructors want to stay connected with pedagogy in the public schools. The partnership provides the ground for testing new ideas and theories.

Support is a necessary component on both ends, particularly in the context of professional development schools. The K-12 school and teacher have the responsibility of providing the proper amount of nurturing and feedback to help the pre-service teacher become ready for a career. If teachers are looking for someone else to do their work, or to simply do the “grunt” work, then the partnership will collapse; likewise if the university does not provide adequate supervisory support to the pre-service students. Collaborators must be up front with the other on their needs and then follow through on their responsibilities. The authors suggest the following translational research approach to working collaboratively in a school university partnership.

Translational Research

The translational research process helps maintain authentic connections between university and school leaders (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). For many years, education programs have been fighting the notion of the university as the Ivory Tower. One approach, translational research, begins with the premise that universities are a part of, not *a part from* the schools and communities that surround it. There are varying differences in definitions of translational research or TRIP (translating research in practice). For example Sandra Petronio (1999) writes, “Translating scholarship into practice is a concept born out of a preconference focusing on fundamental approaches to solving practical concerns by using the ‘science of interpretation’ to translate theoretical orientations and research findings into useable information in the everyday world,” (p. 87). While firmly rooted in theory, translational research provides pathways for translation embedded within the research design and methodology through continuous formative assessment to guide decision making thereby improving outcomes. These pathways provide the vehicle for future dissemination of findings to the appropriate audiences. The unique and defining aspect of this approach is that it “creates a space for collaborative, co-constructed inquiry that uses the expertise of all stakeholders involved,” (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). Figure 1 illustrates how the translational research approach can effectively meet the research need for both translational research (TR) faculty, that is, faculty members committed to utilizing this approach and school stakeholders.

Figure 1: Translational Research implementation model



For the purpose of this model, the term “stakeholders” is stated generally, however, one may insert a number of descriptors before the term in order to recognize the specific nature of a project or study. The relationship between TR Faculty and school stakeholders implies that the research is mutually derived and mutually beneficial. It denotes shared responsibility for ensuring all components of the model are truly collaborative, however remain separate components because the responsibility for action at each step is not identical between the two. The foundation of this approach is

relationship building that is grounded in trust. Once these relationships are established it is possible to move through the model in a deliberate manner to work towards sustainable improved outcomes.

As experts in their own context, school stakeholders have the responsibility of identifying areas for improvement. That is not to say that TR faculty are not involved. At this stage in the model faculty can provide invaluable feedback as the school stakeholders hone in on a particular area they would like to address. However, if school members do not take the lead in this step the risk of corrupting the translational approach is highly likely. Partner buy-in is vital, and this approach requires genuine attention and participation by school stakeholders to safe-guard projects from reverting to the traditional top-down approach that places the researcher in a position of power while the stakeholders within the school merely enact the research agenda provided (Shaft & Greenwood, 2005).

From here the model leads to collaborative inquiry on the school side. Once an area has been identified for improvement important questions need to be asked. This is where TR faculty and school leaders work as equal co-collaborators to determine not only what inquiry questions fit the specified problem but also what data will best contribute to answering the questions. This is placed on the school stakeholder side of the model because just as identification of areas in need of improvement need to be led by school members, so does this piece. The data-driven decision making push has been valuable in educating leaders that better informed decisions lead to better outcomes. However, knowing that data is important and useful only scratches the surface of making sound decisions. Understanding how data informs decisions, which data to use and how those data should be analyzed is critical for ensuring positive outcomes (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). TR faculty brings expertise in methodology and data analysis to the collaborative inquiry phase that can inform and guide school leaders in the joint quest for improved outcomes. This step also allows for TR faculty to develop a rigorous methodological approach to address the inquiry questions with a deeper understanding of the context of the study.

Once the study has been collaboratively designed and is ready for implementation, the responsibility generally shifts to TR faculty to take the lead on data collection. It becomes the TR faculty responsibility to update, share, and disseminate preliminary findings necessary for shared decision making. This step distinguishes the TR from participatory action research, where the school and community members are trained to collect and analyze data (Schafft & Greenwood, 2005). Continued community participation in decisions made through implementation reinforce the co-constructed nature of inquiry and keep them involved as experts in the study.

Continuous formative assessment and review of progress sets translational research apart from more traditional methods of research. TR faculty are responsible for “placing data on the table” and thinking through its meaning in a timely manner so that community members can use the preliminary findings to move forward, backwards, or sideways. Rather than committing to “implementing with fidelity” which can lead to faithfully implementing a plan that will continue to be ineffective, formative reviews allow for modification to achieve improved outcomes. These improved outcomes then feed back into the cycle of collaboration and co-construction of inquiry questions that build upon previous translational work, ideally supporting sustainability of improvements.

Public schools working with TR faculties in school-university partnerships have found that the inquiry model presented is advantageous to educators (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). With increased availability of data and the need to constantly improve, it is essential for K-12 administrators and teachers to adopt an inquiry stance within their own practice. Being satisfied with the status quo is not acceptable. Inquiry has been found to be an ideal method building the partnership between the university and school wherein both sides are able to achieve individual goals while supporting the work of the other. The university gains knowledge, data, or information for existing studies. The public school gains knowledge, data, and information about the current practice. The university is able to adapt or change structures within its preparatory programs for pre-service teachers and develop research ideas within the unique context of the school setting. The public school is able to improve the outcomes that are reached with students.

Data-Driven Decision Making

Using research and data is not a novel concept in educational leadership (Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008; Lagemann, 2000). Increasingly school leaders are expected to interpret more sophisticated data and apply what they glean from the data to inform practice (Potter & Stefkovich, 2008). Translational research extends beyond the foundation of data-driven decision making in several important ways. First, the translational approach provides leaders the opportunity to become active participants in the co-construction of research questions that have contextual meaning in the here and now. A leader becomes a generator of knowledge and application through collaborative inquiry that addresses the specific needs of his or her school while maintaining an awareness of the unique context of the study (Petronio, 1999; Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). A second difference is that while data-informed decision can be collaborative, it is often restricted to a small group of administrators and teacher representatives. In translational research collaboration

among school leaders and TR faculty is explicit and required. The discussions produce questions that are contextually relevant at the local level and address areas in need of improvement in a timely manner. Most importantly, generating inquiry at a local level leads to improved outcomes that can then be built upon to create sustainable improvement using localized data during the shared decision making process (Smith & Helfenbein, 2009). Finally, the process allows leaders to look at their own interventions and programs within their schools, examine formative findings, and make intentional mid-intervention corrections rather than wait for end of year data generated outside the specific context of a single intervention or program. This is not to say that this process is absent in data-driven decision-making theoretically. However in practice, research shows that the process can be circumvented when the data is external and mandated, rather than generated within (Kowalski, Lasley & Mahoney, 2008; Smith & Helfenbein, 2009).

Community Partnership Engagement

An important and intentional by-product of the translational approach is a strengthening of the community involved with a particular study. Translational research practices rely on developing and sustaining relationships among stakeholders. There is a tremendous body of research that supports the claim that effective and sustainable school reform requires building an authentic community of stakeholders committed to improvement (Meier, 2000; Strike, 2004;). Ken Strike (2004) writes,

“...schools are communities when they have what I shall call the ‘four C’s’ of community: these are coherence, cohesion, care, and contact. Coherence consists of having a shared vision and a shared language—a shared education project. Cohesion is the sense of community that results from the shared pursuit of such a project. Care is required for initiating students into this project. The fourth C is contact. Above, I have emphasized what might be called the conceptual framework and affective requirements of community. Community also has ‘structural requirements. People need to be in regular contact with one another in ways that build understanding and trust,” (p. 225)

If we know these things to be true of community at the school level then is it such a stretch to posit the notion that these same elements, all critical components to translational research, could be incorporated into school-university partnerships?

Conclusion

The call has been made across the field of educational research that school-university partnerships need to examine their current ability to respond to the changes that have occurred in education. It will be necessary to focus resources and training in a manner that allows stakeholders to address current issues and be pro-active in anticipating future needs within both schools and universities. The foundation of data driven decision making has answered the question of “why” data use is an important part of decision making. The extensive literature on community building and its effect on school reform and climate answer the question of “who” should be involved; namely all stakeholders. If we define stakeholders in a P-20 context, pre-school through lifelong learning, then translational research provides the necessary answer of “how” school-university partnerships can be approached in a more effective manner.

One cannot overlook the importance genuine relationship building plays in this endeavor. Collaboration and co-constructed inquiry as illustrated in the translational model brings experts to the table from both the university and school context levels. These two levels of expertise are critical if schools and research are going to effectively address emerging issues in schools. Relationship building extends beyond a particular project or study. The relationships developed through the translational approach help create an environment of trust and provide the opportunity for continued partnership work into the future. The authors offer the following recommendations for effective school-university partnerships:

School Stakeholders

- Be clear on your purpose for entering into the partnership. Communicate this to all stakeholders.
- Establish and maintain open lines of communication.
- Be open to the needs of the university. Remember that it is a “two way street.”
- Maintain flexibility, as the partnership grows and transforms.
- Become an active participant in research that partners with university colleagues.

University Stakeholders

- Begin developing relationships with potential partners before there is an immediate need for a partnership.
- Be clear about your expectations for the study and how it connects with your goals and/or long term research interests.

- Recognize the expertise school stakeholders bring to the table in terms of deeper contextual knowledge of problems schools are facing.
- Be available whether in person, through email, or via telephone to respond to school stakeholders in a timely manner.
- Keep in mind that the cultures between schools and universities are distinctly different from one another and enter the partnership ready to explore differing realities.

The development of stronger school-university partnerships has the potential to connect theory to practice in meaningful ways that are beneficial to both researchers and practitioners. The pace of education reform is faster than it has ever been. Innovative ideas and creative approaches to emerging issues are required to meet the challenges facing schools. We must look towards innovative and creative ideas in research design as well. Translational research offers both rigorous study design and continuous feedback to practitioners in a timely manner that not only shapes reform but also builds community. Broadening our options and working together is a smart way to approach school reform topics as educational research moves into the future.

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