The Role of Teacher Empowerment and Teacher Accountability in School-University Partnerships and Action Research

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Abstract

Large-scale educational reform is occurring in Canada, the USA and the UK. Different strategies for change have resulted, including the school-university partnership and teacher-led action research. While this partnership and professional development method is perceived as a way to empower teachers it also appears to be riddled with issues of accountability. This study investigates the impact of participation in a school-university partnership, using action research as the professional development method for school improvement, on teaching professionals’ sense of accountability and empowerment. The findings from this study showed that these projects were organized from the top-down and teachers felt accountable to the government, their peers, their students, the School Board, the school community, and the project funding body. However, teachers also were found to be empowered as they experienced shared decision making, teacher autonomy, professional growth, and school change. This suggests that the relationship between accountability and empowerment is not a simple one.

Key words: action research, school-university partnership, teacher accountability, teacher empowerment

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Introduction

Large-scale educational reform, defined as systemic approaches to changing the way schools operate, is not a new phenomenon and it is not limited to any single country. In Canada, the USA and the UK, various professional development strategies for educational improvement have resulted from educational reform initiatives. Such professional development strategies have included the school-university partnership and teacher-led action research (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010; Kinsler, 2010; Levin & Rock, 2003; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000). While school-university partnerships and action research can be transformative and a method to empower teachers, they can also be a method of accountability and control.

Accountability and empowerment are often discussed in literature written on school-university partnerships (Anderson, 2005; Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000) and action research (Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010; Kinsler, 2010; Levin & Rock, 2003; Rosaen & Schram, 1997). However, accountability and empowerment are rarely discussed together as simultaneous influences on these partnerships. This study investigates the impact of participation in a school-university partnership, using action research as the professional development method for school improvement, on teaching professionals’ sense of accountability and empowerment.

The findings from this study showed that these projects were organized from the top-down and teachers felt accountable to the government, their peers, their students, the School Board, the school community, and the project funding body. However, teachers also were found to be empowered as they experienced shared decision making, teacher autonomy, professional growth, and school change. This suggests that the relationship between accountability and empowerment is not a simple one.

Background and Theoretical Framework

One university researcher, one School Board personnel and thirty-six elementary and secondary practitioners were a part of this school-university partnership. The university researcher was a professor at a mid-size university in Ontario. The School Board personnel and the thirty-six practitioners were employed by the Western School Board (WSB) located in Ontario, Canada. (Western School Board is a pseudonym). This partnership began when a School Board employee applied for and received an action-research grant from the Canadian Education Association, and asked a university professor who specializes in action research to join the project. These two stakeholders formed a school-university partnership in order to provide an opportunity for teachers and administrators to collaboratively work toward improving teacher practice and student achievement through action research. All action research projects in this school-university partnership aimed at improving student achievement, largely due to government policies and benchmarks. These action research projects provided a vehicle to empower teachers to create school change; however, they also held teachers accountable due to their focus on school improvement. A brief review of the literature on teacher accountability and teacher empowerment in school-university partnerships and action research helps to situate this study within the current literature on this topic.

For the past two decades, school-university partnerships have been perceived as a viable educational-reform strategy (Burton & Greher, 2007; Shen, Lu & Kretovics, 2004). Reports, including the American Tomorrow’s Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group (1986) and the British Schools Achieving Success White Paper (2001) have emphasized the role of school-
university collaboration and its potential for educational renewal (Shen, Lu & Kretovics, 2004). Both universities and schools have been seen as key contributors in educational change as they have much to gain by working together. Universities provide opportunities and instruction for teachers to take part in research that informs school improvement. They also provide support needed by teachers to make use of academic expertise, data, and resources. In return, schools provide access to field work and knowledge regarding the practicalities of teaching that is imperative to move research forward (Ciuffetelli Parker, Fazio, Volante, Cherubini, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Stephens & Boldt, 2004).

School-university partnerships consist of any number of forms and can range from, but are not limited to, a single university academic working with an individual school to several university academics working with an entire school district. These partnerships can range from a few months to several years in duration (Dembele & Schwille, 2007). They often consist of introductory workshops, a combination of formal and on-the-job training, and regular in-service meetings for all facilitators and evaluators (Burton & Greher, 2007). They also can include teacher directed action research. While all forms and types of involvement listed above can exist within a school-university partnership, it is important to note that each collaborative partnership has its own unique structure, while sharing a similar responsibility for maximizing student learning and achievement through exemplary practice and meaningful, professional growth (Burton & Greher, 2007).

Action research, similar to school-university partnerships, can also improve student learning through teachers’ professional growth. Action research, often defined as the “systemic, intentional inquiry by teachers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 5), is a professional development method that uses inquiry and reflection to promote change in a school (Rosaen & Schram, 1997). It opens communication among teachers and increases awareness and reflection of issues that affect learning and professionalism (Levin & Rock, 2003). It is also viewed as an empowerment method where teachers examine their own beliefs, and explore their own practice through critical reflection, and decision-making abilities that improve teaching and learning (Gilles, Wilson & Elias, 2010).

School-university partnerships and action research can be transformative, yet it would be inaccurate to say that this is the norm. Accountability has often been embedded in school-university partnerships and action research. Accountability is a concept in government that is often used synonymously with such concepts as responsibility, answerability, and blameworthiness for actions, decisions and policies. In particular, the way the school-university partnerships are organized, and the accountability and control that have often been perceived in this collaboration, can be problematic. For example, school-university partnerships are typically organized by university personnel in conference with School Board administration and it is much later before representative teachers from one or more school buildings may be involved (Bartholomewa & Sandholtz, 2009). In this situation, teachers may give their consent, but they are not empowered. In addition, accountability has been reported in school-university partnerships due to the reason they are formed (Anderson, 2005; Kinsler, 2010; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000). Teachers in school-university partnerships, like many other teachers in the profession, have felt multiple responsibilities to make progress by improving student outcomes. They have felt politically accountable for the range of services provided by the government and for the adherence to rules and to bureaucracy. They have reported feeling accountable to their peers and to their students to create successful student and school change. There is also the wider
community, including potential employers that demand an effective education service within the competitive global market (Anderson, 2005; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000).

Accountability is also often embedded in action research, as this professional development tool often aims to meet the criteria and benchmarks that come with standards-driven reforms, causing action research to become much more bureaucratic (Kinsler, 2010). Rather than action research advancing social justice and change, which was its original aim, more often than not educational action research is used as a technical tool to facilitate the use of particular teaching techniques and to implement government policies (Kinsler, 2010). This results in teachers being held responsible and accountable for student outcomes, which also often occurs in school-university partnerships.

While accountability has been used by reformers in school-university partnerships and action research projects, it has been increasingly recognized that in order for school reform to be successful, teachers need to be empowered. The two terms of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment, while often presented as counter-narratives within the literature, are rarely discussed together as simultaneous influences on these partnerships. Yet, within this study, both teacher accountability and teacher empowerment were investigated together and were found to be simultaneously present in this school-university partnership.

The concept of teacher empowerment has been discussed in different school management strategies for educational reform (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Ingersoll, 2007). Empowerment includes how individuals and/or communities create and share knowledge in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies. By being empowered, individuals not only manage and adapt to change, but contribute to change in their lives and their respective environments (UNESCO, 2000). Goyne, Padgett, Rowiki & Triplitt (1999) envision six dimensions to teacher empowerment and five of these dimensions directly relate to the aims found in this school-university partnership. They consist of shared decision making, teacher professional growth, teacher self-efficacy, teacher autonomy, and teacher impact.

First, shared decision making, which is often stressed in school-university partnerships, is perceived as leading to teacher empowerment because it incorporates the teachers’ voice in school decisions that typically has been mute (Ingersoll, 2007). Second, continued professional growth is perceived as empowering as teachers can develop their own self-images as knowledgeable individuals (Levitt, 2008; Ryan, 2005). Action research or a school-university partnership, for example, encourages teachers to be inquiry oriented, skilled, and reflective professionals who co-create a vision for school change. Third, when teachers believe their behaviours and performance can make a difference in the lives of students, they have self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Manning, 2007; Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2007). Teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy willingly undertake challenging tasks that may occur in the school change process (Enderline-Lampe, 2002). In this sense, teacher self-efficacy is believed to be a central component in school-university partnerships and action research. The fourth dimension of teacher empowerment is teacher autonomy. Without a significant degree of teacher autonomy, organizational control may deny teachers the very power and flexibility they need to create effective school change (Hargrove, Huber & Walker, 2004; Ingersoll, 2007; Kinsler, 2010). A school-university partnership and action research may combat this problem as it is based on the belief that teachers are equal partners in making school decisions. Fifth, when a teacher believes that s/he can affect or influence the life of school, they exhibit teacher impact. This could occur, for example, when a teacher believes that a student has achieved a level of success in school that he or she had previously not obtained. This dimension, in collaboration with the other four
dimensions of teacher empowerment, is often found in school-university partnerships and action research.

While school-university partnerships and action research can result in teacher empowerment, it is important to not overlook the fact that “the freer we are to make decisions about ourselves and the worlds around us, the greater our responsibility” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 15). In other words, while school-university partnerships hold possibilities for greater decision-making abilities and empowerment, accountability is often embedded within this position.

In summary, teacher accountability and teacher empowerment often occur in school-university partnerships and action research. Teacher accountability is perceived as controlling teachers work and holding teachers responsible for student outcomes. Teacher empowerment is perceived as teacher-led change in respective environments through shared decision making, teacher autonomy, professional growth, self-efficacy, and teacher impact. While these perspectives to professional development are typically dichotomous, this study illustrates that the relationship between accountability and empowerment may not be that simple. In fact, teacher empowerment and teacher accountability may be two positions that teachers simultaneously hold within school-university partnerships and action research.

Methods and Methodology

This school-university partnership consisted of one university professor, one School Board personnel and thirty-six voluntary elementary and secondary practitioners. The role of the university professor was to instruct the practitioners how to conduct action research and assist them through the process of inquiry described below. The role of the School Board personnel was to act as a liaison between the teachers and the university professor, and to produce a deliverable project (i.e. final report) to the funding body for this partnership. These two stakeholders jointly decided the schedule of events in order to achieve this aim. After this was complete, teachers were recruited to join the project. The role of the practitioners was to create an action research project targeting the needs of their school(s). There were seven action research projects, with two to seven participants in each group. Five secondary school teachers from four different schools worked together on a common project. Four elementary schools worked independently with a team of 6-7 teachers from individual schools. The two remaining teams consisted of 2-3 support teachers who each supported a variety of different elementary schools. Topics consisted of: discovering strategies to improve writing, reading and literacy levels, general student success, improving student achievement through collaborative teacher lesson study and team building, and improving student attitudes through character development.

Six half days were allotted for this partnership during the 2007-2008 school year. Three half days consisted of teaching the practitioners how to conduct action research. Two half days were for in-school professional growth to collect and analyze data. During this time, practitioners were also expected to write a two-page research report that articulated their research question, process and findings. The sixth and final half day meeting at the end of the school year was for all groups to come together, share their findings, and reflect on the process.

A total of 21 teachers participated in this study, with at least one person per action research project. Thirteen practitioners were interviewed and the participants were equally distributed among the different action research groups. All practitioners in this study were contacted via the WSB’s email and conferencing system. A letter of introduction was written and
emailed to all participants. Details of the study, a request to complete an on-line survey, and a request for any volunteers to be interviewed were included. The letter of information and a consent form was also attached to the email. The participants were asked to read the letter of information and had the opportunity to have their questions and/or concerns addressed via email.

The practitioners who participated in the semi-structured interviews were recruited with the same courtesies as those who participated in the survey (Appendix 1). Upon agreement, an interview strategy was arranged that was convenient to the participant. Interviews (Appendix 2) were conducted in person or via email communication. These practitioners were chosen from a larger pool of study participants in order to gain diverse sampling of teaching and personal backgrounds.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods constitute this study. The questions that were asked in the questionnaire were derived from literature written on school-university partnerships, teacher accountability and teacher empowerment. Questions were also derived from documents provided by the School Board. These documents provided a brief snapshot of each project which helped formulate the survey questions.

In the surveys, seven demographic/background questions and twenty-seven questions were posed on the themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment (Appendix 1). These questions arose from the research literature and the School Board documents. The questionnaire was administered to capture general trends, to suggest questions for the interview protocol, and to provide a wider understanding of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment in school-university partnerships.

Once the surveys were completed, the findings from both the surveys and the documents were analyzed and formed the interview protocol for the teachers. In all thirteen interviews, seven teacher/project background questions were asked and the remaining twenty-six questions were posed on both themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment (Appendix 2). These were asked to gain an understanding each person’s experience. Demographic questions were asked in order to gain a detailed picture of those who participated in this school-university partnership.

The data for this research project was analyzed in different manners. First, the surveys were analyzed using an Excel Spreadsheet that was configured from SurveyMonkey. Second, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded according to a priori and emergent codes, and analyzed using MAXqda2 computer software. The School Board documents were read and analyzed according to the themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment that arose from the literature. The survey and interview responses were also analyzed according to the themes of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment.

Survey participants were asked to submit their demographic information. Of those practitioners who participated, nineteen percent had taught for one-five years, thirty-three percent had taught for six-ten years, fourteen percent for eleven-fifteen years and thirty-three percent had taught for sixteen or more years. Seventy-six percent were female and twenty-four percent were male, which reflects the gender distribution in both this case study and in the teaching profession in North America (Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004; Rowden-Racette, 2005). Seventy-one percent of the survey participants indicated they were not classroom teachers, but rather were Administration or in teacher leadership/support positions, such as a Student Success Teacher (SSI), a Literacy Numeracy Support Teacher (LNST), Learning Support Teacher (LST), English as a Second Language Teacher (ESL) or Guidance (Table 1). Their experience in school-university partnerships was little to none, although many had some research experience or a
research interest. A few practitioners were encouraged to become involved in this partnership despite their hesitancy due to the perceived time commitment or their inexperience. Most volunteered or agreed to participate because they felt it would be an excellent professional growth opportunity. The practitioners who participated in this school-university partnership were teacher leaders who were largely pre-selected – seventy-five percent of the surveyed practitioners stated they were asked by their principal or by the School Board personnel to be involved in this school-university partnership.

Table 1
Survey Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>(7)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in the School</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administration (e.g. principal)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNST/Coach</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SST</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis/Results

According to the survey results from which they could choose more than one option, the teaching staff themselves believed that they were selected because they were enthusiastic about the project (50%), had an interest in improving school/student outcomes (78%) or were significantly involved in the school (61%). A few of the practitioners acknowledged that those participants who were selected for this school-university partnership could be considered a “top-notch teacher” (Participant 7). While there were some practitioners who felt that they were “pushed into it” (Participant 9; Participant 13) and felt unable to say no because “usually if your principal asks you to do something you usually have to say yes with a smile” (Participant 1), most participants saw their involvement in this school-university partnership as an opportunity for professional growth or an extension of their present position. In fact, all the interviewees and the survey participants stated that their involvement in the school-university partnership was either moderately (38%) to greatly (57%) enjoyed, on a five point scale.

Accountability expectations in school-university partnerships and action research, like all other aspects of teaching, can be extensive. As reported in the literature above, accountability to
the government’s bureaucracy and rules, to their peers and professional norms, and to their students are often felt by teachers (Anderson, 2005; Kinsler, 2010; Woods & Jeffrey, 2000). This school-university partnership was no different. All forms of accountability discussed earlier, and more, were perceived by the practitioners.

First, accountability to the government was felt by the teachers/administrators. This was illustrated within the documents that the practitioners submitted and were published by the School Board, and the interviews that were conducted in this study. While the practitioners may not have felt that they should be accountable to the government, as only twenty percent of the survey respondents indicated their project was to improve provincial results and thirty percent stated that these projects were created to improve student achievement, the interviews and documents proved otherwise. According to these two data sources, every action research project that occurred in this school-university partnership was tied to a government mandate to improve student success and student achievement. From improving “EQAO testing scores” (Participant 9) to “having that 85 percent graduation rate by the year 2010” (Participant 10), it is clear that government policies and benchmarks were indeed central to the project and the teachers/administrators strove to meet them.

Second, accountability to peers was felt by the practitioners. In fact, 100 percent of survey participants stated that they felt accountable to their peers, in choosing from a list of six items which they could choose as many answers as they wished. This included peers who were not participating in the school-university partnership as well as those who were. For example, Participant 4 stated that she felt accountable to “communicate the results and some of the strategies that were used within the school” and to peers who were not in the research project. She also felt accountable to these same people because she “volunteered for this role as taking part in this research”. Others, to a greater degree, felt accountability to peers within this project. For example, Participant 12 felt accountable for her peers “to have a positive experience in [the project]” and Participant 9 felt accountable to “keep data, keep records to present to the whole [group] because they are relying on me”. This may be because, as Participant 5 explained: “when you’re committed to a project where other people are in the same boat as you, you feel that you’re actually compelled to pull your own weight and every time you meet…your colleagues are depending on you to do your own piece”. For a great number of reasons, mostly due to the fact that they had committed to this project, teachers/administrators felt accountable to their peers both within and outside of this school-university partnership.

Third, accountability to students was felt by ninety percent of the survey participants. According to interview participants, accountability to students occurred because, as Participant 6 suggested: “we’re junkies as teachers, we want the best for our students and for ourselves and we never want to fail through the process”. Participant 1 suggested that the teachers/administrators “were doing it for [the students] and it would have been a wasted year for them if they didn’t get anything out of it”. Some practitioners felt accountable to the students because they felt it was in their job description (Participant 2; Participant 1), while others felt accountable to students to change their personal practice and to be a change agent now that they had useable data driven information (Participant 6; Participant 11). In fact, seventy-five percent of the survey participants stated that improving professional practice was the key reason for these projects to be created. In essence, by working on action research projects within a school-university partnership, these practitioners felt accountable to the students because, as Participant 8 stated, she felt it was her job “to engage and question [her] own practice and look at ways to improve practice, so we can better the students…which ultimately helps the school”. By not using these data and by not
finding a solution to the workable problem, these practitioners felt that they would be letting their students down and themselves down as practitioners.

Fourth, and not referenced in the literature, are teachers/administrators feeling accountable to the School Board. Within this study, this type of accountability was mentioned in two ways. Participant 13 felt accountable to use the professional growth time effectively so that there was not “any unaccountable time”. Participant 11 felt accountable to the School Board “to maintain a focus…dialogue at my school and as an entire group ensure that we were on the right track”. These practitioners felt accountable to maintain a professional focus and thoroughly use the professional time allotted to them in this school-university partnership.

Fifth, accountability to the school community and the community at large was felt. Only ten percent of the survey respondents acknowledged this, but within the interviews it was discussed more frequently. For example, Participant 6 felt that he was “accountable to our students and to our school [because] every school is different…so it is important for us to find our own school culture and work with what is best for our students”. Participant 11 felt accountable to be “more connected to the schools across the system” and Participant 5 felt accountable to the community because “our kids are living in a global economy where they are going to have to be competing against people from all around the world”.

Lastly, accountability to the grant funding body was felt by one practitioner. Participant 8 stated that she presented to the funding body and felt responsible for “talking and working with them at the table and giving them feedback so they could see what we were doing down at our Board, so they knew that their money was working”. She felt accountable to be able to articulate that the action research projects in this school-university partnership had been meaningful to create school change.

As one can understand, accountability felt by teachers/administrators in this school-university partnership is extensive. It includes accountability to the government, peers, students, the School Board, the community, and the grant funding body. However, with this accountability, empowerment also occurred, although perhaps not directly realized by the practitioners.

Within this study it is immediately apparent that the participants in this school-university partnership are attempting to evoke positive change for their students, peers, the School Board, the community, and the grant funding body. By contrast, the teachers did not appear to be doing it for any other reason but to help others. They were not trying to empower themselves and many did not realize that they were in an empowering position until it was discussed in the interviews. Nevertheless, when comparing Goyne et al.’s (1999) five components of teacher empowerment to the attitudes and activities within this study, one can recognize the many ways the teachers were empowered.

Shared decision making and teacher autonomy, which are often emphasized in school-university partnerships and action research, are perceived as leading to teacher empowerment. This is because shared decision making and teacher autonomy incorporate the teachers’ voice in school decisions they normally have not been a part of (Goyne et al., 1999; Ingersoll, 2007). In this study, shared decision making and teacher autonomy both occurred. For example, in the survey, choosing from five options, one hundred percent of the participants stated that the team collaboratively chose the plan of action. Eighty-six percent of the participants felt that their individual opinion greatly mattered within their team, eighty-one percent felt that their feedback was greatly considered, and ninety percent felt that they had the ability to make their own decisions. This positive feeling of collaboration and shared decision making was also articulated.
in the interviews. There was a general consensus in the interviews that the projects were “absolutely collaborative” (Participant 8), which included everyone putting “their input in, like what needed to be included [in the report]” (Participant 7) to “decid[ing] on roles” and “shar[ing] certain aspects such as data analysis and collection and report writing” (Participant 12). Even in meetings, where an administrator predominately was the facilitator (which may suggest an authoritative position) the teachers felt part of the process. Teachers generally articulated that the administrators “asked first if it was a good time [for a meeting]” (Participant 1) or as Participant 4 stated, “we kind of decided as a group”.

When working with the university professor practitioners also felt they were making shared decisions. For example, one participant thought that this school-university partnership was “a great way to support and work with teachers in a collaborative way. We all learned together [because we could] explore research questions that are of interest to those involved and grounded in student need” (Participant 12). Also, despite the fact that “again the university was being called in as the expert, so to speak” this partnership was felt to be “set up as a partnership, it was set up as a learning process [where] it was nice to actually have the university come and take us through action research, teach about action research, and then through that, we could identify a problem and work on it” (Participant 8). It was due to this “hands on approach” (Participant 8) to research and the “relationship building” (Participant 6) that these teachers/administrators experienced empowerment. They were empowered because they were able to conduct their own research and have “a say in what are the best practices. Rather than the researchers at the university doing all the research and then coming to the teachers…the teachers [were] a part of research” (Participant 7).

A third dimension of teacher empowerment, according to Goyne et al. (1999), is continued professional growth. Professional growth allows teachers to become inquiry oriented, skilled and reflective professionals. Continued professional growth was felt to occur within this school-university partnership by the majority of survey participants. For example, sixty-two percent of the survey participants stated that they greatly experienced improvements in the quality of teaching, eighty-one percent stated that this school-university partnership provided great opportunities to think/talk about their practice, and participants moderately (43%) to greatly (47%) enjoyed their profession more. The interviews also reflected this finding. For example, one participant stated: “I am more confident in my own teaching practice, my own assessment and everything else because I had to do it last year and refine it” (Participant 1). Participant 5 commented on the increase of reflection and dialoguing which was leading to an increase in skills. For example, she stated that the project was “a time for you to do some reflection and [through] that reflection, I think you come to an understanding of, you know you can do [something] that does positively impact students”. Participant 8 also saw this type of reflective, and what she called “purposeful, accountable talk” occurring. In her experience, people who had co-taught with her “want[ed] to dialogue about it on their time…[they] still want[ed] to continue that conversation about what happened in the classroom”. By engaging in on-going professional growth, such as the action research projects that occurred in this case study, practitioners were able to step out of their comfort zone, to learn new things, and try them out in front of others. It also brought people together through collaboration and dialoguing. This in turn allowed practitioners to empower each other, and through support, empower themselves.

A fourth dimension to teacher empowerment is a strong sense of self-efficacy, to willingly undertake challenging tasks, expend greater effort, and show increased persistence in the presence of obstacles. This dimension, like the ones mentioned above, was also felt to occur
in this school-university partnership. For example, almost all of the participants felt that this school-university partnership, on a five point scale, moderately (47%) to greatly (33%) allowed them to take risks as a teacher. In addition, Participant 1 felt a sense of empowerment due to self-efficacy because he felt he was allowed to “pretty much experiment in my classroom with different materials and different lesson delivery techniques to engage the boys in literacy and in reading in particular”. Alternatively, Participant 8 saw how self-efficacy empowered a “reluctant teacher” who she was working with. She felt that the teacher she was working with transformed from a woman who “was a little worried…and very stressed about [a coach] coming into her classroom with everyone and [how] she felt her class was being watched and that would reflect on her teaching abilities” to a teacher who was positive and enthusiastic because she could see “that it really did engage the kids”. Changing practice through self-efficacy can be a method to empower teachers.

Teacher impact is the fifth and final dimension of teacher empowerment in this study. Teacher impact refers to a teacher’s belief that s/he can affect or influence the life of school (Goyne et al, 1999). Within this school-university partnership, many teachers felt teacher impact for a great number of reasons, including: completing research, student improvement, attitude changes and changes in practice. For example, Participant 7 stated: “You know it does empower you to know that wow we did this research…it empowers you because you are seeing change. You know you are making that change in your school which is really wonderful”. Participant 2 felt that “the biggest thing was that end result… It just makes you feel good to see that those students are improving through what we are doing. It’s empowering right. It makes you feel good that you are helping them”.

Discussion

Looking at the evidence in this study, accountability and control were a part of the school-university partnership which used action research as the professional development method for school improvement. Within this partnership, the School Board and the university professor were authoritative figures who organized this collaboration from the top-down. Teachers were recruited last. In addition, the action research projects within this school-university partnership were created because the education system and/or teachers were still perceived as needing improvement. Help was still sought from the outside through a university professor. This in turn, as the literature suggests, caused teachers to feel a high degree of accountability - or multiple responsibilities for performance - to a great number of people and/or organizations. They felt accountable to the government, their peers, students, the School Board, the community, and the grant funding body to increase student outcomes. For example, Participant 9 and Participant 10 felt accountable to the government as these projects were formed to raise EQAO testing scores and the secondary school graduation rate. One hundred percent of survey participants stated that they felt accountable to their peers, and ninety percent of survey participants stated they felt accountable to their students. Participant 11, among others, felt accountable to the School Board to focus on the project and ensure it was completed, while Participant 5 felt accountable to the community because students will be living and competing in a global society. Accountability to the grant funding body was experienced by Participant 8 who felt responsible to give feedback and show them that their money was being used effectively.

While participants felt accountable to improve student outcomes within the action research projects they created in this school-university partnership, they simultaneously
experienced the characteristics of teacher empowerment as outlined by Goyne et al. (1999). For example, one hundred percent of the teachers stated in the survey that they experienced shared decision making and teacher autonomy when they collaboratively chose their research question and how they would carry out their research methodology. Over eighty percent of participants also experienced shared decision making and teacher autonomy when they felt that their individual opinion greatly mattered, that their feedback was greatly considered, and when they felt they had the ability to make their own decisions. Professional growth occurred as participants felt they had greatly improved the quality of their teaching and had great opportunities to think/talk about their practice which resulted in the participants enjoying their profession more. For example, Participant 5 felt that the action research projects gave teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice in order to positively impact students. Teacher efficacy was experienced, as this partnership allowed teachers to take risks, experiment in classrooms, and empower other teachers to take risks in their practice. Participant 1, for example, felt a sense of empowerment because he felt he was allowed to experiment in his classroom in order to discover which materials and lesson delivery techniques were most effective. Lastly, participants experienced teacher impact or the belief that s/he can affect or influence the life of school by completing their research, witnessing student improvement, attitude changes and changes in practice within themselves and other teachers. Participant 7, for instance, felt empowered to know that they conducted the action research and because of it, they were experiencing change.

With both accountability and empowerment simultaneously existing in this school-university partnership, it suggests that the relationship between accountability and empowerment is not a simple one. In this study, accountability and empowerment were not dichotomous positions. Teachers did feel accountable to be change agents in their school, but this sense of accountability was not negatively perceived as the research often indicates it to be. Instead, study participants felt that creating change was a natural outcome of their profession and of their action research projects. The teachers never implied that the School Board or the university professor put pressure on them to create significant change in their schools. It was these participants, these “top-notch teachers” who already had a great interest in school change before the project began, that felt they owed it to their students, their peers and themselves to make educational change occur. They all wanted to create positive school change and were excited when they witnessed that change.

Looking at the data now, it is unclear if teacher accountability led to teacher empowerment, if teacher empowerment led to teacher accountability or if the position of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment is continuously oscillating. This is a limitation of the study. Further research is recommended in order to understand the influences, parameters, and extent of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment in school-university partnerships and action research. Nevertheless, within this study, both accountability and empowerment were embedded within this school-university partnership, and teacher participants found this experience to be rewarding. The majority of the study participants felt that the quality of their teaching improved and they were enjoying their profession more. They did feel responsible to make changes in their schools because of these projects, but they also felt proud, excited, and empowered to witness the change they were helping to create.
Conclusion

Based on these findings, I believe that accountability and empowerment simultaneously exists in school-university partnerships and action research projects aimed at creating school improvement. Yes this partnership and professional development method can be riddled with accountability. Yes change is not easy, and yes these partnerships are often organized from the top-down. Nevertheless, school-university partnerships that use action research as a professional development method for school improvement are rooted in needs and front-line work of teachers. They enhance teacher collaboration and empower them to make changes in their school. They may not be perfect in conception or implementation; however, it is important to note that while school-university partnerships have been around for more than one hundred years, they are continually evolving and increasingly moving toward bottom-up, teacher-driven change (Ciuffetelli Parker, et al., 2008). As Fullan (1999) states: “We are still at the beginning of an intellectual burgeoning… [and] this revolution has barely touched schools”. It is true. School-university partnerships and action research are relatively new concepts in education and they are still evolving. We have yet to see their full potential. With greater understanding of the inter-workings of such collaborations, and how the dual role of accountability and empowerment unfolds in action research projects and school-university partnerships, it appears that greater school change is indeed possible.
References


*Brock Education, 20*(2), 43-64


Appendix 1: School-University Partnership Survey

I: Teacher / Project Background Information

1. How long have you been in the teaching profession?
   □ 1-5  □ 6-10  □ 11-15  □ 16+

2. What is your gender?
   □ Male  □ Female

3. What is your role in the school?
   □ Teacher
   □ Guidance / LST
   □ Department Head
   □ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

4. In which school-university (action research) project have you participated?
   ______________________________________________________________________________

5. How did you become involved in this project?
   □ You volunteered
   □ You were selected by your principal / school board
   □ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

6. If you volunteered and/or were selected, what factors do you feel led to this decision? (Please check all answers that apply.)
   □ You were enthusiastic about the project
   □ Years of Teaching Experience
   □ Interested in improving student outcomes
   □ Involvement in the school
   □ Other: ______________________________________________________________________

7. Why was your project created? (Please check all answers that apply.)
   □ to improve provincial test results
   □ to improve schools based on governmental policy (i.e. student success initiative)
   □ from institutional needs (what the school staff felt it needed)
   □ to maximize student learning and achievement
   □ to develop and implement of exemplary practice
   □ to engage in meaningful, ongoing professional development
   □ to educate effective teachers
   □ other: ______________________________________________________________________
II. Project Involvement

8. Who was involved in your action research project? (Please check all answers that apply.)
   - colleagues from your school
   - colleagues from other schools
   - a university professor/researcher
   - a school board member(s)
   - a principal(s)
   - Other: ______________________________________________________________________

9. Please explain your role in the action research project?
   ______________________________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________________

10. How often did group members meet?
    - once a week
    - every other week
    - month
    - every other month
    - other: _______________________________________________________________________

11. How long was the time commitment given to the project?
    - 0-6 months
    - 6-12 months
    - 1-2 years
    - other: _______________________________________________________________________

III. Project Formation

12. Did your project consist of any of the following: (Please check all answers that apply.)
    - introductory workshops
    - formal training
    - on-the-job training
    - regular in-service meetings for all facilitators and evaluators
    - peer observation
    - group discussion
    - documentation / data collecting
    - strategies to influence policy decisions
    - other: _______________________________________________________________________

13. Each project had a specific plan of action, how was this plan chosen?
    - the researcher suggested/chose the plan of action
    - the school/school board administration suggested/chose the plan of action
    - the team collaboratively chose the plan
    - other: _______________________________________________________________________

Brock Education, 20(2), 43-64
14. Each project involved a professional researcher. Did you feel that the professional researcher provided: (Please check all answers that apply.)
□ research that informed school improvement
□ support to allow teachers to make use of academic expertise, data and resources
□ an opportunity for teachers to contribute to national debate regarding student improvement
□ other: _______________________________________________________________________

IV. The Project

15. Did you feel that this partnership helped teachers to advocate for students?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did not advocate</td>
<td>Strongly advocated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15.b. Please explain your answer
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

16. Did you feel that your involvement in this project helped you to become a better teacher?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No improvement</td>
<td>Great improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16.b. Please explain your answer.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

17. Do you feel that this project: (Please check all answers that apply.)
□ provided opportunities for you and other teachers to think and talk about their practice
□ enabled you to take a political stance on issues of student improvement
□ allowed you to take risks as a teacher
□ had a high consensus of agreeable goals and values
□ allowed teachers to have a voice and feel that their opinion mattered
□ allowed you to experience improvements in the quality of your professional life
□ allowed you to enjoy your profession more
□ other: _______________________________________________________________________

17.b. If you felt strongly affected by any of these answers, please indicate which item and your reasons for feeling so.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
18. Did you feel that there were any struggles that arose from the project, such as: (Please check all answers that apply.)
- □ miscommunication between the professional researcher and the teachers
- □ miscommunication between teachers
- □ an unreasonable time commitment to attend meetings
- □ an unreasonable time commitment to prepare materials for this project
- □ added stress or pressure
- □ division between you and your colleagues because of your involvement in this project
- □ a false sense of collegiality and friendliness
- □ unequal opportunities for leadership
- □ individuals who exercised power to promote or protect their own interests
- □ feeling silenced and/or unsupported by colleagues, co-participants, or administration
- □ other: _______________________________________________________________________

18.b. If you felt strongly affected by any of the above struggles, please indicate which item and your reasons for feeling so.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

19. Did you feel that your opinions mattered in creating the project? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

   □ □ □ □ □
   1 2 3 4 5
did not matter greatly mattered

20. Did you feel that your feedback was taken seriously once the project was undertaken? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

   □ □ □ □ □
   1 2 3 4 5
not taken seriously taken very seriously

21. Did you feel this project put constraints on your teaching, including what should be taught, how it should be taught and how much time you could take to teach it? (Please rank your answer on the scale below)

   □ □ □ □ □
   1 2 3 4 5
many constraints great freedom

22. Did you feel that you had less autonomy (ability to make your own decisions) as a teacher because of your involvement in this project? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

   □ □ □ □ □
   1 2 3 4 5
no autonomy great autonomy
23. Did you feel that your involvement in this project made you accountable to finding a successful solution that met the aim of the study? (Please rank your answer on the scale below.)

- [ ] 1  
- [ ] 2  
- [ ] 3  
- [ ] 4  
- [ ] 5  

strong accountability  
no accountability

24. At any time did you feel that your involvement in this project made you accountable to:
(please check all that apply)
- [ ] teachers working within your project
- [ ] the government and their policies to promote student success
- [ ] your students
- [ ] the students’ guardians
- [ ] the wider community, including potential employers for students

24.b. Please explain your answer.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

V. Final Questions

25. Overall, would you say that your involvement in this project has been positive?

- [ ] 1  
- [ ] 2  
- [ ] 3  
- [ ] 4  
- [ ] 5  

not positive  
very positive

26. Have there been any outcomes or evidence of change because of this project?

- [ ] 1  
- [ ] 2  
- [ ] 3  
- [ ] 4  
- [ ] 5  

no change  
great change

24.b. Please explain your answer.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

26. In your experience, do you believe that teachers working with professional researchers are a way to create successful school improvements and student learning?

- [ ] 1  
- [ ] 2  
- [ ] 3  
- [ ] 4  
- [ ] 5  

weak mode  
great mode

27. Are there any suggestions you can provide that you feel would make a partnership between teachers and professional researchers more successful?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you become involved in this action research project?
2. Did you feel pressured to be a part of this project in any way?
3. Have you ever been a part of a school-university partnership before? If so, can you compare this project to that one?
4. Most people who were chosen to be a part of these projects were already holding special positions (i.e. LNST, LST). Why do you think these people were chosen to be in the projects?
   a. Do you think they represent the typical teaching population?
   b. Do you think the people chosen made your project more successful, less successful or it would have made no difference if other teachers were carrying out the same project?
5. Were the approximate years of experience of the people in your group similar or did they vary?
   a. Do you think this had an impact on the project?
6. What were the reasons for this project to be created?
7. What were the intended outcomes?
8. Were the reasons for the project creation the same reason why you wanted to be involved or did you have additional hopes?
9. What was your role in the action research project?
10. How was your specific role chosen?
11. Did everyone have separate roles? If so, briefly explain what they were.
12. What was the role of the administrator?
13. What was the role of the university professor?
14. Did you find the training presented by the university professor helpful? Please explain.
15. Was the training for these projects extensive enough? Please explain.
16. Was writing the final paper collaborative or completed by one individual?
17. How often did group members meet?
18. Who decided that you should meet at this time?
19. Do you feel that these meetings were effective? Please explain.
20. Our project was less than a year in duration, who chose the length of time for the project?
21. Do you feel it was enough time to complete this project? Please explain.
22. In the survey most teachers stated that this project advocated for students either moderately to greatly. Can you tell me how you felt it advocated for students?
23. In the survey there was a strong sense that the students’ opinions needed to be heard and validated. Was this central to the project?
24. The only difficulty that seemed to be mentioned in the survey was stress. Did you feel added stress because of your involvement in this project? Please explain.
25. Were there any other problems that you felt occurred during this project? If so, please explain.
26. What types of opportunities did this project provide for you personally, if any?
27. Research shows that involvement in school reform projects, such as the one you participated in, often increase teacher empowerment, but also increase teacher accountability. How do you feel about this statement?
28. Please explain if there was any evidence of change that came from this project?
29. What types of change were you hoping for? School-wide change or change in personal practice?
30. Do you feel that school-university partnerships are a promising way of improving schools and student learning?
31. Is there any other aspect of this project that you feel is important that I haven’t asked about? If so, please add additional comments here.