

## Partnering with practitioners: Designing for context

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*In this paper we describe a research-practice partnership between the Woolf Fisher Research Centre and the Digital Schools Partnership, a group of 84 schools in 11 geographically-based clusters that were implementing a ubiquitous digital teaching and learning platform within their face-to-face classes. The model of research-partnership employed is the Learning Schools Model (LSM), which is a design-based research approach that has been tested and replicated over 15 years and across diverse contexts and countries. We reflect on benefits and challenges of working in partnerships to achieve practice and research aims, which are to improve valued learning outcomes for students historically under-served in education and to advance research knowledge more generally (Lai, McNaughton, Jesson, & Wilson, 2020). We describe a recursive process of collective inquiry that involves researchers and teachers: working together to identify valued learning outcomes (VLOs) on which to focus our improvement efforts; developing a rich profile of students' strengths and areas for improvement with respect to those VLOs; generating and testing a set of possible explanations for that profile of learning; co-designing and implementing targeted interventions, and; evaluating the extent and impact of changed practices. We reflect on the importance of building relational trust and approaches for doing so.*

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### Introduction

The worlds of education researchers and practising teachers can seem disconnected. Some educational researchers find it hard to access schools and classrooms in which to conduct research and then, when their study is completed, can feel frustrated that teachers and school leaders beyond the research sites are not as interested as they hoped in the findings that they worked so hard to generate. Teachers on the other hand can feel that researchers' suggestions are too far removed from their lived realities to be of much practical benefit to either them or their students. Some teachers and school leaders have had the experience of participating in research about questions that they had no part in generating and which they never have the opportunities to learn about. Other practitioners have at some time been passive or active resisters of professional development based on research findings generated from studies in other schools and settings but assumed (wrongly, in their view) to be generalisable to their own. Such experiences can contribute to teachers feeling "done to" by researchers and reinforce perceptions that researchers don't really understand them or their students and arrive with pre-set change agendas rather than a genuine commitment to learn from and with them. This disconnect between research and practice is one explanation given for the persistent problem of limited transfer of educational research into practice. On the other hand, some have argued that the low status of educational research is partly due to an historic applied versus basic research divide where applied research in messy contexts has lower status than basic research in more controlled situations (Snow, 2015).

Research-practice partnerships, in which the respective knowledge-bases and experiences of researchers and practitioners are both valued, have been promoted as one strategy for making educational research more impactful. Such partnerships seek to improve educational practice at the same time as advancing research knowledge.

### **The Learning Schools Model**

The Learning Schools Model (LSM) is a design-based research-practice partnership that has been tested and replicated over 15 years and across diverse contexts and countries. The LSM was developed by researchers at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland as an effort to serve both practice and research aims: to improve valued learning outcomes for students historically underserved in education and to advance research knowledge (Lai, McNaughton, Jesson, & Wilson, 2020).

The twin aims mean that the model has a “near” and “far” transfer focus. The near focus is to solve specific educational problems in a particular setting such as a school or cluster of schools. The far focus is to generate research findings that are of value to those in education elsewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas. The near focus demands we work over extended periods of time in ways that are relevant to and respectful of the school leaders, teachers, students and whānau in those settings whereas the far focus demands our research be rigorous and robust. Achieving the right balance of respectful relationships and research rigor is complex. Too much emphasis on maintaining respectful relationships could make researchers shy away from challenging possibly problematic practices whereas too much emphasis on rigour could undermine the trusting environment needed to foster quality research, professional learning, and change.

### **Initiating research-practice partnerships**

In this paper we illustrate the model with a case we call the Digital Schools Partnership which involved 84 schools in 11 clusters that implemented a ubiquitous digital teaching and learning platform within their face-to-face classes (Jesson, McNaughton, Wilson, Zhu, & Cockle, 2018).

Our research-practice partnerships within Aotearoa New Zealand have typically been initiated by schools, clusters, or agencies with a request to discuss a perceived issue of student learning. We do not have a separate formal relationship building phase that precedes our research and development activities; rather we attend to the building of relationality and trust as we do the work together. We build relationality and trust in the early phases of the projects by negotiating what valued learning outcomes (VLOs) to focus on and what tools to measure these with; which levels and groups to aggregate and disaggregate the data to (e.g., gender, year level, ethnicity, school decile, whole cluster, whole school, syndicate); and how best to represent and discuss those data, and with whom. At later stages we negotiate the meanings of the shared data analyses and the actions to take in response to these. At all stages we see the process as one in which decisions, meanings and actions are discussed and negotiated – not imposed by one party on another.

The first steps in developing the relationship involve discussions with school leaders about what VLOs the partnership should take account of. In all cases to date these have included but not been limited to student achievement outcomes, particularly reading, writing and mathematics and, when high schools are involved, qualification data. Other outcomes have included key competencies such as Managing Self and Relating to Others,

participatory outcomes, engagement, and, with one diocese in Australia, outcomes related to Catholic citizenship.

The next step in our process is to agree on measures or indicators of those VLOs. We do not prescribe particular assessment tools, but we do have a set of design principles that guide the joint selection of tools. One non-negotiable is that all the schools agree to use some common tools that are valid assessments of the agreed VLOs, and which allow for comparisons of both achievement (at a single point in time) and progress over time against norms and/or national curriculum expectations. We need such tools so we can judge the effectiveness of the partnership in accelerating the achievement and progress of groups of students regularly identified as under-served, usually using quasi-experimental designs. The exact choice of assessment tool is up to the cluster as a whole to decide. Another requirement is that the tools are reliable so the partners collaborate to establish assessment protocols and cluster-wide and within-school moderation systems, especially for writing, so we can all be confident that teachers in different schools and year levels are assessing consistently.

We are mindful of unintended effects of using standardised assessments. One risk is the potential for narrowing the curriculum to those VLOs assessed by the common tools. Another is narrowing the constructs of the VLOs to just those assessed by the tools; there are many valued aspects of reading, for instance, that are not assessed well by the standardised tools, such as reading for pleasure, resilience, critical literacy, synthesis across texts, and more disciplinary-focused reading in subject areas. We try to mitigate the risks of narrowing by stressing the importance of multiple sources of evidence and emphasising that the standardised tools provide snapshots in time and are indicators of some important aspects of the learning area – but being a “good” reader, for example, is much more than just doing well in a standardised reading comprehension test.

An even greater risk is that the data analyses unintentionally reinforce deficit discourses about those groups of students identified as not achieving or progressing as well as others. We try to address this by framing achievement issues in terms of what schools can influence and by being future- and action-focused: “What are we as educators going to do differently to serve these students more effectively?” We also are at pains to highlight positive variability, for example by showing that while the writing scores for boys are lower than girls *on average*, some of the highest achieving writers are boys and some girls struggle with writing – meaning that essentialist discourses about gender are not supported by the data.

### **Developing a rich profile of learning, teaching and other aspects of schooling**

A key assumption of LSM is that it is neither respectful nor effective to suggest ready-made solutions to problems that we do not yet fully understand. Schools and clusters all have unique features and different strengths and gaps in student achievement, progress, and teaching. The most effective interventions are not generic but are tailored to the specific profile of the settings involved.

Our first step in understanding a problem is to build a database to enable detailed analyses of students’ achievement and progress against VLOs. Data are analysed to various levels of aggregation. At the most “zoomed out” level our analyses profile the achievement and progress of all students from all the cluster schools across all year levels relative to national norm or curriculum expectations. At the more “zoomed in” level we examine patterns in each learning area for each specific year level and cut the data by gender, ethnicity, school, classroom, and whatever other factors the schools and we are

interested in. These data are presented visually, and we engage in what we call “sense-making sessions” about these data representations with leaders and teachers. The purpose of the sense-making sessions is to develop a shared understanding of key patterns – areas of strength and areas for development- and to agree on priorities. In the Digital Schools Partnership, for instance, one pattern evident in the reading data was that students typically made progress at a sufficiently accelerated rate in their first years of schooling for them to be close to norm by the end of Year 4 but that between Year 5 and Year 8 the rate of progress plateaued and the gaps between cluster and norm student achievement increased. This was adopted as an agreed project-wide focus.

The next step is to work with partners to generate hypotheses – possible reasons for the problematic patterns – and to co-construct ways of testing those hypotheses. With the problem of plateauing reading comprehension levels in the Digital Schools Partnership the partners agreed that the pattern suggested that instructional patterns might be sufficient to accelerate progress in those early years but not sufficient to “inoculate” students against the ever-increasing demands of reading comprehension in the later years. A range of specific hypotheses about what kinds of instruction would be most effective in the early and later years of schooling were generated – these included hypotheses about the texts students had opportunities to read, the types and levels of tasks, and the opportunities for talk about text. Our profiling of teaching and other aspects of schooling that might contribute to the problem of plateauing consisted of hypothesis testing using classroom observations, observations of class sites (each class has its own website from which students and whānau can access texts, tasks, resources, and student blogs), and questionnaires with students, whānau, teachers and leaders. Our profiling of instruction identified, for example, that students in these culturally diverse schools had relatively few opportunities to read texts where people other than those from the dominant culture were represented, few texts were extended texts, most tasks did not push reading comprehension beyond the literal level, there was very little evidence of any focus on critical literacy, and although thematically linked texts were commonplace, there were few opportunities for across text synthesis (Wilson & Jesson, 2019). The focus of sense-making sessions about these data were to surface our and practitioners’ theories about the relationship between the teaching and student data, and to inform the design of bespoke interventions.

### **Redesigning practices**

For our shared efforts to impact on the patterns of outcomes across a school or cluster, changes need to be widespread so that the changes are experienced by all students. Our processes of ongoing shared and negotiated analysis and sense-making at all levels of clusters and schools are designed to develop a shared understanding of the issue, and hypotheses for the solutions. Teacher professional learning and development (TPLD) has been a common focus of intervention in many LSM projects, but interventions have also included developing school leadership, providing specialist staff, purchasing, or creating new texts and resources. In the TPLD sessions designed to address the issue of plateauing reading, the student and teacher data were revisited at the beginning of each session so that the rationale for the TPLD focus was always clearly grounded in the local context. In our experience, local data that problematises patterns of learning and teaching has been the most powerful lever for leader and teacher engagement in school improvement and for making our co-constructed theory of action explicit.

In the intervention phases of the model, teachers and leaders redesign practice in ways that test these potential solutions. Redesigns require resourcing: potentially time, effort, new learning, and texts. They also require examples of where new designs are going well, and evaluation of the changes. In our work, case studies and teacher inquiry inform these changes. Case studies are led by researchers, inquiry by teachers. Both approaches provide descriptions and evidence changes to be adopted by all, as teachers work together to share ideas and describe their practice.

Description of changed practice is necessary, but by itself insufficient, to understand why those practices might support learning. We are mindful that one risk of describing practice is that the form of the practice, rather than the reasons for it, are adopted. An example of this might be using a particular app to build vocabulary. If the app is adopted, without understanding how the processes are used to support language learning, the imitation of others' practice will not change outcomes for students. Our approach here is to draw on theory to explain the underlying, and therefore generalisable, impacts on learning. Statistically, understanding the change requires understanding the variation that might be explained by differences between particular students, or year levels, or classes or school characteristics. Our approach to this is to use statistical modelling to adjust the analyses for these different characteristics. By separating the layers in this way, we are able to estimate how much additional learning is explained by the change in practice. These explanatory analyses constitute the 'far transfer' as theory that might be taken up by others in different contexts.

## Conclusion

In summary, the Learning Schools Model has been developed over time with schools to contribute to the learning of the children in non-dominant communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Patterns of disparity are our particular focus. The processes of working with schools, with the aligned but dual aims of research and practice, mean that throughout the partnership there are a number of contestable sites of negotiation and therefore co-design. Ultimately, we strive for outcomes that support learning through improved teaching and contribute to theoretical understandings about the relationships between learning and teaching. Partnerships are intensive and long term. We, and our partners, are deeply invested in a shared outcome: Improving learning for students.

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