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Published

2008

Journal Title

SEAMEO VOCTECH Journal

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THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS IN VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper explores the political nature of research partnerships in vocational and technical education. Such research, by its nature, is seen as being unavoidably political, in the sense that its undertaking raises issues to do with the nature and distribution of ownership, interest, influence, benefit, and threat in – and flowing from – the research practice. Reflection on a selection of case studies of research in the field point both to the diversity of activities that we contemporarily identify as research and to the diversity of research partnerships used in its undertaking. They also indicate a diversity of politically significant issues raised in such research partnerships. Those issues are interpreted through a framework of nine dimensions: (1) the types of knowledge intended from the research partnership; (2) the purposes of the research partnership; (3) the research approach; (4) the ownership of any epistemic gain from the research; (5) the degree of epistemic gain sought or expected from the research partnership; (6) the substantive focus of the research partnership; (7) the openness of the research; (8) the research beneficiaries; and (9) the ownership and resolution of any threats from the research. While these dimensions are largely epistemological in origin, they acquire political import in particular research partnerships to the extent that issues of difference arise on any of the dimensions. It is suggested that the optimum situation in research partnerships is where a coherent political profile is negotiated on these dimensions before they present any issues seriously threatening to the conduct and success of the research.

Keywords: research partnerships, political issues, vocational and technical education.

Introduction

In the contemporary age, the value of knowledge generated through research is potentially High (Arimoto, 2007). Such knowledge can be used to accrue wealth, power, or prestige and hence to gain superiority and influence over others. It thus becomes increasingly political – far removed from the traditional liberal democratic ideal of research as the disinterested scientific pursuit and publication of knowledge about the way the world works, for the enlightenment and betterment of all humankind (Feyerabend, 1978). Contemporary research is much more likely to be undertaken for private gain and advantage over others than it is for the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and common good. In such a climate, even research that is ‘pure’ or ‘basic’ according to the traditional liberal ideal is politicized, since it is located and must operate within the context of a globalized research culture that is essentially instrumental, privatized, complex, fluid, and incredulous of suggestions that it might be otherwise (Bagnall, 2004). That research culture puts a

premium on performativity (Lyotard, 1984) – on achieving valued outcomes, whatever they may be. Maximizing performativity in such a culture raises political considerations of ownership, interest, influence, benefit, and threat (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

The diverse field of practice that we recognize under the label of ‘vocational and technical education’ --or its cognates, ‘vocational education’, ‘technical and vocational education and training’, ‘career education’, etc.-- is that which is the *object* of research in this field (and which I will henceforth here term ‘vocational education’, for convenience) (Moodie, 2002). Research in vocational education may well be pure or basic in the traditional sense of being non-instrumentally and disinterestedly directed just to advancing public knowledge of the field – what it is, how it works, how it connects with other fields, and such like (Best & Kahn, 2003). Many of us working as researchers in the field might see our work as being, to some degree at least, of that sort.

Overwhelmingly, though, most of the research in which we collectively engage is directed in some way towards improving or publicizing practice in the field itself and is, to that extent, applied or instrumental (Bagnall, 2004). Through that instrumentality, our research is also, inevitably, partial – in the sense of being non-disinterested. This is the case because, as an instrumental engagement, it will be unavoidably directed to advancing the welfare or interests of one category of persons over others, and to advancing practical knowledge of one area of vocational education over others (Usher & Scott, 1996).

Research in vocational education is thus largely, if not entirely, *political*, in the sense that its undertaking raises questions of who owns it, who might benefit and who might not benefit from it, who might be threatened by it, who might see it as a good thing, and such like (Usher & Scott, 1996). Even those who might wish to construct our research in vocational education as either disinterested or non-instrumental (or both) are unavoidably faced with working in a community of practice that is socially constructed as being essentially instrumental and hence unavoidably also partial. In such a climate, even research which, like that in vocational and technical education, has been an activity largely in the public domain, in support of a social service (that of vocational education), is now strongly privatized and political in this sense. We therefore, as practitioners, cannot avoid engagement with the political dimensions in our work.

It is those dimensions that are the focus of this paper. The analysis works from the (instrumental) assumption that successful research partnerships depend upon (at least) getting the politics right – by which I mean having a research partnership that is politically coherent and compatible with the political interests of each partner. By ‘political’ here I mean the nature and distribution of ownership, interest, influence, benefit, and threat in and flowing from the research practice.

It might be imagined, then, that we could minimize, if not avoid entirely – for whatever reason – attention to those political dimensions in our research by simply avoiding the engagement of partners. In other words, by being monadic researchers, untainted by the interests of others. Such a situation, though, is demonstrably unrealizable, except in the most extreme case of totally autonomous activity. At the very least, our research, if empirical in nature, is likely to involve our research subjects as partners, or providers of data or documentation. It may also involve more than one researcher, while its undertaking is likely to involve institutional contexts, both our own as researchers and those of our

research subjects. In terms of publication, it is likely to involve editors, publishers, or website gate keepers. It is also, for most of our work, likely to involve bodies that fund or otherwise support the research. All such offices and persons may be understood as being partners in the research, and that points to the sense in which I am regarding the concept of ‘partnership’ here – as identifying the interrelationships between and among persons or organizational entities consciously involved in some aspect of the research. By research ‘partnership’ it is meant the interrelationships between and among persons or organizational entities consciously involved in some aspect of the research. Partnerships are particular functional relationships between or among partners. They serve particular purposes or meet particular needs of the partners through the partnership relationship.

They are related research networks in being particular substantive instantiations of network potentialities. To capture the essence of partnerships here, the consciousness of involvement in the partnership must be mutual, in the sense that it is a shared awareness on the part of the various participants. Thus excluding, for example, persons whose connection with the research is just that their own published work is consulted in the research and others who just read or otherwise used the resulting research output. Partnerships in research are thus a normal, if not entirely a necessary, part of any research undertaking – especially perhaps those in vocational education, because of its instrumental nature.

Early theorizing of research partnerships in education focused on constructing the subjects of educational research as the co-participating partners of the formally recognized researchers – in ‘participatory’, ‘action’, and ‘participatory action’ research models (Bibace, Young, Herrenkohl, & Wiley, 1999; McTaggart, 1997; Reason, 1994). This construction was further developed through the school partnerships movement into a more inclusive conception of partnerships in research, variously involving students, school teachers, local education authorities, professional associations, and colleges of education (e.g., Aiello & Watson, 2007; Kiggins & Cambourne, 2007; Miller, 2001). The latter conception of research partnerships is thus more in line with that which I am adopting here. It needs to be understood, though that much of the research in and theorization of partnerships in research is based on more particular and often singular partnership relationships such as those between schools and universities (e.g., McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2004), those between universities and industry partners (e.g., Kruss, 2006), those between tertiary education providers and community-based organizations (e.g., Nahemow et al., 1999), those between universities and public sector departments and agencies (e.g., Harman & Ollif, 2004), and those noted above between the researchers and the research subjects.

This analysis, then, seeks to examine the political dimensions of research partnerships from the perspective of the researcher. It does so, firstly, by illustrating the range of ways in which we use ‘research’ as a term to identify an activity. It then presents a framework of dimensions that may be seen as capturing the important variability among those uses, before using that framework to suggest some implications for the negotiation of research partnerships.

Research Partnerships in Vocational Education

As a backdrop to the analysis here, I invite you to bear in mind the following, not atypical, examples of research partnerships in vocational education.

1. An academic in a university has obtained funding from the University Grants

Committee for a research project directed to testing a theory of approaches to learning among students in vocational education. It was not until her third revision and re-submission of the research proposal that it was finally accepted for funding. The problem appeared to be the difference in the earlier proposal between her moderate expectations of testing the theory in a new context and the assessors' expectations that she focuses on advancing the theory itself – which she adequately addressed finally in the fourth proposal.

2. The office of the shadow minister of Workplace Relations and Training has commissioned a confidential research project from a private social research company to survey public opinion on an aspect of the recently released white paper on vocational education reform. The research is to inform the main opposition party's response to foreshadowed legislation from the Government. Conflict arose between the Minister's office and the research company when it emerged that the company had combined the survey with another that it was running for public release on the same topic – releasing information that the Minister's office regarded as privileged and private.

3. Following an invitational call for tenders, the Department of Employment and Training, in collaboration with the Department of Education have commissioned a research team to undertake an international review of research and evaluation literature on the topic of vocational education in schools. The purpose of the review is to inform future government policy and provider practice in the field. The research contract specified approval of the research report by the respective government departments before its public release. The researchers were distressed to find large sections of their findings rejected by one or other of the contracting departments, apparently because the findings could be interpreted as showing key aspects of their respective current policies to be misplaced. Only after extensive delays and quite radical modification, was the report finally released, and then deliberately in the middle of the summer holidays, when it would attract no serious attention in either the mass media or parliament.

4. A large company with an extensive staff training program at all levels has brought in a management consultancy to work with its Strategic Planning Unit in undertaking a strategic research study of how the Company is being served by its staff development programs in comparison with its major competitors. The report of the research is to be restricted to senior company management. The project faltered early on over major differences in assumptions between the Strategic Planning Unit and the consultants as to what constituted the most strategic approach to the task – the Company assuming a more holistic, program-based approach and the consultants assuming a comparative metrics-based approach using data drawn from annual reports and other accessible documents.

5. An international development agency has worked to facilitate and support the formation of an international network of researchers in different developing countries around the world. The purpose of this network was to undertake a survey of vocational education structures, provision, engagement, and need in each country. The research is to inform that agency and others like it as to priority areas of need and to publicly profile the area of educational engagement. International and national Advisory Teams were formed, with memberships of researcher, government, and international agency representatives, to develop and negotiate the national and international parameters of the project. Unfortunately, the advisory team guidelines did not give clear directions on the

inclusion of non-government organization providers, some country teams including them; most did not do so. The resultant differences in the country plans being developed and the problems raised in those countries lacking NGO representation almost entirely de-railed the project entirely in its formative stages.

6. A national NGO providing community-based education programs – including enterprise skill development programs – in rural areas has drawn together a research team from its membership to evaluate its programs. Differences among members of the research team as to what should be done in the project seemed to be irreconcilable, until someone realized that the real difference between the competing views was in the sort of knowledge that each was expecting to generate. Some gave priority to the existential knowledge of participant experience, others to descriptive information from outcome measures, others to the formal aspects of program design.

7. A national association of vocational education teachers was running a research project to highlight the stressful conditions under which its members worked. They had intended to use the mass media to publicize their findings. The project was being run by a small collaborative group of members from different types of vocational education providers. One of the issues that they faced, though, was the design of the survey instrument. Some members, who were focusing on the agreed primary reason for the research, insisted on an instrument that gathered information on just those features of teachers' work that were known to be problematic. Others argued that they should aim for a comprehensive and balanced survey, to better inform both the Association and the general public.

8. A number of instructors in a local college were collaborating in running an action research project in an effort to improve class attendance and student involvement. An issue that had arisen for them was that of the target audience for the research. Most members of the team accepted that the research was just for the improvement of their own practice. Two very pushy male teachers, though, insisted that it needed to be much more rigorously undertaken, so that it could be written up and published for the benefit of other vocational education teachers.

9. After some disastrous incidents with members of her staff, the Director of a small private training company had made the decision that she needed to improve her personnel management skills. She decided to conduct her own research project into different approaches to personnel management and what the research said about them. To support her in that activity, she teamed up with one of her former classmates, who, as a librarian, had good literature search skills and who had an interest in the same topic. They found, though, that they were constantly arguing about the material that was being obtained. The manager wanted to focus strictly on skill development, but her librarian-friend seemed to be sourcing much more theoretical and philosophical materials that contributed little or nothing to meeting the Director's learning need.

Each of these case studies presents a somewhat different combination of research partnerships in vocational education. Each differs from the others in the way in which it constructs research. In doing so, the case studies illustrate the great breadth of different sorts of disciplined enquiry that we currently refer to as 'research' and 'research partnerships'. Each also highlights a different issue of political importance that has been exposed in the research partnerships. I now want to focus more formally on those different issues.

The Political Dimensions of Research and Research Partnerships

An understanding of the political dimensions of research calls for some understanding of the nature of research itself. Undoubtedly, all who read this paper are likely to have a conception of the nature of research. I accept that, and wish to make it clear that my observations here on the nature of research are not intended to be patronizing, but rather to make my argument clear. Most broadly – and that is the sense in which I am using the concept here – research as an activity, the function of which is the generation of new knowledge through systematic enquiry (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). That new knowledge – as the intended output of the research activity, or as ‘research’ in the sense of the products of research activity – may be of various types: descriptive, instrumental, ethical, aesthetic, existential, and so on (Bagnall, 1989). It may be any one or some combination of those types, depending (at least) upon the purposes of the research. It may, for example, be a new way of understanding something or of understanding it in greater depth, or of doing something or doing it better, of acting ethically, of appreciating something, and so on. Variability on this dimension becomes an important consideration in the politics of research partnerships when there are conflicting views among partners as to what sort of knowledge should be generated through the research – thus identifying the first dimension of variability in the research activity – that of the *types of knowledge* intended from the research partnership (exemplified in the sixth case study introduced above – that of the NGO program evaluation).

The sort of new knowledge intended from the research relates to the purposes of the research (Eichelberger, 1989). Research that is directed to developing a normative philosophy of vocational education, for example, calls for particular attention to ethical knowledge. While all research is directed to the generation of new knowledge, in a field of largely instrumental research (as vocational education research clearly is) the question of why the research is being undertaken is clearly important. Common purposes for engaging in a research partnership in vocational education include at least the following: (1) using research to raise the cultural value of vocational education as a community of practice; (2) using research to enhancing practitioner and public understanding of vocational education activities, processes, interrelationships, impact on individual welfare, impact on business productivity, and such like; (3) using research to support a position (such as a commitment to a competence-based approach to learning assessment) or a state of affairs (such as a skill entry requirement); (4) using research to inform a decision (such as which teaching approach to use) or solving a practical problem (such as why graduates of a particular program perform so well in the job market); (5) (for research partners providing funding), being seen by significant others to be supporting this sort of research; (6) (for researchers), being involved in a rewarding research activity (regardless of the outcome); (7) (for publishers), publishing high quality and high impact research papers; and (8) (for mass media personnel), being first to broadcast news of a significant research breakthrough. Any conflicting differences between or among research partners as to the purposes of the research may make this dimension one of political significance. I identify this here, then, as the second dimension of variability – that of the *purposes* of the research partnership (exemplified in the seventh case study introduced above – that of the Teachers’ Association survey of teacher stress).

The question also arises as to what constitutes 'systematic inquiry', and here I wish to acknowledge an increasingly broad church over recent history (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The proper approach may be seen as, for example: a statistically representative questionnaire survey; a biographical case study of one person; a review of selected literature; an in-depth study of selected individual experiences; or the comparative evaluation of available learning outcome data. What characterizes all members of that church, though, is that the activity is directed toward generating knowledge in ways that are accepted on good grounds by those engaged in them as likely to lead to the generation of the kind of knowledge sought. The nature of those grounds (and hence of the approaches used) is open to contestation and there are no universal criteria outside any particular set of approaches by which a definitive evaluation may be made. Indisputably, different approaches to research are stronger or weaker in generating different types of knowledge. These differences become politically important in negotiating research partnerships when methodological positions and decisions are made on non-epistemological grounds that seek to advance the interests of particular partners. The question here thus identifies a third dimension of variability in research activity – that of the proper research *approach* (exemplified in the fourth case study introduced above – that of the company strategic review).

The question arises, then, for whom the knowledge generated (or to be generated) is new. Contemporary uses of the notion of research identify a range here, as was illustrated in the examples presented earlier. It may, in the traditional use of 'research', be new to humankind (Randall, 1962). Much more commonly, though, it may be new just to a particular community, organization, or individual – and not necessarily new to others outside that particular entity in any given case. The traditional conception of research in this regard differentiated it strongly from learning, which was seen as an individual acquisition (Popper, 1989). It worked serviceably well as long as research activity was seen as being directed largely to discovering universal truths through scientific activity. However, in recent decades, as the earlier examples indicate, research has been increasingly directed to investigating the local and the particular, for example, to understanding or manipulating cultural contexts, organizations, or communities.

At the same time, the conception of learning has been expanded from its traditional subject, the monadic individual, to include, for example, communities and organizations (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). An organization may thus generate through research a new insight into its operations or a more efficient (a new) way of doing something. Alternatively, it may be said to have 'learned' that new knowledge of itself and way of doing the job. Significantly, the research-based knowledge in such instances may be new to the community or the organization involved, without its being new to other communities or organizations, for whom it may have been well known or practiced for some time. We also acknowledge research activity in individuals and groups when they are engaged in learning things that are already well known to others. The model, for example, of university-school research partnerships for teachers' professional development that has been drawn together by Thornley, Parker, Read, and Eason (2004), conceptualizes research as being for learning. For the individual, research activity may reveal something new to him or her that is potentially known already to any number of others. That individual may also be said to have 'learned' that knowledge. Similarly, research-generated knowledge that is new to all human kind, may also be said to have been 'learned' by society – as in 'we have learned

through this research that ...' – even though it may still be known by only a very small number of persons.

There is, in other words, no longer any clear distinction between research and learning in the way these terms are commonly used, both professionally and academically. It is, accordingly, more helpful to acknowledge a range of variability in the population for whom the research-generated knowledge is new: from humankind at one end of the spectrum to the individual at the other. The issue raised here, then, may be understood more formally as the *ownership of any epistemic gain* expected from the research – identifying a fourth dimension of variability in research activity (exemplified in the eighth case study introduced above – that of the instructors' action research project). Again, the issue becomes an important political consideration in research partnerships when conflicting differences with respect to it arise between or among partners.

This dimension, it should be noted, recognizes and incorporates as research, not just activity directed to learning, but also activity that would traditionally have been excluded as 'evaluation' or, at best, 'institutional research' (Eichelberger, 1989). Program evaluations, institutional research projects, and many action research projects, for example, are understood in this dimension as research that is limited in its epistemic gain to individual institutions, organizations, or such like. The contemporary plethora of university-school action research partnerships directed to teacher professional development and school change exemplify partnerships of this sort (e.g., Evans, Lomax, & Morgan, 2000; Stringer, 2008).

A further question may be raised with respect to research knowledge being new – that of just how new. It focuses on the magnitude or the degree of difference between existing knowledge and that sought (or achieved) through the research – what more formally may be termed the 'degree of epistemic gain' from the research (following Muller, 2000). This question was really only important in traditional conceptions of research in the evaluative sense of judging the difference that the new knowledge might make or had made to our knowledge of the world – greater value generally being accorded to bigger differences (Rosenberg, 2005). However, it has become increasingly important with the politicization of research and with the parallel rise of the 'information society' (Feather, 2004). Expectations as to the degree of epistemic gain may be, for example: *major and general*, as in research that is directed to a highly-ranked international journal; *quite minor and local*, as in the search for a better understanding of what is leading to dropout from a diploma program; *essentially zero*, as in a confirmatory policy analysis; or *incidental*, as in a researcher's singular commitment to the research process. In the context of research partnerships, this dimension acquires particular importance as a point of potential difference between or among partners, where partners may hold conflicting views of just how much change in knowledge they wish to see and will tolerate from the research. This, then, identifies the fifth dimension of variability in research activity – that of the *degree of epistemic gain* sought or expected of the research partnership (exemplified in the first case study introduced above – that of the learning research grant application).

Also arising from the quality of research as generating new knowledge is the question of knowledge about what (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The substantive focus may be, for example: the extent to which a policy is meeting its stated goals; the effects of a policy, regardless of its stated goals; the experiences of program participants; the effectiveness of an educational intervention; the learning gains of program participants; the learning

interests of a target group; the learning needs of a target group; or the drivers of enrolment choices. This question too acquires political importance in research partnerships when there arise conflicting differences between or among the partners about what may be the substantive focus of the research and hence what findings may be generated. It acquires particular significance in combination with the third dimension identified above (that of the nature of the research approach), when different partners have different views on how to research particular features based on the sort of outcomes that they wish to see (or not to see). This, then, identifies the sixth dimension of variability in research activity – that of the *substantive focus* of the research partnership (exemplified in the final case study introduced above – that of the training Director’s learning project).

There arises also the question of how *openly* the research outcomes are available. In the traditional conception of research, the ideally singular answer here was always something like ‘publicly’, since research was seen as being a public good (Habermas, 1983). Contemporarily, much, probably most, research is undertaken to benefit particular sectors of society, organizations, communities, or individuals. It is, in other words, no longer public or open in a universal sense, but closed to varying degrees and to different populations. It is, thereby, variously privatized (Bagnall, 1999). Research outcomes may thus be variously open or closed. They may be, for example: freely (generally) available through publication; released only to particular stakeholders but not restricted; released in confidence only to a particular office-holder; or not available to any third party. This variability identifies the seventh dimension of variability in research activity on which I am focusing attention – that of the *openness* of the research (exemplified in the second case study introduced above – that of the Ministerial public opinion survey). It becomes political in nature both when it is less than universal (at least for traditionalists) and when there is any disagreement among research partners as to how openly available the research outcomes should be.

That dimension leads naturally to the question of for whom the research is undertaken or, more broadly, who is to *benefit* from the research and in what ways. Again, traditionally research has been essentially disciplined inquiry that stood to advance the knowledge and well-being of humankind – its beneficiaries being universal in that sense (Collier, 2004). Contemporarily, though, the beneficiaries are often constructed quite exclusively – as individuals or individual units, companies, or communities, even when the research may well have *potential* benefit to more extensive sections of the population. Research beneficiaries may be, for example: humankind as a whole, from the enhanced understanding; a regime in government, from knowledge of what electors are fearful of; an individual organization, from knowledge of how to undermine the competition; or individual players in the research process, from the enhanced prestige of being associated with the project. Conflicting differences between and among the research partners as to who is to benefit from a research project and in what ways expose the political nature of this eighth dimension – that of the research *beneficiaries* (exemplified in the fifth case study introduced above – that of the international agency’s evaluative survey). Those differences may pertain either to the research as an *activity* or to its *outcomes*. Not infrequently, for example, a research partnership will include one or more partners who are more interested in the research processes, than in its outcomes, and who may be threatened by its outcomes.

And that brings us to the final dimension identified here – that of who stands to be threatened by the research outcomes and how those threats should be addressed, or the

ownership and resolution of any threats from the research (exemplified in the third case study introduced above – that of the Departmental review of research literature). Threats may be feared, for example, by: a funding government department that fears exposure of its operational weaknesses; and a researcher who fears ridicule from the trivial outcomes expected from a particular approach. Threats may be handled, for example, by: standing by the value of the truth at any price; or modifying the timing, manner, construction, or content of what is released to address the threat. Although this ninth dimension is highly political in itself, it thus gains particular political import when either different threats are experienced by different research partners, or research partners differ in their assessments of how research threats should be handled. Traditional research culture argues for the absolute supremacy of the truth at any price (Alexander, 1995). More commonly, we see research partners influencing what is revealed in research outputs, or limiting access to research findings, when those findings are perceived as threatening, either to themselves or to significant others (such as their employing department).

Interrelationships Among the Dimensions

The foregoing dimensions of research partnerships are clearly non-discrete and interrelated in complex and situationally-dependent ways. For example, there are clearly inter-dependencies between the types of knowledge intended from the research, the purposes of the research, and the nature of the research approach. Clearly also, any threat arising from the research outcomes is likely to be exacerbated by research findings that make a bigger epistemic difference and that are made more openly available. While researchers commonly seek to design projects that maximize their chances of developing big knowledge gains that can be made publicly available in well ranked publications, other stakeholders may seek to maximize the chances of a project merely confirming existing knowledge or popular belief. Any degree of success with respect to the latter purpose would unavoidably diminish any chances of the research outcomes being publishable in a highly ranked journal.

In considering these dimensions in the negotiation of actual research partnerships, or in testing them through research into research partnerships, it is therefore imperative that the interplay of such interdependencies be accommodated.

Implications for Negotiating Research Partnerships

From the perspective of researchers or other research partners negotiating research partnerships, each of the foregoing dimensions should be understood as focusing on *intentions* and *expectations* with respect to research activity and outcomes and on the relationship between those intentions and expectations and the reality that is emerging or anticipated in the research. That point follows straightforwardly from the goal-oriented nature of partnerships in research – from their being directed towards doing something of a particular sort (research) for the purposes of generating knowledge.

There are three main speculative propositions that I would want to posit from this analysis – propositions for testing in critically reflective practice and in empirical research.

Firstly, I would speculate that the political dimensions of research partnerships identified here are increasingly important features of research in vocational education – both as a function of its increasing privatization and as a function of the increasing importance of partnerships in that research.

Secondly, I would speculate that, to the extent that these political dimensions do arise as issues in any research partnership, and to the extent that the differences are not resolved, the success of the research endeavour or quality of the research outcomes is likely to be compromised. In other words, differences between and among partners on these dimensions do matter. They do make a difference to the likelihood of the research endeavour being successful and to the quality of both the research undertaken and its outcomes. And, unless those differences are identified and resolved, their impact is likely to be negative, rather than positive.

This proposition is supported by a number of studies into research partnerships in other fields of research. Berman (2008, p.165), for example, noted that her study of 15 research partnerships between Australian universities and industry partners “identifies the ‘cultural gap’ between academia and industry as a significant impediment to successful collaborations.” James and Worrall (2000, p.95), concluded that their case study of a university-school research and development partnership demonstrated the importance to the success of partnerships of developing a “mutual understanding of different needs and purposes” through negotiation. And McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins’s (2004) study demonstrated the dependence of success in school-university research partnerships on there being mutual benefits, reciprocity and a genuine coalition of interests between the partners.

Thirdly, I would speculate that the optimum situation in research partnerships is where a *coherent* political profile is negotiated on these dimensions before they present any issues that seriously threaten the conduct and success of the research. Again, this proposition is supported by studies of research partnerships in other fields. Nahemow et al. (1999, p.301), for example, in their case study of collaborative research through a community-based consortium of long-term care providers and educational institutions, concluded that “needs must dovetail, not replicate those of one another” partners. And Kruss’s (2006) study of South African partnerships between universities and industry partners in three high technology fields identified the importance of aligning the different motivations and imperatives driving the partnership. Baumfield and Butterworth (2007), building on such work, have developed a model of partnership exchanges used in negotiating partnership realities.

The precise nature of what constitutes a coherent political profile will certainly be situationally or contextually dependent to some extent. As such, its form must be developed in response to the particularities of each research partnership. What emerges as a coherent political profile in one research partnership may not be so in another.

Nevertheless, from experience, at least the following guidelines as to what constitutes coherence may be posited – for testing heuristically in practice and through research –

1. Within any one political dimension, differences should be negotiated to the point that they are formally compatible. In most cases, that will mean agreement on any given dimension (such as the purposes of the research, or the types of knowledge to be generated). However, in some cases, differences may be accommodated; for example, the perspective of a funding provider who is only concerned to be seen to be supporting the process of the research, may be tolerated in a research partnership that is otherwise strongly focused on achieving positive research outcomes for educational

practitioners, so long as the funding partner is not also threatened by any particular, or particular sort, of research outcomes.

2. Any threats from the research engagement or its outcomes should be negotiated through the research partnership and accommodated in the research design. As a general rule, their resolution is likely to be important to the quality of research activity and its outcomes.
3. Attention should be paid to ensuring compatibility across dimensions where interdependencies are known to exist. Such cases include, at least, the interdependencies between and among:
 - (a) the types of educational knowledge intended from the research, the purposes of the research, the research approach, and its substantive focus (since these dimensions are closely interrelated through their epistemological foundations);
 - (b) the ownership of the epistemic gain from the research, the degree of epistemic gain expected, and the openness of the research (since who owns the epistemic gain and how big it is may be expected to have an important influence on the release of the research findings);
 - (c) the degree of epistemic gain expected and the research approach (especially since higher levels of epistemic gain commonly demand more rigorous research approaches);
 - (d) the openness of the research and the ownership of any threats (since threats from research are most commonly perceived to arise through either the more public or general release of the research outcomes, or from their release to specific interest groups);
 - (e) the openness of the research and the research beneficiaries (straightforwardly since the research beneficiaries, or those providing for them, should be included among those to whom the research findings are released);
 - (f) the openness of the research and the research purposes (since different research purposes tend to have quite specific requirements for the release of the research findings); and
 - (g) the beneficiaries of the research and the other dimensions (since all other dimensions should be responsive to the interests of the beneficiaries, if only to optimize the value of the research activity and its outcomes).

Conclusion

This analysis has identified a number of political dimensions of research partnerships in vocational education. The dimensions are grounded in an analysis of contemporarily accepted and common uses of the notion of 'research' in the field. The analysis has revealed a concept of research that is considerably more encompassing and less exclusive than that which has traditionally been used by professional researchers. In embracing the greater diversity in research that is identified here, we may better understand and respond to the political dimensions of research partnerships.

The identified political dimensions of research partnerships may be used by researchers and other research partners as flagging potential barriers to the successful negotiation of

research partnerships, and hence as indicating points to which attention should be paid in those negotiations. As well as pointing to implications for practice in research partnerships, the analysis also suggests three speculative generic propositions: 1) that the identified political dimensions are increasingly important features of research in vocational education; 2) to the extent that these political dimensions do arise in any research partnership, and to the extent that the differences are not resolved, the success of the research endeavour or the quality of the research outcomes is likely to be compromised; and 3) that the optimum situation in research partnerships is where a coherent political profile is negotiated on these dimensions before they present any issues that seriously threaten the conduct and success of the research. These propositions may be seen as hypotheses for testing in critically reflective research practice and in targeted research into research partnerships. The analysis points also to the more general need for research into research partnerships in vocational education, where experience suggests that such partnerships are increasing in frequency, importance, and complexity, but that there is little research into them in this field.

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