

Making research relevant through an engagement of identities

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This paper is based on a research project designed to cultivate teachers as creative writers and as teachers of creative and critical writing. The project involved both primary and secondary teachers from eight schools located in Sydney, Australia. It documents the evolution of an open-ended research project that aimed to accommodate the needs of external stakeholders, participating teachers, and project researchers. It describes the development of a 'professional learning community' formed between the researchers and participants who identified as creative teachers and writers. It also explores how the research project acts as an example of how knowledge production can develop communities of practice via on-going collaboration with stakeholders. The authors highlight the complexities of conducting open-ended research that meets the emergent needs of specific communities of practice.

Background

This paper is situated within a broader research project that investigated the implementation in 2015 of the *English K-10 Syllabus* for all students Kindergarten to Year 10 in New South Wales (NSW) schools (NSW Education Standards Authority, undated). One aim of this project was to identify and explore the participating teachers' attitudes to writing, both as individuals and as teachers of writing. The project involved eight teachers from four local primary (Kindergarten to Year 6) and secondary (Years 7 to Year 12) schools in the Campbelltown area in south western Sydney, NSW. This area is home to approximately 158,000 people with median age of 33.5 years and an average income of \$47,000 per annum (Campbelltown City Council, 2016). It includes 51 primary and schools for students with disabilities, as well as 23 secondary schools (government and non-government). Approximately one third of residents in this area speak a language other than English in the home with just over 33% of residents being born in an overseas country (Campbelltown City Council, 2016). Unemployment in the Campbelltown city area is currently 6.6% (Campbelltown City Council, 2016).

The research project was initiated by the governing body of the four schools involved, the Catholic Education Office of Wollongong (CEO Wollongong), to investigate strategies to motivate students to write more regularly and in different forms, for different purposes and audiences. The CEO Wollongong had identified that students across this region were underperforming in the nation-wide literacy test, the *National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN). They initiated this research project as a pilot study to improve student test results and expertise in writing.

The underlying tensions and complexities surrounding the CEO Wollongong's request became apparent at the initial meeting of the participating teachers and researchers. The teachers understood the value of improving literacy scores, but expressed frustration at

the emphasis on testing at the local and systemic level, arguing that students first and foremost needed to become intrinsically motivated writers. They also argued that a focus on test-taking would minimise student agency and their critical and creative thinking capacities. Thus, in view of the perspectives of both the teachers and the CEO Wollongong, the researchers undertook a reflexive approach by depicting research, “as a process of becoming rather than an established truth” that interweaves different stories, identities and agendas (Orr & Bennett, 2009, p. 88). This paper sheds light on the reflexive process of inquiry through making visible one initiative that encompassed an “interactive and dialogical approach” between the researchers, research users and external stakeholders (Davis, Nutley & Walter, 2008, p. 190).

Introduction: ‘Situating’ the research

As concrete and quantifiable research outcomes become increasingly prioritised and tied to accountability measures (Apple, 1979; Ball, 2012; Davies & Bansell, 2010; O’Neill, 2002), educational researchers are less likely to undertake projects with an open-ended design. Open-ended approaches to research embrace uncertainty and can evolve to meet the complex needs of unique local contexts. However, such approaches may elicit high levels of anxiety and insecurity as the research trajectory is fluid and responsive to change (Edwards, 2002). Other theorists, however, assert that all meaningful research is inherently open ended, as inquiry entails “struggl[ing] disgracefully to understand our uncertain world in new ways” (Edwards, 2002, p. 158). Davis, Nutley and Walter (2008) similarly explained how meaningful educational research is an uncertain process that is contingent upon a constantly changing environment. It is considered to be an intuitive, interpretive and reciprocal as it is receptive to local communities; this contrasts to scientific approaches of information exchange that rely heavily on hard data, rarely diverting from its original purpose (Edwards, 2002). Borrowing Taylor’s (1985) notion of “dialogue of the deaf,” Edwards further highlighted the problematic nature of objectives-driven research that focuses singularly on “brute data” (p.124).

Although such approaches to educational research can powerfully engage local communities, researchers may favour scientific approaches that are easier to manage and control. Carspecken articulated the repercussions of opting for statistical research approaches by asking, “Why does the vast bulk of social research conducted, presented and published each year seem to solve few problems, generate little consensus, resolve few disputes?” (2005, p. 11) His comments drew attention to the apparent disconnect between research and practice (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman & Vallejo, 2004; McIntyre, 2005; Williams & Coles 2007). Bodone (2005) raised similar concerns by asking “... what difference does our research make and for whom?” and “... how is education as a whole different because of our work?” (p. 1) Further, Bodone regarded such questions as constituting an “unrelenting moral” concern that all researchers must examine for the benefit for participating communities (p. 273). This view resonates with criticism of educational research that has little impact in teacher practice and attitude. These conversations are pertinent to educational researchers who seek to conduct inquiry that positively transforms practice (Borko, 2004), while Cartwright and Hardie (2012) stressed

the importance of researcher receptivity by stating that good answers are achieved by asking the 'right' questions.

In this paper we offer an account of how a teacher professional development initiative within the wider project addressed questions of impact between research and practice. It documents researcher accounts of 'constructing' an inquiry path to meet the needs of teachers who work within conflicting tensions surrounding effective pedagogy and performance goals. From the initial request to improve student writing outcomes on mandatory tests, the project evolved to help teachers engage in writing as a critical and creative process. The project was designed so that the teachers' experiences of learning and engaging in creative writing could inform their teaching practices. Teachers also engaged in action research so that they could evaluate and develop their teaching strategies. The initiative included 5 full day teacher creative writing and action research workshops that occurred over a year. Researchers took on a mixed methods approach to data collection via researcher reflections in a research journals, ethnographic observations and teacher and student interviews.

Literature review

As outlined above, researchers need to increasingly demonstrate impact to justify their work in circumstances of limited funding and resources. Demonstrating impact is complex, however, as it is both conceptual and instrumental; it can involve raising awareness or enacting transformations in practice (Walter, Davis & Nutley, 2003). Another complicating factor lies in its definition. Edwards, Sebba and Rickinson (2007) used the term 'knowledge exchange' as they believe that knowledge is produced through an on-going collaboration between all those involved. They consider relationships to be inherent to research as inquiry involves a constant flow of information exchange between researchers and research participants and users. High impact therefore consists of the co-production of knowledge between groups, where research meets societal demands and is incorporated into practice (Chaiklin, 1993). The knowledge generated is purposeful as it creates strong causal relationships between research, practice and policy. Rickinson, Sebba and Edwards (2011) introduced another term, 'practice boundaries', to describe the inquiry generated at the boundary between research participants and policy formation to produce effective professional learning communities.

Research impact is generated by professional learning communities that enable knowledge production through on-going collaboration between all participants. Wenger (1998) adopted a social theory of learning approach to propose how learning takes place within practice, "[as] knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities" (p.10), in which a shared identity is formed through participating in a range of common practices (Locke, Whitehead, Dix & Cawkwell, 2011). Professional learning communities promote collaboration amongst teachers (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006); as teachers work together on common goals within these communities, they are given the space to reflect, critically analyse and evaluate their practices (Marzano, 2013). Wenger (1998) proposed that learning and identity formation took place in these communities in three main ways, including: the "mutual engagement of participants," the

“negotiation of a joint enterprise” and the “development of shared repertoire” (pp.77-82). DuFour (2004) expanded on these dimensions by introducing six traits of successful professional learning communities: (1) a shared focus on learning; (2) collaborative relationships that are centred on common beliefs, values and vision, and engender mutual trust and respect; (3) mutual inquiry into effective practice (4) translating knowledge into practice; (5) maintaining a continuous cycle of improvement and development; and (6) tangible impacts on practice. Effective professional learning communities shift the focus from individual professionalism to collective professionalism, which enables practitioners to work collaboratively and interdependently rather than individually (Harris & Jones, 2010) to develop greater efficacy and quality practice (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010).

Professional learning communities create an effective nexus between research and practice. They form ‘partnerships’ or ‘networks’ that enable different parties to have their own specialised stake in research and to offer unique perspectives to enrich inquiry (Edwards, Sebba & Rickinson, 2007). As these perspectives align, a shared understanding or ‘common knowledge’ is formed that enables these groups to work effectively together. Research consequently implies fluid knowledge exchanges, in which researchers form and manages relationships through establishing a common ground. Researchers demonstrate ‘relational expertise,’ as they understand, relate to and articulate their own views as they solve problems with participants (Edwards, Sebba & Rickinson, 2007). They invest their personal and professional identities into their inquiry. Bodone and Dalmau (2005) illustrated the engagement of identities by highlighting how researchers refer to the “I” as they describe their work; they propose that this ‘I’ demonstrates the researcher’s role as a “person-in-action in the world” (p. 273). Bodone, Gudjonsdottir and Dalmau (2004) equally depicted research as an engagement of identities, stating, “... the personal/professional identity and actions of individuals is intrinsically bound to the creation and renewal of their practice”. This re-conceptualisation relies on “holistic or organic interconnections between personal and professional identity, action and belief, and between individuals and collaborative action” (Bodone, Gudjonsdottir & Dalmau, 2004, p.746). The researcher as a ‘person in action’ within a specific context highlights the interpretive nature of inquiry, where researchers tune into what they value and can identify with. Research participants and users equally need to recognise the value of something before they incorporate it into their practice. These theoretical concepts are useful in framing the researchers’ approach to the current project, which attempted to engage teachers and researchers through the common identity of teacher writer. It positions all participants as ‘people in action’, who are engaged in relevant and impactful research that deeply engages their identities and values.

The professional learning community established in this project was derived from the researchers’ and participants shared identities as researchers and writers. To help teachers to reflect, question and to reinvent their identities as authentic teachers of writing, researchers sought to investigate their own writing practices. Cremlin and Oliver (2016) discussed the implications of teacher confidence by proposing that teachers “who perceived themselves as writers” are able to implement more engaging writing instruction, which in turn, “generate[s] increased enjoyment, motivation and tenacity among their students than non-writers” (p. 17). Researchers aimed to create professional learning

spaces where teachers could personally engage in writing to develop their writer selves. Street and Stang (2009) similarly adopted Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of professional learning communities to illustrate how discussing a teacher's "biography, self-confidence, and proficiency" with writing is the first step in generating supportive networks for teacher writers (p. 91). A professional learning community of teacher writers was consequently established to help teachers explore and develop their identities as writers to become effective writing instructors.

Design and methods

This paper draws on the conceptualisation of a research initiative that engaged teachers in the writing and the action research process (University of Technology Sydney, 2016). The initiative aimed to develop teachers' capacity as writers; knowledge of, confidence in, and pedagogical skills, in the teaching of writing; knowledge and skills in action research, and to develop communities of writers with ongoing teacher and student participation. Eight teachers recruited from four different schools (two primary and two secondary) participated in five 6-hour teacher writing and action research workshops that were spread out evenly over the year at 2 to 3 month intervals. The 3-hour action research workshops were facilitated by two researchers from the School of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) who were interested in exploring the implementation of the English curriculum and research inspired pedagogy to improve students' creative and critical writing capabilities. The 3-hour writing workshops were designed to help teachers become better writers and teachers of writers; they were delivered by an award-winning author (John Larkin) who is also a trained teacher. The teachers received professional development in creative thinking and writing skills. After engaging in a series of problem solving activities, participants undertook creative writing activities related to the writing facilitator's top ten tips for writers. Throughout the writing workshops, participants had opportunities to refine these skills through an extended creative writing response. All participants were able to work towards completing a short story under the guidance of the professional writer. The participants and researchers continued to engage with each other outside of the workshops through a *Google Communities* website, where both groups regularly uploaded the progress of their short stories and other creative writing stimuli and resources that could inform their practices as teachers and learners of creative writing.

We anticipated that the teachers would be able to effectively implement these newly acquired creative writing strategies and skills into their practice through action research. Outside the workshops, the researchers conducted two sets of teacher and student interviews and classroom observations for each participating teacher. Altogether, 12 classroom observations, 11 teacher interviews and 56 student interviews were undertaken during the middle and end of the school year. This data was gathered to assess the effectiveness of the teacher professional development workshops and to explore its impact on classroom instruction.

This paper includes written reflections from two researchers and one writer in residence on the relevance of the project. The researcher and the writer in residence kept a research

journal for the duration of the project. One question that they explored through their journals was how they came to be involved in the project. Teacher voices were included through researcher ethnographic observations drawn from the first workshop to illustrate teachers' hopes and aims. These multiple voices were incorporated to reveal how research is constructed by different stories and perspectives, "the multiplicity of perspectives and authorial voices ... to articulate different ways in which our research can be represented, interpreted and understood" (Orr & Bennett, 2009, p. 88). Our investigations subsequently embody an ethnographic element as we rely heavily on the researchers' close-up observations and personal experience of the research context. Ethnography is considered to be a highly effective way to understand communities of practice, as, "... fieldwork is one answer - some say the best - to the question of how the understanding of others, close or distant is achieved" (Van Maanen, 2011, p.2). The researchers closely observed how participating teachers responded to this teacher writing initiative to assess whether they were interested in developing their own writing skills to become better writing teachers. Guillon (2015) similarly argued that ethnographers are "witnesses ... who honor the people and places and things in our ethnographies" (p. 8). Ethnography enables the careful capturing of the voices and has therefore been used commonly in the education field for interpretative and qualitative research (Gilbert, 2001). Researchers can employ ethnographic approaches to take note of and to highlight the tensions surfacing in a professional development experience (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995). As a research methodology grounded in critical post-structuralism, ethnography encompasses factors such as subjectivity, emotionality, and verisimilitude, to account for the ambiguity, paradox and complexities surrounding research. The authors similarly attempted to interpret and attribute meaning to teacher actions and comments to explore teaching as a complex mixture of "tacit and intuit components of teacher cognitions [and emotions]" (Verloop, Van Driel & Meijer, 2001, p. 447).

The researchers likewise adopted an interpretivist research paradigm to honor the interests and needs of participating teachers. The research questions underpinning this study include:

- How did the research design of this initiative evolve from its original conception?
- How did knowledge exchange take place through forming a community of teacher writers?
- What potential barriers existed in the development of this professional learning community?
- How effective was this research design in relation to improving participating teacher and student creative writing experiences?

Findings

The following sections outline how a teacher writing initiative was shaped by diverse stakeholder objectives. It explores how researchers attempted to encompass these diverse and seemingly conflicting objectives through forming a community of practice.

How did the research design of this initiative evolve from its original conception?

The project was first conceived through a request for teacher professional development workshops focusing on the teaching of writing in subject English. The executive staff of participating schools requested professional development for teachers to address poor student performance in national literacy test scores. The executive staff believed that teachers were struggling to motivate students to write in class; as a result, they wanted teachers to be equipped with the necessary skills and strategies to engage students as writers. These thoughts were noted by the chief investigator (CI).

Students in both the primary and secondary schools were not achieving in the area of writing. Discussions revealed that across the Wollongong and Campbelltown areas, students in both primary and secondary schools were not writing regularly and at a level of quality to achieve strong results in NAPLAN and the HSC ... Anecdotal evidence suggested that teachers were struggling to motivate students to write, particularly with regard to sustained writing and consequently, the quality of the writing was poor. (CI, 2015).

The CI, however, saw this project as a unique opportunity to explore the recent implementation of the new *English K-10 Syllabus*, as very little research had been conducted with regard to its implementation. There was also a lack of teacher professional development related to implementing this new syllabus.

It was the first time an authentic continuum of learning from Kindergarten to Year 10 had been established, melding the two previously quite distinct educational dimensions of primary and junior secondary education. And for the first time in NSW curriculum history, content developed by another curriculum authority, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was integrated into the new syllabus (CI, 2015).

The CI's attempts to merge the project with requests to improve student writing were visible through his attempts to connect the project to syllabus writing outcomes; he observed,

In discussions with chief investigator 2 (CI2), we discussed possible research foci including concentrating on syllabus writing outcomes; teacher perceptions of their students' writing; challenges in implementing the syllabus with regard to writing" (CI, 2015).

To narrow the scope of the project, the researchers also decided to target the new general capability in the Australian curriculum, *Critical and creative thinking*, and its higher order thinking skills of "reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation" (ACARA, 2014, para.2), which had been integrated into the *English K-10 Syllabus*. Although this revised proposal was received "enthusiastically", the executive members of the CEO Wollongong believed it was more important to, "get students to write" to improve their writing outcomes. The researchers consequently redirected their focus to evidence-based pedagogical practices in improving student writing so that the project would have greater "benefit for participating schools" (CI, 2015).

Research was conducted into effective evidence-based practices in writing instruction. One of the most extensive studies involved the *National Writing Project* (NWP), which has been a highly successful model for improving student learning outcomes (Friedrich, Swain, LeMahieu, Fessehaie & Mieles, 2008). The NWP is a large scale project that improves student literacy skills by equipping teachers with better teaching and writing practices. It has accumulated over 200 professional development sites across the United States and has offered up to 8000 programs for 80,000-100,000 teachers (Friedrich, Swain, LeMahieu, Fessehaie & Mieles, 2008). The researchers modelled this initiative on NWP's premise of equipping teachers with effective writing skills to help them become better teachers of writing. It also adopted NWP's view that teachers are the key drivers of reform, and university partnerships are a way of delivering effective teacher professional development, because teachers can work collaboratively in communities to experience the diverse range of writing undertaken by students (National Writing Project, 2017). It shared NWP's view that informed and reflective communities of practice are the ideal environment for improving student writing outcomes (National Writing Project, 2017).

How did knowledge exchange take place through forming a community of teacher writers?

Guided by these research informed practices in teaching writing, the focus shifted from cultivating student writing skills to developing teachers as writers. Although these views did not align directly with the objectives of the executive staff, which was the improvement of standardised test scores based on national literacy tests, they were strongly validated by the concerns, interests and identities of the researchers and teachers, who desired to engage students in critical, creative and authentic writing practices. As a result, the CI recruited a professional author to lead the teacher writing workshops to help teachers experience writing as an authentic and lived process.

This particular direction of the project was consolidated through close observations of the first teacher writing workshop, which revealed how participating teachers desired to explore their writer identities. For example, when teachers were queried on their writing practice, a few disclosed that they kept a personal journal, although most regretfully admitted not writing due to the lack of time. Teacher aspirations to write were also evident as a few practitioners related to how they aspired to become authors. Participants revealed their desire to develop their writing skills by inquiring into the writing facilitator's practices as a professional author. Teachers also demonstrated levels of writing expertise by identifying the features of effective writing. One teacher talked about a student's ability to mix tense and voice as an indication of skill. These teacher comments were recorded in the researchers' reflective journals.

But you know you are dealing with a clever writer if they can do it, it makes for a dynamic piece of work, I think as English teachers we pick this up "oh, that was clever," it is a reading point to writing, they are masters at what they do, it is mastery of the word (Teacher A).

Through identifying themselves as writers, teachers and learners, participants disclosed their high regard for the teaching, writing and learning process, perceiving both as inherently valuable aesthetic and meaning making acts.

Teacher C - This project is so important! As teachers we continually want to improve our practices to do what is best for our students.

Author shows a slide with a quote that says writing involves “Fill[ing] your paper with the breathings of your heart.” He then asks, “do we write for the money?”

Teacher D - It is the same for teaching!

Teacher A - Isn't it for the same for all artists, actors, craftsman? You do it to create meaning and beauty.

The researchers encouraged such discussions about participants' perspectives on “truth and worth” to increase teacher commitment and involvement (CI2, 2015). This was reflected in observations of the first workshop, “We talk about the evolution of the project and how the pieces fell into place. I am hoping it will help teachers to take greater ownership of it” (Observations of workshop 1, 2015). As participants and facilitators identified themselves as teachers and writers, they were able to form a strong sense of community. Both researchers and teachers perceived teaching and writing as intrinsically enjoyable acts that they embraced for its inherent meaning. CI2 mentioned how identifying as a writer deepened her engagement in the project, as she stated, “In some ways I felt that fate also led me to this project, as its ideas fit into how I currently perceived myself as a teacher who writes, or a writer who teaches” (CI2, 2015). This self-identification as a writer was strongly conveyed by John Larkin, the writer in residence, who saw writing as one of the most significant 21st century skills, as he noted,

As a society we communicate through the written word more now than we have at any time in our history ... writing isn't just one of those most important skills that we need to teach students, but **THE** most important!” (John Larkin, 2015).

How did this conceptualisation process account for the development of communities of practice?

Communities of practice were established through forming common goals, needs and practices, which made the conceptualisation of this project appear like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle falling into place. CI2 spoke of “fate” when referring to the uncanny way she met John Larkin after CI expressed the need for a professional writer, whilst John described his involvement as “serendipitous”. Each participant's involvement in the project contributed a missing piece in a bigger puzzle. For instance, CI believed that involving a professional writer to enhance the project's impact and authenticity, “as a practical approach would have greater value for teachers”. John also speculated that theoretical support would add validity to his work:

I have toyed with the idea of putting together one-day sessions that I could offer as PD days for teachers, but have always baulked at the idea fearing that such an endeavour without the legitimacy of a university or BOSTES [Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards, replaced by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) on 1 January 2017] behind me, might be dismissed as a money making scheme, or that I

might lack the appropriate credentials or qualifications to have such a course recognised as an accredited PD day. It was, however, at one such workshop (admittedly for students) that I met CI2 and the legitimacy that I had always wanted, but never actively sought, was offered to me through this project (John Larkin, 2015).

Through combining areas of expertise through collaboration, the researchers attempted to maximise the impact of their work.

What potential barriers existed in the development of this professional learning community?

Unequal power levels between stakeholders was presented as one potential challenge to the development of effective communities of practice. The researchers aimed to address issues of status quo and privilege through empowering teachers as researchers of their own practice; however, as teachers did not comment on how they came to be involved in the initiative, the discussion of privilege revolved around the writers and academics. This point was raised by John, the writing facilitator, who identified the tensions of validity and relevance dividing academics and writers:

As a rule, writers and academics tend to be a little wary of one another. We writers generally feel that academics have a tendency towards being overly theoretical and analytical – if we deconstruct a snowflake doesn't it lose its beauty and cease to be a snowflake in the process? While academics are widely of the opinion that fiction writers just make stuff up as we go along largely to avoid footnoting (John Larkin, 2015).

John also spoke about the status quo and the legitimacy attributed to different groups in society when referring to “appropriate credentials or qualification”.

Since the publication of my first novel in 1993, I have wandered the country in the manner of an itinerant farmhand conducting talks and workshops at various schools, universities, colleges and so forth. (John Larkin, 2015).

John was able to reconcile this tension between academics and writers through establishing a relationship built on trust, solidarity and shared vision with the researchers. Through participating as equal partners within a community of practice that aimed to cultivate teachers as writers, the divide between academics and writers could be bridged.

However, having worked with CI and CI2 on this project, I have been forced (on behalf of all writers) to re-evaluate our prejudice. We bounce around ideas like a pinball and as a team we work as equals with the intention of generating the best outcome for the participants of this project; namely to not just assist the teachers in their goal to become better teachers of writing, but to assist them to become writers themselves (John Larkin, 2015).

John's comment highlighted how professional relationships have been complicated by stereotypes and perceptions of privilege. He articulated the importance of mutual awareness, respect and equal partnership for effective collaboration, which lie at the heart of effective professional learning communities.

How effective was this research design in relation to participating teacher and student outcomes?

The effectiveness of the research design for teachers and students was analysed through the data from the student interviews. The first set of student interviews took place from May to August and the second was undertaken between November to December 2015, that is before and after their creative writing and action research projects. A total of 56 students were interviewed. Two key questions were asked to students about their attitudes to reading and writing (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Answers to the question “Would you call yourself a keen reader?”

Would you call yourself a keen reader?	Yes	No
Round 1 (May to Aug, before implementation)	18	13
Round 2 (Nov to Dec, after implementation)	20	3

Table 2: Answers to the question “Would you call yourself a keen writer?”

Would you call yourself a keen writer?	Yes	No
Round 1 (May to Aug, before implementation)	19	12
Round 2 (Nov to Dec, after implementation)	24	0

The researcher also asked follow up questions to students about their writing skills:

1. Why do you think your writing has improved?
2. What has improved in your writing?
3. How have your attitudes to writing changed?
4. What do you perceive to be the links between reading and writing?

Students believed that their writing improved in four main areas: student research, choice, explicit instruction, and the experience of success. They were more motivated to write as they were able to choose and research their own topics. Explicit teacher talk and instruction helped them to experience greater success with their writing, which in turn increased their motivation to write. In relation to the question on what has improved in their writing, the majority of students mentioned higher levels of creativity. Other students referred to other aspects of writing such as planning, vocabulary, structure, punctuation, as well as an improvement in marks. Most students also expressed changes in relation to their attitudes to writing, with one stating, “I keep a diary now. I write every day. I’ll be able to compare my writing now with what I write in the future,” whilst another mentioned, “I realise now that I can write.”

Students were also able to think critically about the connections between reading and writing. Student comments on the connections between both processes included statements such as, “Writing leads to reading and then more writing,” “I get ideas from my reading about how the characters feel. It helps to compare with the character I am writing about” and “I think more carefully about my writing when I’m reading now.”

These responses indicated that the teachers demonstrated positive changes in practice that led to improved student outcomes in creative and critical writing.

Discussion

The authors have depicted the complex ‘coming together’ of ideas within an interactive research initiative, where the inquiry process intuitively evolved to meet researchers’ objectives and the context specific needs. Weiss (1979) commented on this intuitive joint construction of meaning, stating, “The process is not one of linear order from research to decision but a disorderly set of interconnections and back-and-forthness that defies neat diagrams” (p.428). The authors described how research evolves to meet the diverse needs of stakeholders. For example, although the current initiative was originally conceived as workshops for senior secondary English teachers, the researchers explored its potential to address bigger, nation-wide curriculum changes in Australia. As this objective did not meet the needs of external stakeholders regarding poor student writing performance, it was refined to help teachers develop their own writing skills to improve student writing. This conceptualisation process highlights how knowledge exchange is a two-step process, where researchers both survey the concerns of local communities and address them with robust evidence of good practice (Gibbons, et al., 1994). Researchers in this initiative similarly attempted to provide a robust, research-based response to stakeholder concerns.

This initiative depicts how effective knowledge exchange involves different groups working together on shared goals, in a flexible and developing relationship. It adds to the discussion on research impact by arguing that effective knowledge exchange can be more critically understood through developing communities of practice. The community formed in this study involves engaging teachers in the joint enterprise of developing their teacher writer identities. As the project aimed to develop teacher writing skills, it became evident that teachers who identified as writers could effectively engage in the initiative. Research concerning the National Writing Project (2017) documented similar findings which illustrated how as teachers became writers, their attitudes to and practices in the teaching of writing changed, which then led to improvements in student writing (Whitney, 2008; Whitney, 2009; Carruthers & Scanlan, 1990). Although the focus became the teachers rather than the students, the researchers felt the beneficiaries of teacher learning would ultimately be their students. This was found to be the case for this study as the positivity of students’ attitudes to reading and writing increased significantly towards the conclusion of the project.

This process of knowledge exchange was further illustrated through the analogy of a puzzle, where each participating group contributed a missing piece. The puzzle analogy highlighted how different stakeholders engaged in meaningful knowledge exchange by offering relevant and required input. In other words, researchers and research participants contributed their unique expertise and skill-sets within a mutually reciprocated transaction. All groups were able to have their identities, values and sense of being affirmed through purposefully connecting with others in a professional learning community. As the pieces of the puzzle fit together, the stakeholders could derive a sense of legitimacy and affirmation that strengthened their professional identity as writers and teachers of writing.

A final issue relating to knowledge exchange was the possibility for unequal distributions of power between the researchers and participants. The researchers aimed to mitigate possible inequities by empowering teachers to research their own practice. Action research has accordingly been defined as an emancipatory methodology that involves, “developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.1), where research users are able to directly address problems that arise within their immediate contexts (Grogan, Donaldson & Simmons, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Martinovic, et al., 2012). Concerns about power inequalities were raised by John, who drew attention to the possible tension between writers and academics. These concerns affirm the need for researchers to identify and scrutinise their own positionality as research involves a “slanted playing field” that attributes greater power to certain groups (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 199). Different professionals who jointly undertake research may similarly find themselves bound by “master narratives” that are generated by dominant groups to benefit their own interests. McCorkel and Myers (2003) relayed how through greater transparency about these narratives, researchers can develop relationships based on respect, “The substantive relations between the knower and the known mediate the relationship between the knower’s standpoint and the production of knowledge” (p. 221). The authors propose that the affirmation of one’s identities as writers engenders a mutual understanding and respect that can mitigate the power imbalances of the status quo.

Implications

This study depicts research as a complex and reflexive process that takes place within a community of practice, where participants from different professional backgrounds work across the boundaries of their existing discourses. One key implication is the value of acknowledging and cultivating the unique skill-sets involved in undertaking research as knowledge exchange. Rickinson, Sebba and Edwards (2011) described how researchers work as project managers who manage knowledge exchanges within relationships, to inform their practice and those of others. They discuss how researchers need to develop relational expertise to effectively facilitate this process. Bodone and Dalmau (2005) also depicted researchers in a relational capacity as “mediator[s] (or at times translator[s] of epistemologies from the various positions and communities of practice” (p.281), to stress how they need to share their knowledge, listen to what comes back from others and to then revise his or her views so that their research becomes “organic to moral-political life and discussion” (Carspecken, 2005, p.15).

We also found this to be the case within this study, as we had to mediate between external stakeholders, participants and amongst ourselves to create the project plan. However, in order to create a clear project trajectory, we found ourselves relying on the research undertaken by highly successful projects, such as the National Writing Project. As a result, we planned our professional development approach according to key principles of the NWP to allow teachers “to write and to examine theory, research, and practice together systematically... [within a] reflective and informed community of practice” (National Writing Project, 2017, para. 14). Our experiences validate NWP’s claims that there have

been significant improvements in the writing of students whose teachers have participated in NWP's professional development programs.

Some limitations of this study are related to structural support provided to participants. As the study consisted of a pilot project involving a small number of participants, it was difficult to generate support on a structural level to support the participating teachers. Although the teachers were given time to attend the professional development workshops, they were not allotted further time to invest in their learning and to explore and implement different creative writing strategies or to work on their creative writing responses. This affirms the beliefs that schools themselves need to take ownership over teacher professional development initiatives to ensure their success, as schools need to "seamlessly link curriculum, assessment, standards, and professional learning opportunities" (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 47).

A final implication is the need to engage in open-ended research that evolves to meet the needs of all stakeholders despite the difficulties involved (Walter, Davis & Nutley, 2003). In addition to the lack of immediate, quantifiable changes in practice, the outcomes of an open-ended inquiry may not even address the initial questions it sought out to solve (Bodone, 2005). However, rather than dismissing interpretive research as being too difficult and messy, researchers need to value research that "enables/prompts unexpected processes of transformation for the people involved and/or the phenomena observed", and provokes dialogue and reflexivity to create a "point of transformation and an opportunity to re-vision and renew our work" (Bodone, 2005, p. 274).

One possible direction for future research would be to use multiple data collection methods and approaches to assess the outcomes of an open-ended research project. Such steps would enable researchers to assess the effectiveness of their inquiry despite having cast their nets wide to accommodate the needs of various stakeholders. Finally, Walter, Davis and Nutley (2003) proposed that effective partnerships promote ownership and uptake as participants are more likely to incorporate research findings that they meaningfully connect with. In discussions about research impact, researchers need to accordingly consider ways to help stakeholders ask and answer questions about meaning and worth, to begin the process of re-imagining and revitalising practice (Bodone & Dalmau, 2005).

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Please cite as: Yoo, J., Carter, D. & Larkin, J. (2017). Making research relevant through an engagement of identities. *Issues in Educational Research*, 27(2), 381-398.
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