RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

THE LEARNING SCHOOLS MODEL

MEI KUIN, LAI • STUART MCNAUGHTON
REBECCA JESSON • AARON WILSON
Research-practice Partnerships for School Improvement
Research-practice Partnerships for School Improvement: The Learning Schools Model

BY

MEI KUIN LAI
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

STUART McNAUGHTON
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

REBECCA JESSON
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

AARON WILSON
The University of Auckland, New Zealand
Chapter 1 Ambitious Aims: Research for Solutions and Knowledge

Solving the Big Five – Variability, Scalability, Capability, Acceleration and Sustainability 2

Variability 2
Scalability 3
Capability 4
Acceleration 5
Sustainability 6

A New Approach 6

Compelling Reasons for Having Research Embedded in Practice 8

‘Real-World’ Impact 8
Increases Utilisation of Research by Practitioners 9
Develops Research Knowledge That Cannot Be Gained in Controlled Settings 9
Addresses and Repositions the Big Five 9

Our Contribution 10

Evidence from a Variety of Educational and Policy Contexts 10

Training of Researchers in Research-Practice Partnerships 11

The Improvement of Valued Student Outcomes 11

The Learning Schools Model 12
Chapter 2  The Learning Schools Model (LSM)  17

Key Concept 1: Contextualisation of Effective Practice to Local Contexts  17
  Understanding Contexts  18
  Knowing the Problem in Context  19
  Why Context Matters to a Partnership  20
  Going Beyond the Local  21
Key Concept 2: Collaborative Analysis of Data  22
  Understanding Collaborative Analysis of Data  22
  Data and Data Literacy Skills  24
Two Case Studies  25
  Phase 1: Profiling  26
  Phase 2: Resourcing  28
  Phase 3: Sustainability  30
Sequence of the Model  31
The NZ Context and its Affordances  32

Chapter 3  Collaborative Data Analysis  37

The Analysis Process  38
  1. A Focus on Both Valued Student Outcomes and Practices  38
  2. Co-designed Solutions from the Analysis  40
  3. Agreed Criteria for Evaluating Hypotheses  41
  4. Pedagogical Content Knowledge  42
Principles for Data Collection  42
  Data Fit for Purpose  42
  High-Quality Data  44
Principles for Data Analysis and Use: An Extended Example  45
  Typical Analyses: Achievement  46
  Typical Analyses: Teaching and School Data  49
  Typical Analyses: The Relationship between Teaching and School Data and Achievement Data  51
Artefacts for Collaborative Analysis  54
Caveat  55

Chapter 4  Partnerships for Design and Sustainability  57

Partnership Purposes and Roles: Why Collaborate?  58
Principles of Partnerships  59
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) 61
  PLC Setup 61
  Structure and Focus 62
  Within-Schools Sites 63
  Across-School Sites 63
Research into the PLCs 64
Knowledge and Skills for Collaboration 67
  Skill Set 1: Teaching Expertise and PCK 67
  Skill Set 2: Research Knowledge 68
  Skill Set 3: Leadership 69
  Skill Set 4: Analysis and Use of Data 69
  Skill Set 5: Deliberate Dialogue and Facilitation 70
  Skill Set 6: Cultural Expertise 71

Chapter 5  Resourcing and Professional Learning and Development (PLD) 73

Why Focus on PLD to Improve Teaching Practices? 74
PLD as Resourcing: Key Principles 75
  Key Principle One: Profiling Before Resourcing 75
  Key Principle Two: Engaging Teachers in PLD 76
  Key Principle Three: Collaborative Analysis of Data Cycles, Not Silver Bullets 78
  Key Principle Four: The Social Construction of New Forms of Expertise 79
Resourcing as Bespoke 80
  Tensions 80
PLD Model: Cascading Structure 81
  Mitigating the Risks 81
  The Role of School Leaders 83
  Issues with the Cascade 84
Other Forms of Resourcing 85

Chapter 6  Sustainability of the LSM 87

Why Is Sustainability so Important for the LSM? 88
Designing for Sustainability: How Sustainability Is Developed Through the LSM 89
  Sustainability in Phase 3 89
What We Have Learnt from Sustainability Studies 92
  Key Outcomes 92
  School Practices 93
Contents

School Leaders’ Beliefs and Supporting Structures 94
Conditions for Sustainability 95
Issues 96

Chapter 7 Learning to Learn 99
Contributing to Methodology 99
Learning about ‘What Works, for Whom, under What Conditions and at Scale’ 100
Our Solution: A Flexible but Robust Design 102
Contributing to Theoretical Knowledge 106
Example 1: Instructional Risk in the Teaching of Comprehension Strategies 106
Example 2: Explaining Digital Pedagogies 107
By What Mechanisms Do We Learn to Become Better? 109
Thinking and Testing Ideas 110
Feedback Loops and Associated Disposition 113
What Do We Still Need to Learn? 114

References 117

Index 127
List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Fig. 1. The Learning Schools Model Design 14
Fig. 2. Typical Data Analysis Process 39
Fig. 3. Reporting Template for Inquiry Projects 91
Fig. 4. Cross-Sectional Data at Time 1 Which Shows the Achievement Predicted for Each Year Level at the Start and End of the Year 104
Fig. 5. Stanine Means of Time 1–6 Cohorts against Projected Baseline 105

Tables

Table 1. Digital Schools Partnership PLC Structures 65
About the Authors

Mei Kuin Lai (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, and an Associate Director at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, The University of Auckland. Her research focusses on research-practice partnerships to improve valued student outcomes, in particular, how collaborative analysis of data in professional learning communities and networks contribute to these improvements. She was the joint-recipient of the University of Auckland’s Research Excellence Award (2015), awarded for research of demonstrable quality and impact, for her work in co-designing and co-testing the Learning Schools Model. She has published in journals like *Teaching and Teacher Education* and *Reading Research Quarterly*, where her first authored article was selected for inclusion in the International Literacy Association’s edited book, *Theoretical models and processes of reading (6th Edition)*. She consults nationally and internationally, and has led or co-led large-scale and regional projects in New Zealand.

Stuart McNaughton (ONZM, PhD) is a Professor of Education at the Faculty of Education and Social Work and the former Director of the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, The University of Auckland. He is also New Zealand’s Chief Education Scientific Advisor. He has published extensively on children’s literacy and language development, the design of effective educational programmes for culturally and linguistically diverse populations and cultural processes in development. He is a recipient of research prizes, consults on curricula and educational interventions nationally and internationally and has a position as Distinguished Overseas Professor at East China Normal University (Shanghai). He is a member of the International Reading Hall of Fame for sustained contributions to literacy research, literacy leadership and the preparation of leaders in the literacy field through teaching. He was the joint-recipient of the University of Auckland’s Research Excellence Award (2015) for his work in co-designing and co-testing the Learning Schools Model. His publications have featured in journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*.

Rebecca Jesson (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, and an Associate Director at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, The University of Auckland. Rebecca’s research interests centre on literacy learning, and on developing effective instruction for all students that leads to advanced literacy skills. Most recently this focus has extended to investigating teaching and learning processes in Pacific Nations and within digital interventions in
New Zealand. Rebecca has led or co-led large Learning Schools Model projects reaching over 200 schools across three Pacific nations and in New Zealand. She was the joint-recipient of the University of Auckland’s Research Excellence Award (2015) for her work in co-designing and co-testing the Learning Schools Model. She has published in journals like *Teaching and Teacher Education*.

**Aaron Wilson** (PhD) is the Associate Dean (Research) at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, and an Associate Director of the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, The University of Auckland. He researches and writes mainly about literacy, particularly disciplinary and adolescent literacy, as well as about teacher professional learning and development. He was the joint-recipient of the University of Auckland’s Research Excellence Award (2015) for his work in co-designing and co-testing the Learning Schools Model. He presents and consults both locally and internationally, working with practitioners, policy-makers and researchers including the NZ Ministry of Education, and has led or co-led high profile large-scale projects. He was a Department Head for the Literacy Leadership Department of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. He has published in journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*.

The authors wish to acknowledge the Māori name for the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, Te Pūtahi Whakatairanga Hapori Ako Angitu (The Centre for the Promotion of Successful Learning Communities).
Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) constitute a novel and valuable model for doing educational research, one that is growing in importance and in vitality. I celebrate that shift and greatly value the information presented in this book about one successful instantiation of the RPP model. We have come a long way beyond the metaphors ‘applied research’ and ‘translation from research to practice’ that dominated educational researchers’ thinking as recently as 20 years ago.

I have myself worked in those more traditional models, developing tools that proved their worth in experimental trials but then were handed off to teachers who never used them. The difference in uptake when we can provide tools to solve problems that teachers themselves nominate is enormous and deeply gratifying. Thus, I am a strong supporter. The partnership approach of developing tools in response to practitioner needs (and to the extent possible in collaboration with practitioners) is much more effective in leading to high-quality implementation, to measurable impacts and to sustainability.

The intuitive appeal of this common sense approach should not, though, blind us to the risks associated with it. The sudden popularity of the RPP model, and the consequent expansion of funding for research carried out in this tradition, threatens to transform a very good idea into a fashion or a trend. Thus the RPP label is now used for many different approaches to doing educational work in the real world, not all of which are equally authentic exemplars. We should be cautious not to let the heterogeneity of what people are calling RPPs dilute the construct and obscure the importance of the central principles, which are so well incorporated into the work presented in this volume, on the Learning Schools Model (LSM).

This model displays particularly robustly one of the basic RPP principles – that the work be done locally, with a rich understanding of the context. In the work of the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP; www.serp.org), with which I have been involved, we have found that approaches to an urgent problem of practice developed for a specific school district always end up being useful to and adopted by other districts, sometimes but not always with minor tweaks. In other words, as discussed extensively in Chapter Seven of this book, working locally does not mean jettisoning the potential for broader impact, or for contributing to research knowledge. But anticipating those more global contributions prematurely can undermine the local commitment.
In the SERP work we have experienced many of the tensions and challenges associated with adopting the RPP approach, some of which are brilliantly illustrated for the New Zealand context in this volume:

- SERP is committed to starting with the practitioners’ definition of the problem, but sometimes find that characterisation is not helpful. For example, in our early work in the Boston Public Schools we were asked by the superintendent to ‘solve’ the problem of middle-grades reading comprehension. The teachers, on the other hand, characterised the challenge as academic vocabulary – a much more tractable issue. We found, after many years of work, that tools to improve academic vocabulary did indeed improve reading comprehension (Jones et al., 2019), but had we started focussing on interventions for reading comprehension itself we might never have gotten there.

- The collaborative data analysis that is a core practice in the LSM is costly in time and can limit the sophistication of the analyses. An alternative model, adopted within the longstanding partnership between the Department of Early Childhood at the Boston Public Schools (DECBPS) and a team at the University of Michigan headed by Christina Weiland (Weiland, Sachs, McCormick, Hsueh, & Snow, in press) displays an alternative, in which Weiland’s advanced quantitative analytic capacities are deployed to answer urgent DECBPS questions, such as whether investment in summer school for lagging students was justified. Collaboration focussed on refining the question to that BPS got the answer it needed, rather than on engaged in the actual analytic process.

- The LSM centres its activities inside schools, with a focus on professional learning and development as the lever for improvement. SERP also works inside schools, but has focussed its efforts on developing tools that are immediately useful to teachers and that have the potential to change classroom practice; many of the SERP tools are designed to ‘carry the training with them,’ in part because the organisation does not have the capacity to deliver professional development at large scale. Other robust RPPs have focussed much more outside schools on structural and policy issues. The Chicago Consortium for School Research, for example, and the New York City Research Alliance have access to district data and respond to district requests for specific analyses, but also develop their own questions in discussion with the district. Collaboration in these cases is characterised by regular communication and adherence to a ‘no surprises’ rule before findings are made public. But the basic model of educational improvement puts more emphasis on district and school policies than the RPPs that do their work mostly with teachers, inside schools. A recurrent challenge, and one that the LSM team has solved brilliantly, is the sustainability of the partnership model. In the US context, where individual districts have considerable autonomy, where the tenure of district leaders rarely lasts more than a few years, and where new leadership is free to bring in new practices and curricula, the work that is needed to keep partnerships alive across transitions is daunting, and not always successful. There are great advantages to systems of education more like New Zealand’s, where there are fewer layers
between schools and central government and centralisation of curriculum and policies, which can promote a level of coherence that is rarely reached in US public schooling.

In short, this book can be read in many ways: as a primer in the advantages of RPPs as a new structure for engaging in educational research; as an analysis of the epistemological underpinnings of reliable knowledge about educational practice; as an encouraging story about educational improvement; and as a demonstration that lasting improvement in any complex system requires an unending cycle of learning how to learn.

by
Catherine Snow, PhD
Patricia Albjerg Graham Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Chair, Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, USA (1995–1998)
Acknowledgments

Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi
(With your basket and my basket, the people will thrive)
Māori Proverb

To our school, policy, research, and community partners,
and to those who support them

To our families