

# Didn't I Tell You That? Challenges and Tensions in Developing and Sustaining School-University Partnerships

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**Abstract:** Chamberlain High School is small inner-city school within a school in a large urban district. Over its five years of existence, Chamberlain administrators have enlisted the aid of outside partners to help them realize the vision of an interdisciplinary environmental science theme based school. Partners include many university-based groups, as well as groups such as National Public Radio's *Living on Earth*, the Urban Ecology Institute (a non-profit university-based organization), and a local environmental literacy program. This study was undertaken to understand some of the dynamics behind those partnerships. Using activity theory as an analytical lens we found a set of tensions that drove many of the changes that have occurred between the school and its partners. In this paper we document these tensions so others who are working in similar situations will be able to leverage our experience and findings to support urban school change.

## Introduction and Need

This year's theme for ICLS is on making a difference. With that same goal in mind, many educators have argued that collaboration between university faculty, classroom teachers, and community organizations are central to supporting school reform and making a difference in K-12 education (Ball, 2000). To date, however, our understanding of how such relationships unfold and are sustained over time is rather limited. Most research on educational partnerships has been focused on understanding the logistical and administrative strategies used by the partners to maintain working relationships (Borthwick, Stirling, Nauman, & Cook, 2003; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995) rather than the processes that create or inhibit enduring collaborations. The purpose of the work described here it is to document the development of a school-community-university partnership by capturing the tensions that pervaded the partnership and the perceptions of teachers, university partners, and school administrators regarding the partnerships.

## Background

Research suggests that from the perspective of school personnel, educational researchers and other such partners are often viewed as outsiders who lack the perception of what it means to be on the "inside" of schools (Lewison & Holliday, 1997). As Gerald W. Bracey (1990 p. 65) states, "most people in [K-12] school buildings perceive the work of universities as irrelevant." Coupled with this perception of irrelevance, educational researchers have developed a reputation for short term interventions, conducting their research and then abandon school personnel once their funding expires or when their work with school personnel becomes too difficult or time consuming (Lewison & Holliday, 1997). Even worse, teachers (particularly urban teachers) have often viewed educational researchers as "users and abusers" of their time and their students (Lewison & Holliday, 1997). This distrust was due to several factors, but research suggests that such distrust has arisen, at least in part, from the social hierarchical structure that has emerged between university and school faculty (Peel, Peel, & Baker, 2002). Namely, university personnel have been privileged in relation to schools because university personnel are considered knowledge producers whereas school practitioners are considered (and expected to be) users of university generated knowledge (Laine, Schultz, & Smith, 1994). These relations have led to long-standing asymmetries in status, power, and resources which made it difficult for educational researchers and school personnel to trust one another (Lewison & Holliday, 1997). Cultivating better relations are critical for university researchers so the knowledge base about the dynamics of teaching and learning in the settings in which they occur can be improved (Peel et al., 2002). Likewise, establishing better relations for school personnel, allows them to gain new insights and frameworks from which to view their own beliefs and practices which can inform about how to work more effectively with students (Peel et al., 2002). Yet, the question remains: "How do we as an educational community improve relations between schools and university personnel?"

## History and Study Context

Chamberlain High School is small inner-city school within a school in a large urban district. Over its five years of existence, Chamberlain administrators have adopted the strategy of enlisting outside partners (most of whom are university based) to help realize the vision of an interdisciplinary environmental science theme based school. However, while those five years have seen many areas of growth and adaptation, informal conversations among many partners and teachers revealed frustrations with the ways in which those partnerships have manifested themselves, and the incomplete whole-school integration of partners and the environmental science theme. This study was undertaken to try to help understand some of the dynamics behind those partnerships. We also sought to disentangle other factors that may contribute to less than ideal partnerships. Specifically, we were interested in answering the following questions:

1. How do teachers, partners, and administrators at CHS perceive the role and nature of partnerships?
2. What changes to partnerships do teachers, partners, and administrators believe can be made to better facilitate a whole-school adoption of an environmental science theme?

## Methods

### Methodological Framework

Following the framework described by Abell (2000) in her study of collaboration and identity formation between herself and an elementary teacher, our research was guided by the perspective of phenomenology coupled with the principles of activity theory. We called upon the principles of activity theory because complex systems, such as school-university partnerships, are often characterized by their internal contradictions (Engeström, 1993). These contradictions are best understood as tensions among the components of the activity system. Tensions are critical to understanding what motivates particular actions and in understanding the evolution of a system more generally. These tensions can be thought of as system dualities, and it is through understanding the interplay within and among these dualities that one can best understand and support the continued innovation of the system. Wenger (1998) argued that it is the interplay within the dualities that drive the system, with the design goal being to leverage the dynamics of system dualities and not to treat them as polar opposites or to eliminate one side or the other. As tensions enter the system they become the moving force behind disturbances and innovations and eventually drive the system to change and develop. We found that that these two frameworks seemed particularly appropriate because the participants and our research team were jointly living out our stories of collaboration and working together to improve teaching and student learning while attempting to navigate the inherent tensions that permeate educational partnerships (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995).

### Data Collection

This is a primarily naturalistic study grounded in the principles of ethnographic research. Two researchers, who were also partners at Chamberlain High interviewed 7 teachers (out of 20 in the school), 7 partners (representing 4 different organizations, 2 were university professors, 1 was university based professional, 1 was university-based non-profit, and 1 was community organization) and 2 administrators (principal and vice-principal). In addition to the semi-structured interviews (which lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes) the researchers attended professional development sessions at Chamberlain, attending all partner meetings with school administration, conducted informal interviews, and wrote reflective journals, attended classes when partners were present, and developed curriculum materials in collaboration with teachers and the other partners. In addition, we collected e-mail exchanges between teachers and partners and between the partners themselves.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis occurred in an on-going manner during the course of the two years of our partnership with Chamberlain. We began by examining the data documents in light of our personal experience while being partners at the high school. In particular, data were examined through an activity theory perspective with a focus on identifying the tensions that characterized the relationships between school personnel and the partners. We then developed formative theories and tested these theories against the empirical evidence that we were collecting (i.e. teacher interviews, retrospective reflection) from the partners and school faculty. We were in an ideal position to identify emerging tensions as we were participants or were informed about nearly every interaction that Chamberlain had with a partner. As such we could quickly follow-up with the partners regarding our emerging

thoughts. As we developed our interpretations of how the partnership building process unfolded, we began to formalize the tensions that appeared to characterize how the partnership structures and tensions unfolded over time. Following the formalization of the tensions we discussed the tensions with the assistant principal of Chamberlain High School and one partner to determine if the tensions we had identified did characterize their perception of how the partnerships.

## Results

### Tension 1: Participation versus Non-Participation

Teachers fell among four points along two spectra: partnered or unpartnered and supportive or unsupportive (see table 1). Partnered teachers were those who are or have been main contacts or classroom hosts of outside partners. Unpartnered were those that had not. Supportive teachers were those that, regardless of partnered status, seemed generally supportive and optimistic about the utility of having the various partners work with the school, while unsupportive generally did not.

Table 1. Matrix of support and level of participation in partnerships of teachers interviewed

	Partnered	Unpartnered
Supportive	PS	US
Unsupportive	PU	UU

In general, partnered supportive (PS) teachers were satisfied with the ways in which their partners helped them to incorporate what they perceived as valuable curricula into their classrooms, and in general they were perceived positively by the partners. One teacher fell into the partnered, unsupportive (PU) category, and we were not able to interview her. However, both partners paired up with PU teachers and administrators expressed frustration at the PU teacher’s apparently superficial agreement to work with the partners on classroom projects, but to put forth such little effort towards those projects that they were essentially unsuccessful utilizations of resources. It is unfortunate we did not get to interview this teacher (though fortunate there was only one). Unpartnered supportive (US) teachers provided the most valuable insights from teachers’ perspective, and will be described in more detail below. Unpartnered unsupportive (UU) teachers were not interviewed due to the voluntary basis of these interviews and on the three occasions when an interview was discussed the teachers decided not to be interviewed. However, some evidence of their ideas was proffered in discussions with US teachers who relayed UU teachers’ perceptions of the partnerships. According to the US teachers, UU teachers neglected to participate in partnerships for two main reasons. First, they felt it was difficult to incorporate these environmental science-focused partnerships into their course content. For example, a French teacher found the integration of Environmental Science into his classroom quite unrealistic and not aligned with his overall classroom mission. Second, UU teachers perceived that there were administratively ‘chosen’ teachers that got to partner and that they (the UU teachers) were not chosen. This latter finding speaks to the issue that not all of the teachers in the school trusted the administration.

US teachers provided some revealing insights, a voice that has yet gone unheard at Chamberlain, and that is potentially valuable in expanding the interdisciplinary vision and partnerships at the school. US teachers saw the value in the resources the partners brought to bear. In general, US teachers felt outside the loop, and not ‘chosen’ by administration to participate in what the partners had to offer. It was clear that some unpartnered teachers did not feel welcomed, nor did they know how to adapt partners’ resources into their classrooms. One US teacher was particularly interested in partnerships, saying “You’ve (partners) got valuable stuff,” and that she would love to integrate environmental issues such as nuclear power into her math class, but that she had no idea whom to contact or where to begin. She believed that she and other US teachers needed, “just... to talk in a real way, because now...we’re being talked at.” This teacher recognized the content expertise of partners, and clearly recognized the potential value in cultivating such a relationship, yet did not know how to forge such a relationship.

This contrasted with some partners’ beliefs that teachers who do not participate in partnerships are unwilling to do so, and don’t participate solely by choice. These partners generally believed that they were clearly conveying to the teachers the opportunities each partner afforded the teachers, and that if a teacher did not participate, it was due to their own choice. However, one partner lamented that each year the partners ask

administration for a day in which partners and teachers sit down and genuinely talk about who they are and what they have to offer, but that day never occurs.

### Tension #2: Curriculum Developer vs. Resource Provider

As the partnerships progressed there was initially a great deal of discussion primarily between the partners and school administration regarding the role of the partners. The partners tended to believe that their role was one of providing resources rather than one of developing curriculum materials and providing classroom support for those materials. This idea is illustrated by the following excerpt from an e-mail exchange between one of the partner groups:

...I don't feel that it is our place to develop curriculum specifically for the school, but rather to determine ways in which we can support the teachers in integrating our existing resources and helping them to see the connections to the other disciplines...

The teachers on the other hand tended to believe that the partners' role was to provide more than just resources but to provide materials *and* classroom support to implement the materials. This was also the view of the administration but to a more limited degree, in that the administration highly valued in-class professional development where a partner was working alongside a teacher. They believed that this model was a good way to establish trust between the partner and their teachers and that it helped the teacher become a better teacher. This idea regarding the need for classroom support was articulated by one of Chamberlain's teachers:

I appreciate everything that they are trying to do but you know without real classroom support it is really impossible to do some of this. Though, I know that most folks try to make an effort to be here as much as they can. The more the better.

While articulated in this interview by a teacher, this sentiment was also repeatedly expressed in monthly meetings between the administration and partners, as the administration expressed the voice of their staff. There were numerous occasions during those meetings when administration stressed that teachers want partners to, "give us something we can *use*."

Throughout the two years of our work at Chamberlain there have been several discussions regarding the role of the partners, how they should interact, and what services they should provide to the teachers. At the conclusion of these discussions, uncertainty surrounding the role of the partners persisted, at least from the partners' perspectives. However, when the administrators were asked regarding the role of the partners they tended to see the partners as developers of materials alongside the teachers:

I see the partnerships as helping us develop curriculum, implement that material in the classroom and work with teachers in the classroom. What I like best is when the partner is in the room, getting their hands dirty, and really working alongside with the teachers and interacting with the students.

It appears that this uncertainty of roles and a common vision has inhibited partners fully realizing their visions and teachers being able to fully utilize partners in some cases. Given these different viewpoints we recommend (and have learned) that when entering into a partnership it is critically important to identify and document the precise roles of the partners and develop a shared sense of common purpose early in the partnership process or else this tension and the frustrations that embody this tension will have the potential to de-rail even the most well intentioned partnership.

### Tension #3: Perception vs. Knowledge Interaction

From the very beginning of the partnership there has been a sense of mistrust between some teachers and the partners and the administration. Some teachers have seen the partners as strictly looking out for their own interests (particularly their monetary interests) while at the same time perceiving the administration as looking out for their own interests and promotion rather than concerning themselves with improving student learning. Through our interviews and participation as research partners at Chamberlain we found that the requisite trust for successful partnerships was not present between many partners and teachers, primarily because initial actual contacts between unpartnered teachers and partners had not occurred, and that administration and most partners believed that such

contact had indeed occurred. The importance of developing trust was revealed by one US teacher who, when asked whether there was trust between partners and teachers responded:

Teacher: I don't trust them (partners).

Interviewer: Why?

Teacher: Because, why should I? They haven't done anything trustworthy. As far as I can see you guys are getting a whole lot of money to do something and you don't really know what you're doing but you still get the money.

It is important to note that this teacher is one who sees the value in partnerships, and would like partners help her to integrate environmental science issues into her classroom. However, short of the interview in which she was engaged, she had had little contact with partners. Thus, she had no basis on which to trust the partners, who, to her, represented an outside group making money off of the schools, while offering nothing definitive in return. This teacher particularly well represented an inner-conflict common among US teachers: they see the potential benefits of having outside partners but have yet to reap those benefits personally, and have developed a sense of mistrust. This was evident during another teacher interview:

I just try to stay out the fire. I am told I need to do this and work with the partners. I admit I just tend to try to ignore it all, but when told to do something I will, but I often just close the door and teach as best as I can.

A feeling of being exploited (which also contributed to initial mistrust) by universities was evident through many of our initial interactions with our partner teachers. This feeling of exploitation was evident in the following excerpt taken from an e-mail exchange with one of the teachers in the early stages of our work:

We get suitors all the time. They come in get their grant money and leave. It is because working with urban schools are sexy and that it is easy to get grants and to say look at how good we are in helping those kids. Then the grant runs out and they leave, or their students graduate and they leave, or they just leave. Even though I have only been teaching for a few years I feel rather used by the universities around here.

Chamberlain's teachers were optimistic and hopeful that the partner materials and programs would benefit their students, but at the same time they were extremely concerned that we were just another university project that would leave after a few months and that we would not provide the support that they felt they would need. Ironically, similar conflicting beliefs appeared in several of the partners we interviewed. These partners assumed that teachers not involved with projects were uninvolved by choice, yet these partners also generally hoped for a wider net of teacher inclusion within partner relationships. Partners had no reason to trust the unpartnered teachers, since they believed they had sufficiently invited the entire teaching staff to participate in partnerships.

In seeking an understanding to why the teachers tended to not trust the partners one of the school's teachers expressed the belief that previously university-driven initiatives lacked longevity during a presentation at a conference about the collaborative projects.

I feel like Charlie Brown in that old peanuts skit. University faculty have come to me and promised to do this and that. I admit I am always excited to do new things and try new things, but every time I feel that the football is pulled away from me just as I get comfortable with something new. I have been burned many times so I'm not sure whether I want to try anything new anymore particularly if it comes from a university. However, they really came through for us and it worked great!...

#### Tension #4: Politics vs. Collaboration

Our intensive collaboration within the school has revealed that there is a general mistrust between many teachers and administration. While this is not true for all teachers, it is true of many unpartnered teachers. This becomes an important consideration for partners reaching out to those unpartnered teachers, who found it necessary to tread carefully – partners need the support of administration, but if they appear 'too close' to administration,

teachers would associate them with the administration which lead to mistrust. One partner expressed this in a reflection he wrote:

our chief problem (is that) the faculty associates us, at least initially, with the administration. They did not ask for the partners to be in the school. They did not ask for our help in their classrooms. They did not ask for an environmental science theme. As such, I feel that many of them (especially those that have been at the school a while and only interact with us peripherally) view us as just another bureaucratically imposed interruption to their closed classroom. I feel like there are faculty who patiently endure us, and I indeed see why they would. Its essence is that we are associated with the bureaucracy of BPS and the administration, two entities that do little (from teachers' perspectives) other than make it more difficult what it is that most of them love to do: teach kids.

This quote reflects a partner interested in bringing new teachers aboard the partnership programs. This sentiment was also evident in partners' consideration of their existing teacher-partner relationships. These partners noted that it was critically important that when working with teachers, to not appear too close to the administration or else some of the teachers would choose to only marginally participate and tend to explore ways to ensure that the partnership would be a failure to show the administration that the partnership model was untenable. Thus, most partners recognized that an important tension and something that they had to quickly learn to navigate was the political landscape within the school and to understand the relationship between the administration and all of Chamberlain's teachers.

## Discussion and Implications

The research base and historical evidence reveals that many school/university educational partnerships that have existed 'fizzle and fail' (Peel et al., 2002). As noted by Peel and colleagues (2002) many educational partnerships have been formed to provide only temporary band-aid solutions to very complex and multifaceted problems, *failed to develop equity and trust between the participants*, and as a result were short in duration. Yet, some educational partnerships have continued to shine and formed viable coalitions (e.g. see Borthwick et al., 2003). There are many facets to building a successful school-university partnership including professional development, sufficient time, open communication, and strong leadership. However, we have found that developing an understanding of how trust is developed between university and school personnel is critically important if such partnerships are to be successful and sustainable (Bracey, 1990; Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Identification of the tensions that act as barriers to the development of that trust can be an important step in cultivating healthy, productive relationships. Noting those tensions and sharing them among stakeholders can allow everyone to go in with 'eyes wide open'. In closing, this study highlights the merit in consciously studying the dynamics of school-university partnerships as they unfold because through the constant of reflection upon the partnership it will allow one to better understand the pitfalls that one may encounter and the exact nature of the tensions that are inherent in any partnership. If stakeholders do not understand the tensions that emerge during the partnership building process many new partnerships will be less productive and functional than they could be. This point is particularly salient now since funding agencies have recently mandated that schools and universities form partnerships with the goals of impacting student outcomes and supporting school reforms, yet there is little empirically grounded research that examines the tensions that will naturally arise when working across the two different cultural landscapes that are K-12 schools and universities.

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At a basic level, we as educational researchers are "outsiders" to the communities that we hope to serve and improve; namely, the school systems (Lewison & Holliday, 1997). Yet, a first step when attempting to implement

curricular interventions or conducting research is often necessary to develop relationships with schools and teachers. This process of building relationships is particularly important for those of us who are outsiders to the communities if we expect to conduct valid research or create successful interventions (Miller, 2004). In fact, we argue that building trust is an essential, critical, and an often overlooked component of the school-university partnership literature. If trust does not exist between university faculty and teachers, interpersonal access is unlikely, and participants may be inclined to offer “frontstage” responses when asked to provide their thoughts and reflections (Primavera, 2004). In essence, teachers may opt to respond according to what they perceive to be the researchers’ expectations or simply provide what they consider to be politically expedient answers (Miller, 2004). However, to achieve trusting and mutually beneficial relationships it is necessary that school-university partners invest the time and energy to develop the sort of trusting relationships that will facilitate interpersonal access, trust, which in turn fosters the sharing of “backstage” information.

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