Expert? Collaborator? Or a pair of hands?

Autobiography of an external change agent accounting for the process of role negotiation in the context of university-schools partnership

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Abstract

This paper is an extract from a reflective chronicle of my role as a School Development Officer (SDO) in a university-school partnership in the last ten years. In such a role where I help schools to achieve cultural change and improve teachers’ professional capacity, my duties are similar to that of an external change agent, who is not necessarily a welcome presence to the partnership schools. Current theories, with emphasis on the deep-seated suspicion between the university and the schools, characterize the external change agent as an expert leading the uninitiated, or a doctor treating the patient, leading to undesirable results at times. Yet, my experiences show that the role of an external change agent can be conceptualized in ways that appear not to be clearly or commonly understood by academics, policy makers and practitioners.

By using Bottery’s (2003) hierarchy of trust as the interpretative lens to examine the development of trust, a systematic and close scrutiny of the process of role negotiation is made possible. My own experiences indicate that there is no prescribed formula to build the three kinds of faith: confidence, mutual trust and belief which we consider to be the pre-requisite for the partnership’s success. This echoes Block’s (2000) views that the way we contact and engage people around our expertise is an applied art and takes a hundred forms. The realities of most contexts are such that there will be times when pair-of-hands or expert roles are more appropriate and other times when they cannot be avoided.

Keywords:
external change agent, critical friend, comprehensive school improvement
1. **Aim of Research**

The primary aim of this research study is to explore in depth the changing roles and practices of teacher educators in a university-school partnership project (hereafter referred to as the ‘Project’). The Project has evolved since September 1998 and is still in operation with a different source of funding.

The establishment of a university-school partnership creates an intricate web of relations which includes those stated relationships among organizations, roles, and personnel who are participants. Partnerships among organizations can only be played out at the personal level. The individuals are the ones who make it work.

Being the only SDO who has served in this external change agent role since the inception of the Project, I wish my personal testimony to the development of the Project over the last decade will provide the readers with a sense of the real thoughts of someone seeking to be successful as a teacher educator and as a professional.

This study aims to investigate two research questions:
1. What problems might an external change agent face when entering the partnership?
2. What factors shaped the development of the trusting relationship among the partners before, during and after the act of collaboration?

2. **Overview of the Three Parts of the Study**

The original research was divided into three parts which corresponded to the time frame of the three phases of the Project. Embedded in it were three case studies, one from each phase. An overview of the three parts of the study is shown in Table 1 below:
Table 1. Overview of the Three Parts of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Hong Kong Accelerated Schools for Quality Education Project (ASP)</th>
<th>Quality Schools Project (QSP)</th>
<th>Quality Schools in Action Project (QSA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase</td>
<td>3 years from September 1998 – August 2001</td>
<td>2 years from September 2001 – August 2003</td>
<td>1 year from September 2003 – August 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td>School principal and teachers from School A for which the researcher was the primary SDO; The researcher and other SDOs who have provided professional support to School A</td>
<td>School principal and teachers from School B for which the researcher was the primary SDO; The researcher and other SDOs who have provided professional support to School B</td>
<td>PSMCD from School C for which the researcher was the primary SDO; PSMCD from other schools who were invited to present at a cross-school conference about their collaboration experience with the Project;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research site and informants</td>
<td>Informants; Project’s database</td>
<td>Informants; School-based Project documentation</td>
<td>Informants; School-based Project documentation; and cross-school professional conference documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data sources</td>
<td>Real time data, but only accessed in the third year for preparing a case report</td>
<td>Real time data</td>
<td>Real time data plus delayed interview data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection period</td>
<td>Complete Participant; Document review; Semi-structured interviews; The researcher’s journal; The researcher’s contributions in interviews conducted with independent researcher from the Project research team</td>
<td>Participant observation; Document review; The researcher’s journal; The researcher’s contributions in interviews conducted with independent researcher from the Project research team</td>
<td>Participant observation; Document review; The researcher’s journal; Delayed as well as real time interviews of 2 PSMCDs (from School B &amp; School C) conducted by independent researcher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 Part 1

Embedded in Part 1 was a case study of the perceptions of the professional support of the university-school partnership held by the teachers in one project school (School A) conducted in 2001, the final year of the ASP phase. The study was done from the perspective of the core group teachers who had participated in the powerful learning programme.

2.2 Part 2

Part 2 was a case study of how the interplay of the various factors in the tripartite relationship (as depicted in the conceptual framework) influenced the implementation strategies employed by the external change agent. The focus was on the ‘mutually adaptive’ process involved in supporting the project learning programme at one project school (School B) during the QSP phase. I reviewed all the documents from the Project database which included stock-take reports, interview notes, field notes, minutes of meetings, my reflective journal and school documents related to the implementation of the project learning programme such as programme design of teacher and student workshops, etc.

2.3 Part 3

Part 3 studied the ongoing negotiation of the SDO’s role(s) as well as the development of the Project as it entered the QSA phase. It looked at the transition between the two phases and how the reform implementation strategies were again adjusted to cope with new policy demands and funding conditions. School C was selected as a case school from this phase to facilitate cross-phase/case comparison. In addition to my subjective interpretation of the collaborative experience and the diagnosis of the contextual factors which informed my decision to develop new strategies to cope with new issues, the perspectives of two curriculum leaders (PSMCD of School B & C) who had been my close collaborators in the project learning programmes were also considered.

2.4 An Update Beyond 2004

Although the study ended in August 2004, the Project and my participation in it continued. Therefore, an update of the reform environment and its impact on the development of the Project and the role taken by the SDOs was provided to illustrate changes beyond this point.

3. Conceptual Framework

As emphasized by many school reformers and researchers, the process of school improvement is highly complex. It involves the actions and interactions of different groups of actors; the interplay of changes in practitioners’ beliefs and practices; and the interplay of changes in agency, structure and culture in a school over time (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002). Therefore, in order to understand the process of role negotiation as experienced by the external change agents or SDOs, it is necessary to position the Project within a tripartite relationship (see Figure 1 below) among the University, the

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base that houses the Project and confers the institutional identity of ‘experts from the university’ on
the external change agents; the Schools which are the recipients of professional support and the target
of education reforms; and the Government, as represented by the funding organization and the
Education Bureau. This tripartite relationship is enclosed by a permeable boundary that separates it
from the external environmental contexts.

Figure 1. Tripartite Relationship Among University, Schools and the Government

4. Literature Review

4.1 Role of External Facilitators in Comprehensive / Whole School Reform

A key element in many comprehensive school reform designs is the use of coaches, or
people positioned outside of schools and working within them, to effect change. They have been
called “school change facilitators” (Williams, 1996), “outside reformers” (McDonald, 1989), and
“external consultants” (Fullan, 1991). External coaches serve several roles that those inside of
the bureaucracy can not serve : they are objective and unbiased; and they have more flexibility to
train and build networks with other schools (Hopfenbery, Levin & associates, 1995).

There are a number of important studies about the role of external facilitators. As reflected
by the literature review, ‘critical friends’ and ‘expert’ emerged as two dominant roles assumed by
external facilitators in university-school partnerships.

4.2 Critical Friends

Swaffield’s (2004b) paper Exploring Critical Friendship through Leadership for Learning is
all-encompassing as it explores the origin, use and definition of the term ‘critical friend’ along
with consideration of the role, critical friendship relationships, the individuals involved, and the
contexts. The comparison and contrast with other similar roles is enlightening as it helps to clarify my conceptions about a role and a relationship which appeared to be neither clearly nor commonly understood.

A critical friend has been described by Costa and Kallick (1993) as:

“… a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (p.50)

This description is quoted frequently by other writers (for example Stoll and Fink (1996); MacBeath, Schratz & Jackobsen (2000); Doherty, MacBeath, Jardine, Smith & McCall (2001)). Other descriptions by Stoll and Thomson (1996), McDonald (1989) and Brighouse and Woods (1999), emphasise the critical friend helping schools make sound decisions, challenging expectations, patiently playing a role that is interpretive and catalytic, helping shape outcomes but never determining them, alerting the school to issues often only half perceived, and being sympathetic to the school’s purpose.

In order for critical friends to carry out their role effectively they need a range of skills and personal attributes (Swaffield 2005). The general approach of listing competences and competencies forms a common strand in the literature. Miles, Saxl & Liberman(1998), MacDonald (1989), MacBeath et al.(2000) and Fuller and Fisher (2000) all provide such lists. Drawing on extant literature, Swaffield (2005,p.45) has identified five interrelated aspects to describe the work, conduct and characteristics of a critical friend:

1. ‘Roles’ – the particular functions that the critical friend fulfils (e.g. facilitator, supporter, critic, challenger);
2. ‘Behaviours’ – the specific things that the critical friend does ( e.g. listens, questions, reflects, feeds back, summarizes);
3. ‘Knowledge and experience’ – the relevant background which the critical friend brings and uses (e.g. about the education system, schools as organizations, adult and pupil learning, change processes);
4. ‘Skills’ – particular techniques employed (e.g. interpersonal and group work skills, data analysis and interpretation skills); and
5. ‘Qualitites’ – character, attitudes, beliefs, and values (e.g. respect, empathy, genuineness, confidence, enthusiasm).

The temporal aspect of critical friendship is recognised by Fuller and Fisher (2000) who distinguish between the four stages of preparation, entry, action and exit. At each of these stages the relationship between the critical friend and school colleagues will be subtly and significantly different.
Swaffield (2005, p.45) points out that there is very little in the literature about the part played by school colleagues (e.g head teachers) with whom critical friends work. She remarks that the extent to which head teachers actively enhance relationships with critical friends depends to some degree on how they view such associations. She goes on to cite Schien’s (1988) three models of consultancy which provide a framework for considering critical friendship:

1. Customer-provider;
2. Doctor-patient; and

Each of these models suggests a different locus of power in the relationship. Gordon (1984) argues that consultants often foster a dependency on the part of the client, since ‘helping people is seductive’ (p.203), and consultants have a vested interest in keeping themselves employed. Critical friends with this perspective would be disinclined to encourage an equal partnership with head teachers. By contrast, MacBeath (1998) suggests that one of the indicators of a good critical friend is that he or she is able to play down the status or expertise so that the ‘befriended’ comes to believe that he or she ‘did it myself’. In a similar vein, Block (1999) advises consultants to measure their work ‘by the optimism and self-sufficiency you leave behind’ (p.324). Striving to create a culture of independency rather than dependency is, as conceived by Block and MacBeath, the essential characteristic of critical friendship.

Based on a small scale study that involved five head teachers and three Local Education Authority (LEA) advisers which sought to investigate what makes for positive and productive critical friend relationships, four contributing factors are identified (Swaffield, 2005) :

- Trust
- Values, purpose and personal qualities
- Communication
- Practical action

All the participants in the study identified the importance of trust to the relationship, described it as something that needed to be nurtured and developed over time. The initial stages of a critical friend relationship were seen as particularly significant in the establishment, or not, of trust between the partners. Trust takes many forms, but it is essentially about having confidence in the person to do their job and act professionally (Swaffield, 2005, pp.49-50).

Bottery (2003) describes this depiction of trust as ‘role trust’ (p.252), suggesting that there is a hierarchy in which that role trust develops to ‘calculative trust’ (based on weighing the evidence) and subsequently to ‘practice trust’ (based on the experience of cooperative working). Deeper personal trust, as in O’Neill’s (2002) ‘trust in the individual’ and Bottery’s (2003) ‘identificatory trust’, may develop in the longer term if the relationship moves beyond the bounds of a purely professional one.
4.3 Perceptions of Coaches, Teachers and Administrators

Tung & Feldman’s (2001) report on the preliminary results of an ongoing long-term study of the role of coaches from the Centre for Collaborative Education (CCE) in facilitating whole school reform is one of the most detailed descriptive studies of a partnership process found in partnership literature. Tung & Feldman’s study seeks to expand upon existing research on what coaches do and how they do it. Central to CCE’s model of whole school reform is the role of the coaches, external facilitators of change who, through their knowledge of the content and process of school reform, bring ongoing and intensive resources, skills, and support to build the capacity of individuals within the school.

Key findings of the study show that the coaches’ principal activities focused on facilitating meetings, resolving conflicts among staff members, interacting with teachers and students, and devising solutions to schoolwide dilemmas. The most frequently mentioned roles of a coach were to ask questions, to mirror the school culture for teachers, and to bring resources to teachers.

The report also provides a breakdown of the types of the roles that coaches assumed in their meetings with school personnel. The roles include facilitator, co-facilitator, observer and participant. The role assumed by the coach varied with the object of interaction and the mode of support. One coach used the word “chameleon” to characterize the many roles she plays in her school, and, in fact, all coaches interviewed described their role in multiple ways.

Following the discussion of the coaches’ own perceptions of their role in schools, their relationship-building with school staff, their short and long term goal setting, and their belief about change, Feldman & Tong (2002) presented another paper which extends those findings by analyzing teachers and administrators’ perceptions of coaching practices in their schools. The findings were similar to the ways that coaches talked about their role in school, as documented in the first study.

5. Analysis and Findings

The exploration of how different factors interact to shape the development of a ‘process’ over a long period of time demanded that data analysis for this study should involve two levels of analysis – within-case analysis and cross-case comparison. These two levels of analysis are not separate stages. Rather, they overlap as an iterative process.

One feature that stood out from the cross-case comparison and therefore a good starting point to develop the analysis was the relative proportion of input and output in each phase. Input was defined in terms of the funding resources which included both the amount of money granted and the time-frame allowed to implement the Project. Output was defined in terms of the intensity of support
provided to the project schools which included the frequency of contact, the variety of support mode and the multiple levels of recipients that could be served.

5.1 Conceptual Framework Revisited

A simplified version of the conceptual framework as shown in Figure 2 below is used as a prototype to illuminate the interplay of the various contexts and the three parties involved - the Government, University/ Project/ SDOs and Schools.

By placing the Government at the top of the diagram, it highlights its top-down approach in initiating education reform and its power base derived from holding the financial resources to support reform programmes. The schools, positioned on the right hand side are the targets of education and curriculum reforms, not the Project. The funder and the Project should be viewed as partners, the government exerted pressure to reform the education system on the ‘schools’ side; and on the other hand, provided support through QEF-funded projects to support schools in implementing reform.

Apart from satisfying funding conditions, the Project personnel must acquaint themselves with the policy demands imposed on schools in order to be able to develop empathy. Together with the school personnel, joint diagnosis of the school-specific needs would be conducted following the initial stock-take exercise to determine the focus and mode of support to be provided by the Project.

Figure 2: A Simplified Version of the Conceptual Framework

Attention should be paid to the varying thickness of the arrows shown in the subsequent series of diagrams to represent the changing condition of the tripartite relationship at different phases of the Project. During ASP, the Project received the most generous funding support but
reform efforts were not equally prominent in the early years as shown in Figure 2a below. Conversely, QSA has suffered from the most severe budget cut, yet the intensity of support was proportionately the highest (see Figure 2c).

Figure 2a: Condition of the Tripartite Relationship in Early Years of ASP

Compared with the ASP phase, the pressure exerted by policy mandates were strongly felt after the publication of the reform documents in 2000/2001, which in turn facilitated the collaboration between the schools and the Project. Significant cut in funding and membership changes were two major factors that have immediate impact on the implementation strategies adopted by the Project. Figure 2b shows a different case configuration during QSP.

Figure 2b: Condition of the Tripartite Relationship During QSP

Entering the QSA phase in September 2003, the Project operated on a much smaller scale as a result of a severe budget cut. However, it was decided to maintain ‘comprehensiveness’ as the distinguishing feature of the partnership project. On the other hand, we realized it was unrealistic to pursue the goal of whole school change within just a 1-year time-frame. Therefore the
implementation strategies were revised in light of the above considerations. The short duration of the collaboration period was compensated by the intensity of contact and in-depth exploration of issues. The high-touch and in-depth approach promoted strong bonding between the partners, thus a very thick arrow linking the schools and the Project as shown in Figure 2c below.

**Figure 2c : Condition of the Tripartite Relationship During QSA**

![Diagram of Tripartite Relationship](image)

5.2 Transition Between the Phases

Project implementation throughout the 6-year period was characterized by an iterative process of “mutual adaptation” where project goals and methods were modified to suit needs and interests of participants (McLaughlin, 1976). The evolution of the Project from phase to phase was contingent upon many factors, funding and time being the most important ones. Between every two phases of the Project, there were major re-assessment and adjustment of implementation strategies to cope with new concerns of clients arising from the change in policy demands which in turn affected the schools’ motive to seek external help and the selection of programmes to join.

The impact of funding conditions including both budget and evaluation criteria on the Project are summarized as follows:

- budget affected the scale of the Project and the size of the pool of SDOs
- evaluation criteria affected how ‘success’ would be defined which in turn would affect what kind of support the Project would consider to offer. Choice of action were based on balancing between long-term effect vs. short-term success; teacher capacity building vs. student learning improvement and quantity vs. quality.

The duration of the partnership period affected the pace and the sequence of action. For example, during ASP, more time could be afforded to establish relationship through stock-take interviews and other meetings that might yield inquiry points from which to develop action plans. When the time-frame was shortened in QSP and QSA phases, schools were impatient to wait for the results of the stock-take exercise before their perceived needs were addressed. Therefore,
stock-taking and action planning needed to be done simultaneously, or even reversed to address clients’ immediate needs first as in the case of School B.

Experience cumulated over the years certainly made us wiser and enabled us to have a better grasp of the realities of teachers’ working life and how policy initiatives were enacted locally. We [SDOs] became more adept at designing and conducting workshops, training programmes and other consulting skills (interview, facilitation, meeting skills, etc.) To compensate for the shortage of manpower and shortage of time to develop new programmes, it was necessary to develop pre-packaged material and to promote experimentation in areas we claimed to be good at; we chose ‘depth’ instead of ‘breadth’ as a coping strategy.

We have been developing specialisation as well as expanding our repertoire continuously to satisfy diverse and multiple needs/ concerns of schools and teachers. Instead of sticking to our original role as either ‘big wheel coach’ or ‘small wheel coach’, ideally all SDOs would need to expand personal repertoire in order to perform both roles. This has become important since the promulgation of curriculum reform. It was more so during the QSA phase when the pool of SDOs was so small that each SDO has to perform multiple functional roles instead of relying on the team approach.

5.3 Cross-case Analysis

The final cross-case analysis used the research questions as the thematic device to organize data. Instead of listing out all the findings, I just concentrate on those that have direct relevance to the notion of role negotiation.

(1) What problems might an external change agent face when entering the partnership?

(a) Knowledge of the Project’s Theories of Action

We need to be clear about the characteristic of the particular project we are engaged in: what are the distinguishing features from other reform initiatives? what are the theories of action? If we are not clear about the ideological underpinnings, we would become just ‘a pair of hands’ (Block, 2000) doing what our clients want us to do without exercising our professional judgement. Moreover, we cannot just rely on intuition to judge what is good and appropriate for the teachers and the students.

(b) Alignment of Reform Agenda

It is important for the schools to know and consider the theories of action of school improvement projects (the assumptions, values and beliefs on which improvement strategies are based), and whether those beliefs are congruent with their own. If schools want to introduce more than one programme at a time, they should consider whether the beliefs and strategies of the programmes are complementary with one another. Misalignment of reform objectives would create unrealistic expectations. To further complicate the issue of mis-alignment, there may also be variation in understanding about the Project’s reform agenda within individual partner school.
Based on what we gathered from stock-take interviews, teachers were often confused because of the multiple agendas playing out simultaneously. For example, even our close partner such as the PSMCD at School B was not aware of the Project’s reform agenda at the outset. It was only towards the end of the partnership period that she realized what we meant by whole-school cultural change and the linkage between the project learning programme and the reform agenda:

“Despite their claim to be a comprehensive project, the only reason for joining the Project was just about project learning… Although what they had been doing at our school was mainly about project learning, but I gradually understand and sense that it is a genuine programme aims at changing the school culture. In my opinion, if we aim at changing the school culture, there must be a platform to do it, to us, implementing project learning is the platform for effecting change in school culture.”

It was especially important that the School Principal, being the primary client of the Project shared the same reform agenda as promoted by the Project. Without this initial agreement, the partnership would be doomed to fail. One way to assess the degree of alignment was to find out the school’s motive for project adoption. These adoption motives spanned a range in terms of specificity, from tasks such as providing resources and tools for certain teaching practices to comprehensive school-wide cultural change. In extreme cases, reason for joining was non-educative: just showed obligatory response to policy mandates, and used SDOs as an extra pair of hands or as a substitute teacher.

(c) Dilemma of role selection

Bearing in mind the notion of ‘partnership’, we were supposed to work in a democratic and liberal way. We did not want to pressure the school staff into doing something they were not motivated to do. We found that this more liberal style worked well in some schools, but in other schools, it caused our work to come to a standstill.

A liberal attitude often worked at schools with a highly motivated staff. The school staff would push the programmes forward themselves, and seek guidance only when they needed it. This gave school staff a sense of ownership and improved the motivation and quality of Project-related work. For example, at School B, the teachers liked the liberal attitude of the SDOs. We reported that teachers felt safe with the Project:

We won’t force them to do anything…If they don’t want to begin, we won’t force them. If they want to try, we will provide full support. This is the message that we convey. This message makes them comfortable. (minutes of meeting, SDO’s report)

However, if the SDO played an active dominant role at the school, the staff might become too dependent on the SDO. This would be contrary to the goal of the Project – building staff capacity and the capability for self-improvement.
But time constraints sometimes forced us to adopt a role which deviated from our plan. Usually, the greater the time constraint, the more we have to assume a dominant role because it gives more control and guarantees better results and initial success, and leave a positive legacy.

(d) Understanding the Local Context and Acquiring ‘Big Wheel’ Skills

As the impetus of education reform originates from the Government, the Project and the SDOs need to maintain alertness to the new policy initiatives and mandates which will impact on the schools’ local enactment. Upon entering into partnership, SDOs need to familiarize with the local school context as soon as possible. This is important because it is compatible with our claim to provide school-based and context-specific support. An important avenue is through the initial stock-taking exercise whereby the SDOs can reach a significant portion of the key players and a wide range of stakeholders. Therefore SDOs need to be equipped with the basic interview skill in addition to their content knowledge.

(e) Negotiating Roles, Expectations and Establishing Relationship

This is perhaps the biggest challenge for any external change agent entering into partnership. Based on the long-held beliefs about the roles and expertise of the university academic, schools and teachers hold preconceptions about our role(s) and expectations towards them. This is heavily influenced by the historical relationship between the university and the school teachers and whether initial role trust is there prior to their joining their Project.

However, the ‘power relation’ issue reported by many researchers in western societies was not considered an issue in our Project from the outset, partly because of the non-academic background of the SDOs. Another reason might be related to the Chinese conception of teachers which will be elaborated later.

Implicit in this issue of ‘establishing relationship’ as a pre-condition for successful partnership are concepts like ‘trust’, ‘expertise’ and ‘credibility’. In view of its importance in the partnership process, I shall devote a separate section to discuss the ‘development of partnership’ with specific reference to the ingredient of ‘trust’. The discussion will also serve as answer to the next research question.

(2) What factors shaped the development of the trusting relationship among the partners before, during and after the act of collaboration?

All partnership literature points to the importance of ‘establishing trust’ as a forefront step in any collaborative endeavour. In answering this reformulated research question, I looked up some definitions of “trust” including our own and revisited Bottery’s (2003) normative hierarchy of trust which I found very illuminating in analyzing the development of a trusting relationship at different phase of the Project among the various partners.
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(a) Defining Trust

‘Trust’ is commonly regarded as the most important ingredient in the formation of any partnership and described as something that needed to be nurtured and developed over time. ‘Having confidence in the person to do their job and act professionally’ is one definition (Swaffield, 2005, p.49). ‘Being reliable’ and ‘doing the job’ were other ways of describing trust in the relationship. ‘Doing the job’ suggests a view of trust in the professional role as distinguished from the trust that we have in individuals (O’Neill, 2002). Bottery (2003) describes this depiction of trust as ‘role trust’ (p.252).

Our Project explicitly stated its belief in the importance of establishing trust between the partners especially between the Project and the partner schools. Trust has been elaborated to comprise three kinds of faith (信心, 互信, 信念) (because all three ‘三’ phrases include the same Chinese character ‘信’ which generally means ‘trust’). Translated into English, the closest equivalent would be ‘confidence’, ‘mutual trust’ and ‘belief’. The first kind is more cognitive in nature, and to the second one we add ‘mutual’ to signify it as a two-way process with an affective dimension. The last one escalates to include a moral and ethical dimension.

Bottery (2003), in his paper The management and mismanagement of trust introduces more elaborate differentiation of ‘trust’ in a number of forms. The first four, calculative, practice, role and identificatory trust, are all developmental and normative in nature, becoming more complex and valuable as they move from an essentially cognitive platform to incorporate motivational, affective and principled elements (p.249). At the lowest level is calculative trust which involves an ability to take a variety of factors into account and make a judgement concerning the probability that someone will do something that is beneficial to us, or at least not harm us. Given such a description, this form of trust is therefore referred to as calculative trust. Such calculative trust, Gambetta (1988) argues:

“should be seen as a ‘threshold point’ on a continuum form complete trust to complete distrust, the actual decision to trust being a variable point, determined by such variables as personal predisposition, the amount of information we may have of a situation, knowledge of a person’s past performance, the risk and harm attached to trusting, the ability to bring sanctions to bear on someone who is likely to break that trust…”(cited in Bottery, 2003, p.250)

The presence of such calculative trust was evidenced at the early stage of every partnership that we launched. Knowledge of the Project’s track record was the prime consideration for trusting our suggestions and judgement. For example, at School C, the senior management made it clear that they had compared the track record of many service providers before they decided to join the Project.

“In fact, we didn’t have any action plan in mind, what they publicized about being able to support comprehensive school improvement is what we are looking for. Therefore, we applied to join the Project. Of course, they must possess professional knowledge; secondly, they must have good track record. It’s like looking for a good doctor to diagnose your problem. Some doctors are in great demand, with a long list of clients waiting for their service. We joined mainly because of their experience and
track record, i.e. they got good reputation. …they also have rich experience working with different schools.” (PSMCD, School C)

Implicit in their decision to join was the ‘role trust’ in the Project’s expert status comparable to that of a medical practitioner. Therefore, in our Project, role trust appeared to occur at the start of a relationship, as the head teacher’s trust is related to the SDO’s professional position. This is different from Bottery’s normative hierarchy which puts ‘role trust’ at a higher position. Personally, I felt the importance of prior positive relationships in laying the foundation of the ‘role trust’ in me as I had conducted many leadership programmes for many head teachers when they were newly promoted to the post, long before we entered into formal partnership relationship. In fact, the school principals at School A, B & C all happened to be participants in my headship programme before. Other than personal connection and the teachers’ prior relationship with the university, we did not have track record to advance the role trust to a higher level during the ASP phase due to the novelty of the Project.

Once the School Principal and SDOs began to work together, calculative trust came into play again as evidence for the deepening or withdrawal of trust became available. At schools, they were always comparing the performance between different programme providers:

“…during the same period, we also entered into partnership with another organization, they have a standard package for us to follow and execute. …. they are meticulous and strict about no. of service hours for student workshops, teacher workshops and parent workshops respectively, and also the number of beneficiary, etc. This is a big contrast compared with the university’s partnership project. They don’t really care about the effectiveness of their programmes, only concerned about completing their schedules and plans.” (Heidi, PSMCD, School C)

At School A, relationship-building was not smooth in the beginning partly because of personnel change shortly after the launch of the partnership. And also because the original SDO had not done much, a core group member overtly expressed their disappointment which was a sign of trust withdrawal:

“In the first year, er… I didn’t find it very useful in the first year, not much organised activities, er… stock-take … workshops …. Change …. team building….. my expectation was much more.” (Interview, core group member, School A)

The feelings of distrust and skepticism implicated in the teacher’s comments was also related to the slow process of developing genuine collaboration. The initial talking and planning during the first year was perceived as a lack of progress. In other words, the basis of the relationship was still ‘calculative trust’. If we did not move quickly to another level i.e. practice trust, trust would be withdrawn forever. When I tried to remedy the situation by establishing ‘credibility’ through a carefully planned staff development workshop, I did not realize that I had made a wrong decision.
Although the teachers enjoyed the training workshop very much, they were not ready to accept criticism about their performance. ‘Credibility’ is more about confidence in a person’s cognitive ability. In fact, the ‘expert’ status was already automatically conferred on us because of our institutional identity as ‘someone from the university’. There was really no need to gain role trust through establishing credibility. In Chinese societies, the teacher is always a highly respected figure, so ‘role trust’ is easy to achieve. This also helps explain, as Meyerson et al. (1996) argue, why ‘swift trust’ is possible:

“Individuals within a group who come together for a short space of time can trust others within it to carry out their role, even though they have neither the time nor opportunity to form strong personal bonds, or develop detailed knowledge of each other. For when these workers all accept the same cultural role and share the same value code, then conditions are put in place which help to short-circuit the normally lengthy time period needed to build satisfactory practice trust.” (cited in Bottery, 2003, p.252)

According to Lieberman & Grolnick (1997), we should play down our role as expert and be humble:

Professors who are humble – as well as knowledgeable – help overcome what teachers perceive as their “ivory tower” separation from real practice as well as the barrier that the status and prestige of being a professor places between them and school-based educators. (p.380)

At one level, then, trust is largely a matter of personal calculation. It may also be a relatively trivial affair, entailing no great damage if broken. However, many acts of trust have more serious implications. It may result in complete distrust. Therefore it is necessary to honour such trust through engaging both parties in continued interaction and practice trust. Such practice trust can be performed simply as an extension of calculative trust, for repeated encounters increase the amount of knowledge about a person, and therefore facilitate more accurate calculations concerning an individual’s trustworthiness. Such reasoning expands the calculative context, but does not change the basic cognitive nature of trust. However, repeated encounters do create a new form of trust, because they facilitate the development of interpersonal bonds in relationships. Such bonds do more than merely create a larger calculative context, for they generate a requirement that each acknowledges and respects the other’s integrity, introducing to the relationship additional ethical and affective components. A relationship then begins to develop which transcends business transactions or others based on gain: the relationship is now nurtured for its own sake.

The addition of ethical and personal commitments within practice trust helps one further understand that trust and being trusted need not be two sides of the same coin. It may simply be that one party places more emphasis upon the calculative components of practice trust, while the other places more emphasis upon the ethical and affective elements.
This issue - of the inclusion of personal and ethical elements – also helps to explain that trust may become depleted through lack of use, and may be strengthened by continued used. Importantly, it also suggests that practice trust is the level at which we begin to think ‘trust’ becomes a reality. Thus, as Kipnis (1996) found, being trusted generates very positive feelings, for individuals who feel that they are being trusted believe that not only does the other party like them, but that they also regard them as person of ethical integrity. The reverse of this – of not placing trust where it could be placed – provides precisely the opposite message. In both situations, this is the kind of trust which contains affective and ethical judgements of another person. The results, unsurprisingly, are benign and vicious cycles: the more I trust you, the more complimented you feel, and the more likely you are to react favourably and repay that trust by carrying out what is expected – and the more likely I am to extend that trust on a future occasion. This description matched my experience at School B (see 5.6.4):

“At school B, we felt we had gained the trust of the senior management and had developed a very healthy partnership with the school...Because of this healthy, interactive relationship, we increased the resources that we put into this school...In the process, we visited the schools very frequently, because SDO2 and I both live close to the school. The teachers were surprised that almost as soon as they requested our support, we would promise them to come” (Interview, SDO).

In the weekly meeting, we described our partnership with the school in this way:

“I think the partnership is mutual. They [the school] also believe that this is what the partnership should be like. Thus, they are willing to share the work...They understand clearly about the reasonable division of labor in a partnership.” (quoted from minutes of meeting)

As the relationship unfolds further a new form of trust develops, a practice trust, derived from the establishment of interpersonal bonds, acknowledging one another’s integrity and evidence of mutual professional benefit. If the Project / SDO needs to establish trust and credibility within a shorter timeframe, they have to take quick actions in order to achieve result and create small success so that successive rounds of inquiry can be carried out in the school, SDO must be prepared to play a more leading role and specialize in certain areas which would address the immediate needs of teachers. This echoes the view of Grundy et al., (2001) about credibility:

Credibility in the school setting may depend upon the ability to provide practical advice as to what will solve immediate problems in the day-to-day practice of teaching and learning. (p.207)

This may explain why, during the QSA phase, despite its short duration, it seemed quite easy to build a relationship based on practice trust because of the intensity of contact and the teachers’ perception of the usefulness of the professional support.

Deeper personal trust, as in O’Neill’s (2002) ‘trust in the individual’ and Bottery’s (2003)
‘identificatory trust’, may develop in the longer term if the relationship moves beyond the bounds of a purely professional one. Maggie, PSMCD at School B acknowledged the emergence of personal friendship with SDOs why Heidi of School C expressed appreciation for the attitudinal qualities of SDOs:

“The communication between myself and the SDOs are very frequent indeed and means of communication was not confined to formal and scheduled meetings. We communicated a lot informally over the phone and through emails, I called them a lot on telephone. The subject of our communication often goes beyond ‘difficulty in implementing project learning’. ….Sometimes I ventilated my grievances and work stress, they [SDOs] are very good listeners, I feel a great relief after pouring out my emotions. I regard them as ‘masters’ [teachers], they taught me a lot and our relationships grown over the course of collaboration. I must say they are good friends as well as good teachers.” (Maggie, PSMCD, School B)

“We are particularly impressed by their enthusiasm and whole-hearted commitment to the Project. They never set a quota for their visits, how should I put it… whenever we seek help, they would try their best to serve us. Even during the Easter holiday, they were willing to come …Moreover, they also provide us with material resources .. I know some of the materials are from their private collection. Although this seems trivial but our teachers noticed their [SDOs’ and the support staff] attention to details, and so they were moved by their enthusiasm. We feel that they do everything from the heart, not just fulfilling their duties, even our head teacher was touched.” (Heidi, PSMCD, School C)

It is worth mentioning that although at the outset, the schools did not mention their expectation about the qualities of support, what they appreciated most was more about the attitudinal qualities of the Project’s personnel such as commitment, dedication, enthusiasm, willingness to listen, etc.

(b) The Development of Trust Overtime

The temporal aspect of critical friendship or partnership development has been identified in many studies. For example, Fuller and Fisher (2000) distinguish between the four stages of preparation, entry, action and exit. At each of these stages the relationship between the critical friend and school colleagues will be subtly and significantly different. Instead of following the original timeframe of the Project, I found Fuller and Fisher’s (2000) four stages a very simple yet suitable model to describe the development process of each partnership. However, the preparation and entry stage would be combined for the discussion of this study because in Hong Kong, the preparation stage is quite straightforward and often do not involve teachers’ choice. Once the school was recruited, buy-in or entry soon began. By combining Bottery’s hierarchy of trust and the 4-stage model of critical friendship development, the following matrix (Table 2) is used to illustrate how trust is developed overtime during different phases of the Project.
Table 2. Level of Trust Developed at Different Stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Levels of trust</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation + Entry</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The role assumed by the external change agent varied with the object of interaction and the mode of support, added to these two considerations is the temporal dimension in the development of the critical friendship described above. According to our experience, typically, the relationship is initially characterized by an emphasis on friendship or support, with critique or pressure becoming more evident later; and Lieberman & Grolnick’s (1997) suggestion ‘knowledgeable’ but ‘humble’. At the highest level of trust, what I have been describing were essentially partnerships of people, not institutions. Only relationship that build on identificatory trust can be sustained beyond the exit of the partnership project.

(c) The Issue of Power Relations in University-Schools Partnership

After trust, the enduring dilemma regarding the place of experts and expertise in the educational enterprise was a second major issue that the Project had to address. In this section I reflect upon the issues of culture and power I encountered in this Project. In reviewing the literature on partnership conducted in western countries, I found that many researchers highlight the tension created by power relations between university academic and school teachers as one of the major pitfalls that impeded collaboration.

As a member of the university-school partnership project, I was becoming an integral part of those power relations described above, I was coming to define myself and to be defined by others as an expert of sorts, as someone with a store of experiences and knowledge that others might see as valuable.

As a developing practitioner-researcher I was also being apprenticed into the norms and values of the university. This meant learning to value theoretical knowledge or knowledge derived from research and make it a part of my professional identity. I do not view power as explaining the relationship between SDOs and school teachers with whom we worked. Power was not consciously conceived as an important part of our relationship at all, it did not prevent me from working closely and productively with the teachers.

At both School B and C, I was co-constructed by myself and the teachers as an expert in the relationship; I tried to define the terms of the relationship and encouraged a perception that I was an expert in project learning. I did this by showing what I have achieved in some other schools and by suggesting the cascade training approach to effect whole school change. The core group teachers were
amenable to the approach that I set for implementing the project learning programme. It sounded nice because I did not overtly take control of the relationship. I did, however, take control by setting a collaborative agenda. Even if the agenda could be viewed as conceptually promoting equal participation and shared decision-making, there was nothing egalitarian in how it was organized and what issues were represented as relevant. From the outset I implicitly let teachers know that I was the expert in these matters; that I knew best how our relationship should proceed and what would be accomplished. The power to define the terms of a relationship was the power to control the processes and outcomes of that relationship. Although I wanted to take myself out of an authoritative role, my actions were critical to constructing my position as an expert. Yet it was a position without authority. Therefore, we could never forced the teachers to do what we wanted to do. We could only influence or persuade them by doing demonstration or exposing them to practices beyond their immediate circle through networking with teachers of other schools. The teachers did not see me as a threat. They saw I was ready to roll up my sleeves and dig in. Despite our stress on the ‘mutuality’ of the relationship which required both partners to contribute and be accountable for the outcome of the partnership, I wondered how many teachers would pay heed to this prerequisite. On the contrary, the school partners seemed to be granted the right to exercise their ‘consumer power’ to terminate the relationship if they were dissatisfied with the service provided by the Project.

Creating a mutual respect between participants is a necessary prerequisite to partnership. Trust and a sense of being valued are essential for all partners. My authority as an expert was more theoretical than real until it was enacted. So I did not mind being looked upon as ‘expert’ as long as I could really live up to that expectation. But I prefer to be looked upon as ‘master’ (師傅) which is usually used to name the teacher in a master-apprenticeship relationship. This label befits the traditional Chinese conception of teacher-student relationship: relationships between teacher and students are emphasized; teachers should care for students academically and socially, and they should be worthy of imitation as moral and social leaders” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997 cited in Chow, 2003). Likewise, the master-apprentice relationship is preferred to the expert-novice relationship. The latter one is more of a transient and functional nature while the former one denotes more intimacy and a more permanent nature. The first kind can be terminated at will by the novice but the bonding between master and apprentice is rarely broken, but rather grows with time. Perhaps the finding that teachers at both School B and C valued ‘explicit modeling’ by SDOs or employing cognitive apprenticeship as an effective form of teacher professional development is no coincidence.

6. Discussion of SDO’s Role: Expert, Collaborator or A Pair of Hands?

Our work in the partnership project is first and foremost about developing trust. And, we learned, it would take time, and it would require that we be there – present, regularly and predictably, among those who participated, particularly the local reform representatives, particularly the core group and the teacher leaders.
In his book *Flawless Consulting: a guide to getting your expertise used*, Block (2000) elaborated on the roles of consultants as identified by Ed Schein - an expert role, a pair-of-hands role, or a collaborative role. He has already made it clear that all three styles are valid:

“The choice depends on individual differences in management style, the nature of the task, and the consultant’s own personal preference. As you consult in a variety of situations, it helps to become aware of the role you typically assume and to be able to identify situations where this will help or hinder your performance. Only then can you make a conscious choice among alternatives. One discovery people often make in such self-analysis is that they begin to identify situations where they can operate more successfully in a collaborative mode. However, the realities of most organizations are such that there will be times when the pair-of-hands or expert roles are more appropriate and other times when they cannot be avoided.” (p.21)

I think what is described above is a very sophisticated measure, the highest possible state for an external change agent to reach, and definitely not a goal to be understood and appreciated by novice change agent. The dilemma is we always want to know whether we are making a difference to the schools we support. There is a self-serving aspect to each act of service. Providing service, at its best, is an act of love: the wish to be genuinely helpful to another; to use what we know, or feel, or have endured in a way that lightens the weight on another. The cost of our generosity, though, is that it carries within it our wish for dominance and gratitude. To be seen as wise and right, to be first with the insight, to claim credit for the changes in another, etc. We are prone to measure the value of our help by whether today’s service leads to a demand for more service tomorrow.

Having served as an external agent for ten years, my advice is: do not get trapped in this dilemma, view yourself as a free agent who, as Fiske (1991) suggests, “make do with what one has” to construct your relationship with your partners.

7. An Evolving Conceptual Framework Beyond 2004 – Positioning the Project at the Periphery

During the different phases of the Project, different kinds of tensions and obstacles emerged, subject to the changing circumstances. SDOs must be alert to these changes, sometimes subtle, sometimes conspicuous, and identify the characteristics of these obstacles so as to negotiate their changing roles accordingly. In the light of the changing relationship between the funder and the Project, it seems that the original conceptual framework is no longer applicable to account for the changing reality. Thus the tripartite relationship has to be re-configured as in Figure 3 below:
Figure 3 above shows that the position of the Project has moved from being the subset under ‘university’ to become a more independent entity as positioned right in the hub of this tripartite relationship. Physically, the Project is still housed on university campus enjoying all the administrative and research support as in the previous phases. There was a new source of funding. Monitoring of the Project’s operation and effectiveness is more realistically designed with a view to inform future practice of both parties. With a proven track record for six years from 1998 to 2004, the focus of evaluation has shifted from a mere quantification of visits and the variety of service provisions to more qualitative type of evaluation.

Using Bottery’s (2003) hierarchy of trust as an interpretative lens to analyze the changing relationship between the funder and the Project, there appeared to be a qualitative change in terms of the nature of trust. The original relationship was probably one based on pure role trust because of the value code of the teaching profession and the academic ethics. At the ASP phase, there could be an interpretation of distrust towards the funder’s evaluation criteria which was viewed as imposing unduly detailed, restrictive or inappropriate procedures upon a professional workforce. This workforce, i.e. our Project, which saw its work as being defined at a role trust level, now perceived that it was being treated at a lower level of trust; such trust ‘demotion’ then acted very much as if one were regarded as being untrustworthy. Professional distrust of government was interpreted as hostility to good intentions, or simple obduracy of progress, and even more detailed prescription and low-level calculative trust was employed (p.254). Bottery (2003) warns that:

Where governments have not trusted educationalists to deliver what they have promised, they have unilaterally moved from a practice and role trust relationship with professionals to an overwhelmingly calculative one. .. To remedy this situation requires a number of measures from both sides, for a recognition that both must engage in change can generate a benign spiral of trust.(p.257)

Bottery goes on to suggest that from the government side, some measures would include:
a reduction in demands for written planning evidence; in many instances this is little more than a calculative trust accountability mechanism which impacts little on the quality of teaching…...a recognition of the need to move from the use of predominantly calculative trust accountability mechanisms to the development of accountability mechanisms containing greater elements of practice trust; these would entail more longitudinal information about the work of schools [the Project], rather than the use of one-off visits, as well as a greater acceptance of teachers’ qualitative judgements…. The creation of independent research bodies to investigate the effects of this greater degree of trust upon professionals, and the modification of policy upon the results of such research. (p.257)

A relationship based on more developed trust emerged after 2004. For example, paper work and reports were kept to the minimal and substituted by observation at authentic reform setting. A dozen of our counterparts even participated in our one-week long orientation programme for our new SDOs at our university base at the launch of the lastest Quality Schools Improvement Project. The change in the monitoring of our work again place the Project further away from the bureaucracy, or just at an arm’s length, granting us more professional autonomy to define our work.

7.1 New Arrays of Tensions and Obstacles

The current reform environment has been characterized by multiple reform initiatives. The reform environment may send competing and contradictory messages to school practitioners (e.g. competition versus collaboration). A high level of professional judgment is required to harness school efforts to achieve the deep changes that are envisioned by the reform.

Providing cohesion among multiple reform agendas became more difficult if teachers failed to view and understand the nature of our CSI programme as an umbrella structure that housed and provided linkages among all the reform efforts. It has been necessary for SDOs to make explicit from time to time what all the reform agendas were and tried to give them coherence, for themselves and for school staff, by developing matrices aligning the goals of the different initiatives.

The ability of a SDO to simultaneously facilitate instructional, structural and cultural changes is a challenge that all coaches or change agents face. Needless to say, developing expertise and expanding our repertoire are always necessary especially now that the school teachers thought they were already very familiar with the language and requirement of reform.

8. Conclusion

Answers to the research questions revealed that our findings corroborate largely accumulated knowledge from current research in the areas of university-school partnership and professional teacher
development conducted in other western countries. However, it was found that the often contested issue of power relation between tertiary staff and school personnel identified in partnership literature was not conceived as a cause of tension in the development of partnership probably due to a different interpretation of the teacher-student relationship in the traditional Chinese cultural context. The ‘expert’ status of external change agent from the university was subtly acknowledged by all participants regardless of the range of motives for joining the partnership project. But the expert-novice relationship soon transformed into a kind of master-apprentice relationship as noted in two case schools with initial success in partnership experience. This also explained why teachers preferred our model of professional teacher development which resembled so closely to the Cognitive Apprenticeship model - the explicit modeling demonstrated by SDOs designed to bring those tacit processes involved in carrying out complex skills (e.g. project learning skills) into the open, where students can observe, enact, and practice them with help from the teacher (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). Such relationship took time to develop.

The relationship between the participants gradually evolved from one that initially based on role trust and calculative trust which are basically cognitive in nature, to a more substantial relationship based on a new form of trust – practice trust. This was achieved through repeated encounters which facilitated the development of interpersonal bonds. Such bonds did more than merely create a larger calculative context, for they generated a requirement each acknowledged and respected the other’s integrity, introducing to the relationship additional ethical and affective components. Deeper personal trust may develop in the longer term if the relationship moves beyond the bounds of a purely professional one, the master-apprentice relationship at one of the case schools is an example that built on identificatory trust. But at the highest level of trust, it is essentially about partnerships of people, not institutions.

References

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Expert? Collaborator? Or a pair of hands?
Autobiography of an external change agent accounting for the process of role negotiation in the context of university-schools partnership

49-51.


Chan Ho Yee, Pauline joined the Project since its inception in 1998, the only SDO who served in all phases of the Project. First she worked as an arts administrator after graduating from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Later she became a human resources development consultant. Before joining the Project, she has served in the Training Unit of the former Education Department from 1994 to 1997, responsible for conducting Management Training Programme for newly-promoted school principals.

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