

Relationships matter: Forming a collaborative educational researcher group

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Background

Despite increasingly being taken-for-granted as 'best practice', doing collaborative research is challenging, and little is known about how collaboration works in research practice. The purpose of this study was to shed light on the early stages of a collaboration in educational research. The paper describes and critiques, from an insider perspective, some of the benefits, challenges and tensions that accrued as a group of early and mid-career education researchers (the authors), from two universities, and with quite different epistemological and ontological understandings, attempted to develop a collaborative research group.

Study Design

Experience-centred narrative (Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2008).

Method

Emails
Group meetings
Facilitated written narratives and responses

Analysis

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engestrom et al. 1999).
Paper developed over 12 months.

Participants

Group formed as a result of CRN's first 'whole of network meeting' in Sydney, 2011.

The group comprised 6 researchers:

- 4 CSU & 2 Monash
- 2 quantitative, 4 qualitative
- Range of theoretical frameworks
- 1 mid-career and 5 early-career researchers

All researchers were exploring relationships in the early years (family, preschool and school)

Findings

Group members reflective comments and analysis

Goal driven activities

"My reasons for joining the group initially largely focused on the objectives of the CRN. In all honesty, I knew that as a CRN member, I needed to increase publications, as well as publish across institutions. This 'relaters' group offered that opportunity".

Initial desire to create a conceptual framework to document collective understanding of relationships and their impact on children's development.

"The need to conceptualise our thinking as a group always came back to 'the diagram'. It must be said that it was 'the diagram' that seemed to capture our thinking or even at times bring the whole process to a standstill ... We seemed to invariably fall back on the same trodden path which resulted in an aesthetically pleasant but uninspiring diagram".

Subjectivities

Membership of the group afforded opportunities to learn new ideas and ways of viewing the world.

"Initially being part of this group was daunting. Conversations included theorists I hadn't heard of, ways of thinking about research and theory which were foreign to me and methodologies which appeared narrow even though they elicited broad and intriguing data. I didn't let on I didn't understand or agree ... Their openness and insight was refreshing and encouraged me to rethink my own, increasingly stagnant ways of thinking about research".

Artefacts

cultural tools that mediate the subject and their goals

Face to face meetings; meals together; virtual meetings both asynchronously (emails) and synchronously (video links).

"Face to face collaborations and discussion, for me, are almost always most effective and efficient. However, the fact that we are in so many locations makes this difficult. Even with funding provided for travel, family commitments would make such travel very difficult for some of the group members".

Division of labour

Not all members in a collaborative partnership can contribute equally – setting expectations was important.

Conclusions

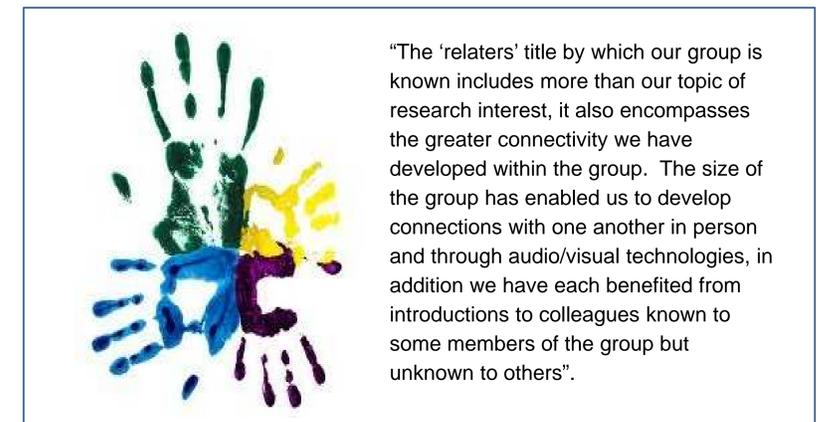
Collaborations like the 'relaters' group are valuable, rewarding and enriching.

Although we didn't meet our original aim of developing a conceptual framework to document our collective understanding of relationships and their impact on children's development, we have developed strong collegial, cross-institutional relationships that will be long-lasting and productive.

Collaborations develop as researchers connect at some level, experientially, over a common interest, but they take time.

Collaborative groups need facilitative structures and resources including opportunities to meet face to face.

Collaboration is not easy but it is a way of encouraging cross-institutional networks to deal with the complex problems facing contemporary children and families.



References

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Resulting publication

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