Broad-based collaborations in education: strategic coalitions for constructing knowledge about the local conditions of schooling

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Introduction
Schooling continues to shortchange those students who need it most. Along with other most basic needs, opportunities to develop intellectual and social capitals at school elude vast numbers of young people around the globe. Where schools exist, they maintain an essentially modernist and universal form in a sea of shifting economic, political and social formations. Whilst this form produces educational discourses that are relatively stable and predictable, it also attests to the ability of schools to resist change. This paper discusses a recent attempt to disrupt some of the undesirable and persistent outcomes of schooling discourses for students from low income communities through an interagency collaboration in Sydney known as the Granville District Collaboration (GDC). Collaborations in education, such as various types of school-university partnerships and school-community partnerships, are not new and their tendency to be time consuming, complex and fragile is documented (see for example Yeatman and Sachs, 1995). In this paper, I focus on the potential of particular types of collaborations in education to build strategic coalitions for the purpose of disrupting the certainty with which schools deliver differential and inequitable outcomes for particular groups of students. I suggest that this purpose may be achieved through strategic coalitions aimed at producing knowledge about the local conditions of schooling.

Whilst much educational research is fundamentally collaborative, this feature tends to be treated as a method for achieving research outcomes, or a mechanism for achieving other outcomes related to professional development and teacher preparation. Even when collaborative processes form a major focus of methodological descriptions of research, they frequently fail to address how the collaboration was fostered and facilitated (cf. Grimmet and Dockendorf, 1999). In this paper, the collaborative process underpinning the GDC is worked with as part of the data to be accounted for, and the potential of this process to produce certain types of knowledge about schooling is explored. This paper is underpinned by the belief that it is not just teachers working in classrooms who are responsible for the effects of schooling: this responsibility is shared by whole communities, not only in terms of sharing responsibility for engaging students in learning, but also in terms of managing and dealing with the effects of schooling on the social, intellectual and economic capitals of communities.
Background to the Granville District Collaboration
The Granville District Collaboration (GDC) was initiated in June 2000 to improve the learning outcomes of students in four schools in Sydney's inner west. The specific focus was on students in the middle years (Years 5-8) from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. This focus was chosen because despite the long-term efforts of programs that target these students, they continue to gain less benefit from school participation and to lag behind others on a range of school outcome indicators. Aligned with this concern is a recognition that the middle years of schooling provide a tenuous bridge between primary and secondary education that many students traverse with great difficulty and some fail to complete the journey. There are also indicators of widespread reduction in achievement outcomes in these years (QSRLS, 2001) and concerns that students are exiting formal education at increasingly younger ages.

Participants in the collaboration included the district superintendent and other district personnel; the managers and coordinators of programs targeting low SES students and others students at risk; parents and other community representatives; and academic researchers. Soon after the collaboration was initiated, two primary schools and two high schools were invited to join it and to develop action research plans to address the specific learning needs of their students in the middle years. All the schools chosen had a high proportion of students from low SES backgrounds and from non-English speaking backgrounds. Whilst the students attending these schools fitted the profile of groups that traditionally underachieve and underparticipate in schooling, these schools were chosen because of their record of success in implementing reforms aimed at improving students' educational outcomes. For example, Parkview High School had a strong reputation for its long established teaching teams and Junction Public School had received a national award for its innovative literacy programs.

By the end of 2000, all the schools had developed action plans that were approved for additional funding by the district and targeted programs. The combined total funding in 2001 was $(AUS) 30,000 in cash. All of this went to the schools in varying amounts to support the implementation of their action plans. For example, Parkview HS conducted a review of the school's goals, surveyed teachers about their teaching and initiated intensive professional development for the school executive, including discussion on core teaching/learning issues; Bridge Street High School focussed on developing its Year 7 teaching teams and on aligning support for these teams from across the school; Year 5 and 6 teachers at Junction Primary School developed an observation tool to help them monitor the engagement of students at risk; and Talltimbers Primary School introduced three-way reporting to more actively involve students and parents in learning.

The coordination and implementation of these four action plans became the means by which the interagency collaboration was operationalised. The
complexity and scope of the collaboration meant that participants needed to periodically restate, renegotiate and reaffirm the purpose of the GDC. The need to continually align the purposes of participants in the collaboration echoed the findings of a review of the Innovative Links Project, which was a practical and experimental conception of partnership and exchange between academics and practitioners. The research circles established by this earlier project gave precedence to research questions generated in the school setting. Also, the research results were jointly negotiated and published with the approval of the participants and with due acknowledgment of the contribution of all members. In their review of the project, Yeatman and Sachs (1995) emphasised the fragile nature of sustained collaborations. They observed that “the form and processes for collaboration between [partners] had to be continually negotiated and renegotiated” (p. 43). This iterative process was manifest within the GDC through the ongoing discussion participants had about the ‘five projects’, namely, the four school action plans and the collaboration. The challenges associated with communicating, negotiating and working across institutional locations and cultures have presented ongoing fundamental challenges to the participants and to the development of the GDC.

This paper draws upon artefacts produced by the GDC, such as the minutes of meetings and interviews with the various participants, as well as the literature on collaboration in educational research in order to reflect upon the nature of the GDC and how various stakeholders perceived it. It focuses on the participants' attempts to collaborate around a specific set of educational issues, their understanding of these issues and the effects of their involvement in the collaborative process. Whilst my standpoint as researcher is most strongly presented, I have attempted to incorporate the critical comments of the principals of Parkview HS and Junction PS on earlier drafts, and I am grateful to a number of other participants who agreed to allow their quotes to be incorporated in the paper.

Collaboration - a strategic coalition
Given the scale of the Professional Development School movement in the US and the large number of collaborative projects involving schools in Australia, such as the previously mentioned Innovative Links, it is a little surprising that there is a lack of attention to collaborative processes in the educational research literature. As Shulha (2000) notes,

Currently, ‘collaborative’ is being used to describe almost all inquiry that establishes working relationships among university researchers and teachers. Unlike action research, however, many of these projects are intended to make a contribution to more general knowledge about programs, policy and pedagogy. Collaboration is often touted as an ideal strategy to enhance the relevance and utility of findings. When findings are presented, however, rarely are data about the collaboration or arguments grounding findings in collaborative processes included. (p. 1)
Shulha's claim is supported by a national report that mapped educational research and its impact on Australian schools (DETYA, 2000). It identified four models of systematic educational inquiry. These included traditional knowledge production, investigator-controlled applied research, investigator-user linkages and user oriented action research. Whilst research within each of these categories can involve some form of collaboration, less than 1 per cent of records in the Australian Education Index nominated participatory research as a methodological descriptor (DETYA, 2000).

This situation may be interpreted in a number of ways. As Shulha points out, it may suggest that the primary focus of much collaborative research is simply considered to be other forms of knowledge. Aligned with this is perhaps a tendency to treat collaboration as an approach or a set of techniques to be applied in certain circumstances. Whatever the reason behind this lack of attention to collaborative processes, the fact remains that collaboration has eluded sustained analysis and ‘if findings from collaborative investigations are to have significant influence in educational decision making then more adequate and dependable models for this type of inquiry need to be developed’ (Shulha, 2000, p. 1).

Consequently, I’ve chosen in this paper to focus explicitly on the collaborative processes within the GDC, not in order to suggest ways of fixing or improving these processes, since they are already and always inscribed with particular forms and functions, but in order to illuminate them and to suggest ways of working with them for particular purposes. If our purpose is to disrupt the certainty with which schools produce limited outcomes for certain groups of students, then collaboration alone is insufficient to bring this about unless it is underpinned by a commitment to its processes, not simply as a set of techniques but as platform for holding together broad-based alliances for specific purposes - strategic coalitions. These coalitions take on the challenge of constituting new understandings and ways of thinking about endemic inequities in education. In other words, it is a process of joint knowledge construction focussed on improving the learning outcomes of students who benefit least from education.

The joint nature of this process and the scale of the problems being addressed require broad-based collaborations. However, collaborations are not by nature necessarily inclusive, participatory or collaborative. The need to actively construct these approaches to working together was illustrated in numerous ways in the GDC. In the case of parent involvement, the GDC replicated some of the problems experienced by some participating organisations, and overcome by others, in maintaining and sustaining parental participation. For example, the longstanding parent representative noted:

I don’t really know why I’m [on the coordinating committee of the GDC]. Or whether I need to be here any more...it really does feel like just a token involvement because perhaps that’s part of [the targeted program], it is one of [their] guidelines that you have to have some
parent involvement, but [I find it discouraging] to go there and sit there and not have any direction or an involvement…

Junction PS team meeting, September, 2002

Interestingly, this parent was an active participant in her school and district consultative processes. Within the participating organisations comprising the GDC there were some well-established mechanisms for involving parents and community members but these did not transfer to collaboration. Instead, they need to be reconstituted and reconfigured.

Similarly, the inclusion of non-school based personnel, particularly those from targeted programs, was problematic. The principal of Parkview HS stated:

I would just be interested to hear what [they] say they have contributed. I know that they’ve contributed money and guidelines and rules. But I’d just like to know what they think that they’ve actually contributed other than financial support.

Parkview HS team meeting, September 2002

Although the parent and community representatives were among the most reliable attendees at meetings of the coordinating group, after two years their role in the collaboration remained weakly defined and poorly understood. One of the community representatives described this situation in the following terms:

Most people outside school, I would say, feel very warned off school, it feels very closed to most people...if we want communities to be in partnership with schools, schools have got to come half way, you know, they can’t expect the community to keep knocking on the door and getting rejected and they won’t keep coming back, it’s easier to stay away. So I think, rightly or wrongly, there’s a feeling that schools don’t want other input. You know. Unless it happens to satisfy their agenda at the time...If they really want to meaningfully engage with community, [they need] to be aware it’s a two way process, be willing to take the community on as an equal partner, not define the agenda for the community because the community will just go away, you know, and community groups just find it easier to go away and do stuff on their own.

The difficulties associated with establishing and maintaining a broad-based collaboration were not unanticipated. Indeed, the GDC drew heavily upon past research in drawing up a set of guiding principles that included a commitment to articulating an agreed and shared process; professional dialogue with a broad consultative base; and open lines of communication. However, despite being forewarned, and to some degree forearmed, the GDC ran aground on a number of occasions.
This paper was written at such a moment during which participants were reassessing the costs and benefits involved in refloating the collaboration. The principal of the Junction PS described this moment in the following way.

I just figure, for us as a school, we've reached a turning point as to what we choose to do, so we, we feel it's time just to really share and put it on the table and we feel we can do that quite comfortably. But it might not be shared by other people. And we are equally happy to be told that that's not how other people are feeling.

Junction PS team meeting, September, 2002

This ‘grounding’, like others on various scales, provided opportunities for participants to expose and open up problems. Such problems can be treated as effects of collaborative formations and of the desire to work on a set of shared issues across different institutional locations, or they can be viewed as obstacles to be overcome. An important distinction to be made is that thinking of these problems as effects is underpinned by a commitment to collaboration as a way of working, whereas thinking of these problems as obstacles falsely implies that they can be overcome. This distinction is stark in its consequences because the former views collaboration as a strategic alignment of resources and interests to work within and against the endemic effects of schooling, whereas the latter views collaboration as a mechanism that can be corrected and improved. The history of collaborations in education is littered with abandoned wrecks. I am not suggesting that problems can be ignored or left unattended but that they are more productively viewed as processes to be managed rather than problems to be fixed. Nevertheless, this particular grounding of the GDC exposed the fragility of the collaboration and the need for sustained commitment to its logic and purposes, however illusory these at times appeared.

Collaboration: a commitment to joint knowledge production
A commitment to joint knowledge production facilitated by collaboration requires that prior assumptions about knowledge, roles and relationships be successfully challenged. As Kirschner and Dickinson (1996) explain: ‘Since engaging in joint intellectual effort requires... the free exchange of ideas, risk taking, and respect for different perspectives... we had to challenge prior assumptions about knowledge and blur the lines between roles’ (p.207). Understanding collaboration in this way requires a distinction to be made between the roles of participants inside the collaboration compared to their roles outside it. Hierarchically and institutionally defined roles outside the collaboration need to give way to more equally defined roles within the collaboration if participants are to function as joint or co-contributors to the construction of knowledge about schools and their effects.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that the roles of participants outside collaborations directly relate to how they are positioned and function within
them. For example, the participants in the GDC had various connections to the four schools: this was most tenuous for me as an academic and for the community representatives who were furthest removed from day-to-day life in the schools; it was highly integrated with the job profiles of district personnel who were already engaged in working with the schools on a range of programs; it was most ‘close to home’ for parent representatives who were deeply connected to the lives of the students we were trying to influence; and, it was most work for school administrators and teachers who were responsible for operationalising the GDC at the school level. In other words, the collaboration placed varying demands on participants and these were sometimes experienced as unequal demands. The challenge for the GDC was to balance these demands with rewards and to align each participant’s commitment to the collaboration with their other interests and responsibilities.

Prior and continuing relationships among the participants and the organisations involved meant that many new ways of relating had to be worked out. These prior relationships involved supervisory relationships and other traditionally hierarchical relationships that persisted while parallel collaborative relationships were developing. For example, the active involvement of the District Superintendent leveraged support for the collaboration from certain participants but this also placed heightened expectations upon them. This was perhaps most keenly felt by the principals who had been selected to take part. For them the risks were high because as the principal of Parkview HS explained:

> Now that we’re in...you can’t pull out [because] it means that there’s something going to be written about you at the end, so you’ve got to make a go of it. Okay? So, there’s an incentive. Instead of saying, oh, this is all too hard, how much work am I going to have to do - you do it. Because something has to be shown at the end. And I’m not going to let this school be seen to have tried something and failed.

Principal interview, April 2002

A corollary of these risks were rewards and the principal of Junction PS described the value of her school’s involvement in the GDC in the following terms:

> To a large extent the value of the Granville District Collaboration is the public perception of the school being involved in a pilot project. The community likes to see a school ‘having a go’ at something, being worthy of inclusion in that sort of project. The value has been a very strong community perception. In addition, the Stage 3 team of teachers has found [the GDC] to be a motivating force.

Team meeting Junction Primary School, September, 2002

In addition, the benefits of coming together regularly also helped build professional networks among the principals.
It’s very good from the perspective of getting to meet people in a smaller group [compared with attending the] principals’ meeting in the district with forty, fifty other principals […] there’s a connection, so it’s good that way.

Talltimbers PS team meeting, September 2002

Another principal further illustrated this:

I can quite happily get on the phone and ring [the other three principals], which I wouldn’t have done previously, but that’s because the project itself has provided a sustained, ongoing [point of contact]…you’ve seen what our principals’ meetings are like, you don’t get a real lot of time for interaction. So, that’s been one of the best things.

Junction PS team meeting, September 2002

Balancing the demands with the rewards whilst building new relationships and maintaining prior ones mark out the complexities of collaborative processes. As time went on, the issue of differential experiences of various groups of participants came up more frequently. These differential experiences partly reflected the structure of the GDC which was managed by a coordinating group made up of representatives of the schools and organisations involved. Whilst this group grew to include the principals of each school, rather than just one principal representing all schools, as had been initially planned, other participants were not part of the coordinating group. A head teacher at Parkview HS described the experiences of participants involved in the collaboration but not part of the coordinating group:

If you’re talking about collaboration, I think there are levels of it. I mean, you may very well have a sense of collaboration through attending a coordinating group meeting, because you’re talking with people from the [other] schools. If you took a straw poll of the staff here, I would suspect that very few of them would be able to identify that what we do [here] is actually part of the collaborative project. And that’s not because it hasn’t been addressed and talked about - put into a context, it’s just that there’s no, I think for most people, there’s actually no tangible link that we are actually in a collaborative project with another high school and two primary schools.

Parkview HS team meeting, September 2002

Some of the principals perceived differences in the expectations placed on schools compared to other organisations involved. This view was reflected in the following statement by the principal of Junction PS.

I guess there was a little bit of expectation that while the schools were doing their thing, if I could put it that way, the other interacting agencies would be doing their thing. And I guess what has never been
identified for us, are what are the roles of the [other] agencies, in the sense of is PSPF there purely as a funding source. Or, are they out there doing something that contributes to what we’re doing. You know…is the YAS there because of the benefit that they see working with, say, the high schools...But if, I think if we’re going to stay together as a group, those areas need to be identified. Because some of these [other agencies] don’t really do anything but talk money at us, or talk, you know, what you can and can’t do guideline-wise with us.

Junction PS team meeting, September, 2002

These comments indicate that participants within the GDC struggled to imagine and create new relationships out of those that were already established. Whilst the GDC built upon the familiarity and mutual understanding that had developed through prior relationships it requires a different way of working. Early in the project, one of the district consultants explained:

It is affecting the way I work as I’m having to negotiate with a lot more people…the collaboration, and negotiation that has to go on for it to work smoothly is very different perhaps to my working with 1 or 2 colleagues at district level.

December, 2000

Different ways of working together took some time to adjust to and to agree on as illustrated by the following exchange I had with one the school principals.

Researcher: My feeling was that at the start, you were kind of saying to us, well, what do you want us to do. You know. What is it that we’re really being a part of? And there was a sense in which you were sitting back to a degree, waiting for us to tell you. And I think you were a little bit suspicious of us, because you thought there might be a hidden agenda...

Principal: No, no. We thought you were going to approach us to do some research on us. Rather than us doing research on, within ourselves.

Researcher: Right.

Principal: We were under the impression that…we were being part of a research study that would help look at middle schooling and pedagogy and then it dawned on us, about six months into it, that in fact, we were the ones, we had unintentionally agreed to do a research project on ourselves, yes.

Parkview HS team meeting, September 2002
Whilst we attempted throughout to define, document and discuss roles and expectations these did not always produce agreement or the shared understanding that they were supposed to mediate. At the end of the first year of the project, members of the coordinating group were asked to describe their roles in relation to the GDC and these were documented in a conference paper (Hayes and Koester, 2001). Earlier still in the letter sent to schools inviting them to consider joining the collaboration, they were asked to identify focus areas for the collaboration. However, this was an unfamiliar expectation as their previous interactions with external agencies were more likely to be tightly prescribed by funding and policy guidelines. The assistant principal at Talltimbers explained how she first responded to the realisation that schools were expected to develop their own research agenda.

I can remember that very first meeting […] and by the end of the meeting we were told go for it. And getting back to school and thinking, go for what? Where are we going? [laughter]. They told us we could do anything. Well… anything is like, excuse me, I need a little more direction. So, there was that initial frustration and initial looking at the watch thinking time is ticking away […] but once the focus was set, everything was fine. It was just, it was just too airy-fairy to start with.

Talltimbers PS team meeting, September 2002

Feedback such as this did force adjustments in the GDC and renewed attempts to improve communication but these efforts sometimes created other sets of issues. As the Stage 3 coordinator at Talltimbers PS explained:

I’ve been very happy with what we’ve been doing, I think it’s been extremely productive in regard to engaging the students, I’ve no doubt about that. But, at the end of each year I think, well, what are they going to want from us. And for example, last year, I think we had to fill out a form for someone and then we had another one from someone else and then someone came for an evaluation meeting and it sounded like we were doing the same thing three times over. Peak different stakeholders had their own requirements…

Talltimbers PS team meeting, September 2002

These comments indicate that her frustrations partly grew out of attempts to clarify expectations and develop shared understandings of roles, not because these issues were ignored or unattended. Close attention was paid to developing the research focus of the GDC but it was hard to sustain this focus and build broad-based agreement on its operationalisation. Whilst there was some degree of flexibility, the GDC was also bound by some core concerns: a collaborative approach to engaging students from low SES backgrounds in the middle years. A consequence of this bounded flexibility was that in the first few months of the project the schools developed four very different actions plans whilst the district superintendent, funding program coordinator and university academic focused on establishing the coordinating group. By the
time that the coordinating group first came together, two research questions had emerged from these separate processes:

(1) How do we more effectively engage and improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students in the middle years?

(2) How can a collaborative approach to this question support all stakeholders (students, teachers, communities, organisations and out-of-school educators) to more effectively engage students in learning?

It was hoped that naming and documenting these two questions would provide a shared understanding of the GDC but this was not simply achieved. The participants tended to focus on different aspects of these questions: the school-based participants focussed more on the first question whereas the community and program participants tended to focus on the second question.

Despite being fairly removed from the organisational processes that managed the GDC, classroom teachers were perhaps most positive about the benefits. The assistant principal and stage 3 coordinator at Talltimbers PS made the following comments during a team meeting.

Assistant principal: The biggest value was that you gave us time. You gave us money to allow stage three to sit down and have a professional dialogue that wasn’t rushed…If you want to change any student learning outcomes, then those teachers have to have time to talk.

Stage 3 coordinator: That’s what I think, too. Just the time to collaborate. And I think in that time, our thinking was directed towards [improving learning outcomes], because often when we’re having staff meetings or whatever, there are twenty different issues that we’re discussing. Whereas the time we set aside for this was really focused.

Talltimbers PS team meeting, September 2002

The Stage 3 coordinator at Junction PS also commented on how participating in the collaboration helped classroom teachers to focus on the goals written into their action plan:

I tend to think that because [the GDC] is there and because we’re answerable, then it will stay a priority and (the school’s action plan) will get done. Within teaching there are so many things, that it would be easy to set aside something that’s not answerable to get the other things that are answerable done. [Being answerable] would be the ‘push’ behind [the GDC]. Because the [GDC] is there, we’re getting good results from what we’re doing, which is great. But, I think we need to keep more emphasis on [the GDC].

I don’t think we would’ve got the classroom observations off the ground. I think the concept of classroom observations would’ve been there in theory. But I think we would’ve gone down another track … getting
behaviour support, for example, having somebody else do the observations for us.”

Junction PS team meeting, September 2002

Whilst there were numerous problems associated with the maintenance of the collaboration, these comments from teachers illustrate a widely held view of participants, that the GDC facilitated a sustained focus on a common set of issues. The complex relationships and funding incentives generated both pressure and support to maintain this focus among many other competing demands.

Conclusion
These perspectives of participants provide some insight into the ways in which power operates and circulates within collaborations. As previously discussed, these effects of power are partly a product of imprinting a collaborative process on existing relationships but they are also the inevitable effects of building relationships among participants in a broad-based coalition. By focusing on these issues, I have been attempting to illuminate them without any expectation that they can be eliminated. This is not to say that our attempts to improve the quality of collaboration are in vain, but that the effects of power may be more productively worked with, than against, in order to leverage support for the purposes of the collaboration. Indeed, power differentials can leverage support for the collaboration by aligning its processes and outcomes with existing and parallel purposes and relationships. This alignment is underpinned by an understanding of schools as being embedded within local contexts yet also influenced by global trends and formations. Managing and interpreting ‘glocalization’ (Robertson, 1995) requires that schools have porous and dynamic interfaces that open their processes to external influences whilst connecting their learning programs to the world beyond their classrooms; it requires that they be more open and more democratic in nature. Collaborations are particularly suited to this task and to mediating the strategic alliances that will strengthen the ability of schools to respond locally to shifting global conditions. Although collaborations are not by nature collaborative, I have attempted to show in this paper that they have the potential to be strategic coalitions for constructing knowledge about the local conditions of schooling.

1 The retention rate to Year 12 for students with low SES backgrounds was 55% compared with 76% of students with high SES backgrounds (MCEETYA, 1997, p. 94). For indigenous students these figures are even more alarming: the retention rate of indigenous students in 1997 was 30.9% compared with 72.8% for non-indigenous students.
2 Whilst the name of the district has not been disguised, pseudonyms have been used to describe the four schools involved.
References
Hayes, D., and Koester., J. (2001) Inter-agency collaboration to support school based action research: An early stage report on the Granville District Collaboration, paper presented at the Priority Schools Funding Program Team Training Workshop, Sydney, July 10