“I’m trying to keep one foot in my school’s culture and the other in the university’s; I don’t want to end up doing the splits!” Teachers’ perspectives on school based research within a schools-university partnership.

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Abstract
This paper describes the diverse experiences of the teacher research co-ordinators (TRCs) who represent their schools in the Schools University Partnership for Educational Research (SUPER) partnership, as they reflect on what happens in the so called “third space” (Zeichner, 2008). Parallel studies have been undertaken by university colleagues in the partnership. In this paper we discuss the various dimensions which TRC’s identify in that “third space” as they review their experiences within the partnership. The key issues for TRCs regarding time and space, intellectual space and access to academics and their theories, complementary and conflicting cultures and agendas within the institutions, and issues related to sustainability in an environment of change are all discussed. How these link to the theories and concepts outlined in our university colleagues’ papers are also considered. Visual and auditory records of the informal interviews and discussions between TRCs, coupled with the experiences of the two authors, given as case studies, are the data sources. TRCs are involved in working in partnership with their university colleagues, each other, the Headteachers group and other teachers in their school environments, some of whom may be participating in collaborative research projects with SUPER, and some who do not. This paper seeks to examine how this rich variety of relationships provides tangible benefits, but also considerable challenges for TRCs, as they grapple with encouraging collaborative practitioner research within their respective school institutions. It also reflects on the possible role of government in supporting such research based partnerships between universities and schools.

Introduction
This paper explores the benefits and tensions inherent within “the third space” (Zeichner, 2008), as experienced by school colleagues within the Schools and University Partnership for Educational Research (SUPER). The partnership is formed of eight secondary schools and the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. The aim of the partnership is to establish and encourage a new teacher practitioner research culture in schools. The paper draws upon the perspectives of the teacher research co-ordinators (TRCs) from each school who meet at least twice termly with Faculty staff at the university. The TRCs have a key role representing their schools in the partnership, but also act as champions for practitioner research back in their own institutions. The partnership has been in existence for nine years, during which time it has developed some understandings of the role conflicts experienced by practitioners, operating in both university and school settings. In this paper we reflect on the personal commitment, motivation and identification required for teachers and schools to operate successfully in this partnership. The government’s intention to create teaching as a Masters level profession, requires an understanding of the ways in which schools and universities can work with school partners to create a truly research led profession. This paper seeks to illuminate relevant current experiences which may have implications for future developments regarding schools and universities working together to develop practitioner research.

The paper will also explore the notion of the third space (Zeichner 2008), as it is viewed by the TRC members of the SUPER partnership in its various forms. Whilst it is a geographical space in the sense that the TRCs and faculty staff meet regularly at the faculty buildings, there are several occasions where meetings are held elsewhere. TRCs meet half-termly with their critical friends at their individual schools, and there is an annual overnight conference involving the faculty staff, Headteachers and the TRCs, which takes place mainly at a conference centre. Thus, the geographical location is not always the same. However, the paper will also examine how it is also an intellectual space, where research and its attendant issues can be discussed, planned, reviewed, and disseminated. Thus the notion of a “third space” is itself complex. The idea of crystallisation (Richardson 2003) is a relevant concept here, with its ideas of a complex reality, illuminated by being viewed from many angles, the angles here relating to the variety of reflections expressed by the TRCs during our data collection.
In addition, we explore here the idea of the third space as a space where the two cultures of the university and the schools come together. Thus, each TRC participant has a foothold in their own school and has another foothold in the so called “third space.” This third space may be perceived to be a new place, occupied by the partnership, which exists between the university and the schools, which is developing its own identity and culture as it evolves. The notion of the third space is therefore multi-dimensional and worthy of investigation, as the teaching profession moves towards becoming a research led, Masters level profession, and schools-university partnerships become more common.

The data sources used are mainly transcripts of conversations between five TRCs who participated in recorded discussions about their experiences and perceptions of the third space, and their place within it. These sources provide descriptions of experiences and reflections on their meaning as articulated by the individuals involved. The role of the authors has been to analyse and structure these accounts to enable an understanding of the tensions and benefits of belonging to a partnership made up from two very different cultural traditions. Other data sources are two case studies drawn from the authors’ own experiences as TRCs. Jennie Richards has been a TRC over a period of seven years, and thus has witnessed many changes in the partnership and how it operates. Her school was one of the original founders of the partnership. By contrast, Helena Ceranic has been a TRC for two years, being appointed when her school joined SUPER. She is also a member of the second group of SUPER MEd students, and therefore also has insights created from a very different perspective.

In the first part of this paper, we start by detailing information about the changing context in which TRCs work, showing how the recent evolutionary developments in the partnership have impacted on TRCs. In the second part, we explore the five dimensions which we have identified as forming key components of the third space. Within these dimensions, we explore TRCs’ reflections on their roles, the perceived benefits they gain from the partnership, but also the challenges they face both at the university and back in their individual school environments, which may have agendas which conflict with the academic aims and traditions of the university. Key concepts related to border territory, learning, identity and power are also explored, as identified in the companion paper written by our university colleagues. Finally, we draw some conclusions which summarise the benefits and tensions reported by the TRCs as they consider the nature of the third space, and the potential for government support for schools university research partnerships.

Recent changes which have affected the role of the TRC and the context in which they work

It is now three years since the publication of the first book about the partnership (McLaughlin et al 2006). Since then, there have been three significant developments in the partnership. Firstly, four of the schools who presented their case studies in the book, have been replaced by four others. This has therefore added new challenges to the partnership as it sought it to both understand the reasons for some schools leaving, and to work out how to induct new Headteachers and TRCs into the partnership, and to work with these schools to establish new working relationships. These changes have provided a rich and varied set of experiences for all TRCs involved in SUPER. It has also afforded the partnership the opportunity to reflect upon itself.

Whenever we have anybody new come in, they will ask questions of us that make us think, and make us reflect, and actually make us clearer about what we’re doing. (Chris)
A second recent significant change for the partnership has been the establishment of a two year part-time SUPER MEd course, launched in 2005, which draws at least two students from each of the partner schools. The first cohort of students completed in September 2007, the second cohort will complete their studies in September 2009, and a third, much larger cohort, with students drawn from all the current SUPER schools, is due to begin in October 2009. Funding for these masters courses has been secured by a government PPD grant. This has reinforced the viability of the course and enabled increased enrolment. One major new role for TRCs therefore, has been to be involved in the initial recruitment of prospective MEd students, and to act as a support within the school throughout the course. For the TRCs who are themselves undertaking the MEd course, this has added a different dimension and experience again, as they have roles both as students of, and teacher-partners with the university. There are significant implications here for the complexities in the sense of identity of these TRCs, and the also with regard to the power relationships within the partnership. In addition, the number of Faculty staff involved in the partnership has grown as the teaching and supervision requirement has increased, so new academics have been introduced, bringing different dynamics and ideas to the group.

A third significant change has been that the partnership has moved significantly in terms of the direction of its research focus. Whilst there has always been an element of the faculty staff researching the partnership itself, most of the time has been spent in schools researching in small scale projects on topics of interest to individuals or groups within the schools. However, four years ago, the partnership made a policy decision to conduct a common piece of research. The precise research question was agreed as a result of collaborative visits and discussion between the schools, TRCs and the Faculty. It was recognised that a common issue for all schools was one of pupil engagement, and so a decision was made to move away from learning about how research partnerships work, to learning as a partnership from research. Initially, a common research tool was used as a baseline for developing the research questions which would then be individualised to each school, whilst still under the umbrella of pupil engagement research. Thus, all TRCs have themselves been significantly involved in a SUPER collaborative practitioner research project in their school, rather than just co-ordinating the research of others, which was often the case previously.

There was a stage when it was a little bit too nebulous and not focused enough, but since the pupil engagement thing and the survey, there’s been direction and clear purpose. (Alan)

The partnership has also, however, continued to research the evolution, successes, challenges and complexities of the school and university working collaboratively in this way. Thus the interest in the notion of the so called “Third Space” has been raised amongst the faculty staff and the TRCs.

These changes have been particularly significant for TRCs who have had to develop a far greater range of roles than was previously the case. They have themselves become leaders of collaborative practitioner research and are actively involved in the SUPER MEd, either as students or in a support capacity, or sometimes both.

**Methodological Issues**

When considering the best means of conducting our research into the views and experiences of TRCs, it was clear that qualitative methods would be appropriate for the data collection, as only through such enquiries could the depth and complexities of TRCs perspectives be captured. TRC meetings are always events where there is a great deal of dialogue between the TRCs and the university partners as research is planned and relevant issues discussed and debated. The method chosen to collect data from the TRCs was therefore to create space in a regular TRC meeting to discuss their views and experiences with the university colleagues absent, and to tape record their
responses to the key questions being asked. The method therefore had some similarities to a semi
structured interview, but the researchers were themselves part of the ensuing discussion, and in fact
acted as participants in the research. The results are therefore highly reflective and subjective. The
research design was deliberately “loose”, due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of the
research aims. On the day chosen to collect the data, there were three TRCs not present due to a
variety of reasons., and therefore their views were not part of this research, bringing into question
the representativeness and validity of this research. Nonetheless, a large amount of data was
collected from those present. Two were very experienced TRCs, two were currently on the MEd
course as well as TRCs, and one was a new TRC and a prospective MEd student. Thus a variety of
experiences were represented in the responses. All agreed to their being part of the research and to
their names being used.

The discussions were transcribed, and the resulting data was constructed by the researchers into
discreet dimensions which the authors could identify in the data. This analytic process, is, by its very
nature, open to critique, since other researchers could have identified other dimensions.

The two case studies quoted in this paper are also purely reflections from the authors themselves,
and have been used to illustrate time-framed examples of the partnership at work. They have been
included so that a flavour of the research partnership in action can be appreciated.

**Dimensions of the Third Space**

**Space and time**

All the TRCs spoke enthusiastically about the space and time opportunities afforded by the SUPER
partnership. For them it is significantly a geographical space away from schools for TRCs, where they
can meet with the Faculty staff on a regular basis. TRCs say that a place away from their school
environment is vital for them to avoid the inevitable interruptions to their research focus. The
partnership tends to centre on the Faculty buildings for most of their meetings, but they do meet
elsewhere during the annual overnight conference, and, for example, the Heads group meet in one
of the schools. Each school also has a critical friend from the university who visits each school half
termly. Thus it can be seen that all colleagues in the partnership, both from schools and the
university, spend time in each other’s territories, with their attendant borders. These borders, as
identified by Giroux, 2006:51, can be the parameters of cultural meaning and identities. They
represent the edge of maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being
negotiated and rewritten as codes and regulations which organise them become destabilised and
reshaped. These borders can also be analysed as being constructed around co-ordinates of
difference and power (Giroux 2006:51).

However, it is the time away from the borders of the school environment which is most appreciated
by the TRCs.

> I really appreciate the time at the Faculty. Any sort of meeting at school, they would find me.
> It’s the distance that’s important, not the Faculty (Alan)

In addition to being a geographical space, there is also a time element to the notion of the third
space. This opportunity for thinking, reflecting and learning from each other is also seen to be very
important for the TRCs

> The great thing about here is freedom, the holistic approach and the time to think, to clear
your head to think about how to do research. The slower pace here, and time to think, has
made more of a difference to how I approach pretty well everything else I’ve done in
school. (Garrett)

I know there’s this tension between teaching my lessons and coming to a place where you
can stop and get off the treadmill for a little while and reflect and think about things and
even start planning. Just to have the space and time and encouragement to do that, I think is
also a big impact of the benefits of being part of the project. (Alan)

These quotations demonstrate that being in the supposed “foreign” territory of the Faculty is
actually relished by the TRCs, and that they feel that they are somewhat freed by being away from
their normal school environment.

However, there is also a recognition that TRCs have other roles in school and that this can impinge
on their time at the Faculty.

I’m going to question myself in terms of whether I always step across totally into that space,
because at the back of my mind is “When am I going to pick up my emails? Has anything
happened back at school? What have I got to pick up?” (Chris)

This quotation clearly demonstrates that a TRCs school identity is still a powerful aspect of the TRCs
experience, and that perhaps, borders are never totally crossed when TRCs are at the Faculty. TRCs
still retain their school responsibilities, and there is still a sense in which Faculty meetings are a
merely a temporary border crossing for TRCs.

The tension of managing TRC responsibilities alongside regular workload is one that is shared by a
number of colleagues. In fact, one TRC recently relinquished his responsibility, citing the clash with
sixth form lessons and half-termly meetings at the Faculty as one reason for doing so.

Furthermore, for TRCs to find time back in school to disseminate information from SUPER, and to
put agreed actions into practice, can prove even more difficult. Arranging time with colleagues at
school to develop and embed research practice has proved difficult for many TRCs, and as a result
they have embarked on pupil engagement research alone within their own settings, or with the help
and support of one other colleague. TRCs argue this to be often the most realistic and productive
way of engaging with the research questions and gathering student voice data. Thus the lack of time
and opportunity for TRCs to develop research practice with other colleagues in school has been
identified as a frustrating and major limiting factor on the impact and influence of SUPER on its
school partners.

Intellectual space and access to academics and their thinking

A much more important benefit of the third space than purely time and geographical place, is what
happens in that space. The key aim of the partnership is to further educational research. Therefore,
it is the collaborative learning about research and from research which make this third space, as
created by SUPER, unique. TRCs and the Faculty staff meet regularly to plan and review their
research agendas. Whilst there is always much discussion at TRC meetings about methodological
issues, theoretical, ethical and practical, the most important aspect from the TRC perspective is the
access that is given to academic ideas, academic writing and the academics themselves which is both
informative and inspirational.
It is about the university’s wealth of knowledge, and capturing that knowledge into our understanding, so we don’t reinvent the wheel. And I’d equally say there isn’t a meeting I go away from without thinking “Well that was a good idea. Yes I’ll use that one.” (Chris)

This demonstrates clearly that the faculty staff are seen as accessible “experts” who can offer practical insights and learning benefits to the school partners. An outstanding example of the way in which SUPER has led to significant knowledge creation in schools, relates to the first survey that SUPER carried out into pupil engagement (2007), involving a sample of 2408 pupils from all the SUPER schools. The TRCs and Faculty staff agreed on the precise questionnaire to be used, and the university organised the data collection, sorting and analysis for us. Obviously, no single school, without the university input, would have been physically able to conduct such detailed and extensive research. As a result, TRCs were given a huge amount of data, covering the whole cohort, and also a detailed breakdown of information gathered about our own individual schools for TRCs to reflect on, and investigate further. One author of this paper recalls that at that time, she felt somewhat awash with data, and was not clear about what it was revealing beyond the fact that most of her pupils seemed engaged at her school. The following case study illuminates how working within the partnership enabled her then to develop her understanding of what the data was showing, and led to significant later research which had a profound effect on her school.

After the initial survey results were published, further focus group interviews, carried out reciprocally with a fellow TRC, across the two schools, showed that pupils engagement centred around what we came to regard as the three Rs – relationships, recognition and respect. Further reflection with fellow TRCs enabled her to recognise that her pupils rarely spoke about themselves as learners, and most of their engagement was not within the classroom itself.

Whilst the survey and focus groups had enabled a great deal of insight pupil engagement, she still felt she lacked an academic theory or perspective which would encapsulate what was being learned. At the subsequent SUPER annual conference, which was reflecting on the findings from the survey, TRCs were introduced by one of the Faculty staff to a model which had been created. (Ruddock and Flutter 2004). It consisted of a matrix of four dimensions, contained on a single A4 page. The dimensions related to whether pupils were passive or active, negative or positive, accepting or influencing, indifferent or rejecting. This model was to have a profound impact on at least two of the TRCs.

Reflection during the conference on this matrix particularly resonated with one author and her TRC colleague as a means through which to make sense and interpret the data that had been collected by the two schools. The Ruddock and Flutter model enabled both to identify a highly significant issue for their schools, which they had not been able to conceptualise before. Their pupils were clearly passive/ accepting in the main, as opposed to the influencing/ active participant they both wished their pupils to be. This “eureka moment”, led to both TRCs recognising the precise focus for their next piece of action research within their schools, as they continued in their quest for understanding pupil engagement.

A further case study example would be, again from the experience of one of the authors, was when she felt privileged to be invited, along with the other TRCs, to attend a lecture at the Faculty given by Carol Dweck, a visiting academic from America. Dweck spoke about her extensive research into pupils’ fixed or growth mindsets and their effect on how pupils approach their learning. (Dweck 2006). Not only did this author find the lecture very interesting and informative, it was also truly inspirational. It was as if, at last, she had heard someone put into words what had always been her instinctive homespun philosophy about the potential of pupils. Now she had a vocabulary to use to
express her thoughts and evidence to support her gut feelings. In this way, an opportunity was afforded to develop a deeper understanding of how pupils’ mindsets can affect their learning.

Fired with enthusiasm, she was able to use Dweck’s ideas as the basis for a recent action research project in her school as part of the pupil engagement research. With a teacher colleague who is a fellow enthusiast for Dweck’s work, she set up an action research enquiry designed to answer the question “What happens to pupils when we talk to them about their mindsets?” The pupils, a year 9 bottom set English group, were introduced to Dweck’s ideas over five lessons using the “Philosophy for Children” lesson style. The results exceeded expectations, with interview data showing the lessons had produced a profound effect on the pupils’ motivation and self belief, even two months after the lessons. This finding has inspired further pupil learning projects next year.

In another school, where teacher-pupil relationships had been identified as a priority from the SUPER Pupil Engagement survey, the other author made quotations from academic readings on this topic the focus of discussion and debate amongst members of the school’s Teaching and Learning group. This group identified a key theory that they identified with, namely Vitto’s definition of ‘a relationship-driven approach to teaching’ (Vitto, 2003). This theory became a starting point for mini action research projects and the development of a whole school relationship-driven approach to teaching and learning, which has now become embedded in the school’s development plan.

These case studies demonstrate that TRCs have been able to gain academic knowledge from the partnership, and use it in a powerful way which has had, and will continue to have, a profound and positive impact on teachers and their pupils in the classroom. Each school involved in the project has been able to conduct their own action research project. This has not only impacted within each individual school, but through the sharing and dissemination opportunities within SUPER, the knowledge gained has been reviewed, discussed and pooled to the mutual benefit of all partnership members.

Practising teachers lack the time, expertise and knowledge to track down cutting edge academic writing on education. TRCs identify that having access to educational literature and theory is of great benefit, enabling academic research to have an effect in the classroom.

The university can provide us with, you know, “have you thought about this? Look, this has been said before, and what about this here?” And then what we are able to do is to take that and say “Extremely interesting, but what does that mean for our practice?” Therefore, what does that mean for the learning in the classroom? After all, learning in the classroom is what we are all about (Chris)

A significant benefit for the TRCs, therefore, is the access that membership of SUPER gives to recent, innovative thinking in education, which would not otherwise be easily accessible for them, and which they can then use for the improvement of teaching and learning in their schools. However, the challenge for TRCs is to take this from a benefit for them, to a benefit for all teachers in their schools, to develop intellectual and academic learning amongst more teachers than just the privileged few that take on the TRC role or embark on the MEd. For many teachers outside of the TRC group, educational research and academic literature can be a daunting and unappealing prospect. A number of the TRCs have found ‘research’ to be an unpopular term among colleagues back at school, inciting fear, scepticism or disinterest. A number of TRCs now use terms such as ‘enquiry’ and ‘professional learning’ in place of research, to avoid such responses. Some TRCs have experienced colleagues’ reluctance to get involved in research as a result of their skewed understanding of what educational research entails.
One of the major challenges that TRCs have therefore faced, is to confront existing stereotypes of educational research amongst teachers in their schools and to present research practice in an engaging and interesting way. Both authors have distilled educational theory and cherry-picked the most pertinent readings to share with teacher colleagues. They have also selected models of research methodology and practice that can be adapted and used by colleagues within school, for example one author has used Flanders’ Interaction Analysis. TRC meetings have acted as an important forum for sharing successful practice and research resources amongst colleagues across the partnership, as TRCs grapple with the practical issues they face in developing research in their schools.

The cultural dimension

As Baumfield and McLaughlin (2007) say:

Fundamental differences exist between the nature of schools and universities as organisations and the roles of teachers and academics within them.

The University learning culture espouses notions of academic rigour and the desirability of evaluating and critiquing educational research and government educational policy. These are not always issues which are at the forefront of the schools agendas, which are frequently standards driven, or related to the implementation of national strategies. Therefore there can be an inherent tension between these cultures. Indeed, the distinction between critiquing and being critical is identified by TRCs as a vital aspect of the third space.

Part of that third space culture has become that we expect to ask questions of each other and we could call it critiquing. We could call it that we justify our position, and we don’t mind anymore, we’re not defending. We’re not defensive, which is where we might be back in school.
I think we’ve actually learnt an awful lot from our openness. I started that sentence with I think. I know I have learned an awful lot from that openness. If I roll back the clock to 1999, it was a time when it felt very challenging because we weren’t used to being questioned in that way. Whereas now, it feels refreshing…it’s about building a culture.(Chris)

There is also a rigour that’s applied through SUPER, as you know like an academic degree, I suppose, as you would expect., that a lot of the other opportunities for school based action research don’t have. You know they’ll give you money but that’s pretty much all they give you.(Garrett)

Garrett also reports that when considering his proposed research focus for the next two years, he had originally been concerned with how to implement a national strategy related to family education and parental involvement in his school environment. He now realises, as a result of engagement with SUPER, that there are new academic challenges he will have to meet. He says:

How am I going to be able to maintain an objective research approach with my feet in both camps? That’s my challenge for the next two years. How am I going to maintain the thoughtful nature of the MEd and those processes, and the TRC meetings, and not let the strategy try and dictate what I do? ... It’s helped clarify a lot for me, that’s allowed me to discuss strategy more intelligently as opposed to implementing strategies(Garrett)
A further identified major role of the third space which relates to learning, is to help clarify the understandings of the individuals who make up the group, and the institutions to which they belong.

The university culture is, or my understanding of it is, that it is right to ask those really deep delving questions that make you reflect on your practice.... We need that kind of questioning, we need to see it as something we can grow stronger from. In many ways I see that as one of the huge benefits of the third space.(Chris)

It’s given you the space to focus on the bigger picture or to focus on things you wouldn’t normally see as big pictures...... The idea of making the familiar strange. It’s been an opportunity for all the TRCs to do that collaboratively and through that have a greater understanding of our own contexts (Helena)

An interesting dimension and possible tension relates to the normal university/student relationship which is a familiar role for Masters degree students and their tutors, not being an appropriate relationship for the TRCs with SUPER. Although there are some TRCs who are also students, the TRC meetings are characterised by a rather different set of relationships. These are more equal, less hierarchical than would be the case where assessment and accreditation are involved. There is also the sense in which SUPER is a space in which the building of a collaborative research culture amongst the partnership can flourish.

There needs to be that third space environment that isn’t based on certification or accreditation of any type. Where professionals can exchange points of view, can learn from each other. (Chris)

It has proved a most invigorating, challenging inspirational space for me..... It’s also a conceptual space where you can explore things. It’s a very egalitarian space where people can speak as they find, where you can admit to challenges, where you can admit to things not working quite how you wanted them to.(Jennie)

It is clear, therefore, that TRCs identify in this third space, the importance of the open, non-hierarchical, egalitarian, academic culture that they feel exists within the partnership. Whilst there are many examples of universities in the UK working with schools to offer Masters level study, and further professional development for teachers, it is perceived to be a different experience for TRCs working within the partnership, and this is highly valued. The power relationships as viewed by the TRCs, appear to be more egalitarian than those where the university is involved in assessing the progress of the TRCs against agreed academic criteria for a Masters qualification. TRC meetings are therefore seen as a significantly different space compared to the SUPER MEd course itself, or even the experience of the TRC back in their school environment.

They trust our opinion and intellect as well, whereas in school people may mistrust your agenda.(Garrett)

Finally, one TRCs asks whether the government be encouraging more such collaborative university/school partnerships?
Is it something that the government has missed? ... Should there be more of an actual structured approach with schools and universities in terms of their relationships and learning? I feel strongly that there is so much to learn from everybody within that third space, both universities and schools. It somehow should become a structure that exists in education. (Chris)

Complementary and conflicting agendas

SUPER agendas have to meet the needs of the university staff and the schools if the partnership is to work and be sustainable.

I would say that they've actually got to coincide for the relationship to be a valuable relationship, the two way relationship we wish it to be. And there is no doubt in my mind that SUPER has shaped the schools and the university, and that we are both winners from the partnership..... Neither side is more important, but in that third space where they come together, they actually learn from each other, and I feel that's the really powerful part of this partnership.(Chris)

Thus the research agendas in the partnership can be seen to be complementary, with significant learning from both sides of the partnership. However, there are inevitable tensions which arise when the performance and standards driven agenda of the school seem to be dominant when the TRCs are back working in their school environments.

As a senior leader myself, I can see that leadership teams are almost driven by... there is a demand for them to be driven by standards. To achieve this. To jump through this. To tick this box. To do that. There is a danger within that we forget about learning, that we develop learners who don’t actually know how to learn, they don’t know what true learning is. All they know is the answer to enable them to jump through set hoops........ And this third space enables you to challenge that.(Chris)

While TRCs and Faculty colleagues recognise the benefits of bringing university and school cultures together for mutual learning, outside the parameters of the third space, it can be difficult to resolve the clashes in culture. Schools’ emphasis on improvement agendas and raising standards can be seen to be at odds with the developmental model of university style research which often asks more questions than it answers, or analyses issues rather than solving them. This approach can be seen to conflict with schools’ quick fix standards agendas.

Members of the SUPER partnership have sought ways of addressing these conflicting cultures through the changes identified in the introduction to this paper. By acknowledging the differences within the diverse membership of the partnership, rather than ignoring them, SUPER has allowed schools to individualise their collaborative research projects.

Change and sustainability issues

The SUPER partnership has survived over the last ten years through a number of issues related to membership changes in terms of individuals and schools. There have been many issues related to funding and the direction in which our work has been heading. The partnership has learned a great deal over that time, but one of the key factors has been to do with the commitment of the Headteachers of the schools involved.
We’ve seen the sustainability issues haven’t we? We’ve see the changes in schools in terms of what happens at the top across a number of schools. With somebody new coming in, they are the lead learner, the leader, the leader, and if they do not deem it important…normally the school left (Chris)

One solution to the sustainability and funding issue was the development of the SUPER MEd, which has led to an increase in the schools of the number of people with knowledge of the partnership and the practitioner research culture it seeks to encourage in schools. However, not all teachers who undertake the SUPER MEd will continue working in the SUPER schools, nor will they necessarily espouse the collaborative research culture after graduation.

The model for sustainability is linked to this idea of the MEd. You’ve constantly got an influx of people that are developing enquiry skills and incentives to do it. Still relying on individuals, having the MEd will enhance the numbers in the third space, and the question is how much this will perhaps impact on the schools, when those staff, when they’ve finished the MEd, leave. (Helena)

The development of the pupil engagement research project has also been key to sustaining the partnership. The topic is of universal interest to all schools, but the way the enquiry has developed has allowed for schools to identify and pursue particular interests within the broad umbrella theme. Thus the survey information has been invaluable for individual schools to identify specific areas for further research, and thus related issues within school development plans have been able to be addressed.

Thus the TRCs identify that commitment to SUPER needs to be multidimensional for the partnership to be sustainable. SUPER needs to have funding, school leadership support, a research focus which meets the needs of the school in terms of its development plan and school improvement agenda, and a structure within the partnership which encourages new individuals to become involved in research as an integral part of their professional lives. The enthusiasm of a few individuals within a school is not enough for sustainability. A research culture in a school is not only difficult to develop, but also to sustain. The fact that SUPER is still thriving and in existence after ten years is a testament to its ability to adapt and develop new structures in response to identified problems. The commitment, creativity and enthusiasm of the Faculty partners have been the most crucial to the sustainability of SUPER. A core group of schools have also been strong in their level of commitment, and they have also been influential in the continuation of the partnership. However, it is probably the TRC meeting structure that has provided one of the most powerful components in the structure of the partnership, the so called third space.

**Conclusion**

SUPER is an exciting, challenging and dynamic intellectual space for teachers. The partnership frequently reflects on its purpose and practice in order to stay relevant to all of its members, and evolves to meet the changing needs of its partners. Our discussions with fellow TRCs have made us confident that the role has profound effects on the individuals concerned and also the schools that they represent. TRCs have recognised the opportunities afforded by SUPER to network with colleagues from other schools within the partnership, to engage in critical and intellectual debate, to improve research practice and to develop and sustain professional learning. The third space, where teachers have the time and opportunities to make sense of educational environments, cultures and agendas, is highly valued. Being introduced to cutting edge educational research and access to academic literature has been both inspirational and insightful. It requires high levels of personal commitment from TRCs.
Undoubtedly, there are also challenges involved for TRCs, particularly when working within a fast-paced and pressured school environment. There are cultural and agenda differences to contend with which can prove to be frustrating and difficult to overcome. Although the TRCs involved in this study recognise the demanding nature of managing these conflicts, they also value the third space for the chance it gives teachers to look beyond the immediate, short-term, and sometimes superficial priorities that they are faced with in the day-to-day life of schools. While SUPER and its goals can sometimes seen as an additional workload or pressure for the colleagues involved, especially when spreading and developing research practice back in their own school contexts, the TRCs in this study argue the potential impact that this third space has on pedagogy and practice makes these tensions worthwhile.

It is to be hoped that future government policy will be supportive of similar schools/university educational research partnerships beyond the development of Masters level courses. The experience of TRCs involved in the third space created by the SUPER partnership shows its uniquely egalitarian and mutually beneficial nature as being crucial for the development of a truly research based teaching profession. All teachers should ideally have the time and opportunities to engage with their local university education departments throughout their careers, not just for initial training or a part-time Masters level course at one particular point in their career. Then teachers truly would have access to career-long professional learning.

Bibliography


