Book Review

Research Partnerships in Early Childhood Education: Teachers and Researchers in Collaboration

Judith Duncan and Lindsey Conner, editors
New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013

Reviewed by: Laura Teichert
                     University of British Columbia

Research Partnerships in Early Childhood Education: Teachers and Researchers in Collaboration, edited by Judith Duncan and Lindsey Conner, provides a rich discussion on the issues, challenges, and complexities of working in partnerships on research initiatives. Duncan and Conner have brought together a number of researchers from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to address the dynamics of partnership research. This book allows the reader to think deeply about how to build successful partnerships, how different groups have worked toward a common goal, and how to keep the common goal in focus during difficulties. Most poignantly, the chapters provide many examples of insights gained by educators, researchers, and other partner agencies who worked together and challenged their assumptions and beliefs about working in the field of early childhood education.

The book is separated into nine chapters. With the exception of the introduction and conclusion, each chapter is written by a researcher (or research team) describing their collaborations. Although each chapter examines very different questions about early childhood education (with varying combinations of collaborators) all contributing authors discuss, in some measure, how to support "new ways to rethink their *taken-for-granted ways of working*, to be *troubled* within their pedagogical habits, to encounter tensions and uncertainties around and about *best practice* or *evidence-based practices*" (p. 153, emphases in original).

Chapter 1, the introduction, is written by the book's editors, Duncan and Conner. They highlight their rationale for compiling the book, which is that many early childhood centres and schools are responsible for deciding directions for professional learning and that making these decisions requires common objectives for collaborative activities. Duncan and Conner acknowledge that educators intuitively know what works in their practice but when they "consider these situations from other perspectives, they begin to reconceptualize practice in light of their new insights" (p. 1). They argue this provides exciting opportunities for the research community to collaborate with educators to help teachers build new knowledge for their sector as well as to build teachers' capability and capacity to "contribute to their own learning" (p. 1).

Chapter 2, *Re-generating Research Partnerships in Early Childhood Education: A Non-idealized Vision*, by Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo, introduces the concept of *re-generation* in research collaboration. They use re-generation as "ways of seeing that produce

mutual inferences to ordered narratives" (p. 12). Their study used pedagogical narrations with early childhood educators as a way to contest and reshape some of the pedagogical understandings underlying practice in early childhood education in western Canada. They highlight the "multi-layered aspects of knowledge-in-the-making; about non-innocent relations; about difficulties of thinking change in research; and the potentialities of conflict and dissension" (p. 12). For example, one educator in their study expressed a desire to shift from a fixed daily schedule and sought the researchers' assistance in addressing the issue with coworkers. This led the researchers to trouble the notion of "professional development" and how their "research and pedagogical practices collided with circle time routine" (p. 16), which acknowledged certain practices and excluded others. They questioned the assumptions underlying the researcher-educator partnership and the consequences of such assumptions.

Chapter 3, *Attunement of Knowledge Forms: The Relational Agency of Researchers, Policy Writers, and Early Childhood Educators*, by Marilyn Fleer, discusses the increased attention given to the field of early childhood education and how this has led to research collaborations among academics, educators, psychologists, speech pathologists, neuroscientists, pediatricians, and the like. Since difficulties are inevitable in collaborative activities, Fleer posits that these problems often arise from how individual collaborators view themselves in relation to their role and in relation to other collaborators' roles. Fleer conceptualizes *relational agency* as a term that captures a "host of practices and thinking that are enacted in successful collaborations" (p. 29). In order to underline this concept, Fleer discusses her experience in collaboration with many agencies during the development and implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in Australia. For Fleer, relational agency encourages participants to move beyond a focus on individual expertise (e.g., doctor as medical expert, educator as learning expert) to consider their contributions in relation to other participants, which, in the case of the EYLF, proved successful. Partner members generated new forms of knowledge together under a shared theoretical lens (i.e., cultural-historical theory) and successfully constructed the EYLF document that is now used throughout Australia.

In Chapter 4, *Developing Effective Research-practice Partnerships: Lessons from a Decade of Partnering with Schools in Poor Urban Communities*, Mei Lai and Stuart McNaughton dissect the research-school partnership and present a framework that other partnerships could follow in order to create effective research-school collaborations. Acknowledging that every collaboration varies, they use their Learning Schools Model (New Zealand) to illustrate key principles for partnerships: partnerships based on robust research methods; building a shared community of practice based on learning from each other; complementary and reciprocal expertise (teachers as adaptive experts); and an ethical imperative.

Claire McLachlan, Alison Arrow, and Judy Watson, in Chapter 5, *Partnership in Promoting Literacy: An Exploration of Two Studies in Low-Decile Early Childhood Settings in New Zealand*, examine research methodology and its role in answering research questions about educators' short-term professional learning and changes to those educators' beliefs and pedagogies. The first study, a quasi-experimental design including pre- and post-tests of teachers and students, examined whether professional development could improve teachers' knowledge about facilitating alphabetic and phonological awareness. The second study was designed as an extension to the first one and asked whether greater involvement with the teachers would lead to greater pedagogical change and stronger outcomes for primary students. This second study used many of the same instruments as the first study but was more qualitative in nature as it included semi-structured interviews and prolonged engagement of researchers

with teachers in order to collaboratively review the kindergarten's literacy program. The researchers argue one-off professional development days, as seen in the first study, were not effective as they placed less emphasis on teachers' and children's learning. By contrast, prolonged time working together around the shared goal of promoting literacy strengthened the collaboration, which was demonstrated in the second study. The researchers suggested that the reasons for this were that "trust, empathy, and great communication" (p. 89) are the underpinnings of a successful relationship and take time to establish.

Chapter 6, *Ko koe ki tēna, ko ahau ki tēnei kīwai o te kete: Exploring Collaboration Across a Range of Recent Early Childhood Studies*, by Jenny Ritchie, Janita Craw, Cheryl Rau, and Iris Duhn, examines four aspects of research: research interview; collaborative choreography between researcher and teachers; Indigenous conceptualizations in research projects in "mainstream" childcare centres; and unlocking the "circles of wisdom that surround *tamariki*" (p. 94, emphasis in original). They adopt precocious methodologies to discuss and express possibilities for post-colonial and counter-colonial research with children and communities while also challenging others to problematize the "simplistic interpretations constructed by adults in the name of children" (p. 108).

Chapter 7, *An Ongoing Exploration of Uncertainty: Ethical Identities—Ours and Children's*, is by Kim Atkinson and Enid Elliot (with input from the Victoria IQ group). This chapter focuses on a sharing circle project conducted in Victoria, British Columbia that brought early childhood educators together to "think critically, question assumptions, and look more deeply into their practice" (p. 115). Kim's experience with the *Bad Guy Beavers*, tells the story of a group of young boys in her professional care who were continuously engaging in bad guy play by "spying, shooting girls, stockpiling weapons, fighting and being *bad guys*" (p. 116, emphasis in original). Kim describes her personal and professional challenges (e.g., coworkers' concerns; parents' concerns) that she encountered while examining her practice. Kim struggled over whether to abandon her "no guns" classroom policy (a challenge to her own assumptions that this was a best practice policy) while simultaneously needing to justify her actions to educators, parents, and other professionals. The sharing circle provided Kim with support, freedom from being judged, and the opportunity to work through the complex issues, which allowed Kim the space to wrestle with gun play in her classroom.

Chapter 8, *Teacher Reflection in Early Years Partnership Research Projects: But It's No Use Going Back to Yesterday, Because I Was a Different Person Then (Says Alice from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland)*, by Judith Duncan, discusses the role of reflection and reflective journals. While working with early years teachers in New Zealand, Duncan used journals to examine the "here-and-now through reflection (looking back)" and "critical reflection (looking back and forwards)" (p. 138). She uses Michel Foucault's notions of surveillance, written examination, and normalizing judgment to outline how reflection and reflective journals affect the "nature of the partnerships" (p. 148). She highlights the duelling qualities of journal reflection as a tool that allows educators to tell their stories of becoming while also being research data or what Duncan calls "research data stories" (p. 149), which are examined and judged. As the requirement for accountability in early childhood education increases, Duncan notes that the reflective journal can also be used in the auditing of teachers' practices and can create uneasiness toward research by educators, no matter how well liked the researcher may be in the collaboration.

The final chapter by Judith Duncan and Lindsey Conner reflects on the theories and frameworks established throughout the edited book. The authors also seek to challenge

traditional research-teacher dynamics, where the researcher approaches potential participants with pre-determined research questions and methods for answering those questions. Duncan and Conner encourage readers to rethink approaches to developing these relationships. For example, they ask, "Why do researchers interview teachers and not the other way around in a partnership?" (p. 163). They discuss theories associated with the importance of context, place, space, time; complexity of change and transformation; and power, which is the elephant in the room regarding teacher-researcher partnerships.

Given the increased role that interdisciplinary collaboration currently plays in scholarly activities, partnerships at all levels of research are now encouraged and expected. This edited book addresses the complexities of research partnerships from the perspective of early childhood education. Duncan and Conner explain that they have not attempted to "provide instructions or models of educational research partnerships to follow, nor have [they] tried to capture guidelines or exemplars" (p. 164). The theoretical nature of all the chapters of this book is directed toward an academic audience rather than practitioners. Although the book contains some concrete examples of practices that aid successful partnerships, such as the sharing circles in Chapter 7 (Kim's story) and the qualitative methodologies explored in Chapter 5, the bulk of the book theorizes partnerships and collaborations and outlines theoretical frameworks for successful research partnerships.

The concepts of change and becoming are woven throughout each chapter of *Research Partnerships in Early Childhood Education: Teachers and Researchers in Collaboration* with an overall emphasis placed on being open to the expertise, voice, and beliefs of all participating members in the partnership. Recent interest in early childhood education by governments in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand has led to more collaborative research efforts with members who aim to establish practices that will assist all children in growing to their full potential. The contents of this edited book can be used by researchers, educators, and policy makers to aid in their reflection of their own collaborative work and to consider the theories outlined in each chapter to ponder the complex issues that inevitably arise during research partnerships.

Laura Teichert is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Her research focuses on early and emergent literacy, in both print and digital media; literacy practices in the context of family life; and children's transitions into kindergarten and early primary school.