University-school partnerships as arrangements in policy implementation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge base of school-university partnerships by exploring such partnerships in terms of policy implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews.

Findings – To achieve a joint understanding of roles, focus and work in the partnerships based on the schools' needs and scholars' competence was crucial. This was not easily achieved in all partnerships. Conflicting expectations were part of the process. Although they were demanding, the partnership arrangements also represented opportunities for the university scholars to learn.

Originality/value – The findings suggest that partnership arrangements require parties that understand the implications of this collaboration and that respect, mutual trust and joint understanding are needed. It is likely that bringing different parties together will create conflicts that must be resolved. If unfamiliar to the parties, the use of partnership arrangements is itself an implementation that has its own process that operates in parallel to the work in focus.

Keywords – Partnership, Implementation, Educational change, Professional development

Introduction

Throughout the world, policy makers attempt to improve their schools using different strategies. However, the path from policy enactment to practice in schools is long and demands implementation on different levels (McLaughlin, 1990). Implementation requires learning and renewal on both the individual and staff level, and it has been suggested that external support is helpful in this process (Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2015). However, in contrast to disciplines such as medicine and agriculture, which are populated through schools of medicine and agriculture, the field of education has not looked to teacher education for support (Goodlad, 1988). In fact, a tradition of an asymmetric relationship with a university, which produces knowledge and that educates teachers, and teachers who teach in schools has caused more distance than proximity (Goodlad, 1988).

Today, as thirty years ago, teacher education is accused of being too theoretical, and educational research is accused of focusing on questions that have little importance to schools. For their part, scholars worry about teachers' low level of interest in research-based knowledge and about basing their practice on their own experiences when they come to school (Bransford, Vye, Stipek, Gomez, & Lam, 2009; Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hadfield, & Hargreaves, 2013).

Bridging this gap between academia and practice in schools has long been discussed across nations, and various partnership projects have been carried out (Goodlad, 1988; Rice, 2002). However, such collaborations have proven to be challenging, and some educational scholars have identified different understandings of evidence-based practice as a problem and suggested that increased knowledge of one another's work can provide a more unified understanding (Hargreaves & Stone-Johnson, 2009). The purpose of the present study is to explore partnership arrangements between universities and schools as a way to support the implementation of a national strategy to improve lower secondary schools in Norway.

The Norwegian strategy
Although the municipalities in Norway own the elementary and lower secondary schools, the national authorities have launched three major initiatives in the past ten years (Ministry, 2017). Since 96% of students attend public schools, national initiatives reach most of the student population. The initiative highlighted in this article is the latest and largest during this time period. It is based on White Paper 22 2010-2011 (Ministry, 2011), which reported low motivation among students in lower secondary schools. The programme "Secondary school in Development" (SiD) was launched as a measure to change this low motivation. The aim was to change teaching practice in classrooms by developing teachers' professional capital through school-based learning activities focusing on classroom work. The schools could choose to focus on basic skills in reading, writing, numeracy or classroom management.

The framework of this programme was inspired by work in Ontario and had a systemic approach urging all parts to pull in the same direction. The Directorate of Education and Training provided seminars for school leaders and seminars to educate internal leading teachers and it financed local mentors to help the schools. A whole school approach based on

individual schools' challenges was a central principle, encouraging all teachers to learn together on site with the principal as the leading force, supported by the school district (Directorate of Education and Training, 2015).

In this five-year SiD programme (2013-2017), the universities were invited to participate as partners of the schools. A total of 22 universities agreed to form partnerships with 426 municipalities to serve 1114 lower secondary schools within five years. Grants and guidelines framed the work. The guidelines were given in basic documents that described the principles and theoretical perspectives of this strategy. According to these guidelines, faculty from teacher education departments were to collaborate with each school for three semesters, providing research-based knowledge. They were supposed to come to agreement with the school districts and the schools concerning the practical work. Thus, during the five-year period, the scholars started three-semester partnerships with new schools each year.

Partnerships in the literature

The concept of partnerships has for years been used to describe a variety of arrangements between organisations established for a purpose (Goodlad, 1988). Goodlad's gold standard for partnerships was a symbiotic relationship, which attended to the needs and satisfaction of both parties. To him, this implied that the institutions needed to be dissimilar, which schools and universities are. Additionally, they needed to create a balance between respect for each other's needs, and protection of their own satisfaction. This involved planning, commitment, creativity, leadership, sacrifice, and endurance (Goodlad, 1988, p.14). Baum warned about unrealistic fantasies of what such partnerships could accomplish and urged that good planning with clear and realistic goals was important for success (Baum, 2003). Recently, the "research-practice partnership" concept has been used to describe collaborations between researchers and practitioners for the purpose of investigating problems and solutions of practice to improve schools (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p.48).

Research has suggested that improvement is possible when the partners have the same focus and are willing to learn together (Castelli, Centeio, Boehrnsen, Barclay, & Bundy, 2013; Daniello, 2012; Ndlovu, 2011). In contrast, research into the dynamics of partnerships has shown that they can be challenging due to issues of culture, power, and control (Clark, 1988; Goodlad, 1988). It has also been suggested that such collaboration can be threatening for both teachers in schools and university scholars alike (Goodlad, 1994).

Due to different traditions in universities and schools, partnerships have been called "a deviant idea and an idea whose time has come" (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 15) - deviant because the idea departs from the tradition of the university as the ivory tower of knowledge and the school as the student of that knowledge. Instead, partnership points to equality and mutual work towards a shared aim. In the US, more than 1,000 partnerships between schools and universities formed the "Professional Development Schools" movement more than twenty years ago. The results from a meta-ethnographic study on twenty case studies suggested relational challenges to be the most frequent (Rice, 2002).

The literature on school-university partnerships has described cultural differences as a theme (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Goodlad, 1994; Rice, 2002). Generally, these cultural differences have been understood as hindrances, whereas Goodlad (1994) described them as potential energy for learning provided that the parties could agree to be complementary and were committed to sharing both their vision and their problems. In fact, he urged both parties to look upon the other as able to add value, and he saw the start-up phase of the partnership as critical.

In addition to the tensions between the parties, research has also reported tensions between individuals within the same organisation during partnerships (Baum, 2003; Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Rice, 2002). At the university, tensions may be caused by limited interest among faculty members, and the merit system not recognising this kind of work, whereas in schools, tensions were identified when not all teachers participated. Rice pointed to the critical role of the principal for partnership arrangements in schools, which, she reported, varied from being passive and uninvolved to being supportive and caring (Rice, 2002).

Partnerships as a measure in implementation

The concept of implementation is defined by Fullan as consisting of "the process of putting into practice an idea, program, or set of activities and structures new to the people attempting or expected to change,"(Fullan, 2001 p.69). Thus, "the essence of implementation is behaviour change" (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009, p.43). It requires a process in which learning and openness to change are essential (Hall & Hord, 2015). The process takes place within a social context, and although the concept focuses on both activities and processes, the social process is acknowledged as being the most challenging (Fullan, 2001). The activities include the core intervention components, which are the content to implement,

and implementation components, which are the activities used to conduct the implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). Successful implementation depends on a shared understanding of the aims and focus among the participants. In schools, the principal acts as a leader, advocate and facilitator (Larsen & Samdal, 2008; Midthassel & Ertesvåg, 2008).

When an externally initiated intervention with external partners takes place, a dynamic perspective of the complexities involves parallel processes between the core implementation in question and the delivery system (Domitrovich et al., 2008). In the present study, there are two parallel implementations that interact. The most obvious is the schools' implementation of the national strategy with help from the university partner. The other is the school-university partnerships themselves. Considering that such partnerships break with the traditional form of cooperation between the two institutions, new forms of collaboration are needed.

International relevance

Although this study was conducted in a Norwegian context and there may be some contextual characteristics that are unique to this nation, this study has international relevance. Although partnerships between schools and universities are not new, systematic use of school-university partnerships to implement a strategy within national guidelines and a short time span does represent something new. In these partnerships, there is tension between the tradition of knowledge delivery and knowledge construction; therefore, such partnerships exist in the space between academia and the practical world of the school.

Research questions:

Based on the literature on partnerships presented in this article and the Norwegian strategy of using partnerships to implement a national programme, the following questions are raised:

1. How did university scholars experience the development of a joint understanding of roles and focus, and what were the challenges of this process?

2. What were the characteristics of these partnerships?

Methodology

In this exploratory investigation, a qualitative approach using individual interviews was chosen because this was assumed to provide the most relevant information for this study, which focuses on roles, relationships, interactions, and experiences.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that the same themes were covered across the interviews. Simultaneously, the interviews allowed for individual reflection that could be important to pursue (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

The data originated from interviews with university scholars. Eight universities were chosen using a strategic sample to cover all regions in Norway. Such a wide sample was assumed to increase the chances of detecting more diversity in this exploration. An invitation was sent to the liaison at the universities, who arranged for contact between two scholars involved in the project and the researcher. At least one of the scholars at the university was to be an educator involved in classroom management and organisational learning. The other could be a lecturer in reading, writing, or mathematics. Sixteen scholars participated in the individual semi-structured interviews. The themes of the interviews were the scholars' roles and their work with the schools. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were conducted on-site.

Informants

When referring to the informants' seniority in the results chapter, the following categories are used: *novice* = less than five years of seniority; *mid-senior* = 5-10 years of seniority; and *senior* = more than ten years of seniority.

The group of university scholars comprised seven male and nine female scholars. Seven of the scholars were novices, three scholars were in the mid-senior group, and six scholars were seniors. The majority of the scholars had acquired experience with partnership work before they started the SiD,

At the time when the interviews were conducted, all the informants had worked in several partnerships as part of the SiD strategy- fourteen of them for more than three years. This means that they had completed two rounds of partnerships and were mid-way through their third. One had completed one round and another was mid-way through her first. Altogether, the group of informants had been partners with nearly 200 schools.

Data analysis

This study used an eclectic approach to understand the participants' perceptions of their interactions and their work, as well as their reflections on their work.

According to Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña(2014), data analysis is interactive and involves data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to keep them as close to the recorded version as possible. Two steps were taken to condense the data. First, summaries of each interview were created to obtain an overall impression of each case. The use of narratives avoids getting lost in the transcripts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Then, the data were coded from the transcript with the help of NVivo 11 (NVivo, 2015). The coding procedure for the main categories was closed based on the themes from the interview guide. Some sub-categories were produced by open coding and stemming from the transcripts. The nodes and the summaries of the cases were read and reread to achieve a holistic view of the data. For further exploration, the data were displayed using two strategies. First, summaries of the main variables were generated to obtain a holistic impression of each variable and the relations among them. Then, content-analytic summary tables were made to compare meanings and experiences across the informants. Consistent with a hermeneutic approach, the analytic process moved from codes to transcripts to theory in a circle to obtain the best possible interpretation.

Validation

The validation of qualitative projects lies in all the steps that are taken in the process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The themes in the interview guide were based on implementation theory. A shared understanding of direction is vital if organisations are to improve (Fixsen et al., 2009; Fullan, 2001; Mintzberg, 1989). The implementation components and the process provide experiences that will influence future efforts (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001). The chosen informants were assumed to have the experience needed for this study. The interviews were transcribed carefully and reviewed a second time, although by the same person. Moreover, in the different steps in the analysis and reporting, checking against the transcripts was important for validation.

Ethics

The informants agreed to participate based on the written information describing the project. It is important to maintain the informants' anonymity and to simultaneously present information that is relevant and true. The focus in this study is on the phenomenon more than on the individual cases, and the given quotes do not have identifying names or places. The researcher has the responsibility to secure the integrity and quality of the data. In this study, the interviews were given in the Norwegian language. When translating the quotes to English, the main objective was to maintain the message, which means that a word-for-word translation was difficult. The principles of ethics also apply to interpreting the informants' experiences and drawing conclusions; therefore, the interpretations and conclusions have been checked and rechecked to ensure that they are reasonable.

Findings

How did the scholars experience the development of a joint understanding of their roles and focus, and what were the challenges in this process?

To work in a partnership as part of a national strategy required a joint understanding of the roles and focus, as well an understanding of how to work together. The strategy did not recommend any evidence-based programme or practice to be implemented, but an important direction for these partnerships was the national guidelines according to the "school-based development" principle. This principle implies that the development work had to be based on the needs of the individual school with the principal as the leader of the work (Directorate, 2015).

Joint understanding

The results from the interviews with the sixteen scholars suggested that developing a joint understanding was a process they needed to go through every time they started collaboration with a new school. They started the process by clarifying expectations before negotiating roles and responsibilities. According to the scholars, the expectations of the schools varied from wanting a traditional lecturer to expecting the scholar to assume all responsibility, tell schools what to do, and to follow up, to schools that did not have any expectations. In these schools, preparation for the work was often low or non-existent. However, due to different

traditions and the schools' previous experience with the universities, the principals did not always know what to expect. As one of the scholars said, "It is not that easy for them to know what they can expect from us, and we have to be careful when we walk into the lives of these schools," (Betty, a female novice scholar).

To the scholars, being a partner indicated more equality than in the traditional university role. They saw the teachers as the practical classroom experts, whereas their own role was to help the teachers place their work in a theoretical frame and suggest new ways of working based on research. In some partnerships, the parties achieved joint understanding with little effort, and the work could begin. In other partnerships, it was a more difficult process that required continuous negotiation, and in some partnerships, the parties never came to an agreement. One scholar said that "when the expectations don't match, we don't succeed, so we take the time to sort it out: ok, what does this mean, and how can we work together to succeed?" (Britney, a female senior scholar).

In this new set of roles, the scholars and principals had to agree on the focus and how to work together. In their new roles, the scholars could take the initiative, they could wait for the principal to place an order, or they could collaborate to identify the needs of the school. For some of the scholars, the strategy changed depending on the principal's competence and how prepared the school was for this task.

Sometimes the process to agree on the aims was perceived as constructive and based on respect and cooperation. As one scholar described it, "because they were very open, and I was open, it was an open area. Even if they had their own specific aims, we found out through dialogue that it is possible to think a little differently," (Tracy, a female mid-senior scholar).

At other times, the divergent understanding of roles was a challenge - for instance, concerning leadership and responsibility. One scholar said that "sometimes, it's okay because we have had a shared understanding from the start of what this is about. At other times, it is a little difficult because they want me to take more responsibility than I understand is my role, and then there is some friction, but it was only once that it didn't work out," (Ann, a female novice scholar).

Although all scholars achieved a joint understanding in most of their partnerships, most of them had worked with several schools where this was difficult, and four of the scholars had experienced partnerships that ended without completing the mission. The latter group of

schools either continued the implementation alone or waited a year before they tried it again in the next round, in agreement with their district office.

The informants described the clarification process with the schools in the third round as smoother than in previous rounds. This change was due to increases in their own certainty and because the schools in the third round were more prepared than in previous rounds.

The results of the interviews suggest that a trusting relationship was important to the development of joint understanding. In particular, all of the scholars emphasised that a trusting relationship with the school leadership was important. One scholar said this about the process: "I try to emphasise a good and open dialogue with the leadership at the school. To listen and to try to catch what their culture is, what they stand for and what kind of experiences they have with development activities at this school. I think it is important to take the time in the beginning to talk and get to know each other," (Tessa, a female mid-senior scholar). To be present in staff meetings or just to be at the schools were opportunities the scholars used to collect information on the culture, which they in turn used when planning their actions. One of the scholars reflected that "if I am to succeed as a partner, I have to be in position. I need to invest in relationships with them. In addition to the clarity of roles, there is a 'get to know you' factor that is valuable to have when things get tough," (Sander, a male novice scholar).

Thus, a trusting relationship between the university scholar and the school principal was crucial for a joint understanding of the partnership. Such a relationship, based on acknowledgement of equal, although different roles started with clarifying expectation. This was a process that became smoother as the scholars become more experienced as external partners.

The characteristics of the partnerships

The frames were prescribed by the national authorities to help schools with the implementation as part of a national strategy,. Thus, the initiative to form these partnerships did not come from any of the involved parties. Furthermore, grants and guidelines framed the work in these school-university partnerships. Although the guidelines also provided theoretical perspectives for the work, none of the scholars felt that the guidelines restricted their work. On the contrary, most of them considered these guidelines to be helpful when negotiating their role, and they felt free to add perspectives that they thought were missing in the basic documents.

The results from the interviews showed that most of the informants experienced time as a challenge. Three semesters were considered too short for real changes in how teachers worked in their classrooms. In fact, some partnerships needed more than one semester to get started. In addition, the grants restricted how often the scholars could visit the schools during the three semesters. For most of them, two workshops with all staff and one meeting with the leadership per semester was the norm.

The workshops were implementation components that contained training and inspiration for the work in the schools. To the scholars, the workshops were an important arena to bring new knowledge and to organise learning among the staff. Although the teachers' work with the students was the aim, the scholars rarely met the students. While some scholars reported observing teachers in the classroom, most of the collaborations involved planning and reflection on actions at workshops and meetings. The scholars introduced the teaching staff to various activities to increase their learning. Peer observations were followed by reflection with colleagues, various forms of inquiry-based teaching and lesson studies (Dudley, 2014) became the core components in many schools working on classroom management and basic skills.

To most of the scholars, the workshops with the schools were filled with mixed feelings of positive excitement and some fear of not meeting the teachers' expectations. One scholar said that "the reflection on whether this is too obvious or will it be useful, this has been demanding. I am sure that I have used three times as much time (preparing) than what is normal," (Betty). In fact, most of the scholars said they used more time than allocated, which caused strain and the need to work long hours and weekends.

Although challenging, the results from the interviews suggest that the partnerships and in particular, the workshops, gave the scholars access to up-to-date knowledge of the work in schools, which for some scholars, increased their credibility as teacher educators on campus. One scholar said that "my teaching of classroom management (on campus) has improved because I know more about what is relevant in schools," (Betty).

Taken together, interviews suggest that although the aim of the partnerships was to help schools with implementation, the scholars gained increased understanding of the practical work in schools. Although time was a challenge, the guidelines gave room for adjustments and the workshops provided learning opportunities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and opportunities in school-university partnership arrangements as an indicator of policy implementation. Findings have revealed both challenges and opportunities concerning the relational dimension and learning as well as for the characteristics and frames. Thus, these themes will be focused in the discussion section.

Partnerships as a measure of policy implementation

The idea of using scholars from teacher education as partners in schools' implementation of a national initiative is interesting. Based on the literature on both school-university partnerships and policy implementation, challenges due to culture and tradition were expected. Framed by the Directorate, the parties were supposed to collaborate in joint actions aimed to renew classroom work. Furthermore, the implementation was to be based on the individual school's challenges and to involve all staff. While trustful relationships were experienced as crucial for learning to take place, time and guidelines framed the partnerships.

Guidelines to give direction

The purpose of the guidelines in this project was to direct the work according to principles and theoretical perspectives and thus to help the system to pull in the same direction. However, such policy documents are characterised by compromises, such as central direction versus local decisions and plural theoretical perspectives. Hence, they could be viewed as suggestions, as was the case with some of the scholars in the present study. Moreover, researchers on policy implementation have noted that policy documents often lack clarity, which may lead to misinterpretation (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Taken together, unclear guidelines and low fidelity provide opportunities for local variations that may be in conflict with the desire to be a united system pulling in the same direction. Moreover, in trying to understand the work to be done, it is likely that the cues indicating what has worked previously influenced the process of whether to take a risk of trying something new or sticking to methods that are safe. Research has suggested that "on the surface changes" can be a deceptively easy way to address change challenges (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Hargreaves, 2016).

Time

Based on research in the US, Baum (2003) suggested that grants are strong incentives for universities to get involved in partnership arrangements. This seems also to be the case in Norway. The findings reported in the present study indicate that the grants decided the duration as well as restricted the scholars' time in the partnerships.

In the present study, the duration of the partnership was three semesters. Based on research on implementation, this is too short to achieve real change in teachers' classroom work (Hall & Hord, 2015). Thus, realistic goals are important to avoid what Baum called unrealistic fantasies (2003). However, to determine the realism of goals, partnerships in which the parties quickly agree on how to work together are favoured. Moreover, this is more easily done when the parties know each other and have a trusting relationship.

The relational dimension in partnerships

Findings from the present study suggest that relationships characterised by trust, respect, and equality were crucial for achieving joint understanding and starting a constructive collaboration in the partnerships. This central role of a relational dimension in partnerships is in accordance with previous research (Rice, 2002).

To the scholars, the most urgent relationship was with the principal, who was in charge of the internal work in the school and thus was the gatekeeper to the staff. According to Baum (2003), although a partnership is an agreement between institutions, the real work in the partnership is between individuals; thus, social interactions become important. Moreover, Baum suggested that partnerships could be threatening for both parties because they challenge established roles and that the uncertainty of roles can provide more variation in the process of establishing joint understanding, which favours partnerships with parties that have similar expectations and objectives for this collaboration and principals who prioritise the work. This is supported by the fact that all of the informants experienced great variation in the principals' engagement, and most of the scholars had experienced some principals with whom it was difficult to achieve a joint understanding.

In the present study, a central task for the scholars was to help teachers improve their classroom work, offering research-based knowledge and training in new working models. However, several of the scholars expressed uncertainty in their ability to give the teachers

what they wanted. Moreover, they underlined that a trusting relationship was crucial to influence the work in the schools. This need to establish trusting relationships, together with uncertainty of how to accomplish this, could promote relationships that avoid challenging matters because they become too unpleasant. Hence, there could be a risk of maintaining the status quo by praising good work without being critical. In fact, a fear of challenge together with an uncertain relationship could hinder creativity and put a strain on the teachers. For example, it has been noted that for teachers who enjoy being stimulated by good lectures without letting this challenge their work, a follow up in their own classroom can be threatening (Hargreaves, 2016).

Joint focus – joint learning?

To Goodlad (1988), the gold standard was a symbiotic partnership able to use differences to add value to each other's learning. Although the focus in the present study was professional development in the schools, the interviews suggest that the partnerships provided opportunities for the teacher educators to enhance understanding and practical examples that they could then take back with them to their teaching on campus. It is also likely that being more familiar with the practical challenges of schools causes research to be more relevant to schools, as suggested by other researchers (Hargreaves & Stone-Johnson, 2009; Shirley, 2016). However, given that the focus in the present programme was the school, one can question whether the scholars' learning was more accidental than intended. To follow the advice from Goodlad (1994), the joint focus should have included joint learning to bring added value for both parties. One could assume that this also would have promoted a state of equity between the parties.

"A deviant idea and an idea whose time has come"

It has been twenty-six years since this quotation was published (Sirotnik, 1991, p.15), suggesting that school-university partnerships could be promising arrangements for collaboration for school renewal, despite all the challenges. As the present study suggests, many of the challenges still hold.

Furthermore, there is a question of whether scholars who are open to partnership work with schools have more of an interest in the practical world than some of their colleagues. To want to work with schools and learn from them is a motivation that drives some scholars (Hargreaves, 2016; Shirley, 2016). In the present study, a majority of the interviewed scholars

had previous experience working with schools before they started the current project. Furthermore, three scholars were in fact practitioners who were hired to work on this strategy, and they did not have a permanent position at the university. Therefore, it is suggested that the impact that this strategy could have on the gap between universities and schools is modest. This suggestion is consistent with international research (Baum, 2003; Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Goodlad, 1994) showing a modest impact because universities are large and complex organisations with large departments, and there is a low degree of collective commitment.

Partnerships call for new roles that are based on equality between experts from two fields using their expertise to create something better (Hargreaves, 2016). Thus, to establish partnerships between schools and universities to help schools with implementation may actually be implementing a new way of working, since the traditional role of a university is as an educational expert, often in a proactive role with the school as the recipient. These new roles must be understood and accepted by both parties (Shirley, 2016). In implementation, monitoring is mentioned as a useful task to investigate whether the work is on track (Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2015). Considering the complexity of partnerships as a measure of implementation, it may also be relevant to monitor the partnership itself in relation to the aims of the work.

This study has several limitations. First, because of the methodological choice, generalisations from this study are difficult. However, it is assumed that the findings from this exploration can add some knowledge to the understanding of partnerships as arrangements.

Second, conducting the interviews with the scholars more than midway in the strategy period makes it likely that the scholars who continue to be involved are more successful. In fact, several of the scholars discussed colleagues who no longer wanted to be a part of this work. Moreover, when the interviews were conducted, most of the scholars were in their third wave of partnerships as part of this strategy, and it is likely that there would have been more frustration among the interviewed scholars if the interviews had been conducted two years earlier. However, by conducting the interviews so late in the strategy period, the scholars' experiences with many schools gave them more maturity to reflect on the positive and negative aspects by seeing their work with more perspective.

Conclusion and implications

This exploratory study of partnership arrangements in policy implementation has identified challenges regarding the establishment of a joint understanding of the roles and objectives as well as how to work together. These findings are in line with the international literature on school-university partnerships. Despite the acknowledged challenges, this researcher believes that partnerships between universities and schools are promising arrangements that can bring academia and the practical school closer.

Based on the international literature and the experiences from this Norwegian study, at least two themes point to importance for future work. The first is to recognise partnerships as complex ways of learning. In fact, the partnership itself should be treated as a core component of implementation that acts in parallel with the target implementation to enhance learning on both levels. This entails acknowledging that there are also challenges that need to be resolved at both levels.

One implication of treating the partnership as a core component of implementation is to view the principle of joint learning as the core component of intervention (Fixsen et al., 2009). Thus, both parties need to determine together what the concept of joint learning means in their context and how to accomplish it as a balanced activity between helping the other party learn and attending to their own satisfaction (Goodlad, 1988, 1994).

In fact, to bridge the gap between the theoretically oriented universities and practically oriented schools, the objectives on learning for both parties should be expressed. This expression would also identify the equity in the partnership. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that a partnership is a complex entity in which power and understanding will be challenged and disagreements and conflicts are likely to be present. Without any tension, there is a risk that change will not be implemented. Moreover, making conflict part of the normal situation increases the need to learn how to handle conflicts without ending the partnership or continuing with only one satisfied party (Hargreaves, 2016).

Based on the previous literature and the findings in the present study, school-university partnerships appear to have potential for learning for both institutions. However, the parties need to have knowledge of the dynamics and challenges of such collaborations. Therefore,

policy makers should provide guidelines that can help the parties to carry out partnerships that can promote joint learning through awareness of the challenges that will come.

This study calls for more research to be conducted by treating the partnership as a core component of implementation. There is a need to understand more of the complex processes that occur in the school and the university department. Furthermore, the suggestions in this study call for a re-examination in other contexts using other methodological approaches.

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