Future Directions: A Model for Educational Partnerships in Australia

Beverley Moriarty and Brian Gray
Central Queensland University, Australia

Educators are typically people who have much to offer their profession as well as the communities in which they work. This article analyzes the strategies used to develop a university postgraduate education program that involved input from stakeholders representing different educational systems in regional and rural Australia. The results indicate that professional goals can be achieved when people from regional or rural schooling systems and universities form strategic partnerships. The findings support the recommendation that empirically tested models of collaboration be used to guide the joint efforts of partners from different organizations. It is also recommended that partners formally evaluate their processes in order to contribute theoretically to existing models of collaboration and to other approaches less extensively researched. While this approach is likely to benefit people living in regional and rural parts of Australia, it could also be applied beyond the regional Australian context.

One of the most exciting possibilities working in educational fields in Australia at the moment is the opportunity to work with partners who represent different systems, such as schools and universities. Regardless of whether partnerships are actively encouraged or occur more spontaneously, they are more likely to be successful if the processes of working together are consciously considered. Further, given that considerable research has been conducted into the operation of cooperative communities and collaboration, there are models or blueprints as *modus operandi* that can be used to help ensure success.

This article focuses on a model of collaboration based primarily on Johnson and Johnson's (1998) research into cooperative communities as applied to a particular situation in which educational partners worked together to develop a postgraduate degree in education that would initially serve the interests of particular teachers in regional parts of Queensland, Australia. The emphasis in this article is not on the specific content or focus of the degree but on the collaborative efforts of the stakeholders involved in its development. The article begins with an examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the model in order to analyze the strategies used by the participants who developed the program.

Theories of Working Collaboratively

In situations in which two or more groups or the members of a single group cannot succeed unless the other groups

or members succeed, a type of dependence may develop. There is little point in competing or even working entirely independently when the parties or members cannot succeed alone. The main consideration would be to clarify goals to ensure that all groups or members are heading in the same direction. Further investigations could identify the joint rewards that could be achieved by working together, and how resources can be shared, complementary roles defined, and a shared identity developed in order to achieve those goals. Together, these points represent the first principle of cooperative communities as defined by Johnson and Johnson (1998), and are collectively referred to as positive interdependence.

Once the parameters of positive interdependence are determined, it is fairly obvious that a successful collaborative exercise would involve each partner being individually accountable for a fair share of the work in order for the joint venture to be a success. This view is well supported in the literature (Johnson & Johnson, 1987, 1991, 1998; Slavin, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1989). In the process of making their individual contributions, the partners need to be genuine in their promotion of one another's success, and offer assistance, encouragement, and praise in support of one another. Working closely together also requires that the partners employ interpersonal and small group skills that can be the determinants of a successful liaison. At this point, it is very important to have a trusting relationship, which is possibly more likely to have developed among groups or individuals who have laid the groundwork with discussions about their goals and responsibilities before proceeding too far. Partnerships also need to be monitored for the extent to which their goals are being met and for the effectiveness of the partnership. Johnson and Johnson (1998) refer to this principle as group processing but it is also known as reflection. Together,

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Beverley Moriarty, Faculty of Education and Creative Arts, Central Queensland University, Gladstone QLD 4680, Australia. (b.moriarty@cqu.edu.au)

these five principles—positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotion of one another's success, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing—are the principles that the Johnsons identified in their research as being essential to the collaborative efforts of partners in cooperative communities.

In a more general sense, this theory is regarded as belonging to an advocacy genre; it arises from a considerable body of research that has a long history of testing and identifying positive sets of principles intended to guide practice, rather than a more critical approach that could be regarded by now as being overdue. The advocacy genre was promoted through empirical research that compared dependent variables across three environments: cooperation, competition, and individualization. From the results of a large body of research and a landmark meta-analysis (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981) the promotion of cooperative learning principles as being superior to competition and individualization has been advocated. More recently, however, much of the research has been qualitative, the empirical comparisons being regarded as of less importance now that there is agreement on the results of the comparative research. The five principles of cooperative learning, established through this body of research, have been articulated by Johnson and Johnson (1998) more specifically in relation to cooperative communities.

Communities in regional, rural, and remote Australia often offer ideal conditions for working collaboratively because of their shared understanding and ownership of the difficulties that face them. Educational issues are frequently a common concern among the members of these communities because of the difficulty of attracting professionals to many areas outside Australian metropolitan cities and the often transient nature of commitments that are secured (see Jarzabkowski, 2003, and Mills & Gale, 2003). In general, however, the relevance of cooperative community theory for analyzing and understanding the dynamics of groups that work collaboratively can be usefully compared to a different type of approach that moves away from the advocacy genre and about which there is increasingly more being written (London, 1995).

According to London's (1996) perspective, which draws heavily on Barbara Gray's work on collaboration, when the "right people are brought together in constructive ways and with the appropriate information they can not [sic] only create authentic visions and strategies for addressing their joint problems but also, in many cases, overcome their limited perspectives of what is possible" (p. 1). This point is very important in partnerships representing different educational systems, or what can be termed intersystemic partnerships. At one level, the people in the different systems should have an understanding of the possibilities, limitations, and procedures relevant to their particular organizations and that knowledge can be instrumental in achieving change.

Conversely, there needs to be some way of ensuring that this knowledge does not restrict thinking within an organization to what insiders view as possible. Suggestions from outside the organization can often contest the views of those on the inside, thus opening discussions to a range of options that may previously have been considered impossible or not considered at all. This is an advantage of intersystemic partnerships.

One of the reasons why the advocacy genre has received greater attention than the collaborative and community model to which London (1996) refers may be that the former area has a long research history, which includes application to a wide range of situations in which people work collaboratively. (See, for example, Moriarty, 1994, 2000; Moriarty, Hallinan, Danaher, & Danaher, 2000; Moriarty & Rampton, 1998.) Comparatively little research, however, has been conducted into the collaborative and community model, particularly in relation to cross-agency work on a large scale. Even so, the collaborative model could be viewed as a welcome addition because it offers another level of analysis that goes beyond the often quoted claim that people can achieve more in cooperative settings than they can individually. In the situation analyzed in this article, three partnership groups worked together to achieve an agreed goal and, in working together, also shared necessary information that was not common knowledge across the three groups, resulting in a greater or heightened commitment by all parties to taking action. These elements are all part of the definition of collaboration posed by London's (1996) article.

The present article analyzes the strategies used to develop a university postgraduate program for practicing teachers with an interest in special education in regional Queensland. The program, from conception through to development and implementation, involved input from a range of stakeholders representing different systems and sections within systems. These stakeholders included senior staff from the different systems as well as teachers. The analysis will focus on theories of working collaboratively, particularly Johnson and Johnson's (1998) theory of cooperative communities, as well as theorizing from other sources on collaboration and community that offer a complementary perspective. From these theoretical positions the implications for this type of intersystemic partnership involving at least one partner not situated in regional, rural, or remote Australia are considered.

Context and Implementation of the Partnership Model to Develop the Degree

Access to higher education for people living in regional Australia has improved over recent years. For example, in the Australian state of Queensland, access to undergraduate degrees in teacher education extended further into regional areas in the latter years of the last century; however, access

to postgraduate degrees in education was more limited. While it was possible for students to undertake programs offered in the external mode, teachers in remote as well as many regional and rural parts of the state who had an interest in undertaking higher degree studies through the internal mode were restricted in their access to relevant programs available locally.

The intersystemic partnerships to which this article refers sit very well with London's (1996, p. 1) view that collaborations are "typically designed either to advance a shared vision or to resolve a conflict, and they result in either an exchange of information or a joint agreement or commitment to action." Specifically, the goal of these partners related to a shared vision, rather than conflict resolution. All partners, who represented two schooling systems and a regional university, wanted to see the development of a postgraduate program of relevance to the professional lives of teachers living in regional areas of the state. The exchange of information was essential, as one partner alone did not have enough information about both school and university systems to see the goal through to implementation. For example, school personnel needed to rely on university personnel for guidance about university rules and procedures. These types of situations provide ideal opportunities to enact the elements of positive interdependence as explained by Johnson and Johnson (1998), including going to the extent of clarifying goals at the start to ensure that everyone is heading in the same direction.

Once the need for the degree was identified and clarified, school and university systems had a goal to develop an innovative and relevant postgraduate degree and representatives from the stakeholders began to work together. Overall, a large number of people were involved in the process, although not all of the participants from each organization were involved all the time. The program that was developed represented a pathway within a postgraduate degree program in which students were required to negotiate directions that were relevant to their professional lives, academically rigorous, and consistent with the graduate standards for that pathway. Agreement was reached among the partners about which parts of the degree pathway were essential and which parts should be individualized and accommodate particular student interests. This agreement was reached in the context of a supportive environment in which views were expressed and respected, given that it was recognized that individuals from different stakeholder groups had particular knowledge and expertise to contribute to the process.

Initial small group discussions among key players from the stakeholder groups were important for setting a mutual goal and the responsibilities that would be borne by each partner. As indicated by Johnson and Johnson (1998), this stage is also important for ensuring that everyone has a common understanding of the direction in which the whole group is headed. The considerable time and effort expended

by each participant before the group moved into another phase also helped to build trust among the participants and a confidence that each was likely to be accountable for a fair share of the work. In other words, the participants showed by their support that they were committed to a successful outcome. By the nature of the project, each group could not succeed without the others; if a degree that was relevant to the professional lives of teachers in the region were developed, then everyone had something to gain.

In the initial stages of working together, the participants decided and agreed upon the target groups for which the degree was being developed. They also wrote principles to underlie the degree and articulated the most important outcomes for graduates. This was to ensure that the degree achieved the goals of the employing bodies as well as those of the students. These steps having been achieved, the group decided through joint reflection (or group processing, one of the principles of cooperative community) that it was time to move to the next stage. It was considered important that sufficient time was devoted in the initial stage to develop common understandings of directions and expectations but also important not to delay moving to the next stage.

While the first stage involved key personnel from middle management from each of the organizations, the second stage was one in which more involvement by practitioners at the grassroots level was needed. These people consisted mostly of teachers and other personnel who had a clear idea of the day-to-day circumstances with which teachers were faced and of their professional development needs. With the principles and main goals of the degree already articulated, this group was able to suggest at a greater level of detail the types of learning experiences essential to anyone in regional Queensland undertaking this degree. Extensive data were gathered at this stage and the group, facilitated by a staff member from the university, worked together over an extended period of time.

The outcome of the second stage was a large collection of ideas about the types of learning experiences and content that the group considered to be important. These data needed to be collated in a meaningful way in order for the project to progress. At that point it was proposed that a whole day be devoted to sifting through the data, deciding how different parts fitted together, and determining a more precise set of graduate outcomes for the degree. It could be considered that, while this day resulted in considerable progress on the project, it was also a day of reflection and group processing, because it enabled participants to look back over what had been achieved to date and regroup before proceeding to the next stage. A more senior person in the university was invited to facilitate the day and teachers, deputy principals, principals, and others from a wider catchment area were invited to participate. Strong interest was shown both from local people and from others from more remote or distant locations. Those who attended on the day, therefore, repre-

sented the local education district as well as several more distant districts. The ways in which the participants worked together on that day ensured that everyone had the opportunity to have input by working in smaller subgroups, that ideas were put forward in an environment of acceptance, and that ideas were synthesized in a way that satisfied everyone. The facilitator for the day was able to ensure that everyone had input but also that they worked toward a common agreement about how the data fitted together and what would be the outcomes of the degree. This analysis of how the day operated therefore indicates that the five principles of cooperative community were evident.

The final stage of the development of the degree involved a small number of representatives from industry and the university who constructed course directions within the program and worked on the fine-tuning of the degree to the point at which applications for admission to the degree were invited. This same group of people also took joint responsibility for the delivery of the degree, with one member as coordinator. This group continued to work together on a regular basis, drawing in experts in particular specializations to ensure that student interests were accommodated. In the middle of the first year, the program was extended to another site in rural/regional Queensland, with the key person at that site being an industry partner who was involved in the whole-day planning day and beyond. In particular, the people responsible for delivering the program at each site worked closely together while the initial course within the program was offered at the first site, enabling the program to be implemented smoothly at the second site. In 2003, the program was extended to other parts of rural/regional Queensland at some distance from the first two sites.

Discussion and Implications

Analysis of the ways in which the different stakeholders worked together to develop and implement this degree clearly shows articulation with Johnson and Johnson's (1998) five principles of cooperative community. In broad terms, the stages in the development of the degree were not predetermined in detail but were mutually decided and agreed upon at strategic points of reflection. This approach emphasizes the importance of the fifth principle of cooperative community: reflection or, as it is sometimes called, group processing. While reflection may not have received as much attention in the research literature into cooperative community or cooperative learning as the other four principles, it is clearly of central importance. In this project, the use of reflection at strategic moments enabled the time and space for participants to determine and agree upon the next course of action. Reflection thus gave the impetus to the efforts of stakeholders to continue to work interdependently, to be accountable for what they had done and intended to do, to support one another's efforts, and to conduct themselves

in ways that demonstrated the excellent interpersonal skills that each person brought to the situation.

While the people who participated in the development of the degree came from different sectors of education and had different levels of responsibility within their particular organizations, they shared a goal or vision that was strong enough to maintain their commitment. They came from geographically dispersed situations across regional and rural parts of the state. At any point, participants could have been unable to continue because of their other commitments and their workloads. Having a shared goal or vision that was important to everyone, the interdependence among the stakeholders, their willingness to be responsible for particular parts of the work, the support that they gave one another, the level of their interpersonal skills, and particularly their willingness to engage in reflection at key times represented a model of operation that gave impetus to and sustained the efforts of those involved.

This model operated successfully in regional and rural parts of Queensland, despite the geographical distance of participants. Logic suggests that a model or mode of operation that transcends geographical distance could be the key to sustaining the efforts of people from different stakeholder groups in multiple locations who have a common goal. At one level, the most important point might be that participants use a model or at least work together strategically, rather than leave their operations to chance. At another level, it also makes sense to base the decision about what model to use on the best evidence available, even if there are concerns about the generalizability of the chosen model from one situation to another. Being strategic in intersystemic collaboration, apart from increasing the possibilities for professional success, is also likely to increase personal satisfaction for individuals involved in the process.

It is not possible from this experience to determine whether other models would be equally successful but the recommendation to other groups is to ensure that a model that has been tested empirically be applied to their operations in order to give their endeavors the best chance of succeeding. The particular model used in this case has a long history of research support, with the principles being refined and developed through application to a wide range of situations. The efficacy of its application in educational situations in particular is well established and the success of this study extends its utility, suggesting that it would be a defensible model to apply in other situations. It would certainly be worth applying this model to situations in which the stakeholders come from even more diverse geographical locations, such as capital cities as well as other regional, rural, and remote areas of the country.

There is an apparent absence of evidence that suggests that urban or urban/rural groups cannot work together in partnership in the way that groups in regional, rural, and remote Australia work together using a defensible model

of operation. It could be argued that partnerships based on strategic alliances in regional, rural, and remote Australia have in their favor common understandings of local issues, constraints, opportunities, and strengths that may not always be the case when one or more partners fall/s outside those areas. Similarly, stakeholders from metropolitan cities or urban areas are also likely to have information or insights that those in regional, rural, and remote areas do not possess. When stakeholders from metropolitan cities or urban areas collaborate with stakeholders from regional, rural, or remote areas, therefore, the information or insights that can be shared among the groups can be an advantage when the model of operation is largely based on mutual dependence.

The strength of commitment of local groups to their communities in regional, rural, and remote Australia has a long history and is very powerful. Once these groups work together, they may be able to gain the support of urban counterparts or central figures in the metropolitan cities. Such partnerships are worthwhile exploring when different sectors of the educational community identify a problem or issue of common concern and particularly when they each have essential knowledge or information not possessed by the other/s.

Given the possibilities that partnerships involving different sectors within education may potentially realize and the problems that can be solved more successfully together, it is recommended that potential partners meet and plan strategically. This type of planning is likely to lead to more important outcomes than might be the case if the alliance were more haphazard. Strategically formed partnerships are also more likely to be successful if the approach that they take in their collaboration is based on research findings. One key recommendation arising from this study is to apply the principles of cooperative community (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) to work together. Another recommendation is for intersystemic groups to conduct formal evaluations and analyses of their processes in order to contribute theoretically to existing models of collaboration and the body of available knowledge, not only within the advocacy genre but also in relation to other complementary approaches that are currently less extensively researched.

References

Jarzabkowski, L. (2003). Teacher collegiality in a remote Australian school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 18*, 139-144.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1987). Classroom instruction and cooperative learning. In H. C. Waxman & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Effective teaching: Current research* (pp. 277-293). Berkley, CA: McCutchen.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1991). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive and individualist learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1998). The three Cs of effective schools: Cooperative community, constructive conflict, civic values. *Connections: Journal of the Australasian Association for Cooperative Education, 5*(1), 4-10.

Johnson, D. W., Maruyama, G., Johnson, R. T., Nelson, D., & Skon, L. (1981). Effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures on achievement: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 89*(1), 47-62.

London, S. (1995). *Collaboration and community*. Retrieved November 19, 2002, from http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/ppcc.html

London, S. (1996). *Collaboration in action: A survey of community collaboratives*. Retrieved March 6, 2003, from http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/ppcc-survey.html

Mills, C., & Gale, T. C. (2003). Transient teachers: Mixed messages of schooling in regional Australia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 18*, 145-151.

Moriarty, B. J. (1994, May-June). Chain reactions: How success breeds success in cooperative learning. *Connections: Journal of the Australasian Association for Cooperative Education*, 41-43.

Moriarty, B. J. (2000). Australian circuses as cooperative communities. *International Journal of Educational Research, 33*(3), 297-307.

Moriarty, B. J., Hallinan, P. M., Danaher, G. R., & Danaher, P. A. (2000). All I know is what I learned from my colleagues: Reflections on research from Australian Traveller education. *Queensland Journal of Educational Research, 16*(1), 56-75.

Moriarty, B. J., & Rampton, L. (1998). Learning through conflict: Challenging assumptions about the formation and maintenance of cooperative learning groups. *Connections: Journal of the Australasian Association for Cooperative Education, 5*(1), 14-17.

Slavin, R. E. (1987a). Cooperative learning and the cooperative school. *Educational Leadership, 45*(3), 7-13.

Slavin, R. E. (1987b). Cooperative learning: Where behavioral and humanistic approaches to classroom motivation meet. *Elementary School Journal, 88*(1), 29-37.

Slavin, R. E. (1988). Cooperative learning and student achievement. *Educational Leadership, 46*(2), 31-33.

Slavin, R. E. (1989). Cooperative learning and student achievement. In R. E. Slavin (Ed.), *School and classroom organization* (pp. 129-156). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.