

An attractive choice: Education researchers' use of participatory methodology

L. Ebersöhn*

e-mail: liesel.ebersohn@up.ac.za

R. Ferreira*

e-mail: ronel.ferreira@up.ac.za

J. Beukes*

e-mail: jannabean@webmail.co.za

*University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

Participatory methodologies are often favoured in education research. This study aimed to determine collaborative partnership trends between education researchers and teachers in order to understand the use of participatory theory and practice in education studies. Seven symposium presentations by education scholars from various higher education institutions were analysed using trend analysis from a community of practice theoretical framework. It emerged that participatory methodology denotes various characteristics which indicate favourable use by education researchers. Partnerships between education researchers and teachers share common goals, are contextual in nature, have a process-oriented emphasis and foreground knowledge exchange and the development of knowledge networks. In addition, collaborative partnerships between education researchers and teachers appear to be directed by an overarching philosophy of 'care'.

INTRODUCTION

Given the burgeoning contemporary social challenges such as homelessness, economic development and job training, society is required to deal with social problems which require the commitment and cooperation of more than one division within and across the traditional domains of the private and public sectors (Hood, Logsdon and Thompson 1993). Gray (1989) in Jamal and Getz (1995) refers to such operations as collaborations. In the context of the research sector, collaboration and collaborative partnerships have historically been associated with the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and practitioners¹ with a view to integrating the two traditions. As such, collaboration in the context of research is often perceived as an endeavour which could ultimately lead to more informed practice (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007) based on the sustained interaction, shared

decision-making and mutual respect by which collaborative research is essentially characterised (Sylva, Taggart, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj-Blatchford 2007). In literature dealing with collaboration (and collaborative research), it appears that long-term collaborations do not always come with the structure of authority or norms for interactions among participants from different societal sectors. As a result, collaborations often have difficulty getting started, developing goals and programmes, maintaining support over time and implementing programmes (Hood et al. 1993). In light of this, participatory methodologies appear to be gaining popularity in that the aforementioned methodologies offer researchers and the various parties involved, many unique opportunities and possibilities with regard to the process and outcome of a given research project (Holman 1987; Bhana 2002; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005).

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

In this study, collaborative research resulting in collaborative partnerships refers to a relationship between a group of people, in this case education researchers and teachers, who are working together to create or produce something. Participatory methodology refers to a type of research where the researchers and participants collaborate in defining the research problem, choosing an appropriate methodology and way of doing data analysis, and disseminating the findings, with a view of co-constructing knowledge (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007). Finally, education researcher refers to a researcher within the field of education, participating in some form of research where the aim is to gain new information or to discover new facts about a given topic, and teacher refers to an individual who teaches at a school as a means of employment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research question which guided this article relates to why education researchers opt for participatory methodologies in conducting research projects. The researchers intended to determine various trends which emerge when education researchers and teachers collaborate, and to possibly use these trends in order to explain why participatory methodologies are selected for use by education researchers. Moreover, the researchers attempted to understand how this choice of methodology could be understood and explained in terms of the community of practice framework.

PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES

Participatory methodologies (such as participatory action research) can be regarded as integrated activities that combine social investigation, educational work and action (Holman 1987). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), this type of research is an alternative philosophy of social research associated with social transformation. It is characterised by shared ownership of a research project, community-based analysis

of social problems and an orientation towards community action. Bhana (2002) states that one of the attractions of participatory research is that it insists on communal participation in the process of knowledge creation. Furthermore, participatory methodologies focus on the involvement and participation of the various role-players in a given research project, where researchers and practitioners are regarded as being equally involved in the research process, and take equal responsibility for the outcome of a given project (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont 2005). Ideally, participatory methodologies involve collective production, transformation and control of knowledge which may lead to the planning, development and achievement of jointly set objectives (De Vos et al. 2005). This methodology can furthermore be regarded as fostering a critical method of engaging practitioners in research, which in turn encourages reflection on one's own practices and taking action (Chappell 2000; De Lange et al. 2008). Thus, participatory research functions not only as a potential means of knowledge, but also as a tool for action (Gaventa 1991).

What appears to appeal most to researchers about participatory methodologies is that it may be described as an attempt to contribute to the practical concerns of people in an immediately challenging situation, as well as to the larger goals of social science. According to Bhana (2002), participatory research encourages egalitarian research relationships involving those being researched in every aspect of a project. Thus, these methodologies attempt to know 'with' rather than 'about' participants, and endeavour to reconceptualise and foster knowledge as something that exists among people, rather than seeing it as a barrier dividing people (Bhana 2002).

Since participatory research has the purpose of effecting change for and with research participants (Smith 2001), the research problem may be identified by either the practitioners or researchers, after which the two parties work together to achieve a collective analysis of the research problem. This process makes it possible for all aspects of the inquiry to be undertaken in ways that are understandable and meaningful to participants. Participants are given the opportunity of being authentically involved in making major decisions on focus and design and are encouraged to draw conclusions from a study as well as apply them. This approach also allows inquiry facilitators the choice of placing active emphasis on recognising and valuing the perspectives and expertise put forward by participants, while working to help participants recognise and value their own as well as the expertise of others (Patton 2002). Researchers and practitioners have been able to identify several aspects of a collaborative process which are likely to influence its success, as well as various features of collaboration which need to be nurtured. Thus, it may be fruitful to explore the nature of some existing collaborative partnerships between education researchers and teachers to understand why such researchers choose to employ such methodologies and explain under which circumstances other education researchers may select participatory methodologies as research design in conducting other studies.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Studies on participatory research indicate that different cultures or entities involved in a research process may be able to enlighten the other with some form of knowledge not previously acquired (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007). This type of research approach typically involves the bringing together of what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as communities of practice within which researchers and practitioners jointly operate. Communities of practice highlight the importance of 'those two worlds and the cross-fertilization between them, in order to construct knowledge leading to an informed, even enlightened, practice, and perhaps the emergence of a new community' (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007, 580).

Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that learners usually enter a community at the periphery and then move closer over time to full, legitimate participation as they gain knowledge, learn a community's customs and rituals, and start viewing themselves as members of the community. What distinguishes communities of practice from previous attempts to introduce the concept of community into research-practice efforts is 'the development of self through participation in the community' (Barab and Duffy 2000, 35) and the importance of legitimate participation as part of a community in the development of the self. The greater part of previous collaborative partnerships attempted to facilitate the development of the individual through research-practice efforts, thus primarily focusing on practice fields and the settings in which learners may apply new knowledge, rather than emphasising learners' connections and patterns of participation in practice communities (Buisse et al. 2003).

According to Wenger (2003), communities of practice stem from a convergent interaction between competence and experience which ultimately involves mutual engagement. It offers an opportunity to the people involved to negotiate competence through an experience of directly participating in the active research process whilst simultaneously being awarded the opportunity to learn and teach. In this article, communities of practice refer to various individuals or groups of individuals, namely teachers and education researchers, working collaboratively to combine their shared knowledge in a constructive manner, in order to initiate some sort of change in the community. The development and establishment of teacher supportive structures in the context of dealing with HIV/AIDS in the classroom, is one example of an initiative undertaken by a collaborative partnership in order to effect change in a community.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed trend analysis (Mouton 2008) of seven purposefully selected symposium presentations by education researchers involved in collaborative partnerships with teachers. The purpose of the symposium where data for this study was generated was to provide a platform for education researchers to share their experiences of collaborating with teachers within the context of education research and practice. Participants originated from various higher education institutions in

South Africa. The symposium was held from 1–3 March 2009. Table 1 presents as overview of the higher education institutions and education researchers' special interests.

Table 1: Overview of the higher education institutions and education researchers' special interests

Presentation	Title	Role	Gender	Institution	Special Interests
1	In humble dedication: How David makes meaning	Researcher	Female	University of Johannesburg	Educational Psychology Education Psychology
2	Learning about care and participation in vulnerable school communities	Researcher Researcher	Female Female	University of Johannesburg	Educational Psychology
3	Participatory research in education: Taking hands against AIDS	Researcher	Female	University of Stellenbosch	Educational Psychology
4	Teachers and researchers piloting a PRA intervention: Asset-based psychosocial support in the context of HIV&AIDS	Researcher Researcher	Female Female	University of Pretoria	Educational Psychology
5	Discussion and Reflection Session	Discussant	Female	North West University	Educational Psychology
6	Discussion and Reflection Session	Discussant	Female	University of Kwa-Zulu Natal	Educational Psychology

All presentations were audio-visually recorded and transcribed verbatim.

DATA ANALYSIS

During trend analysis the researchers familiarised themselves with the data through an in-depth reading of the texts, and documenting initial thoughts and ideas throughout the process. Initial codes (key words relating to possible trends emerging in the text) and corresponding colours were compiled to identify and document repeated patterns of meaning which emerged across the texts. The researchers collated their codes into potential trends and then gathered the data relevant to each trend. A trend chart was then developed in order to map the prevalence of trends across texts. Once the process of reviewing the prevalence of trends across the various presentations had been completed, trends were defined and named. This involved continuous analysis of emergent trends in order for the trends to be clearly identified. Finally, a report on the trend analysis was produced. This step formed the final stage of the data analysis and included examples, analysis of extracts and relating the analysis back to the research question and literature.

ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness was ensured in the study by employing various rigour strategies during the data collection and analysis processes. In Table 2, the strategies that were utilised to guarantee the quality of the study are listed.

Table 2: List of the strategies that were utilised to guarantee the quality of the study

Rigour during qualitative research phases	
Credibility	Documentation on transcription and data analysis stages; plotting of relevant trends on a trend chart; recording of field notes; reflection in a journal
Dependability	Peer examination
Confirmability	Audit trail through documentation of the research process; reflection in a journal
Transferability	Utilisation of densely compiled descriptions of symposium presentations; in-depth discussions between researchers; member checking;
Authenticity	In-depth discussions between researchers; reflection in a journal

ETHICS

In keeping with one’s ethical obligation as regards research studies, informed consent was obtained by notifying participants of the research study which would be conducted. Prospective participants were invited in February 2009 to participate in the study by presenting their papers at the aforementioned symposium (Elmes et al. 1999; Mauthner, Mauthner, Birch, Jessop and Miller 2002). Since this study formed part of a larger study for which informed consent had already been obtained, it was the researchers’ responsibility to obtain a formal letter from the founder of the study regarding participation therein, as well as informed consent from prospective participants. Participants were provided with detailed information explaining what was expected of them during the course of the study. Informed consent was also obtained for the use of audio and video recordings of the presentations (Mauthner et al. 2002; Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden 2001). Participants were ensured that only transcriptions of the presentations given at the symposium would be included as raw material for the study, and that the researchers themselves would have no further involvement in the study after the symposium had taken place (Elmes et al. 1999; Orb et al. 2001). In ensuring confidentiality, the researchers took upon themselves the responsibility of not reporting private data that would identify participants (SA HealthInfo 1999).

Since the current study addressed a variety of transcribed texts as a means used by its research participants, and did not comprise any form of experimentation, it was not anticipated that many forms of harm would materialise during the course of the study. The aforementioned education researchers were thoroughly informed of the potential impact of the study (Strydom 2005) as well as the risk of participation therein before the study commenced.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers made use of a non-probability, purposeful sample of documents. Thus, it was not possible for the researchers to collect additional data or probe deeper into the topic under study, since they had only a set of audio recordings and transcriptions to work from. Although member-checking activities were pursued, it is still possible that the researchers may not have had access to the same amount of rich, meaningful information as they might have had, had this study sampled people. The use of transcriptions also implied the potential loss of data, distortion and reduction in complexity (Cohen et al. 2007). In light of this, the transcriptions were used merely as a record of data rather than a record of a social encounter.

Another challenge relates to the type of data analysis that was employed. Given the qualitative nature of the data analysis, it was possible that results could yield a less accurate representation of the content of the text, and a more reflexive, reactive interaction between the researchers and the decontextualised data which is already an interpretation of a social encounter (Mayring 2000; Cohen et al. 2007; Forman and Damschroder 2007). Finally, the risk of researcher bias was a challenge as this study relied primarily on personal constructions and interpretations of the papers presented at the symposium and the knowledge which was generated through each presentation. This challenge was addressed by reflecting in a journal (Bringle and Hatcher 1999).

RESULTS

The objective of this article, which was to determine trends which emerge when education researchers and teachers collaborate, will now be answered. Collaborative partnerships demonstrate core characteristics, namely: common goals, a contextual nature, a process-oriented emphasis, as well as knowledge exchange and the development of knowledge networks.

Common goals of education researchers and teachers

Collaborative partnerships between education researchers and teachers appear to constitute various common goals. Data reflects that both education researchers and teachers appear to have strived towards common goals when entering into the aforementioned partnerships. Furthermore, both teachers and education researchers seem to agree that additional common goals were developed and achieved throughout the collaborative process. Amongst the goals towards which education researchers and teachers appear to strive, is capacity building and community development, as indicated by the statement below:

We have to have team-work; we have to work as teams. We have to set common goals and visions and we have to look at the good that we can accomplish together. (Speaker 4, Presentation 2, Line 483).

Contextual nature of collaborative partnerships

Collaborative partnerships between education researchers and teachers also appear typically to be forged within a specific context. For example, given the nature of the symposium where the data for this study was generated, the focus was primarily on supporting teachers working in vulnerable communities. One context within which many teachers appear to be working is that of dealing with and supporting learners and other community members affected by and infected with HIV/AIDS. It appears as if it is not possible for a partnership which is collaborative by definition, to be developed without being forged within some type of context, since ultimately it is the context within which the partnership is forged, that necessitates such partnerships in the first place. This sub-trend is substantiated by the following education researcher reflection:

Partnerships are forged within contexts. I think it will be ridiculous to try and see a partnership outside of a context. It must be embedded in the context, and we are in a South African context. (Speaker 5, Presentation 6, Line 52).

Process-oriented emphasis of collaborative partnerships

From the data, it appears that education researchers emphasise the process of collaborating with teachers. Ultimately, emphasis on the process of collaboration includes various instances of activities where attention is paid to an actual process which may be followed in a collaborative partnership, in order for the process to be more effective. One example of a process-oriented activity is the building of relationships with communities where education researchers wish to work. Another process-oriented activity, which reportedly receives a great deal of attention in the initial stages of establishing collaborative partnerships, is that of gaining access to communities. The identification of common ground on which a collaborative partnership can be built, also appears to be important in the process of establishing a collaborative partnership. Furthermore, involving participating teachers in every step of the collaborative process seems to be an aspect of collaborative partnerships which is often highlighted. Finally, it seems as if emphasis is placed on monitoring and nurturing a collaborative process. Collaborative processes seemingly emerge to create optimally valuable, constructive experiences for the various parties involved. The following statement reflects the notion of process-oriented practice:

... and the intervention was an emerging intervention, so as the agendas were shared between teachers and us as researchers, the phases evolved. So this wasn't something that Person 7 decided on pre-intervention. It was very emerging, it was a process where we had to adapt the whole time. (Speaker 2, Presentation 4, Line 338).

Knowledge exchange and development of knowledge networks

When teachers and education researchers collaborate, it seems that knowledge is exchanged and that subsequently, knowledge networks are developed. The knowledge that is exchanged between teachers and education researchers entails each partner sharing knowledge which may be of use to other partners, and *vice-versa*. In this way, the various parties involved not only learn from each other but also allow each other to participate in a process of co-constructing new knowledge based on their respective areas of expertise. In exchanging and co-constructing new knowledge, education researchers seem to experience the development of a knowledge network, whereby partners can add to their repertoires of professional skills and services, as well as additional sources which may be of use to them. The process and outcome of developing knowledge networks may be beneficial in that it offers the possibility of enhancing the sustainability of collaborative partnerships, since partners and community members may have begun the process of expanding their resource base. In this way new resources can be utilised after the formal collaborative partnership has been terminated, and the community is left to run further projects on its own.

A result of the aforementioned knowledge networks appear to be the development of platforms for communication between parties involved in collaborative partnerships. These newly established platforms (for communication) seem to gain strength for a number of reasons. Firstly, it seems as if education researchers feel that in providing platforms for communication between partners, knowledge may be exchanged on a broader level which creates the possibility for the various parties involved in a collaborative partnership, to raise issues which are of concern to them, as well as to theorise about how they could best be resolved. In addressing concerns on a broader level, it would seem that providing platforms for communication also serves to raise awareness and sensitivity towards community issues. It is also possible that the various partners involved in similar partnerships or studies to the one under discussion, could be made aware of potential dilemmas which they might encounter at a given stage, which would afford them the opportunity to prepare for and address such dilemmas should the need arise. In this respect, the referred to previously, have the added advantage of showcasing the work in process or that which has been completed. When presented with the fruits of their labour, education researchers tend to be inspired to believe that hope, encouragement and motivation are engendered, and that a space for participatory reflection can be created:

... the knowledge of the teachers it's like a huge web of knowledge and also it's a knowledge network for us as researchers and with our postgraduate students and in terms of publications. And there you can see how everybody benefited, both teachers in terms of knowledge and researchers in terms of knowledge. (Speaker 2, Presentation 4, Line 1213).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Through a discussion of the findings, this section addresses the second objective of this article: to use the trends which emerged in collaborative partnerships between education researchers and teachers to explain why participatory methodologies appear to be gaining popularity among education researchers. The results indicate that at least four core characteristics emerged when education researchers talked about their participatory studies. One core characteristic relates to common goals identified by various partners involved in projects. The notion of life-long learning and knowledge exchange corroborates existing literature which comments on common goals within collaborative partnerships. Jamal and Getz (1995, 11) refer to Gray's definition of collaboration, emphasising that it is 'a process of joint decision making of a problem domain about the future of that domain'. This statement implies that a collaborative partnership essentially entails a process where specific items of knowledge relating to practice are shared and co-constructed. Therefore, it is presupposed that a common object or goal from which an investigation can be launched is identified when embarking on such an effort, and from which shared results can be yielded and 'paired with a double diffusion process for the research and practice communities' (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007, 578). Hall Jackson et al. (2005) concur with the above, stating that when working collaboratively, partners need to agree to work towards a common, ultimate goal. According to Clark et al. (1996) this type of agreement implies a shared understanding of the processes taking place in the partnership, and that it is necessary for partners to be able to share, justify and refine their ideas with others in order to support learning and knowledge construction.

With regard to the setting of common goals during the collaborative process, Hall Jackson et al. (2005) emphasise that goal setting may be regarded as one of the most important aspects of partnership work and as such, it is necessary to ensure that all partners collectively buy in to the vision of collaboration. Furthermore, stakeholders or partners should agree on the criteria for success. As mentioned earlier, partnerships appear to be characterised by shared goals and a common purpose (Casey 2008). With regard to partnerships between university faculties and schools, it appears as if some of the goals shared by these two entities include teacher education, professional development and capacity building (Mule 2006; Kuter and Koç 2009; Murray et al. 2009; Levine and Marcus 2010).

This study also supports research that partnerships are embedded in specific contexts of a given community (or school). With reference to existing literature (Grundy et al. 2001; Van Zee et al. 2003; Witte et al. 2005; Burn 2006; Paul 2006; Schneider and Pickett 2006; Tsui and Law 2007; Evoh 2007; Horns et al. 2007; Moore and Sampson 2008) on collaborative partnerships between university faculties and schools, a similar trend emerges. Taking into account the cultural and social context within which partnerships are forged, may significantly enhance the value of partnerships between teachers and education researchers, as the majority of partnership studies focused on how education and the experience of being teacher or learner can be enhanced and improved so that participants may experience their

work as meaningful, rewarding, enabling and supportive. Smith (2003; 2009) emphasises that the circumstances in which people engage in action and which may have consequences for both the individual and the community, have the potential of creating the most powerful learning environments. Thus, by participating in partnerships which hold such strong implications for the professional and personal lives of the people involved, teachers and education researchers are equipped with the ability to not only change their own lives, but to significantly contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding participatory research where common goals are identified, with a view to initiating social change or social awareness.

Collaborative partnerships between teachers and education researchers also revealed the process-oriented nature of collaborative partnerships, as well as knowledge exchange and the subsequent development of knowledge networks through collaborative partnerships. The finding that partners participate in a process of knowledge exchange rather than knowledge transfer confirms the nature of knowledge transactions in existing literature with regard to participatory methodology theory. The current study sought to expand on this notion. Findings indicate that engagement with, and exchange of knowledge seemingly creates knowledge networks which may culminate in partnerships. Existing literature supports the aforementioned notion, stating that collaborative research is based on the respective contributions of the various parties involved, where both researcher and practitioner may be regarded as co-constructors of knowledge which is generated as part of a team (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007). Furthermore, in correspondence with existing literature (Christie et al. 2007; Sylva et al. 2007) it appears that the relationship between research and practice does not occur in a linear fashion where knowledge is transferred from one partner to another, but is characterised by a process of knowledge exchange. Thus, the abovementioned process of knowledge exchange mentioned and the development of knowledge networks converges with one of the aims of collaborative research (Savoie-Zajc and Descamps-Bednarz 2007), namely bringing the world of research and practice closer together, and mediating between the two traditions so that new knowledge may be constructed and in turn inform practice. As a result, researchers and practitioners can subsequently attempt to bridge a gap which exists between theory and practice in a way which is meaningful to the various partners involved (Ansari et al. 2002; Goduto et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2009; Vogel and Avissar 2009).

The notion that both the researcher and practitioner participating in a collaborative partnership should be regarded as being equal in terms of power and ability to contribute towards a given project is useful for participatory methodology theory, since the question of power relations, roles and responsibilities which can be adopted by various partners in a collaborative partnership project still seems to be debatable. In light of this, the manner in which teachers and education researchers appear to interact on aspects of a research problem, for example how teachers can be supported in dealing with HIV/AIDS in the classroom, may be seen as confirmation that it is in fact possible for equal power relations and roles to be assumed. The roles and

responsibilities which partners choose to adopt, whilst simultaneously developing and maintaining successful collaborative partnership projects may serve as further evidence of the above discussion. According to a sociocultural approach, the building of trusting relationships, rapport and communication is vital to the establishment of strong partnerships. Casey (2008) maintains that valuing partners, developing a sense of ownership and belonging are crucial to partnership work. She views honesty and trust as being central to good management practice, and the requirements for developing a strong partnership relationship. Without traits such as these, Casey (2008) emphasises that it is possible that a partnership could dissolve or that partners may lose interest in participating or being involved in partnership work.

CONCLUSION

Findings indicated in this article with regard to the core characteristics of collaborative partnerships may serve as an explanation the third objective of this article: why participatory methodologies seem to be favoured by education researchers. Participatory methodologies appear to provide meaning for practitioners involved in the field of education in that the value to which their work is attributed is enhanced, and because they are provided with numerous opportunities for reward, enablement and support within the teaching environment. Furthermore, opportunities for the creation of powerful learning environments are offered as a result of the circumstances under which people appear to engage. Participatory methodologies appear favourable because such research designs may equip people with the ability to change their personal and professional lives and develop a sense of self-worth through their contribution to existing bodies of knowledge. In doing so, participants may also be offered the opportunity to develop and promote knowledge networks in relation to other informed individuals. It is evident that such prospects may also then foster the development of a renewed sense of purpose, pride and self-esteem within various aspects of life. Finally, such participatory methodologies seem to encourage those involved in partnerships to work from a stance of equal power relations, where the various partners are awarded equal responsibility with regard to the roles and relations adopted in collaborative partnership projects.

The implications of the above discussion suggest that in employing participatory methodologies, education researchers may be encouraged to adopt methodologies and research designs where participants play an integral role in the co-construction of knowledge, where they are invited to exchange rather than transfer knowledge to other professionals. In addition, utilising participatory methodologies may encourage researchers to build networks within communities so that the findings of various projects can be sustained and have long-lasting effects for their participants. Such sustainability may serve to promote development of personal and professional aspects of participants' lives, and enable them to begin to experience the work which they do as fulfilling and as contributing to a greater purpose. It is possible that the employment of participatory methodologies could invoke a sense of social

responsibility in researchers in that they will begin to recognise the role which their research plays not only in contributing to an existing body of knowledge, but in enhancing the quality of life which participants experience having participated in such research projects.

With regard to the community of practice theoretical framework, certain characteristics emerge from communities of practice which have a bearing on collaborative partnerships between education researchers and teachers. Firstly, communities of practice are described as professional communities where meanings, beliefs and understandings are negotiated and reflected in communal practices (Buysse et al. 2003), and which stem from a convergent interaction between competence and experience which ultimately involves mutual engagement. Secondly, communities of practice can offer an opportunity to members involved to negotiate competence through an experience of directly participating in the research process, whilst at the same time being offered the opportunity to learn and teach. Thirdly, communities of practice view learning as a social phenomenon (Lave and Wenger 1991). Thus knowledge seems to be integrated into the life of communities that share values, beliefs, languages and customs. In addition, communities of practice regard enablement, or the ability to contribute to a community, as creating the potential for learning. Finally, communities of practice typically develop around aspects of life and the environment which seem important to people, with the practices of a community reflecting each member's own understanding of what is important (Wenger 2008).

Based on the abovementioned characteristics of communities of practice, communities of practice shared by education researchers and teachers may be characterised as individuals or groups of individuals (namely teachers and education researchers), working together to combine their shared knowledge in a constructive manner, in order to initiate some sort of change in a community (for example, the development and establishment of teacher support structures in a classroom in the context of dealing with HIV/AIDS). Through participatory methodology practices, teachers and education researchers are afforded the opportunity to negotiate competence in various domains by directly participating in the research process of the various studies in which they were involved, whilst simultaneously being able to teach and learn from one another. Therefore, the basic elements of communities of practice between education researchers and teachers include learning as a social phenomenon, the integration of knowledge into the life communities, and the indivisibility of knowledge and practice. Typically, communities involved in collaborative partnerships in this study adopted an attitude where membership of a specific community afforded the opportunity to learn from others in the community. In return, each individual in the collaborative partnership community took on the shared responsibility of passing on knowledge to other community members. Thus, a process of life-long learning and knowledge exchange appears to be a value embedded in communities of practice in this study. Through the process of sharing knowledge, it may be possible for community members to enable or be enabled by knowledge exchanged and in turn, create further potential for learning.

NOTE

1. In this article practitioner refers specifically to teachers collaborating with researchers in an attempt to co-construct knowledge in various research studies.

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