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Kristin Norum Skoglund

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Social interaction of leaders in partnerships between schools and universities: tensions as support and counterbalance

Kristin Norum Skoglund 

Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT

Partnerships between schools and universities have been emphasized over the last two decades within educational development research. Moving from the traditional single-organization orientation toward a multiple-organization orientation has challenged school leaderships to improve their decision-making processes to align with changing organizational structures, resulting in wider use of partnerships. This study recognizes the importance of addressing the role of tension amongst leaders in partnerships between schools and universities.

This paper presents a longitudinal study, inspired by constructivist grounded theory, conducted in a pilot partnership between schools and a university. The data analysis was grounded in a mix of observations and document studies, all associated with multiple levels of leadership within the partnership. Three areas of tense situations were revealed: Assessment of investments, Assessments of outcomes, and Assessments of commitments. An acknowledgment of the tension was also evident in the findings. A theoretical framework of practice architectures was implemented to analyze the intersection of the findings.

The findings highlighted how tension in social interaction can be both constructive and constraining in achieving a sustainable collaboration, depending on how well the plans and the main purpose of the partnership are aligned within the organizations.

Introduction

This study examines leadership of a partnership between school and university, with a focus on the role of tensions occurring in interaction among leaders at governance level. The empirical example in this research is from a Norwegian context, where a pilot project of an existing partnership between three schools and a university is examined over a period from 2016 to 2019, with a focus on interaction among leaders. The research involved all levels of governance of the partner organizations: the municipality (primary and lower secondary schools), the county (upper secondary school), and the university (teacher education).

The theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014) is implemented in the discussion to provide a deeper understanding of the studied interactions. For the past two

decades, partnerships between schools and universities have been given attention within educational development research across Europe and the United States (Callahan & Martin, 2007). Government educational policies worldwide have shifted toward increased collaborations, both cross-sectional and organizational (McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). Moving from the traditional single-organization orientation toward a multiple-organization orientation challenges school leadership to improve their decision-making processes to align with the changing organizational structures (Briggs, 2010; Briggs et al., 2007; Coburn et al., 2013).

The reasoning behind initiating partnerships between schools and universities includes the achievement of common goals for students and a shared belief in the benefits of employee interaction (Briggs, 2010). These motivations are in accordance with the description of Lillejord and Børte (2016), in which partnerships within education are systems that facilitate knowledge sharing and knowledge development. They also emphasize that a partnership's sustainability is dependent on a unifying vision or ambition beyond everyday practicalities (Lillejord & Børte, 2016). There is not one unified model or structure for an effective partnership between school and university, but a strong management and coordination team, a clear vision, a strong will to reach goals, effective structures for internal communication, and an ethos of inclusiveness are key characteristics outlined by Rodger et al. (2003).

To close the gap between researchers and practitioners (Callahan & Martin, 2007; Hargreaves, 1996; Lillejord & Børte, 2016), partnerships between schools and universities for educational research are required (McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). These partnerships entail a reconfiguration of schools toward research-based practice (McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007), linking theory and practice within schools and universities (Callahan & Martin, 2007). This is accomplished by exploring and developing long-term and sustainable relations between didactic research and praxis (Von Oettingen et al., 2019). Partnership in education in the Norwegian context is a result of increased focus in white papers recommending a higher degree of cooperation between the field of practice and the providers of education (Halvorsen, 2014). The concept of collaboration as in partnerships between schools and universities is not an innovation in Norway (Smith, 2016), as the largest Norwegian universities over decades have sought binding collaborations with schools in order to offer in-service teaching for teacher students (SINTEF, 2008).

The main challenge of collaboration in partnerships, according to Baumfield and Butterworth (2007), is to manage the interactions among the different levels of governance, generating both competition and constructive collaboration. This highlights the need for awareness by leaders in collaboration, as tensions may arise if questions concerning power and allocation are not addressed. Tensions were identified by Lillejord and Børte (2016) in their research mapping of partnerships between schools and universities to be one of six key concepts in successful partnerships. Tensions referred to by Lillejord and Børte (2016, p. 4) are 'primarily related to historically evolved norms and division of labor between teacher educators and school teachers', and exposes a need for research on leadership in partnerships between schools and universities, as the primary focus in the existing research has been on teacher education and in-service training (Lillejord & Børte, 2016). The agenda for decision-making is a key component of tension in partnerships within schools and universities, as agenda-setting is not always

developed collectively (Miller, 2001). Other aspects of tension are identified by Briggs (2010) to be *inter alia* accountability, equity, power, trust, risk, communication, time, resources and responsibility. This illustrates a particular need for gaining knowledge regarding leadership and management, in addition to collaboration within partnerships to provide a sustainable future.

Existing research on leadership focuses on the individual leader of an organization rather than the practise of leadership (Chia & Holt, 2006; Wilkinson, 2020; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). This individual focus draws attention away from the contextual arrangements contributing to the creation of collaborative processes for change. The contextual arrangements which are visible in social interaction are a focus in this study, with social interaction defined as situations in which interaction between humans are influenced by cultural situations (Argyle, 1969), meaning that individuals act in the presence of others' interpretations and expectations (Brante, 2007), and thus they are affected by tensions amongst the participants in social interaction.

The point of departure in this study involved insight into how existing tensions among leaders of partnerships between schools and universities influence their social interaction. The initial analysis in this study showed frequent tense social situations during discussions regarding the process of evaluating the pilot period of the partnership. To gain an understanding of the relevance of tensions affecting social interaction in this research, the theory of practice architectures by Kemmis et al. (2014) was applied as a framework to the discussion, specifically applying the three intersubjective spaces of the theory: semantic space, physical space-time, and social space (Kemmis, 2019; Mahon, Kemmis et al., 2017). The basis for this study was the research question: What role does tension play in the social interaction of leaders of partnerships between schools and universities? This research question addressed the issue explored by Baumfield and Butterworth (2007) about managing interaction among multiple levels of governance. The following sections include a presentation of the theoretical framework, research context, methodology, and a detailed description and analysis of the findings in light of the theoretical framework. Finally, the last section offers concluding remarks on the research.

Theory of practice architectures

The theory of practice architectures was chosen to offer insight into interactions between the individual and the social perspectives of practices, giving a direction to achieve progress in a collaboration (Kemmis et al., 2014) in which results, variations, improvisation, and innovation are created in the practices (Mahon, Francisco et al., 2017). The theory of practice architectures aligns with the social constructionist perspective, which refers to how culture impacts people and their perceptions of the world (Crotty, 1998), as it is influenced by Theodore Schatzki's practice theory and philosophy in which organizations are first and foremost social phenomena that unfold through the occurrence of activities (Schatzki, 2006). In the practice architectures framework, the relevance of the framework is that social interaction is seen as a system in which the combination of what is said, done and relations amongst the involved creates a dynamic interaction (Kemmis et al., 2014). Practice is understood to be enabled and constrained by three arrangements: cultural-discursive (arrangements affecting language and discourse), material-economic

(arrangements affecting activity), and social-political (arrangements affecting the relationships between humans and objects; (Mahon, Kemmis et al., 2017). This interpretation of practices includes an understanding that the involved participants learn that their roles, individually and collectively, act to construct a world worth living in (Kemmis et al., 2014). The three practices (sayings, doings, and relatings) being present at a site are enmeshed with the practice architectures (Mahon, Kemmis et al., 2017) in intersubjective spaces where these practices unfold (Kemmis et al., 2017). The three intersubjective spaces are called: semantic space (sayings and cultural-discursive arrangements), physical space-time (doings and material-economic arrangements), and social space (relatings and social-political arrangements), as illustrated in Figure 1 (Kemmis, 2019; Kemmis et al., 2014). Change made to a practice at a site results in changes to the practice architectures as they are intertwined and dependent on each other (Mahon, Kemmis et al., 2017). The theory of practice architectures is grounded in the ontology of Schatzki, and his critical perspective of calling these spaces intersubjective spaces is emphasized in Kemmis (2019, p. 35); the term literary implies between ‘subject(ivity)s’, while Schatzki would prefer to call them the ‘spaces people act, interact and carry on practices’.

The theory of practice architectures was first presented by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) and is still undergoing development (Mahon, Kemmis et al., 2017). The theory is used in the literature as theoretical, reflective, and analytical frameworks; the latter is the most common. It has been used as a lens in a wide range of fields and disciplines,

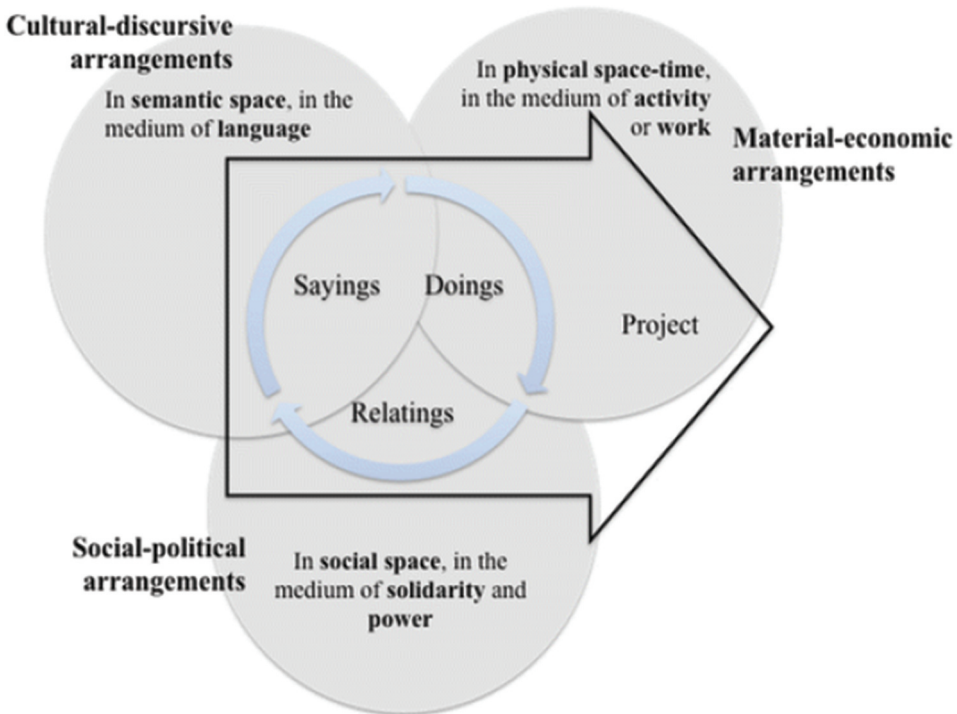


Figure 1. The media and spaces in which sayings, doings, and relatings exist. From (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 34).

amongst other action research involving students and teachers (Kemmis et al., 2014), as well as in other areas, such as leadership perspectives on an organization (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). There exist a few articles and book chapters that combine practice architectures and educational leadership, mainly concerning the topics of instructional leadership (Salo et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2010); collaboration and professional learning communities (Edwards-Groves & Hardy, 2013); and organizational trust and school development (Grice, 2019; Grootenboer & Larkin, 2019; Nehez, 2015; Vestheim & Lyngsnes, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Leadership of praxis by example is elaborated in Wilkinson et al. (2010), Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015), and Langelotz et al. (2019); and (Wilkinson, 2020), in which the practice architectures theory is used both as an analytical and reflective framework. The geographical areas of the research focusing on the practice architectures are limited to Australia, the Nordic countries, the United States of America, and Georgia, with the first two being dominant.

Research context

The research was conducted in a pilot project of an existing Norwegian partnership between three schools and a university, involving a municipality (responsible for primary and lower secondary schools), a county (responsible for upper secondary schools), and a university (government funded), with a mission to develop better schools and more suitably adapted teacher education. The partners came to an agreement about an emphasis on developing knowledge around how to strengthen pupil motivation and learning outcomes, explore new teaching methods in a safe environment, strengthen the school's ability to encourage systematic improvement, enhance teachers' capabilities, research school development, and strengthen the teacher education. The objectives of the partnership are in line with the Norwegian national educational strategies of collaboration across educational and research institutions through conducting joint research projects, preferably initiated by the employees of the schools as a main driver for further development for all involved (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Meld. St. 4 (2018–2019) (2018); Meld. St. 21 (2016–2017) (2016)). The involved organizations in this study selected specific entities to participate in the partnership, affiliated with teacher education at the university, primary, and lower-secondary levels from the regional municipality and an upper secondary school from the regional county (illustrated in Figure 2), meaning that the involved entities represent a full spectrum of the Norwegian educational sector. The time range for the pilot project was over a period from 2016 to 2019.

To ensure successful development of the partnership, there were three levels of leadership: the board (chief executives of the partners), the executive committee (a mix of representatives from both the executives of the partner organizations and the school leaders), and school leadership (leaders of the independent entities). The board had superior authority to establish the policies of the partnership, which were broken down into smaller tasks by the executive committee and further distributed to the school entities by the school leaders and the project leader. The link between the two top governance levels (the board and the executive committee) was limited to the project leader, which attended both levels. Next to formal levels in the partnership, interaction took place in-between the participants from the separate involved organizations.

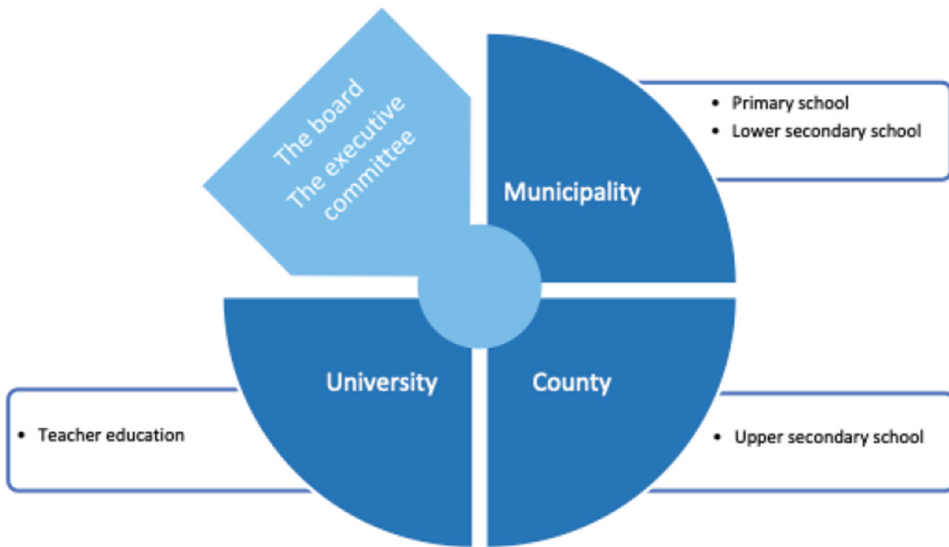


Figure 2. The link between the involved entities of the partnership between school and university.

As a contribution toward the sustainability of the partnership, a reoccurring item on the agenda, more frequently toward the end of the pilot period, was the ongoing internal evaluation and discussion regarding the formal external evaluation. During the evaluation processes, observations at the top two governance levels revealed notable tense discussions influencing the interaction between the leaders. As a consequence of these observations, the concept giving the base to this research study was defined to review tense situations occurring in the process of evaluation. The internal evaluation process was conducted mainly in the executive committee and was carried out thematically during their normal meetings. In contrast to the self-driven internal evaluation, the external evaluation was designed as a tender process executed by an independent research bureau. The planning of the external evaluation was discussed by the board, and the main foci of the discussion were the purpose and the implementation of the evaluation.

Methods and data sources

The applied methodological approach of this research was inspired by the constructivist grounded theory that claims theories are generated inductively from the phenomena that the research represents (located in time, place, and the situation of inquiry) (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach exposes flexibility in data collection, allowing the researcher to follow up what happens at any point in the research process, encoding and categorizing along the way (Charmaz, 2014). The reason for choosing the constructivist grounded theory was to follow the lead of the data, as in traditional grounded theory, as well as explore the advantages and their implications for the research (Charmaz, 2014). In order to create a deeper theoretical insight of the initial concepts in the first part of the analysis, an existing theoretical framework has been added,

corresponding with the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Timonen et al., 2018). Taken together, nuances in meaning are interpreted through the data process as it accentuates the influence of the social context from which the data is derived (Charmaz, 2014). This does not exclude the relevance and validity of the finding but rather highlights the constructivist idea that knowledge is constructed by interaction (Crotty, 1998). The Norwegian ethical guidelines for social science-based research, provided by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities, have been adhered to throughout the research (NESH, 2016).

Data collection

Complementing methods were used to generate data: observations (audiotaped and transcribed), fieldnotes (memos), and existing documents, for example, the agreement of partnership and an evaluation report. Interviews were not used as a method, as the data were collected at meetings where each member raised their own opinion through the internal and external evaluation. This was a longitudinal study conducted with repeated observations of the same variables (Lavrakas, 2008) from mid-2017 to January 2019, consisting of all 19 arranged meetings, involving close to 50 different leaders, as illustrated in Table 1. The role of an observatory was fulfilled as non-participant, which means that the researcher did not interact with the group during observations (Postholm, 2010). This gives opportunity to record data without taking part in the process (Creswell, 2013); however, informal conversations before, after, and during breaks took place.

Methods of analysis

The applied technique for analysis was influenced by the constant comparative method, in which data are collected and analyzed several times until the direction of the research can be determined (Creswell, 2013). The method links well with the social constructionist idea, allowing the researcher to consider the organizational culture (Burr, 2015; Crotty,

Table 1. Overview of the data collection.

	The Board	The Executive Committee	Documents
Data Collection	7 meetings - observations - transcriptions - fieldnotes (duration: 2–8 hours each)	12 meetings - observations - transcriptions - fieldnotes (duration 2–8 hours each)	Evaluation report Agreement of the partnership
Participant	Project leader, senior executives, and top-level advisers	Project leader, advisers at the district governance level (municipality and county), principals, and coordinators.	
Number of Participants	Variations from 9–13 Total of 26 persons involved	Variations from 9–13 Total of 22 persons involved	Total of 48 persons involved
Time Frame	2017–2019	2017–2018	2015–2019
Experience/Background	Leaders Educational context Education: Master's or Ph.D.	Leaders and leadership advisors Educational context Variable levels of education	

1998) within the governance levels of the partnership by creating room for interpretation. Charmaz (2014) describes constant comparative analysis as a method in which the researcher learns from the field, experiencing the wider context of the structures, networks, and relationships. The conceptual coding of the data analysis was affiliated with different governance levels within the partnership. The first cycle of the analysis was inspired by open coding, searching for words, sentences, or phrases that identified explanatory concepts (Goulding, 2005). Following this, the hidden differences and distinctions of the participants became visible through tensions, hierarchies of power, and communication. Throughout the analysis of the first half of the collected data, new areas of focus were identified, which in turn led to further development of the research question, focusing on tensions influencing the social interaction. The two governance levels were seen as one unit as the process of coding support similar findings at both levels. In the second cycle of the analysis, the process of internal and external evaluation, involving three meetings at both governance levels as well as one joint day meeting, was selected as a relevant case to obtain insight for the research question, and the following categories formed: acknowledgment of tension, assessment of outcome, assessment of commitment, and assessment of investment.

Findings

The aim of this study was to provide insight into the role of tension in the social interaction of leaders in partnerships between schools and universities. There were situations during the ongoing internal evaluation and the discussions of the external evaluation of the partnership in which tense interactions influenced the social interaction. Descriptions of the findings are elaborated in four sections. First, the participants' expressions of tension in the partnership (acknowledgment of tension). Second, discussions regarding the consequences or results of the efforts made in the collaboration (assessment of the outcome of the collaboration). Third, commitment within the involved entities (assessment of commitment). Fourth, discussions regarding the justification of investments (assessment of investments). Discussions about enhancing the dissemination of knowledge and experiences are a reoccurring theme throughout the three latter sections.

Acknowledgment of tension

As a starting point, an ice breaker for the internal evaluation process, the executive committee was challenged to make descriptive drawings of their group interpretation of the partnership. A common feature of the drawings was the presence of tensions, enabling and constraining the further development of the partnership. One of the groups illustrated the partnership as a train on a set of tracks with the end point being that of pupils learning. When presenting the drawing, the group highlighted the fact that on the way to the goal, several wagons appeared to provide support and to become a counterbalance. Another group depicted the partnership as beautiful, colorful, and fragile soap bubbles, with each involved entity being the individual bubbles floating on a dynamic path, encircled with triangles asserting cross-pressure of both internal and external expectations and tensions. Their core message was that these bubbles easily

break when interacting with the triangles if they are not handled with vigilance and that the path was dynamically shaped by these triangles. The involved leaders acknowledged present tensions affecting the partnership and illustrated that they did not consider the collaboration a success without obstacles by expressing a presence of tensions. Despite tense situations during general discussions on the executive committee, they expressed agreement about the positive side effect of these tensions as a catalyst of internal transformation. This was, for example, highlighted by one of the principals during the internal evaluation of the executive committee, with emphasis on gratitude for the positive side effect that they had learnt and adopted knowledge from each other.

Assessment of outcome

The outcome of the partnership was a reoccurring theme during the internal and external evaluation processes, considering the participants differing interpretations of the purpose of the collaboration to create a better school and a more suitably adapted teacher education. The differing interpretations were regularly reflected on in the fieldnotes, for example: ‘There are two different levels of discussions concerning the purpose of the collaboration. It is the formulated goals and then there is the interpretation of the operationalization of the goals. Hence, how they have been broken down, rooted, interpreted, etc.’ and ‘The impression of this discussion is that the participants do not share a joint understanding of how to develop a better school and the consequences of research. They do not have a common perception of the purpose’. The purpose of the partnerships is mainly focusing on no tangible goals, which are hard to determine and measure, consequently leading to tense debates during the evaluation process, whether the partnership had developed according to plan or emerged as a positive coincident. Overall, the involved leaders expressed an uncertainty as to whether the main objective had been broken down into tangible goals for assessing the outcome, as, for example, expressed by one of the participants on the executive committee: ‘Those objectives, better school, more learning and a better teacher education. It is impossible to measure!’

In contrast to the tensions about the main objectives providing specific outcomes, the principals in the report of the external evaluation (Stene and Thøring, 2018) expressed a valuable outcome of the partnership:

The participants are not in doubt that the collaboration will cause a better school and a more suitable adapted teacher education. They experienced more motivated teachers, whom were experimenting with new and varied methods of teaching. They have become more self-assured. Learning theoretical concepts as the basis for dialogue creates more confident teachers. Resulting in more ‘equipped’ teachers, well prepared for new challenges. (Principals in the evaluation report)

One of the principals on the executive committee expressed concern about the pressure experienced from the school administration to disseminate the developed knowledge and experiences of the partnership to their remit entities. He expressed this as occurring too early in the process to both measure and disseminate the outcome of the partnership:

The leaders of the administration of the municipality are concerned about the outcome for the remaining schools of the municipality. We’re on our way towards it, but it is not

visualised well enough. One of the main challenges are to systemise what the effect is and what to measure. (Principal)

As a contrast to this view, one of the other leaders, representing another organization, responded by reflecting on their differing perspectives of the dissemination of knowledge. Their main focus was on creating frameworks and systems that other schools could adopt or benefit from, highlighted in the further argumentation:

I am not concerned about the lack of dissemination as, in my view, this project is still young. We all represent complex organisations, and collaboration is time consuming. My opinion is that we at the beginning did struggle with the dissemination, as it wasn't anything to disseminate. It had to be produced before we could disseminate it. And I believe that when it comes to the conducted school-based education of our employees. We have disseminated it! But I am not sure that if we had given a questionnaire to all our schools, that they would relate it to the partnership. I am not sure of this, but the school governance is fully aware that we have disseminated the results of the partnership. We don't share the same opinion on this matter. (Advisor at one of the district governances)

Tensions also occurred among the board when discussing one of the claimed outcomes to be a school-based development project conducted in some of the schools beyond the involved entities. The involved leaders did not agree on whether the new project had developed as a consequence of the collaboration or as a democratic development of national politics, considering their varying previous experiences.

A sense of uncertainty as to the gained outcome of the individual organizations was expressed by the involved leaders on the executive committee, as the involved schools had been strengthening their ability for collaboration at the same time as, in their perspective, the outcome was mainly developing the teacher education. One of the principals on the executive committee expressed the following:

It is obvious for the teachers that they are supposed to contribute towards a better teacher education, and they accept it. And they are excited to see the results, at the same time as they are curious about 'What's in it for us?' This is not yet visible, but we hope it will come later in the R&D projects. (Principal)

Later in the same discussion, one of the advisors in the district governance highlighted that the process of strengthening the organizations' ability to collaborate had positively affected both the work environment and the professional competence amongst the employees at the schools: 'It [The partnership] is not only gaining the students at the teacher education. This is concerning both the work environment and the competences regarding the work environment in general. It is an advantage for the organization!'

Assessment of commitment

The process of assuring united gains within the three independent and complex organizations led toward a pivotal need for collaboration on an organizational level. A distinguished source of tense situations concerning the organizational design during the process of evaluation was the joint commitment within the involved entities, closely related to the degree of involvement. Fieldnotes taken during the pilot project of the partnership described an emphasis on ensuring a joint commitment, with the expressed feeling of an asymmetrical degree of commitment being a source of tense situations. For

example, when implementing a mandatory school-based course for all employees at the involved schools, with the main responsibility for conducting the planning and teaching falling to the university, the results of this course were expressed by the school leaders on the executive committee as creating a joint commitment amongst the employees and a contribution toward preparing the employees for collaboration both internally and externally. In contrast, when addressing the university's progress in preparing for collaboration, tense situations developed as the joint effort in this discussion was absent and as all responsibility was placed on the university. The project leader addressed the problem as a lack of resources as the university did not obtain a similar role as the partnership's local coordinators in the involved schools. One of the principals brought to the forefront that the process conducted in the schools had led to a collective improvement for the organization, but he was, at the same time, concerned that the university was not as well prepared and receptive for collaboration:

The teachers are putting to words the impression that we as schools are during the process being prepared to contribute towards a more suitable adapted teacher education. But on the other hand, they do feel that the university is not prepared What is the motivation of the university? Why should the researchers bother to interact with the schools? (Principal)

Subsequently, one of the other leaders drew attention toward a grievance: 'I am not so sure that the university at the starting point had the same endorsement toward transforming the teacher education, and a desire to improve the existing?'

Early in the pilot project, the pressure of the researchers wanting to involve the schools in research projects became a significant burden for the school leaders, resulting in a unanimous decision for all inquiries to be made through the project leader. The reasoning behind the decision was to shield the school's employees during the first period of the pilot project, focusing on the school-based development program. This, and their complex organizational structure, was used by the university as an explanation for the lack of commitment and organizational development within the university. The implications of the restrictions of research inquiries were expressed by a representative of the university at the internal evaluation of the executive committee as 'a feeling of being held out of the partnership's development'. As a response, one of the advisors at the district governances emphasized that the university was not at liberty to claim that the university's lack of involvement was due to the restrictions, as they were in charge of directing the course module involving all employees of the schools:

It is somewhat paradoxical to say that the university felt the restrictions, as they decided the content, conducted the lectures and conducted research on the module. Is it so that the university was not allowed to take part in the partnership? It gets contradictory in my ears. (Advisor)

Assessment of investments

Discussions regarding the justification of investments, viewed as resources invested in the partnership, were often addressing a tense theme: the dissemination of knowledge and experiences developed in the partnership beyond the limits of the involved entities, both national and regional. This was especially highlighted by representatives from the district governances as a need to justify the surpassing resources used in the entities involved in

the partnership in contrast to the rest of their remit schools. The term ‘dissemination’ infiltrated almost every discussion at the two governance levels, with an escalation toward the end of the pilot project. The involved leaders acted in their interaction as they shared a common interpretation of the term, despite not having created a joint understanding or definition. The concern over a lack of dissemination of knowledge and experiences beyond the involved entities was also distinctly expressed in several board meetings by representatives from the district governances. This became evident in one of the discussions at the board level in which the diversity of interpretations about the presence of dissemination in the main objectives of the partnership was discussed:

You [the board leader] have expressed that we do not want to focus on dissemination. If you stand by it, it will have to be stated clearly in the introduction of the report of the evaluation. Therefore, dissemination was an important part of the original objectives of the partnership, and three years in, it is something we have not succeeded to conduct. We do not want to conceal it, as this is a serious problem for the school administration to disperse the resources without focusing on dissemination of knowledge and experiences. (School administrator)

An outcome of the discussions during the process of evaluating the pilot project was to create a more unified understanding of how to act in collaboration toward a common purpose. This was highlighted by the project leader in a board meeting:

I believe that some of the discussions brought to the table here are some of the most interesting discussions we have had as we have further developed our perspectives, considering what the purpose of the partnership is and the road from here. (Project leader)

As a result of the analysis, four significant areas of tensions were described: acknowledgment of the tension, assessment of the outcome, assessment of the commitment, and assessment of investments. These are discussed through the framework of the practice architectures in the following section to gain insight into the role of the tensions in social interaction among leaders of partnerships between schools and universities.

Discussion

Tensions affecting the inter-subjective spaces

The primary purpose of a partnership between schools and universities is for the involved organizations to gradually become a united entity through creating extended and mutual benefits by working toward a common goal (Lefever-Davis et al., 2007). When working toward unification, obstacles can draw attention away from the purpose of the partnership. These obstacles became clear throughout the findings of this research when several tense situations within social interactions in the internal and external evaluation occurred. The theory of practice architectures emphasizes that the practices are not only pre-shaped and prefigured by the involved participants but also by intangible factors, such as language, work, activity, power, and solidarity, visible in the intersubjective spaces (Kemmis et al., 2014). The discussion begins with a validation of tensions and moves to a presentation of a model to understand the interconnectedness of practices in social interaction, which provides the base of the discussion, sectioned into the three intersubjective spaces: semantic space, physical space-time, and social space.

The first section of the findings, acknowledgment of tension, was included as a validation confirming the existence of the tensions expressed by the participants as relevant for the further development of the partnership. Tensions within the interactions of the involved leaders, described as counterbalances and spikes in the internal evaluation, are highlighted by the participants themselves as important contributions toward giving directions to the partnership. When the involved leaders described the partnership as fragile soap bubbles with potential outside spikes that could break them, they were validating the aim of the theory of practice architecture to highlight arrangements that enable as well as constrain practices (Kemmis et al., 2014; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). To keep these spikes from damaging the partnership, the involved organizations had to become knowledgeable about the other organizations and their aims regarding participation in the partnership. Although involving in interaction at the two governance levels was a time-consuming process, this study showed that the involved leaders learnt to embrace the tensions as drivers for further development. The other three sections of the findings were interlinked through the inter-subjective spaces and related to the further development of the partnership as an active contributor. The common feature of assessment of investments related to the semantic space (the sayings and the cultural-discursive arrangements), whereas assessment of outcome related to the physical space-time (the doings and the material-economic arrangements), and assessment of commitment related to the social space (the relatings and the social-political arrangements).

The three described areas of tensions were intertwined as they existed in collaboration with each other, contributing toward a substantiation of the theory of practice architectures, claiming that a practice consists of the interdepending sayings, doings, and relatings (Kemmis et al., 2014). Figure 3 illustrates the interdependency of the three areas of tension, which evolved out of the social interaction between leaders of the researched partnership.

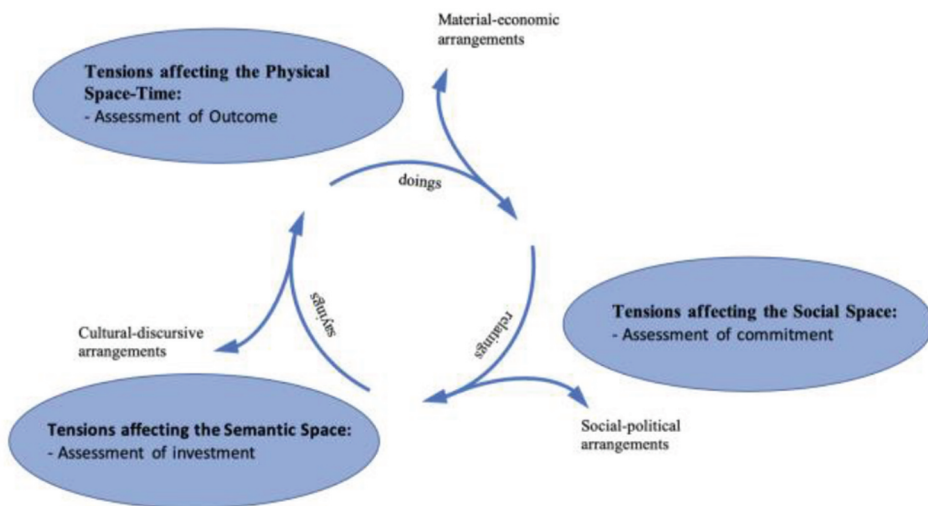


Figure 3. Tensions related to the intersubjective spaces of the internal and external evaluation.

Semantic space and assessment of investment

Discussions in a semantic space require facilitation of the surrounding circumstances, such as time, physical meeting points, dialogue, openness, trust, and bravery. These surrounding circumstances could either contribute toward further development of the collaboration or could conversely lead to internal disunity by creating discussions that are more confusing, irrational, or both (Kemmis et al., 2014). Involving leaders in the process of the internal and external evaluation of the pilot project allowed for a space wherein the language was given meaning. This draws attention to the positive effects of creating a semantic space for discussions and expressing satisfaction regarding how these discussions are connecting and holding all facets of the partnership organization together. In this study, the formal space that was created for discussions concerning assessment of the investments resulted in discussions concerning the purpose of the partnership and methods to gain a united agreement on the execution of those goals. This was highlighted in the findings as both governance levels questioned the aim to disseminate knowledge and experiences or not. To have a united interpretation of the main purpose of the partnership was vital for the assessment of investment, contributing to an understanding of what to invest and for whom. This is in line with Briggs (2010) argument for initiating partnerships, seeking to archive common goals by including a shared belief in the benefits of the partnership.

The meaning of the word *semantic* is ‘in the language’, a basic source of understanding one another. This is especially important when collaborating in a partnership in which the involved organizations do not have a thorough understanding of one another. Language is important for understanding both why and how other organizations are functioning. The involved leaders’ unspoken common interpretation of the term *dissemination* may be related to the encultured knowledge of their uniform professional background. The term encultured knowledge illustrates the importance of a common understanding and a dependence need for a common language (Blackler, 1995), which can be acquired by being socialized into a profession or organization (Ertsås & Irgens, 2014; Irgens, 2007), such as governance levels of educational partnerships. The importance of a common understanding and dependency of a common language affects the functioning of a semantic space through enabling and constraining the social interaction, depending on those involved, the continuity, and their interpretation.

Physical space-time and assessment of outcome

The interaction between what is done and the material-economic arrangements operated in the physical space-time in which discussions regarding the outcome of the collaboration often led to tense situations in the study. The incoherent expectations of the outcome of the partnership directed the attention of the involved leaders toward the main purpose. Situations arose in which the involved leaders’ encultured knowledge was not aligned, evident in their differing expectations about the objectives. The findings revealed a collaboration consisting of several contrasting perspectives on what to expect as an outcome of the partnership, concerning both the individual entities and the unit, which Briggs (2010) refers to as a single or multiple orientations. The involved leaders expected outcomes were not confirmed due to a lack of ownership of the main purpose, resulting

in a disagreement about whether the outcome was supposed to gain the single orientation or the multiple orientations. This became visible in the findings, whereas the involved leaders were struggling to evaluate the effect on their entity, which was conflicting with their perception of the outcome of the other organizations. It is a complex task to assess if outcomes are profiting the singular or multiple entities, as entities are intertwined, and a positive development affects all involved. By achieving a better understanding of the partners, the involved leaders must commit to working toward a common purpose. The sustainability of a partnership being dependent on a unified vision or ambition is in accordance with the findings by Lillejord and Børte (2016).

The involved leaders gained knowledge about the other organizations by interacting and discussing one another's interpretations and sharing experiences. The influence of the social interaction in these situations was mostly grounded in individual perspectives, wherein the single organization's dividends were first on the agenda instead of a multiple organizational orientation, wherein the involved organizations collaborate for the partnerships' best interest. Consequently, by using the perspective of the practice architectures, the findings provided insight that decisions were made with a single orientation and dependent on the involved leaders' preferences, not focused toward a multiple orientation approach, wherein decisions aim at the partnership's interests.

Social space and assessment of commitment

Interaction in the social space, according to Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 4), is affected by social-political arrangements, enabling or constraining how people connect with one another. Developing a united leadership of partnerships between schools and universities not only depends on the individual leaders but also on the structure of the collaboration. This structure is relevant for interpreting the findings as they relate to the general purpose and the further development of the partnership. How well the involved leaders adapted a shared social space influenced how they came to know how to proceed (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 137).

In the findings of the assessment of commitment, differing perspectives were highlighted by the involved leaders, such as their asymmetrical sense of the effort required to create a commitment within their organizations, as the leaders employed within the municipality and the county acknowledged a collective improvement within the schools, as well as a waiver of liability by the university. The university, however, addressed regarded these issues as exploitation and a lack of resources. This indicated the complexity of creating a united commitment within a collaboration consisting of differing organizations with structures that are not united. Similar to the other spaces, the social space was dependent on an agreed interpretation of the main purpose of the partnership so as to create the sense of commitment needed.

Concluding remarks

New insights about the significance of social interaction among leaders of partnerships between schools and universities were gained through highlighting the role of tension in collaboration with the inter-subjective spaces (Kemmis et al., 2014). The analysis emphasized the areas in which central tense situations occurred: assessment of investment,

assessment of outcome, assessment of commitment, and acknowledgment of tensions. Throughout these tense situations, the involved leaders reached new levels of knowledge regarding the overall purpose of the partnership; new ways to act as united entities were discovered; and stronger methods for relating to one another were developed. Tensions of the intersubjective spaces are essential for the lifecycle of a partnership, as all situations are part of a collaborative planning for the future. The involved leaders' collective perceptions and perspectives expand as the partnership's main purpose is revealed through exploring other topics.

The discussion above implies that a collaboration relies on how well the plans and the main purpose of the partnership are aligned within the organizations. The tensions in the study were grounded in discussions regarding the main purpose of the partnership, whereas the discussions of the inter-subjective spaces positively affected the partnership, as it led to an extended focus on the main purpose of the partnership. The data reveal that repeated tensions during social interactions were related to being committed to the partnership's goals and the actions taken to achieve those goals, including varied expectations and interpretations. The involved leaders expressed different perspectives on what goals of the partnership were achieved, how they were achieved, and even how to evaluate the achievements. The data expose a challenge for the involved leaders in creating distance between the partnership's outcome and the specific organizations' outcomes.

It is a necessity for the involved leaders to consider the interests of their organizations as well as those of the partnership when making decisions, as illustrated in [Figure 4](#). Collaborating for the best interest of the partnership will unite the leaders toward the shared purpose. By contrast, if they are pulled toward their own organizations' interests, it will be difficult to agree on a common purpose. Tensions in the inter-subjective spaces of the researched partnership contributed toward a collective collaboration, resulting in

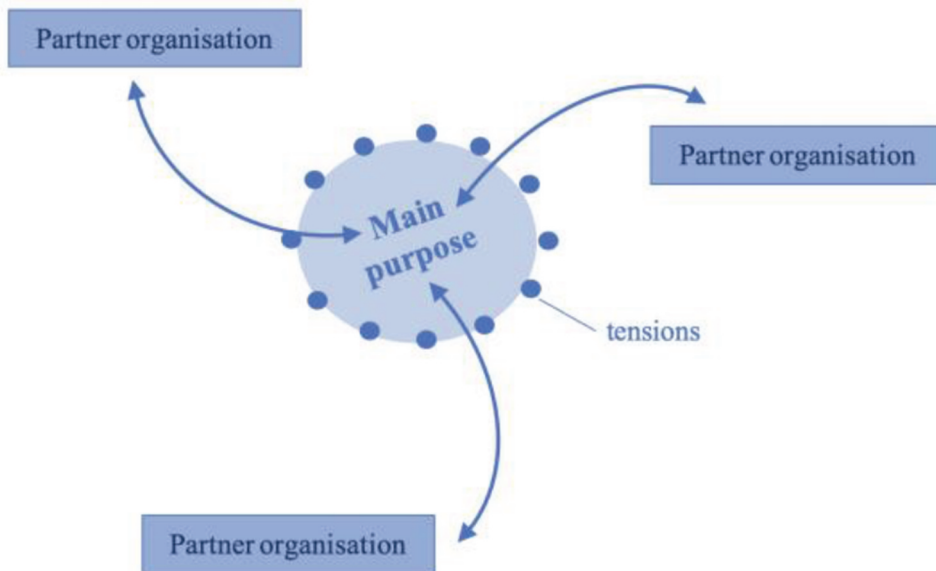


Figure 4. Tensions pulling toward either a common purpose or toward the partner organizations.

a clearer interpretation of the aim of the partnership, which led to a higher degree of alignment at all governance levels.

The findings of this research highlighted how tension within the inter-subjective spaces of social interaction can be both constructive, leading to learning and further development, and constraining in achieving a sustainable collaboration. It is important to embrace the notion that tensions, combined with respect for others, can create constructive processes. If tensions are ignored, leaders may restrain development and focus their energy toward mending the tensions instead of understanding the essence of the tensions.

A limitation of the research project was the focus on one partnership between schools and university in the Norwegian educational context. However, the knowledge developed throughout the longitudinal study is transferable and relevant in contributing to the previously mentioned gap in the research on partnerships between schools and universities. The study is also of relevance to all levels of leadership within education, as schools are involved in many different partnerships, not only with schools and universities, but also with local companies, libraries, museums, and other institutions (Hands, 2015; Paulsen, 2019; Sahlin, 2018). Such collaborations depend on all those involved making an effort to ensure that everyone sees the benefits by building a solid foundation for the collaboration. Further research is needed to gain more knowledge of how partnerships between schools and universities work to create a united interpretation of their main purpose and identify the connection to which practices are in focus during formal meetings at all governance levels of partnerships between schools and universities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Kristin Norum Skoglund is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Teacher Education, assigned to a group working on school development and educational leadership at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, where she lectures in the Master of School Development and Educational Leadership program and the National Principal Education program of Norway. Her research interests focus on collaborative leadership across borders, as partnerships between school and university, with specific emphasis on leadership interaction. Other research projects are focusing on for example, the impact Covid-19 has on future school development.

ORCID

Kristin Norum Skoglund  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1849-979X>

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