

“Capacity building evaluations, initiatives and obstacles across the UK:
Reflections from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland”

Research capacity-building from a Northern Ireland perspective.

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Summary:

Adopting a perspective as both participant and spectator in UK research capacity-building, this paper provides a brief commentary from both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives on the research capacity building initiatives across the UK which are reported within this symposium. Taking these perspectives raises points of critical debate on wider political issues related to knowledge generation and management in Education.

As participant in various UK research capacity-building fora, my perspectives are informed by being involved at local (university and the Northern Ireland Education Research Forum), national (ESRC/TLRP initiatives and the Strategic Forum for Research in Education) and international levels (All-Ireland Capacity building in arts-based educational research, and the International Institution of Qualitative Methods (IIQM) based at Urbana Champaign, USA).

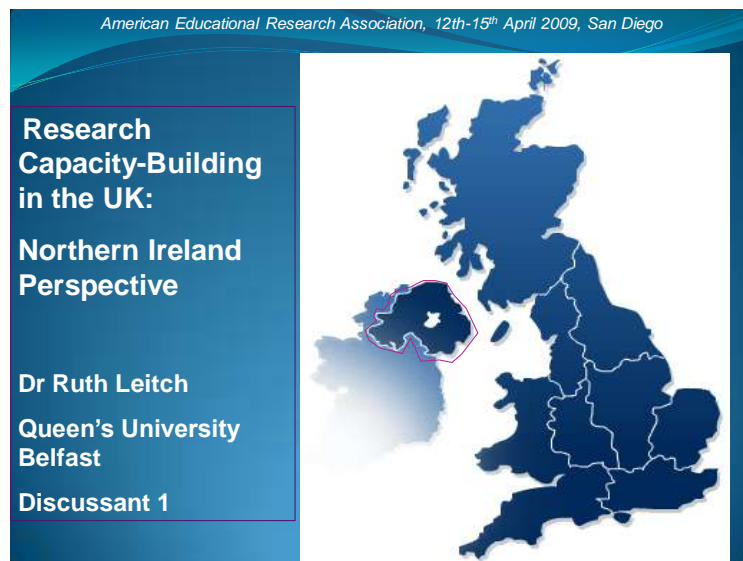
As spectator, I look on at the range of initiatives, such as AERS, TERN and WERN from a country – Northern Ireland – which differs considerably from the other three jurisdictions of the UK by virtue of it being very small, a fact that creates systemic difficulties, such as capacity weakness in both numbers of researchers and the range of research skills available. It is also the only country which has not yet attained financial investment for a research-capacity-building initiative. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Northern Ireland is uniquely distinguished from England, Scotland and Wales, by being a society in transition, emerging from a prolonged period of civil conflict and political instability that has affected its infrastructure and has increased the need for coordinated and specialist research. Northern Ireland clearly needs a system of research development and support, which simultaneously meets local priority research needs, addresses the developmental capacity-building needs of local researchers while at the same time learning from national and international experience.

This personal and professional positioning, which looks outside to initiatives elsewhere in the UK and inside to the demands of knowledge in a society in transformation, allows for some thoughts about challenges associated with research capacity building across the UK. I reflect upon how developmental initiatives aimed at expanding research capacity must take account of political differences and tensions both locally and across the UK, as well as issues concerning size, location, purpose and competition. Attention also needs to be paid to the question of how to assess growth in research capacity and the thorny issue of the relationship between research quality and research capacity.

Introduction: Locating the insider/outsider perspective

I am an educational researcher hailing from one of the two universities in Northern Ireland, the fourth nation and the smallest, demographically and geographically, of the United Kingdom and the one that is separated from the others by the intrusion of St George's channel in the Irish Sea. From this vantage point, where I am located as both participant and spectator, I am acting as the first discussant to the previous papers in this symposium. In this short discussion, what I hope to achieve is two-fold: (i) I aim to offer some critical commentary on issues raised by the previous three presentations, thus stimulating some wider concerns and (ii) in so doing, I will disclose some of the historical and present-day concerns that arise with regard to building educational research capacity in my own country, Northern Ireland, and in which I am implicated, by dint of being a member of the educational research community. These concerns whilst particular to this context, I believe, also raise points of critical debate and departure on wider political issues related to knowledge generation and management in education in the UK and farther afield.

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Arguably, one of the immediate and striking things, arising from the three previous presentations (apart from the fact that they were immeasurably good) is that there is as much that separates as unites us (the four countries/jurisdictions/nations) in the 'United'

Kingdom in terms of research capacity building in education. What is evidently shared are (i) concerns arising from the demographic downturn in educational researchers in higher education – we are getting older, greyer and there are fewer of us (Pollard, 2008)- and (ii) the will or willingness, in some quarters in each of the 4 nations (Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland) to address the issues of building research capacity by recognizing the problems, collaborating and investing energy in developing and supporting initiatives. It is in this latter regard that I view myself as both *participant* and *spectator*, simultaneously insider and outsider. Today I find myself bifurcated in this way (a common postmodern condition) because on the one hand, I attend various forums (fora) within and across the UK and internationally (International Institute of Qualitative Methods(IIQM)) that try to address collaboratively the challenges of research building capacity. Within these, I am *participant* in the sense that I represent Northern Ireland as part of the collective national *will-to-build* capacity (that I alluded to earlier) and contribute to the shared ventures and initiatives through, for example, the Strategic Forum for Research in Education, (SFRE). This is a national body, stimulated into recent existence in anticipation of the void left after the major ESRC/Teaching and Learning Research Programme (that Fowler and Proctor have just referred to). SFRE is concerned to map research capacity issues across the UK.

I am also *spectator* in the sense that adopting my 'independent', local standpoint, I look 'in on' ('across at'), with various degrees of envy, delight and suspicion, the various initiatives that have grown up in recent years in the other three nations in order to stimulate growth in local research capacity - namely, WERN, AERS, TERN, etc. In my conflicted identity, I am therefore standing before you, not truly an impartial observer/discussant - whatever that might be - but as one that is 'a part of' while simultaneously being 'apart from'. My comments as discussant must therefore be received as potentially tainted/skewed by this 21st century schizoid position, for which I make little apology.

New Beginnings.

Let me say a first a little about the Northern Ireland context for educational research.

Northern Ireland differs considerably from the other three jurisdictions, represented in this symposium on a number of counts. It is distinctive by virtue of it having a very small population of approximately 1.7 million. This fact alone creates systemic difficulties such as capacity weaknesses in both numbers of educational researchers and the range of research skills available. Thus far, in Northern Ireland, we have not had an equivalent development such as AERS, WERN, TERN etc funded to kick start or augment our local (faltering) educational research capacity. We have, however, in the past year inaugurated a Northern Ireland Education Research Forum (NIERF), an embryonic talk-shop of sorts, which has been stimulated, unusually perhaps in this instance, by one of (the two) government departments responsible for education in NI, chaired by a senior government policy-maker. Due to a shift in government planning, and the demands for evidence-based policy-making, this department, perhaps for instrumental reasons, recognized its own need for a more co-ordinated approach to educational research. It responded by initiating the Forum, gathering together various stakeholders (including the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)) with the goal of exploring the potential for knowledge-sharing as a first step towards better strategic development for knowledge-generation. Indeed, in the past, there had been various attempts to engage the research community and the policy makers towards a collaborative enterprise but with little success. In 2002, Gardner and Gallagher described the approach to educational research in NI as *ad hoc* and fragmented with no co-ordinated strategy discernible. On the face of it, given its size (geographic and demographic), this fact in itself seems ridiculous; however given its educational complexity and the internal political tensions that have persisted, perhaps not!. It is early days yet to assess whether or not the recently developed Forum, NIERF, will adequately address the issue of coherence which in many senses has been initiated top-down, with no money, some good will to date, considerable talk and with key players declaring a willingness to come out from behind their proverbial institutional barricades. So far, this initiative could be characterized as a tentative and organic, based on networking, and whilst once again aiming to build 'social capital' (after Putnam, 1993) is characteristically rather different than the other country initiatives. Its first step is a series of planned seminars, hosted to share how each of the key stakeholder groups involved in educational research views the purposes, methods, needs and priorities for educational research in this location. Whilst one could adopt a cynical stance, arguing that this proactive move by a government department is driven strictly by their strategic interest, nevertheless it must

also be viewed as a positive opportunity for building research capacity at a systemic level that may yet promote new forms of collaboration, improved infrastructure and increased research investment.

By widening the definition of research capacity building to include not simply the acquisition of skills and capacities of educational researchers but also the policy makers (and indeed other user groups), as Munn (2007) suggested, (and as and referred to by Baird & Baron in their paper), research-capacity building is not only about the supply side, it is also about the capacity of users of research to understand and draw on existing research and in Tom Schuller's (CERI OECD) words *'to be able to formulate effective demands for further research'* (Schuller, 2007:3). In a country the size of Northern Ireland and with its history of political dysfunction and disconnection, developing links between research, policy and practice should be seen as a priority, as the country emerges uneasily from its prolonged period of political conflict. However, while not wishing to burden NIERF with unwarranted expectations at this early stage, we shall have to await for evidence of its impact (if any) in the longer term, possibly calling upon the rigours of an external evaluation, as the WERN initiative (in Wales) wisely saw fit to do, as summarised in Davies' & Salisbury's presentation.

Academic research in Northern Ireland: the tricky issue of capacity versus quality

Second point about context: with regard to academic research, Northern Ireland is served by two universities (Higher Education Institutions), both of which supply teacher education and training through schools of education and both of which are research active. In NI, additionally there are two university colleges providing teacher education that also contribute to the educational research knowledge base. In the recent UK research quality assessment (RAE) exercise (2008), three of the four HEIs were returned for assessment and all three performed relatively successfully on grade average (quantity x quality) as an estimate of quality, given their previous starting points, **but** with relatively small numbers of active researchers; in fact the total number in NI (38) has not been sustained from the previous 2001 exercise¹ (39). This is disappointing given the actual numbers of academics involved in teacher education and the commitment in NI to ensure education is a research-informed profession. With

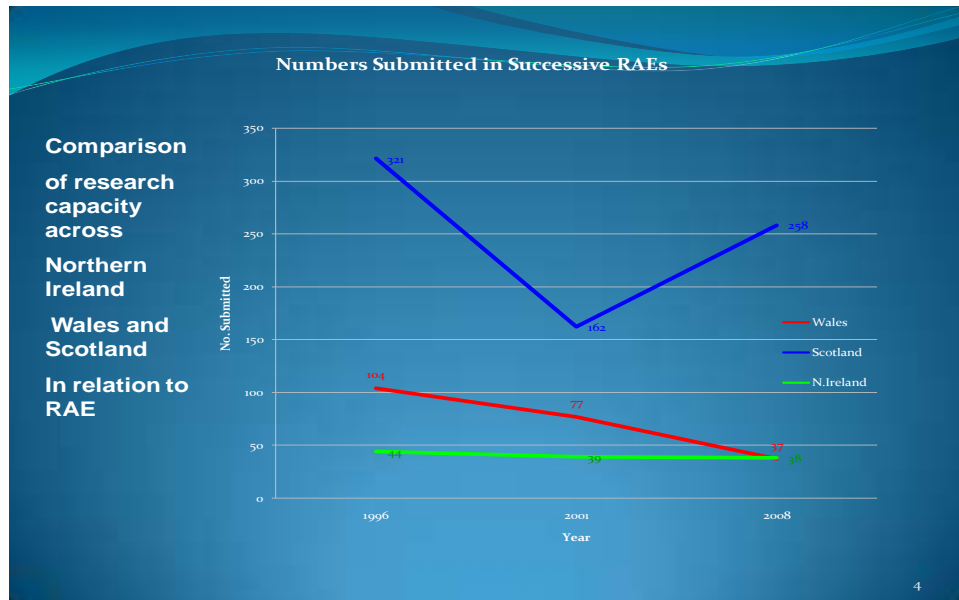
¹ Despite Stranmillis University College submitting a return to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2008, only 38 research active staff were included from NI HEIs in the Education Unit of Assessment, one down on the 2001 entry. While this is comparable to Wales 37 (77 in 2001) who have slumped, it is underwhelming in contrast to Scotland with 258 returned (162 in the previous round).

seven years in the interim between the two assessment exercises, it begs the question, should building educational research capacity by increasing the number of research active staff in education not have been a concerted priority here?

For me, this local concern raises a wider conundrum about the potentially contradictory and complex relationship between the drive for increased capacity on the one hand and, on the other, the drive for high quality, as currently defined within our high-stakes, UK system for research assessment, the outcome being directly linked into core research funding for the HEIs. The drive towards quality often means universities taking a calculated decision to return a highly selective and small number of active good quality researchers as safe bets in order to be assured of a chart-topping success in the final educational research league tables. The tragedy of this tactic, for tactics are surely the name of the research assessment game, is that the remainder of colleagues subsequently become labelled 'not-research active', an identity straitjacket from which it becomes increasingly difficult to release, since the consequences of not being 'returned' commonly means less access to significant levels of university support for research activity and renewal. Whilst not a generality, there are many HEIs that have made this calculation in the recent RAE in the UK and I am sure the case for NI is little different. Seventy percent (70%) of the total university returns to the RAE had fewer than 20 staff and there was a decrease of eighteen percent in total volume across the UK from the 2001 to the 2008 RAE.

Thus, while Schuller (2007) argues that to some extent, these two dimensions – quality and quantity - in educational research are independent of one another and that it is possible for a country to score highly on one but not the other, the penalties for not attending to and strengthening research capacity that has impact within that country's educational system, I argue, are nevertheless obvious. For now, however complex, raising the standards and the capacity of educational research including the actual numbers of skilled researchers is crucially important in Northern Ireland if we want play a significant and influential role in contributing to and improving the knowledge base for the education system in this new era.

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The tiny extent of academic institutions in NI creates a hugely different picture to the patterns of HEI activity in Scotland, England and Wales, where in some cases, at least from an outsider vantage position, there appears to a proliferation of universities and teacher education colleges eg in Scotland (8 institutions returned, 2008) and Wales (6 institutions returned 2008) and where there has been a proactive drive and financial investment by governments in increasing the numbers of educational researchers and improving opportunities for research viz AERS and WERN (also lately TERN in the north of England, to some degree) .²

From my *insider-outsider* position, let me now move to offer a number of critical observations now specifically in relation to the three papers.

Local research tensions

Firstly, what separates us across the 4 counties, apart from stretches of water, notional boundaries and differing strange accents and signposts in indecipherable languages are genuinely different historical, social and political issues and structures that inform and infringe upon education and thus, consequently, upon the purposes and values attached to educational research in these various contexts. This is undoubtedly also entwined

² England numbers are excluded from graph as In 2008 RAE, it has 66 institutions, -19% Cat A FTE (1363) scale was too large to represent.

with various nationalist political agendas in Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland. In each of these three jurisdictions, there is a drive towards independent government, and with this has come distinctive educational policies, priorities, teacher education systems and schooling structures and thus each will have differing research needs and issues of knowledge generation and capacity.

At the same time, these three countries retain connections with and are influenced by and in many instances subject to the politics and policies of Westminster, the seat of UK government. The consequence of these historical, political and structural distinctions within education means that local priority needs for knowledge generation and management are often (though not always) distinctly at odds with national UK identified priorities that particularly relate to England. (And even within England, given its relative uneven distribution of population across north-south 'divide', these tensions of local-national needs can persist). This disjuncture has a knock-on effect for research capacity-building within all four jurisdictions since investment in research initiatives to build capacity are often directed by, related to and judged against the larger political agendas rather than specific needs for educational understanding and change which arise within the local contexts. Added to this, the drive for high quality research outputs (according to the UK research assessment exercise as already mentioned) means that academic researchers must constantly keep their eyes fixed on the broader national/international agendas and horizons rather than working closely with local bodies and policy-makers to address research priorities/agendas at home in order to meet the current quality criteria for national and international excellence in education.

'Soft' monies, as opposed to Council or Charities funded research, and applied research still hold 'uneasy' places in educational research discourse on quality. And while not mutually exclusive, one of the practical consequences of these peculiar local-national-international tensions that ensues is that there can be a lack of sensitivity and understanding between local officials and locally based academic researchers with respect to their various and differing needs, capacities and pressures. Without the opportunities for ongoing discourse, open discussion and 'card-laying-on-tables', local funding for research may often be channeled elsewhere, as has historically been the case in Northern Ireland. In the absence of local seed-funding for and investment in research and its infrastructure, home-growing research capacity can be extremely limited in such a context.

For instance, with an annual budget of less than £400k for educational research, the Department of Education responsible for schooling in NI has until recently dispensed over 50% of its allocated budget to research conducted by researchers from outside the local context, ie mostly England, where expertise and independence are often (erroneously) seen as residing. Opportunities for investing in local research-capacity building have thereby been significantly diminished over the years. Additionally, large sums of public money, as elsewhere in the UK, are being diverted to private consultants for work that could be carried out by academic educational researchers. For instance, in Northern Ireland, in 2002, the percentage expenditure on research and evaluation by the local Department of Education was 80 per cent (academic research) and 20 per cent (consultancy) whereas by 2005, this market-share has changed dramatically to 37 per cent (academic) and 63 per cent (consultancy).

The shift away from funding university-based educational research may be explained, at least in part, by the overhead costs, due to current full-economic costing models (fECs) in the UK, which are now government-mandated for university research bidding. Because this makes research considerably more expensive for funding bodies as they pick up the infrastructural and indirect costs of carrying out research in universities, this fact points once again to indirect problems with research capacity at local levels and within HEIs in particular. This is felt particularly sharply in small countries such as Northern Ireland and perhaps Wales with their limited research purses.

The impact of building research capacity-building through social capital: Example from NI

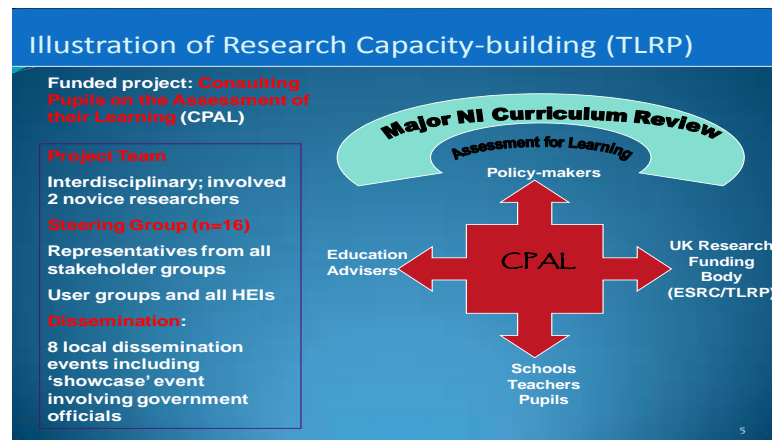
Each of the papers presented this afternoon is based upon an underlying thesis of the relationship between building on social capital theory as propounded by Putnam (1995)³ (and Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) and effective research capacity-building by means of a *social practices* model. The TLRP and subsequently WERN, AERS and TERN have taken research capacity-building beyond the previously restrictive notion that extending individual research skills and improving methodological diversity through training, is

³ Putnam's central thesis is that if a region has a well-functioning economic system and a high level of political integration, these are the result of the region's successful accumulation of social capital (Putnam,1995). Putnam's concept of social capital with that has three components: moral obligations and norms, social values (especially trust) and social networks.

sufficient (Bernstein, 1996). Preference has been given to building networks and communities that learn through engagement in the '*working practices*' of research-in-action and this is at the heart of these projects. Each paper commendably has provided evidence and illustration of ways in which those involved (at all stages of experience and differing roles and capacities) are deemed to have benefited from engaging in these research-capacity building initiatives. In general, the authors have argued that the benefits have been much wider than simply individual researcher professional (skills) enhancement, (though this has been overwhelmingly identified by participants surveyed in all 3 cases), extending to claims of increased quality outputs and renewed commitment for TLRP (Fowler & Proctor), inter-institutional collaboration in the case of WERN (Davies & Salisbury) and the co-production of knowledge between academics and other stakeholders in education for AERS (Baird & Baron).

Using the conceptual framework of social capital (and the expansive-restrictive continuum) Fowler and Proctor illustrate an evidence base for the impact of the major Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) which supported research capacity building across the UK as a priority. The data arising from the evaluation (Fowler & Proctor) led to a greater understanding of how involvement with the TLRP has shaped and influenced capacity-building within the educational research field. Northern Ireland has undoubtedly also benefited from an investment by TLRP but at a differing rate I suspect from the other three countries in the sense that NI had one major project funded in 2000 and three smaller projects, which are called extension projects - extensions of larger TLRP funded projects completed elsewhere in the UK - from 2005-2007. With this critical mass there has been an evident impact and the ripples are ever-expanding hopefully!

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One of the most significant contributions of the TLRP impact in relation to research capacity-building is how, across the four projects, in NI, it contributed to building a network of relationships, the focus of which was research. I illustrate this through the Consulting Pupils in the Assessment of their Learning project, abbreviated to 'CPAL' which I know most intimately since, I was Principal Investigator (Leitch et al. 2007). Obtaining a funded ESRC/TLRP project is considered prestigious and high stakes. Competition was fierce when the calls came out. The criteria for funding were rather different to the standard social science proposal application to a Research Council. A TLRP imperative was that any proposed project should be designed to build capacity by, eg, including less experienced researchers, linking to key stakeholders and having very clear plans for dissemination within the local context as well as nationally and internationally. From the outset, the CPAL achieved this by developing an inclusive and participatory framework: the steering group composition was across-the-board including members from all the HEIs, teachers, charities and policy makers etc; the project itself was designed in collaboration *with* the policymakers, and local authority educational advisers guided sampling frames; the schools and teachers were actively involved and party to the research process and the pupils who were crucial and central to the project were involved proactively as *student researchers*. Finally, dissemination was widespread across stakeholder groups.

Thus while the contribution of CPAL to knowledge about children's rights and assessment was considered to be of high quality, what might be considered even more important was the way in which the project embedded a social network of relevant and interested parties which genuinely contributed to professional learning about research for all involved provided a sense of ownership, added significant value to the project and

its outcomes. The sense of partnership has extended beyond the life of the project and was a prime example of the 'social practices' model in action..

From my *insider* perspective (insider in the sense of having been involved in the TLRP since 2005), I endorse the commitment, intellectual and interpersonal investment and sense of moral purposes that has led to these confirmed outcomes. I also retain a somewhat more skeptical viewpoint as an *outsider*, from across the water. At this point, this outside position leads me to a number of rhetorical reflections which hint at some of the shortcomings of the current conceptualization of a 'social practices' model for research capacity building:

Some critique of a 'social practices' models

Reflection 1: size matters!

A 'social practices' model emphasises collaboration, networking, and inclusivity based on good interpersonal communication, all of which, like motherhood and apple pie, is difficult to disclaim. From the AERS, WERN and TLRP evaluations, these dimensions are wholeheartedly endorsed as central to the success and potential sustainability of the research capacity building ventures. Nevertheless, from a NI perspective, I have a residual concern that relates to size. Size is important! – in the respect that, in small countries, such as NI and here we have only two universities, it is difficult to get away from the harsh realities of a competitive market mentality. With small local research budgets, the high stakes of the RAE and consequent funding models, competition and the need to survive can outweigh the will to co-operate even when joint research ventures might improve quality. While some examples of collaborative good practice exist in this locale, my supposition is that this fundamental tension may well exist elsewhere in the UK (and indeed on occasion between the four nations) in relation to imperatives over economic advantage, league tables and successful funding – factors that need seriously to be taken into consideration.

Reflection 2: what about the outgroups!

While valuing the utility of social practices model, I am going to trouble its application a little further. In the case of TLRP, despite its undoubted and

demonstrable success and scale (700 researchers with their ripples) all delivering a vast array of outcomes, I wish to posit that the very power of such a social grouping created a seeming less porous boundary than may have been experienced from inside the group. 'Social identity theory' (Turner and Tajfel, 1982, 1986 etc) asserts that group membership creates ingroup/ self-categorization and enhancement in ways that favour the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Even with best intentions, developing a powerful, high-profile and effective social grouping such as TLRP has an unwitting side-effect of creating an 'out' group or outgroups. Belonging to TLRP was/is indeed highly prestigious, it affords significant 'expansive' opportunities for conferences, meetings, resources workshops, as Fowler and Proctor attest. Unintentionally and unavoidably, however, by dint of its very existence and success, TLRP also created for some significant pockets of academics and researchers on the outside, a sense of being excluded or at least 'not belonging', and being an outgroup. Whilst anecdotal, I have overheard many asides and allusions to TLRP as a 'club' or having the feel of a club, to which one either had membership or did not.

Thus, despite its huge capacity to 'bond' social capital and indeed in many instances to 'bridge' social capital between a vast array of individuals and organizations (after Putnam, 1993), the 'shadow' side of a group like TLRP is that it can inadvertently inhibit capacity-growth beyond its Pale, by alienating others, must also to be taken into account in the final scoresheet. I have no wish in any way to detract from TLRP's achievements and, at the end of the day, the balance sheet for TLRP shows a growth on any number of counts in the field of education well in excess of any deficit it may have incurred. Nevertheless, evaluations of the success of such initiatives (and this, I would lay at the feet of WERN and AERS too) in terms of the widest goals of regional research capacity-building should wisely take more account of the views of those, who are on the edges or margins of their projects, the potential outgroup and who may consciously or unconsciously undermine the common purpose of group venture. The inclusion of these views may also contribute important lessons for future developments.

Thus, while each of the papers presented, indeed each of the projects, is to be commended for its commitment to evaluating the impact of the initiative to

assess growth in research capacity, in each nation, this task is not an easy one. At present the dominant model of evaluation, even when an external evaluator is involved (WERN), tends towards self-evaluation and even self-report, (notwithstanding Fowler & Proctor's analysis of collaborative publications). Part of the challenge for the future and, on the strength of what has been achieved to date, is to develop more sensitive and multi-dimensional models and methods of evaluation for assessing growth in research capacity at local level and seek to extend our understanding of how social practices supplement /support or inhibit developments in terms of specific outcomes to support the knowledge generation needs of each country and the UK overall.

Conclusion: towards a future for research capacity in NI

Significantly, Northern Ireland is a society in transition, emerging from a prolonged period of conflict and political volatility but with ongoing concerns for the stability and longevity of the hard-won peace. Education in Northern Ireland faces many challenges over the next decade. It is in a period of transition and restructuring and with this comes uncertainty. Specific challenges include pressures for rationalization of school provision, greater collaboration, broader entitlement, improved teaching, learning and assessment, effective school leadership, sound financial management, ways of achieving greater social equality and inclusion and higher levels of attainment. In order to meet these expectations there is a need to increase the evidence base on many aspects of education around strategic priorities and to do this we will need a strong, vibrant research base.

Given the current patterns and infrastructure, there is an imperative to invest in building and extending research capacity, and this will mean increasing numbers of methodologically sound and versatile researchers while simultaneously committing to an expanded version and understanding of research capacity building based on a dialogue between the government and the researcher community, eg through NIERF – an understanding that none of us can improve the knowledge base of education on our own in NI. So, despite some of the critical questions arising from my insider-outsider perspectives, concerning the conceptual fullness/utility of the social practices model, I

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consider we have a lot to be inspired by, as well as cautious of, in terms of what has been achieved elsewhere through WERN, AERS etc. We have also a lot to be appreciative of, in terms of what TLRP has contributed recently to NI's research capacity and what the UK Strategic Forum for Research in Education (SFRE) is set to extend and support. Equally, on balance, we have a lot to contribute from our own rather unique, (if somewhat isolated) vantage point.

Ultimately, our destiny in this regard, as with the peace process, remains in our own hands!

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