*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education on 09/04/2014, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1359866X.2014.902425*

The politics of collaboration: Discourse, identities and power in a school-university partnership in Hong Kong

This article reports on how a team of teacher educators from a university, acting as facilitators, supported different English language teachers in conducting a school-based action research project as a practice of professional development in the context of reform in language assessment in Hong Kong. In particular, the paper problematises how the facilitators and teachers negotiated and managed identities whilst engaged in a collaborative action research project. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews. Critical discourse analysis was used to examine the textual data. A key finding was that identities were neither fixed nor finite in the context of collaboration, but were negotiated within and against a range of contextually salient discourses. A major contribution of the paper lies in its examination of the complexities of negotiating identities when educators from two different institutional cultures collaborate. This critical examination of school-university collaboration challenges the discourse in the professional development literature that advocates this practice as ‘good’ and ‘necessary’ for teachers. The article suggests that collaboration has to be understood within broader sociocultural contexts to identify the interplay of forces that shape relations, identities and practices constructed.

Keywords: collaborative action research; identities; continuing professional development practices; critical discourse analysis; school-university collaboration

# 1. Introduction

The notion of teachers and researchers working collectively to build and sustain a professional knowledge base for teaching has received much attention from education researchers in the past four decades ([Atweh, Kemmis, & Week, 1998](#_ENREF_2); [Burns, 1999](#_ENREF_5); [Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999](#_ENREF_13); [Elliott, 1991](#_ENREF_15); [Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell, Mockler, Ponte, & Ronnerman, 2013](#_ENREF_22); [Johnston, 2009](#_ENREF_23); [Miller, 2001](#_ENREF_31); [Oja & Smulyan, 1989](#_ENREF_34); [Stenhouse, 1975](#_ENREF_38); [Tsui, Edwards, & Lopez-Real, 2009](#_ENREF_40); [Watson & Fullan, 1992](#_ENREF_42)), going back to the 1960s in the UK when school-university collaboration around action research was presented as a practice of professional development to encourage teachers to do school-based research and thus to change the positioning of teachers from research subjects to co-researchers ([Stenhouse, 1975](#_ENREF_38)). Since then, collaborative action research (CAR), involving teachers from schools working alongside university researchers, has become a relatively common practice in the professional development of teachers in a wide range of teaching contexts ([Burns, 2009](#_ENREF_6); [Johnston, 2009](#_ENREF_23)). But while there has been considerable research published advocating the merits of CAR as professional development for teachers, fewer researchers have examined the practice through a critical lens; and while the issues that *have* been highlighted in the CAR literature include how university researchers (fail to) acknowledge the research contributions made by teachers-as-researchers, and how university researchers and teachers negotiate and manage their identities whilst engaged in collaborative action research ([Johnston, 2009](#_ENREF_23); [Stewart, 2006](#_ENREF_39)), these studies were conducted in an adult TESOL context, while collaboration as an overall area of research is undertheorised ([Davison, 2006](#_ENREF_14); [Stewart, 2006](#_ENREF_39)). In particular, there has been little by way of theoretically-informed critical analysis of how school teachers and university researchers negotiate and manage identities in the context of school-university collaboration.

This paper – situated in the context of a school-university collaborative action research project conducted in Hong Kong, at a time when key educational reform was being introduced in secondary schools, with school-university collaboration seen as a way to build teachers’ capacity to implement new assessment practices in English language classrooms – provides such a critical examination of school-university collaborative practices.

In common with predominant practice elsewhere, the rationale presented for greater school-university collaboration in Hong Kong policy documentation draws on a wide range of discourses, including those of community of practice ([Wenger, 1998](#_ENREF_43)) and teacher empowerment ([Carr & Kemmis, 1986](#_ENREF_7)). Thus, for example, in Hong Kong’s government document regulating teacher professional development practices, *Towards a Learning Profession*, published by the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualification ([ACTEQ, 2003](#_ENREF_1)), school-university collaboration, involving ‘sharing’ and ‘teamwork’, is constructed as an essential ingredient of effective teaching:

Collaboration and networking are essential in improving teacher effectiveness ([ACTEQ, 2003, p. 7](#_ENREF_1)).

Also, teachers as professionals believe in sharing and teamwork. They believe that it is important for teachers to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with school administrators and colleagues, with students and their parents ([ACTEQ, 2003, p. 8](#_ENREF_1)).

Such aims reflect laudable aspirations, typical of CAR, to change the world for the better by developing improved shared professional practices and enhancing shared understandings of these practices ([Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 43](#_ENREF_24)). Yet these aims also underplay the constitutive role of power relations in the construction of knowledge and truth ([Foucault, 1980](#_ENREF_17)) and the way such power relations operate through ‘technologies of the self’ ([Foucault, 1997](#_ENREF_18); [Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988](#_ENREF_30)), which “means that people are always complicit in the construction of asymmetrical relations of power and assigning differential values to various subject positions, even when they are attempting to challenge or subvert oppressive power relations (or those asymmetries)” ([Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 47](#_ENREF_24)). However, while we need to be mindful of the dangers of complicity implicit in resistance, involving the mere inversion or reversal of power relations, we should also be wary of totalising power and thinking that its determinations, once in place, hold sway for all times. As Kamberelis & Dimitriadis go on to argue (p. 47), “we are not determined even if our agency is limited and constrained” and to think otherwise is to essentialise power; it is perhaps more productive to see power “in terms of a decentred ‘centre’, a structure which is at the same time unstable and ambiguous, and subject to moments of symbolic crisis” – moments that offer at least some scope for exercising critical agency ([Newman, 2007, p. 59](#_ENREF_33)). Recognition of the pervasive but not all-determining presence of power relations in collaboration ([Brown & Danaher, 2008](#_ENREF_4)) and consideration of its role in shaping identities in CAR are a key contribution of this paper .

# 2. Exploring Identities in CAR

Typically, collaborative action research is presented as an awareness raising activity for education professionals and positions teachers as critical practitioners working with expert university researchers to develop a critical understanding of their own professional practice, a perspective that echoes Schön’s ([1983](#_ENREF_36), [1987](#_ENREF_37)) construction of teachers as reflective practitioners. This construction of collaborative action research assumes that learning as part of professional learning communities is a professional commitment, thus positioning teachers as responsible for improving practice. The role of the university researcher in the CAR literature is thus to support teachers in translating research into practice and interrogating practice through research, while the role of the school teacher is to improve practice through reflection and research and to ensure that such research is ‘grounded’ in teachers’ and students’ experiences in schools and classrooms.

The CAR literature argues that research based on this sort of school-university collaboration is more ‘empowering’ and ‘equitable’, since teachers are positioned as co-researchers rather than as passive consumers of research ([Burns, 1999](#_ENREF_5); [Carr & Kemmis, 1986](#_ENREF_7); [Elliott, 1991](#_ENREF_15); [Kincheloe, 2003](#_ENREF_25); [Oja & Smulyan, 1989](#_ENREF_34); [Stenhouse, 1975](#_ENREF_38); [Whitehead & McNiff, 2006](#_ENREF_44)). Such perspectives are characteristic of research driven by an emancipatory, consciousness-raising and praxis-oriented ethic, and guided by master signifiers like enlightenment, empowerment, participation, collaboration, consensus, and democracy ([Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, pp. 36-44](#_ENREF_24)). However, within such perspectives there is insufficient attention to how existing identities and power relations always mediate and constitute praxis and hence how collaboration is always going to be shaped by the historical and contemporary power and status inequalities that exist between university facilitators and teachers. So, on the one hand, the CAR literature argues that collaborative action research is ‘good’ for educators because it transforms teachers into reflective practitioners; yet, on the other hand, the complexities of *how* teachers negotiate their identities as reflective practitioners and *how* facilitators negotiate their identities as critical friends in the power-laden institutional contexts of CAR practices are not explicitly addressed.

In order to address these complexities, this article draws on notions of differentially defined, discursively shaped and socially situated identities. From this theoretical perspective, identities are seen as differential, in that they are reliant on a system of differences ([Connolly, 2002](#_ENREF_12); [Laclau, 2000](#_ENREF_28)); as discursively shaped, in that they are constantly created and negotiated through a wide range of competing discursive formations; and as socially situated, in that they require the capacity to be recognised as a certain ‘kind of person’ in a given sociopolitical context (author) ([2008](#_ENREF_10), [2009](#_ENREF_11); [Gee, 2005](#_ENREF_19), [2012](#_ENREF_20)). Furthermore, our understanding of identities assumes that we have multiple identities, reflecting the ways we live in multiple and changing spatio-temporal contexts, and that any one of such multiple identities may be in tension or in alignment with others. For example, the university researcher identity may be in tension or in alignment with the action researcher facilitator identity.

# 3. Research Method

Data collected for this paper were part of a larger two-year study (2006-2008) exploring collaborative practice within a public funded school-university collaborative action research project. The action research project was led by a team of teacher educators from a university in Hong Kong with the aim of supporting secondary English language teachers’ capacity to develop and implement school-based assessment, a key element of Hong Kong’s *New Senior Secondary Curriculum*. The data that form the focus of this paper come from semi-structured interviews, conducted with one of the university researchers (Anna) and one of the school teachers (Carol) involved in the CAR project. Anna and Carol were working together as one of a number of collaborative researcher-teacher teams and they both agreed to participate in this study (ethical approval was obtained for the research from the University of X’s Ethics Committee). The first author conducted a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with Anna and Carol to explore their identity construction within the CAR project. The interviews, which can be described as ‘discursive interviews’, in that they were characterised by attentiveness to issues of power ([Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 156](#_ENREF_26)), were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Tools from critical discourse analysis (CDA) were used to analyse the content of the interviews to tease out key identity discourse markers ([‘ways of being' - Gee, 2005](#_ENREF_19)) in the texts. The following questions were used to guide the coding and analysis of the data:

* What is the facilitator’s/teacher’s sense of the self as a collaborator in collaborative action research?
* How do the facilitator and the teacher recognise the self and others in the CAR project?
* What kinds of identities are made explicit in the texts?
* How do the facilitator and the teacher negotiate their subjectivity in the discourse?

The analysis focuses on analysing the linguistic manifestations of identity in the texts to track the speakers’ discursive ways of being. The approach assumes that texts, whether in spoken or written mode, have an important role in constructing people’s identity because who we are is partly a matter of what we speak and what we write ([Fairclough, 2003](#_ENREF_16); [Luke, 1996](#_ENREF_29)). Fairclough argues that our identities have two analytically distinct aspects, namely social identity and personality (personal identity), where *social identity*, which is constructed through the process of socialisation, refers to the social roles we enact in a particular context, while *personal identity* refers to our pre-linguistic, embodied sense of ourselves as individuals, which provides the basis for agentic interventions in social identity ([Fairclough, 2003, pp. 160-161](#_ENREF_16)). There are parallels here with Baktinian notions of authoritative (social identity) versus internally persuasive (personal identity) discourses ([Bakhtin, 1981](#_ENREF_3)), or indeed with the Lacanian distinction between the *symbolic*, which “interpellates us into the normative regulations of the social order”, the *imaginar*y, which “founds our perceptions of ourselves as individuals who possess unique personalities and the potential for exceptional existential trajectories”, and the *real*, which “intrudes into our lives as an unruly vortex of bodily jouissance” ([Ruti, 2012, p. 1](#_ENREF_35)). In each of these theorisations, the meaning of human being – identity – is a complex and ongoing process of becoming, shaped through dialectical interaction between disparate elements – social and individual, linguistic and material, conscious and unconscious – that comprise the self.

In the data analysis, we looked for manifestations of this dialectic process within identification in textual features such as modality and evaluation. Modality is concerned with examining the degree to which people commit themselves to (or believe in) the truth of what they say or write, as well as the degree of obligation or necessity involved in their spoken or written utterances ([Fairclough, 2003, pp. 165-167](#_ENREF_16)). In the context of the CAR case study, this entails examining what speakers commit themselves to when they make statements about the collaboration process and practice, as well as how questions are framed and how demands or offers are made in the email exchanges and the meeting transcripts. It also involves analysing the degree of tentativeness, confidence or assertiveness in the statements of the teachers and facilitators. Evaluation, by contrast, is concerned with examining the values which people commit themselves to in texts. Evaluations are manifested in linguistic choices such as the metaphors and vocabulary used in questions/statements (knowledge exchange), as well as the way demands and offers (activity exchange) are made in the text ([Fairclough, 2003, p. 167](#_ENREF_16)). We also looked for metaphors used by the teachers and facilitators to represent the self and others in the collaborative action research project, for example, ‘mother’ and ‘child’.

4. Negotiating the Facilitator’s Identities in the CAR Project

In this section, we examine five extracts of interviews with Anna to analyse how she negotiated her intrapersonal identities as a CAR facilitator in the case study. In Extract 1, Anna begins by describing her roles as a facilitator in the CAR project, and the specific support she gave to teachers in both the face-to-face meetings and online (emails):

(Extract 1)

Interviewer: What types of support have you provided for the teachers since the launch of the project?

Anna: I gave the teachers lots of information on feedback, examples of research plans, surveys and all sorts of materials. We did a few tasks (in the workshops), even with data analysis, even though they might not have to go into that. Before the interview, there were several emails going back and forwards. They sent their research plans and I made comments, quite tentative about it because you know *I am not used to doing this sort of thing.* I don’t want to force people to do things they don’t want to do! I would send them the email and you would follow up with a phone call. I think those phone calls, that personal input has really helped make all of the groups really gelled with us, the relationship between the University and the school and the research team in each school, I think the phone calls really made a difference…*It’s not a question of you and us, but a question of we are co-investigating this together!*

(Interview, 28 March, 2007)

As part of a team of university researchers, Anna was positioned as an authoritative expert. Yet in this excerpt Anna begins by emphasising the different types of support she had provided to the teachers. She thus foregrounds a professional identity as a caring teacher educator ([Murray, 2006](#_ENREF_32)), as someone who provides support to teachers and is responsible for ensuring that the teachers, as first time action researchers, had adequate input to do the action research project. She also foregrounds her lack of experience in both doing and facilitating action research, thus downplaying the identity of a research expert (*“I’m not used to doing this sort of thing”*). As a non-expert, Anna emphasises the importance of making the teachers feel that they have ownership of the project, thus asserting the identity of a democratic facilitator. From the perspective of this identity, she underlines the importance of adopting a personal and collegial approach when communicating with the teachers and the school so that everyone feels s/he is part of the team (“*It’s not a question of you and us, but a question of we are co-investigating this together!”*). In drawing on the identity resources of a caring teacher educator and a democratic facilitator to mitigate the authoritative identity of an expert researcher, Anna exemplifies how social identity construction is a process of negotiation, one replete with tensions between differing components of identity.

Anna continues to assert her professional identity as a caring teacher educator in the following extract, employing a specifically gendered metaphor:

(Extract 2)

It’s a bit like a mother with a child. If you play with the child to begin with, then that child can go off and play on their own and be quite happy. But if you refuse to play with that child, that child will want your attention and need your attention more and more. So it’s much better to work with them [teachers] at the beginning, to give them the confidence, so that they can go off and as they’re doing now and be independent.

(Interview, March 28, 2007)

Carver and Pikalo ([2008](#_ENREF_8)) argue that metaphors inform and structure our thinking in discourse, functioning as discursive hubs in the interplay of texts and contexts. In comparing her relationship with the teachers in the collaborative action research project to that of a mother and child, Anna seems to advocate social constructivist theories of learning. For just as the child’s capacity for independent play is scaffolded though parent-child interaction, so the support provided by the facilitator enables the teachers’ capacity to work independently in action research. However, whilst reinforcing the construction of Anna’s identity of a nurturing, caring teacher educator that we saw in the previous excerpt, the maternal metaphor deployed here also suggests power inequalities between the expert facilitator and the novice teachers, literally infantilising the teachers by construing them as children. The maternal metaphor is thus in tension with the democratic values espoused above. The issue of power is also evident in tensions over the establishment of shared-ownership of the research, particularly in relation to decisions over how much support to give to the teachers without ‘hijacking’ ([Elliott, 1991](#_ENREF_15)) their agenda:

(Extract 3)

Interviewer: Would you say the teachers that we are working with are experiencing quite a lot of autonomy?

Anna: I have to say I was quite worried when one group I did give lots of autonomy to is the one group we haven’t heard from!! Also the one group that we felt the two of them, they came in late (forum 3 only), only to one forum, they didn’t seem to know what they were doing or want to come, so it could mean that they just didn’t really want to do it in the first place. I was concerned about the comments I gave them, even though it was “Would you consider doing this or doing that?”. I felt what they needed was someone to tell them these are all the things you are interested in looking at, but it’s too many. So I didn’t actually say you should do this or you should do that. I was just trying to untangle things for them.

(Interview, March 28, 2007)

Here we see Anna struggling over how to support the teachers without going so far as to tell them what they ‘should’ do. On the one hand, Anna clearly felt uncomfortable enacting a directive role as a group leader in the project; but on the other hand, she felt it was her role to provide information and support to the teachers in order to encourage and enable them to initiate a feasible research activity for themselves. Her frustration – and her ambivalent identity as caring teacher versus proactive leader – are signalled by the emphatic (indicated in the transcript by the double exclamation marks) declaration that this “is the one group we haven’t heard from!!”. In extract 4 below, we see Anna continuing to negotiate her identities as project leader as she struggles with her discomfort and worries about the *tension* between her roles as a university information provider, handing down details about the project to the other(ised) teacher-participants, *versus* the role she is clearly more comfortable with as a facilitator and negotiator of roles and responsibilities in the collaborative action research project:

(Extract 4)

I felt quite uncomfortable during the forum because I felt first I was teaching in a way I don’t usually teach, such as using a Power Point and out of my comfort zone and the dynamics between the groups. No connection and lots of silent periods. I was a bit worried about how everyone would become cohesive with each other in the research teams in schools and with the University and how each school team would react to one another, I was really quite worried about that.

(Interview, March 28, 2007)

Recalling this, her first meeting (held at the university) with Carol, Jennifer and other school teachers, Anna worries about the lack of connection and the silences that indicate that the cohesion and group rapport she sees as critical for constructing a group identity are absent. As part of these anxieties, she notes her struggle to enact the role of a facilitator in the CAR project, reflected in her concerns about her positioning as expert and her didactic and non-dialogic presentation style, which she clearly felt was different from her ‘normal’ practice.

These tensions suggest that Anna was navigating the construction of her identity as the collaborative action research facilitator whilst drawing on a range of discourses to make sense of *who she is* as a facilitator, illustrating the negotiated nature of identity. In the following extract, we see how such negotiated identities are constructed relationally as we see Anna locating her identity in relation to other facilitators in the team:

(Extract 5)

Interviewer: how do you think your style differs from other group leaders?

Anna: The difference is perhaps I am a lot more tentative and a lot less experienced in doing this sort of thing. So I am learning as everybody else is learning, but I think about how to do action research and what it means to be in the process. Probably someone like Mark or Sue who have done this sort of thing before, they see the reason why they are doing all these things, they see the big picture, whereas I am still at the bottom trying to find out what the big picture is!... I feel I am at that stage where they’re at, but doing slightly different things, but I can respond to the teachers at a much more equal level, not just someone from the University, but someone trying to find out about something, so perhaps that helps other people [teachers] to relax. Also I also feel insecure about it, so I want to give the support to other people so they don’t feel that way.

(Interview, March 28, 2007)

Here we see Anna constructing her identity through the similarities and differences between her and the other group leaders in the CAR project. As a novice, she emphasises her role as a learner in the action research project but turns this potential weakness into a strength by arguing that she did things differently, including providing a high level of support for the teachers and working with them as more of an equal, “*not just [as] someone from the University, but someone trying to find out about something*”.

Overall, the analysis of the interviews with Anna suggests a considerable degree of tension and personal struggle in negotiating her identities in the CAR project. In particular, her desire to enact the role of a caring, supportive and democratic facilitator was in direct tension with her positioning as an expert and authoritative group leader. These tensions are made explicit in her use of the maternal metaphor, thereby positioning the teachers as children, and in the frustrations she expressed in relation to her attempts to foster independence in the teachers. In this way, Anna’s ambiguities exemplify the tensions and contradictions between solidarity and dominance inherent in the discourse of collaborative practices in contemporary modern society. Collaboration is both supportive and oppressive, involving commitment and confusion, a practice literally embodying the contradictions inherent in the notion of empowering and emancipating others, particularly in the context of the insitutionalised status differentials between school and university educators.

## 5. Negotiating the Teacher-Researcher’s Identities in CAR

In this section, we examine the discursive construction of the teacher-researcher identities in collaborative action research, focusing on the construction of the intrapersonal identity of a teacher, Carol, who participated in the CAR project and worked closely with Anna. The analysis draws on data from interviews with Carol in which she discusses her perceptions of the action research experience in the CAR project.

In Extract 6, Carol reflects on the action research project experience and why her school participated in CAR projects with tertiary institutions:

(Extract 6)

Interviewer: What attracted you to the project?

Carol: Because it was somewhat similar to the work we do with the students at the school. So I think it was useful and at that time I think I had three projects so two with the university and one with HKIEd [Hong Kong Institute of Education] so not just this university. Well, we have another project but we just finished after three years...It’s somewhat related as I am the SBA [school-based assessment] coordinator so I think the feedback (from the university researchers) is useful...because I think we can adapt it to our school curriculum.

(Interview, March 14, 2008)

In this excerpt, Carol foregrounds her institutional identity as the school’s school-based assessment coordinator, with participation in research deemed useful to the extent that it complements this role and assists in tasks like developing curriculum and working with students. Her evaluation of this usefulness is moderate and measured rather than enthusiastic or effusive, with the hedging strategy (‘I think’) serving to distance Carol’s identity from the CAR project and place it firmly in the school. This reading is reinforced by the analysis of Extract 7, where Carol’s identification as a participant in the action research project derives its value from the access it afford to professional development that will support her primary identity as a teacher:

(Extract 7)

Interviewer: Did you feel it was a good professional development experience?

Carol: Yes, it was a great experience. Because we seldom have the chance to stand before...teachers of different schools and other countries...so it was a great experience…We can share ideas and then we can get some ideas from teachers of other schools…We learnt a lot from other professional bodies and I think that we can use what we’ve learnt on our students…Maybe professional development for ourselves...I enjoyed the conference because it was a new experience for me standing in front of adults because I am just used to standing in front of students the younger ones, but not adults! And then all the experts, so it was for me a new experience. And for the students we now know how to give feedback to them and how to make them understand how to give peer feedback.

(Interview, June 1, 2008)

Here Carol’s evaluation of the usefulness of her participation in the project highlights the opportunities to meet, interact and exchange ideas with other teachers. The interactions with the academics, by contrast, seem to be something of an afterthought, or an added bonus (‘And then all the experts’). She returns at the end of the extract to the payoff for her students back at school, thus reaffirming her primary identification as a teacher. Interestingly, her emphasis on providing feedback to students echoes the overwhelming priority of Hong Kong teachers in relation to their mentoring work with pre-service student teachers ([Kwan & Lopez‐Real, 2005](#_ENREF_27)). The priority given to feedback is also evident in Extract 8 in which Carol evaluates her action research project and discusses the problems she and her colleagues faced in doing the project, during one of the sharing forums for teachers in the project:

(Extract 8)

Maybe I can talk about the problems that we face in doing this research. Because students have expectations about (teacher) feedback that means we want them to think about what they can get from feedback or why feedback was so important to them, but the problem is that maybe because all (the feedback) these are given in English. Sometimes I think the students may not really understand all these items. I think maybe if we can give them some Chinese translation then it’s much better and they really understand what feedback is and then they can prioritise them. Then they can think which one is important because the purpose of this research, or one of the purposes, is that we want students to get benefit from feedback, how they can do better group interaction in the next cycle, so I think that’s the first problem all right. They may not really understand these items in English…We are expecting maybe too much from the students.

(Forum 4 presentation, June 16, 2007)

In the above extract, Carol again foregrounds her institutional identities as a school-based assessment coordinator and as an English language teacher as she shares issues around the provision of feedback in classroom-based assessment practices. Carol begins her contribution tentatively (‘Maybe I can talk about…’). She then legitimates the ‘problem’ that she introduces on the grounds of the ‘expectations’ of her students and the need for feedback to be intelligible to them. This empirical reality provides an implicit counterweight to the official line (evident in the English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide ([CDC, 2007](#_ENREF_9)) ) that privileges communicating with students in English. In a sense, she is using her experience in the officially sanctioned and high status action research project as a warrant for providing feedback in Chinese, something that is common practice in schools in Hong Kong but that is officially seen as transgressive. That is, she is using the legitimation offered by participation in research culture to speak back to the current ‘research-informed’ hegemony in the field.

So far, we have seen Carol foregrounding her institutional identities as the SBA coordinator and English language teacher, with her ultimate justification and goal being to help students improve. Perhaps as a consequence, Carol also frequently emphasised the challenges of doing research as a teacher, while rationalising her participation in the collaborative action research as a professional development activity for teachers in schools that may bring potential benefits for students in the classroom.

# 6. Discussion

The analysis of the data in this study has shown that identity formation in the context of the collaborative action research project is multiple, shifting and complex, a site of tension rather than a source of stability. In tracing Anna’s (the CAR facilitator) identity, we can see how she struggles to harmonise the role of a caring, supportive and democratic facilitator with her positioning within the project as an expert and authoritative group leader, while Carol persistently returns to her classroom teacher identity, resisting the attempts by the collaborative action research project to position her as co-researcher. The analysis also shows that this construction of identity occurs within the context of broader social, political and economic discourses operating in society, which intersect in complex ways and which are themselves replete with complexities. Thus, university Education staff are pulled between competing identifications as teacher educators or as educational researchers, while teachers struggle with the differing demands of academic, pastoral and collegial pressures. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, our data provide evidence of differing dimensions of identity constructed in conflict with each other. Table 6.1 summarises some of the ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ facilitation practices as construed in Anna’s interview texts:

Table 6.1: Desirable/Undesirable Facilitation Practices as Constructed by Anna

'Insert Table 1 here'

The oppositions in the table suggests that Anna was not just constructing her own identity in the texts, ‘context free’ as it were, but rather that she struggled to balance identity of the group-leader and facilitator within which she was positioned by the university with her own desires to be perceived as an egalitarian and democratic facilitator as first among equals. She also struggled between the non-directive approach identified as ‘good practice’ for facilitating collaborative practices in teacher education literature ([Burns, 1999](#_ENREF_5); [Carr & Kemmis, 1986](#_ENREF_7); [Elliott, 1991](#_ENREF_15)) and the high levels of support and input expected by the teachers she was working with.

In contrast to Anna’s struggles, Carol was more consistent in actively defining her identity, resisting the identity of the researcher as defined by the university researchers and retaining her primary identifications as a classroom teacher and school-based assessment coordinator with pragmatic rather than theoretical concerns. This was evidentin her expectations and priorities in the project, which included such things as strategies to assist her students in improving their performance in group discussions, tangible improvements in her students’ language performance in the action research project and the overall alignment of the collaborative action research project agenda with the needs of her school. Her pragmatic concerns were also evident in the way she foregrounded the need for support from the facilitators. Table 6.2 below summarises the ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ aspects of collaborative action research practices for Carol:

Table 6.2: Representations of Collaborative Practices in CAR as Constructed by Carol

'Insert Table 2 here'

As we saw with Anna’s identity formation, Carol’s constructions did not arise in a vacuum; rather, they reflected her institutionally situated, as well as her individual, concerns ([Fairclough, 2003](#_ENREF_16); [Giddens, 1991](#_ENREF_21); [Walshaw, 2007](#_ENREF_41)). But whereas Anna remained caught in the tension between her own preference for a non-directive, democratic group-leader identity and the teachers’ desire for a more directive approach, Carol managed the tension between her institutional-individual teacher identity and the projects’ positioning of her as a novice researcher more decisively, coming down firmly on the side of the former. In each case, the process of identification was dependent on understandings and values deemed to be of value in relation to collaboration, which in turn rely on their distinction from undesirable practices in relation to collaboration.

# 7. Conclusion

As noted in our introduction, collaboration is a term with mainly positive connotations in education with a large literature advocating its merits. But ideals aside, collaboration is socially and institutionally located and as a result identity formation in the context of collaborative practices will depend on individuals’ own reflexive understandings of and response to their intra- and inter-institutionally situated self ([Giddens, 1991](#_ENREF_21)). Herein lies the potential for both harmony and discord, clarity and confusion, intrasigence and transformation. Both Anna and Carol appeared to feel most comfortable (re-)enacting their habituated institutional identities (as the teacher educator and the English teacher) and they resisted the positioning offered by the CAR project: as expert-leader in Anna’s case or as novice researcher in Carol’s case. The findings thus suggest that teachers and facilitators in this Hong Kong CAR project retained their institutional ‘identities’ – fraught though this process was, particularly in Anna’s case – as they navigated the demands of collaborative action research practices, rather than ‘forging’ new identities to mark joint ownership. In this process of maintaining and revising their identities they were each struggling to meet the needs of their new, different circumstances, while retaining links with established, tried and trusted familiar identities. Identifying the extent to which these struggles are an inherent dimension of collaborative action research and weighing this against the influence of the particular historical and institutional discourses operative in the Hong Kong sociocultural context at the time of the study are further questions this paper has not been able to address but which we hope to address in future work.

Collaborative action research is advocated across disciplines as a useful practice for professional development. This study has implications for professional practice in the context of contemporary teacher education. The study suggests that practitioners might critically evaluate collaboration as a social practice, recognizing and seeking to address issues of power and control. In particular, a major implication is the need for teacher educators to reflect on their own practice and consider how interpersonal relations with school teachers are negotiated and managed in school-university partnership projects. Exploring the micro workings of power in other inter-institutional collaborative practices would be a useful direction for further research. Analysing the process of naturalisation in texts as we have done here, we can begin to understand how ideologies about teacher learning are embedded in discursive practices. This type of meta-research is not an abstract activity, but has practical and significant consequences in problematizing and contesting practices, such as collaboration, that are privileged in educational discourse.

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