



Building agency in School-University Partnerships: Lessons from Collaborative Research during the Pandemic

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**Building Agency in School-University Partnerships: Lessons from
Collaborative Research during the Pandemic**

**School-university partnerships as places for collaborative knowledge
generation**

The disconnection between university-based teacher education and experiences in the field has been highlighted in the literature as a significant and constant barrier to high quality teacher preparation, especially in terms of development of pedagogical knowledge and the ability to analyse and reflect on practice (Adoniou, 2013; Heinz and Fleming, 2019; Zeichner, 2010). This long-standing problem has been referred to as the theory-practice divide, and it has been attributed to the predominance of academic knowledge over practice-based knowledge in the hierarchical epistemic traditions of teacher education programmes (Zeichner et al., 2015). During the last two decades, efforts have been made to imagine and develop inquiry-based ‘third spaces’ (Zeichner, 2010; Daza et al., 2021). *Third spaces* are characterised by less hierarchical structures, drawing on combined expertise from universities, schools and communities, and co-construction of knowledge between teacher educators, pre-service teachers (PSTs), and mentor teachers. The notion of partnerships has become a new cornerstone aligned with the notion and principles of the ‘third space’ in professional practice in teacher education, which promises to move towards a radical shift in the focus of whose expertise counts while simultaneously presenting identities in constant negotiations as a result of crossing boundaries and performing hybrid roles (Daza et al., 2021). Robust partnerships between universities and schools as sites of different and complementary expertise, can be realised through the concept of teachers as researchers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) and reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). Different systems have adopted various

approaches in an attempt to create these third spaces (Sandoval and Van Es, 2021; Donaldson, 2011; McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2007; Tanner and Davies, 2009; Hamza et al., 2018).

In Chile, over the past two decades a series of measures have been implemented to improve Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Whilst these have focused mostly on accountability mechanisms, policies have also included support for collaboration between ITE university programmes and schools with school-university partnership policies that allow both to take the role of co-educators of future teachers (Montecinos, 2014). The most recent policy measures include legislation regarding the professional development of teachers (Ministerio de Educación, 2016), and the formulation of standards for the teaching profession in 2014, revised in 2021. The Research Teams (RTs) initiative presented in this study was created as part of support mechanisms to bridge the gap between theory and practice, a challenging dimension of teacher education in Chile (Bastías-Bastías and Iturra-Herrera, 2022). This initiative was underpinned by the principles of a Networked Learning System (NLS), which emphasises the importance of working across boundaries and inquiry and critical reflection in collaborative research as ways to promote new ways of generating knowledge and a set of relationships between university and schools to improve both school outcomes and professional learning. An NLS is defined as:

a partnership between research and practice that is connected through networks and different types of borders. These can be physical and/or professional and it is driven by design-based research and collaborative inquiry to innovate, test and refine practice and build leadership capacity through practice-based professional learning. (Author, 2021, p. 2)

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The potential benefits and opportunities for schools being engaged with the RTs are increased support for improvement processes with a focus on student learning, accessing professional learning with a focus on collaborative research focused on problems of practice, and strengthening teachers' professional capacities for collaboration (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Spante et al., 2022). University benefits are related to developing a richer understanding of the complex challenges within the educational system and the reality of demands placed on schools, professional learning of faculty staff in models of collaborative research, and strengthening the relationships with schools through more contextualised university teaching. The development of research skills for teachers to be able to connect learning aims and disciplinary knowledge with the students' characteristics, as well as skills for professional reflection, innovation and collaborative work among teachers, forms part of the most recent version of the Chilean standards for the teaching profession (CPEIP, 2022, standards 2 and 11).

The intention of the RTs' model of collaboration is to disrupt traditional relationships established among teacher educators, school teachers and PSTs in pursuit of new rules of engagement. While the idea of collaborative inquiry is not new in teacher professional learning and development, RTs aimed to explore a model to better align university teaching with the realities of the school system supporting context-situated professional learning and improving and innovating the teaching-learning processes going on in schools. Moreover, the extreme circumstances of the pandemic introduced, in some places, new collaborative ways of working between schools, their communities, and universities, placing a stronger focus on students (CIAE and Colegio Antilen, 2021), and bringing together a wider range of actors to explore solutions of problems of practice (ROC, 2023).

This paper explores the RTs initiative as a space for research collaboration in Chilean ITE, and as a site for relational and collective teacher agency during the pandemic. We first present an overview of international studies on collaborative research in ITE, and the promises and challenges of collaborative research practice partnerships (RPPs). Then, we explain concepts related to teachers' professional agency, which provided the framework for the analysis and discussion of the data collected for our study. Special emphasis is placed on relational and collective aspects of agency.

Teacher preparation and collaborative research

The increasing emphasis on professional learning in teacher preparation has seen a sharper focus on adopting various forms of action research for educational change (Elliott, 1991) and approaches to practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). In many countries, it is now commonplace for PSTs to undertake some form of small-scale research project as part of their ITE experience (cf. Cárdenas-Claros et al., 2023, Darwin and Barahona, 2023, Oolbakkink-Marchand et al., 2022).

Evidence shows that PSTs engaged with classroom research make connections across pedagogy, research, and change (Price, 2001), strengthen critical reflection and collaboration, create a more robust teacher identity (e.g. Dikilitaş and Yaylı, 2018), and learn to see students as partners (Ceylan and Comoglu, 2022). The importance of teacher research in ITE is also supported by broader arguments regarding the role of evidence-based approaches to school improvement (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2007) and resonates with long-term visions of teachers as researchers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). Following the influential and well-established traditions of John Dewey in the US and Lawrence Stenhouse

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and John Elliott in the UK, the notion of teachers as reflective thinkers, questioning and testing theory in practice, combined with readiness and openness to allow others to observe and critique one’s work, is key to the notion of professionalism. Despite this tradition, the research capacity that exists in teacher education institutions tends to be limited (Brooks, 2021). It has been argued that the lack of research capacity in teacher preparation impacts on teachers’ abilities to engage with research. For example, in a study conducted in Chile, PSTs' research and reflective skills were assessed, revealing a noticeable deficiency in their knowledge and tools for data analysis and the identification of research issues (Cardenas-Claros et al., 2023). Studies also highlight the importance of building research capacity at different levels (individual, organisational and institutional) and including various stakeholders (teacher educators, teachers, students, policy makers, etc.) in the process to promote a research culture in teacher education (Brooks, 2021).

The promises and challenges of collaborative research practice partnerships (RPPs)

Collaboration between universities and schools can take various forms in shaping knowledge generation and research engagement (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2007). New models move beyond notions of translating research evidence for the use of practitioners towards “processes of collaboration and exchange that are both messier and potentially more transformative than the one-way translation of knowledge of research into practice” (Penuel et al., 2015, p.183). Collaborative approaches to research emphasise promoting less hierarchical relationships; the integration of school and university expertise; and the importance

and need to develop research capacity both at the university and school levels (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2007; Tanner and Davies, 2009). By including diverse voices and expertise, disrupting more hierarchical structures and homogeneous systems, collaboration can enhance diversity in education practice and research in teacher education and has the potential to foster reciprocity, a coalition of interests, innovation, and synergy and be “emancipatory in the formation of new relationships and systems of working” (Baumfield and Butterworth, 2007, p.415).

In the context of teacher education, collaborative engagement with research has positively impacted on teacher-educators' professional practice, improving the knowledge, skills, and critical awareness, benefiting the learning of students (Tanner and Davies, 2009). Likewise, the exploration of new roles in RPPs has demonstrated that these alliances can enhance the link and use of research findings that can inform local practices and create networks beyond schools and universities to become open to new ideas and to judge research that is relevant for local systems (e.g., Burn et al., 2021). A Welsh study emphasises integrating research into teacher professional development, prioritising research capacity building in higher education and illustrates how research fosters deeper pedagogical understanding via teacher-educators' reflection and critical praxis analysis (Tanner and Davies, 2009).

Despite its attractiveness, developing equitable and genuine collaboration between teachers and researchers can be a challenging ambition. Studies of RPPs involving teacher education in the United States have focused on exploring how convergence is achieved through Network Improvement Communities. They highlight the importance of unpacking the complex processes, fraught with tensions, of how these communities agreed on an aim (Sandoval and Van Es, 2021). Feldman (1993)

questioned whether this relationship can be called collaborative, while Oates and Bignell (2022) identified resistance of school-based staff to take full ownership of the process, and Hamza et al. (2018) found differences in the assumption of responsibility and power in the process. In Scotland, 'hub schools' were envisioned as the expression of strong partnerships between universities and schools that could simultaneously strengthen ITE, in service-professional, and leadership development through inquiry and research to ultimately improve student learning (Donaldson, 2011).

Unfortunately, despite attempts to create a more networked egalitarian culture, over a decade later many of Donaldson's recommendations have not been fully implemented; a relatively hierarchical and bureaucratic system remains dominant (Author, 2019). McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins's (2007) seven-year study of a partnership between the University of Cambridge and eight secondary schools discussed the conditions (e.g. clarity of purpose), structures (e.g. dissemination of findings), and organisational arrangements (e.g. resources and time) needed to support such research, insisting on the importance of ensuring the conditions for this work to be successful. Studies have also explored university-school research partnerships by focusing mostly on their impact on either school teachers or teacher educators (e.g. Burn et al., 2021; Oates and Bignell, 2022), but only few have focused on PSTs (Sutherland et al., 2005).

Teachers' agency

In professional development contexts –including ITE– , *agency* is a concept of central importance. Agency has been defined as:

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 970)

Like other human endeavours, education occurs within structural environments, such as schools, school systems, and universities, within which teachers (and others) need to constantly respond to new situations and problems (such as the pandemic).

Priestley et al. (2015) avoid describing teacher agency as an *individual capacity*.

Rather, in their ecological approach, they focus on the *interplay* between capacity and the social and material contexts and cultures in which agency can be *achieved*.

In this sense, research in this area often aims to offer an alternative to an excessive focus on teachers' individual capacities, considering both individual and collective experiences *within structural contexts* that may facilitate or obstruct teacher agency (Edwards, 2015).

In ITE, research has shown that PSTs encounter limitations to exerting their agency, especially when finding discrepancies between proposed innovations acquired in university courses and constraints to implement these in their practicum placements; this includes rigid assessment systems coupled with inflexible mentor teachers (Yuan, 2016), or internal beliefs about their professional pedagogical responsibilities (Barahona and Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2022). In order to overcome these challenges, researchers have proposed the purposeful incorporation of critical reflection (Jones and Charteris, 2017) or action research into ITE (e.g. Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). However, these proposals often continue to focus on PST's individual capacities and agency. With regards to action research in ITE, an analysis has

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shown that for the development of effective teacher agency, individual PST research must be supported by greater collaboration between different ITE stakeholders (Darwin and Barahona, 2023), which can provide the basis for the experience of collective agency —a group capability to work productively together and solve problems (Zumpe, 2024).

The RTs initiative described in this paper constitutes a proposal to create this type of structure for research collaboration (see below). New or challenging situations, such as the pandemic, call upon educators to join forces and act together within the structural contexts in which they work. The experience and belief to be able to achieve meaningful solutions *together* is the distinctive element of collective agency (cf. Bandura, 2000; Zumpe, 2024).

However, a necessary condition for collective agency to arise may be the presence of *relational agency*, which Edwards defines as “a capacity to align one’s thought and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations” (2005, p. 169). For relational agency to be learned and practised, she highlights the importance of “recognising that another person may be a resource and that work needs to be done to elicit, recognise and negotiate the use of that resource in order to align oneself in joint action” (p. 172). It follows that a system in which people engage in relational agency has a greater chance to strengthen an NLS through reciprocal learning, and teaching through critical connection with practice.

Teachers’ *professional use of language* is a central aspect in the achievement of agency; the study and analysis of teacher discourse is, therefore, also an important means to describe and understand how individual, relational, and collective agency are reflected in their vocabulary and grammar (Ahearn, 2001; Konopasky and

Sheridan, 2016). This includes, for example, examining their use of singular or plural pronouns and verb forms, or semantic fields related to collaboration and professional enquiry. At the same time, one of the ways in which agency can be fostered is through the development of teachers' "*discursive resources*" in teacher education, aiming to improve their capacities to collaboratively discuss their work and thus explore the opportunities for agency within their contextual structures (Biesta *et al.* 2017).

This paper explores the emergence of teachers' relational and collective agency in an innovative model of collaborative research between different ITE stakeholders. The nature and role of relational and collective agency in this type of collaborative setting has received scant attention to date, especially in relation to ITE. The research key questions guiding this research are:

- 1) How does the RTs initiative support the **recognition and appreciation of differences** between different actors in the programme?
- 2) What new insights into relational agency as part of teacher preparation does the RTs initiative offer?
- 3) How does the engagement with the RTs initiative support the development of collective agency?

Research context and participants

The RTs initiative was part of a wider three-year plan for the strengthening of ITE at a university in central Chile. This initiative sought to move beyond traditional notions of school and university as the arrangements that facilitate, support and assess PSTs in practical teaching experience. The development of a model of collaborative research to tackle 'problems of practice' identified by practitioners, university staff

and students was core to this approach. The initiative brought together University Tutors (UTs) leading subject pedagogy courses and/or supervising and evaluating school practica, school staff (SS) involved in ITE as practicum mentors and PSTs. UTs were invited to apply to be part of the RTs initiative. This required the UTs to build a team with SS and PSTs, together identify problems of practice in classrooms, and develop a research proposal to be carried out over a period of 12 months. The initiative was coordinated and overseen by an advisory team consisting of a psychologist and an external educational advisor (the first and third authors of this paper) who, from the outset, reinforced clear expectations about *equal participation of all stakeholders*, with the aim of breaking down cultural hierarchies between UTs, SS and PSTs.

The first RT cohort moved complete online due to the pandemic. The second cohort of the RTs work with a hybrid model (face-to-face in schools and online meetings). For this paper, we drew data from the second cohort involving 18 participants from five subject areas: Mathematics, Special Education, History, Physics, and Chemistry. Research Team A involved 4 participants (1 UT, 1 PST, and 2 SS); Research Team B, 6 participants (3 UTs, 2PSTs, 1 SS), and Research Team C, 8 participants (2 UTs, 4 PST, 2 SS).

During the 12-month period, 14 meetings took place, 8 meetings between the advisory group and individual RTs and 6 meetings to share learning emerging from the initiative involving all the RTs and the Advisory Group. Meetings led with individual RTs focused on specific issues that arose during the design and implementation of the research projects (i.e. feedback on research questions,

discussing strategies to data production and analysis, etc.). Meetings with all RTs present focused on developing a shared understanding of the principles and techniques associated with undertaking collaborative inquiry and building a common understanding of how to build an NLS. In addition, each RT held regular internal meetings focusing on their own project agendas. The expected outputs of the RTs included the implementation of the inquiry project and the production of an academic article.

Data sources

The study was designed as an exploratory, qualitative case study (Yin, 2009). The unit of analysis was the 2021 cohort of the RTs initiative. Qualitative data was gathered from three sources including the advising team's notes and materials from reflective sessions, ten online individual interviews, and four online focus groups to which all participants of the 2021 cohort were invited. Those who accepted the invitation signed a consent form where they were informed of the study aims and requirements. Unfortunately, despite our concerted efforts to engage all groups, professional pressures limited the degree of engagement and involvement of SS in data collection. Consequently, their voices and perspectives are less conspicuous than UTs' and PSTs.

Data analysis

Qualitative content and discourse analysis were used to analyse the data. For content analysis, codes developed inductively (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Triangulation between researchers became a central aspect to ensure coding consistency and thus data analysis validity and trustworthiness. The three investigators coded a sub-

sample of interviews and focus group transcriptions individually and then shared codes to identify similarities and discrepancies. Discrepancies were addressed through conversation. Then, codes were reviewed and organised to make sense of the emerging themes, and their properties.

Once the themes were identified through content analysis, selected extracts were analysed applying discourse analysis, focusing on grammatical and semantic features expressing different types of agency within the frame of topics proposed by interviews/focus groups protocols. Within this frame, agency was detected through the use of the active voice, as well as verbs of possibility, intention and achievement (Konopasky and Sheridan, 2016). Individual agency tended to be expressed through the use of the first person singular ("I"). Relational agency was discursively detected through nouns and verbs related to the semantic fields of collaboration, effective communication and togetherness. Collective agency through the use of the first-person plural ("we, our, etc.") whenever it appeared together with verbs and nouns indicating effective action and achievement (cf. Ahearn, 2001; Konopasky and Sheridan, 2016). After the analysis, the extracts were translated from the original Spanish into English, aiming to keep the translations as close as possible to the original.

In this study the first and third authors formed the advisory team, while the second author was a UT in the initial cohort (2020). As authors, we acknowledge our positionality as insiders of the RTs and recognise that our privileged positions within the initiative were key to gathering *insider* knowledge and insights about implementation (cf. Coburn and Penuel, 2016). To establish trustworthiness, we

relied on triangulation of methods and data sources. Inevitably, as with any exploratory study of this scope and scale, the potential for statistical generalisations is limited. However, the rich insights obtained during this project do lend themselves to analytical generalisation (Yin, 2009).

Findings

This paper explores how the experience of the RTs initiative opened up a space for relational agency and facilitated spaces for collective agency **between UTs, SS and PSTs** in the context of collaborative research during the pandemic.

The most salient aspects of the coded data were summarised under **two** headings: developing relational agency and developing collective agency. We selected quotes that met the criteria of high density in agency markers, illustration of codes, and variety of participants, and offer an overview of the discourse analysis for each of them.

Developing relational agency

The new relationships that formed through the research project, with the creation of a space for constant dialogue across different roles, allowed the participants to align perspectives to a common purpose, overcoming the usual boundaries of each professional role. Edwards (2005, 2011) defines this process as relational agency. The experience allowed PSTs and UTs alike to develop a more systemic view of how schools operate, to see more clearly the interdependence between different

actors. The PST's recognition of relational agency was expressed in the interviews through the naming of the different actors that participate in the process and their specific roles, developing empathy, as well as the acknowledgement of the necessary interplay between them to make things work. Relational agency, in this sense, allows overcoming barriers between distributed expertise (Edwards, 2011).

To foster collective agency, it's essential to recognize and respect diverse perspectives, to value input from colleagues, and to provide constructive feedback. While differences in opinion may arise, maintaining a tone of professional dialogue and support is crucial. This helps to recognize that "beyond what meets the eye, there is a diverse world out there".

The following quote is from a PST who is talking about the most important insights from participating in the initiative, reflecting on the work with her team:

And in that exchange, you feel that you want to be professional just for the mere fact of reflecting on it. So, you steadily take nourishment from what the other teachers say and give feedback, giving advice, sometimes you say something and the teachers do not agree so much. But everything in the tone of conversation and help in professional terms to get to know this experience, to realise that beyond what meets the eye, there's a diverse world out there, there are a lot of classroom realities, ways of teaching and that sometimes the same methodology will not necessarily work in all contexts. All those kinds of things related to diversity. So I feel that has become very clear during the

work with the community, especially in the diversity of the way in which people teach and learn. (PST, RT-A)

In this quote, verbs like “want to”, “reflect”, “say”, in the active voice reflect intentional causation of an agentic, thoughtful individual.

Verbs and nouns from the semantic field of communication like “exchange”, “give feedback / advice”, indicate a high level of awareness of the dialogic use of language to reach a common vision. The build-up of the ideas *disagreement*, followed by “conversation” and “help”, and later “realise”, illustrate the process of alignment between different agents’ thoughts. Moreover, verbal constructions (in Spanish) like “uno se va nutriendo” (rendered in English as “you steadily take nourishment”) or “has become very clear” transmit consciousness of a gradual development occurring during that exchange.

The recurring codes of “listening to each other” and “considering all opinions” emerged in interviews with all stakeholders, highlighting the initiative’s potential to break down traditional hierarchies in ITE. Listening to students, through data collected by the teams, introduced new voices into the conversation. For some PSTs, being listened to as peers felt “a bit strange and uncomfortable” (PST RT-A), but this experience helped them overcome insecurities and build professional confidence. As listening improved, so did the group’s understanding of diverse teaching and learning processes.

Moreover, *the code theory and practice intertwined* emerged in the data as a way to describe that particular practices such as reading together on the researched topic allowed the PSTs to bring and use theory to make sense of the context of practice. This type of engagement with theory facilitated the use of a common language by *correcting previous misconceptions* of pedagogical tools and/or interventions collectively. *This theme highlighted bridging theoretical approaches from university with everyday experiences in schools, was evident in PSTs' data and supported by UT and SS analysis.*

From the UTs' perspective, relational agency also included deep learning about how PSTs learn and interpret theories. The UTs also gained sophisticated insights into the accountability demands within the school system. By recognising the gaps in knowledge, UTs also received immediate feedback on their teaching of PSTs including the barriers to learning that PSTs experience and suggestions for possible innovations to teaching practice.

Relational agency in action, therefore, means to assess and connect diverse inputs. Here, different types of knowledge enrich the conversations. However, our findings also confirm that the achievement of relational agency is not an automatic development, rather, it depends heavily on steady negotiation and the necessity to develop trust, and learning to work together. The quote illustrates the necessary mental and emotional work of what it means to learn to have confidence in a team, from the point of view of a PST who joined an already formed team and was asked to explain the challenges related to teamwork and the enactment of collaboration.

I think it is super complicated to work with many people around a single issue, because there are always many ideas, many different positions and it is difficult for people to also give up some things and also, trying to impose some things that perhaps one sometimes believes are correct or believes they are the best. So, one of the main points of working as a team, meeting people, integrating people, and also, integrating myself in a formed team, was a challenge (...) adapting, gaining confidence to give opinions and give ideas... (...) I had to study ... and get to know phenomena that I didn't know before. So it was a super long process and at the end I feel that for me, at least, it was all winning, the experience and everything.

(PST, RT-C)

Adjectives from the semantic field of difficulty (“complicated”, “difficult”) as well as repeated ideas referring to several different standpoints / people / ideas illustrate some of the challenges of achieving relational agency. The opposing verbs “give up” and “impose”, together with “believe correct / best” indicate conflicts that appear in the process of a dialogic negotiation leading to a shared outcome.

Professional learning is associated with three aspects: adaptation to become part of a team, increasing confidence, and personal study. The temporal dimension of this development is expressed through the verbs, “try”, “gain confidence”, “didn't know” with the adverb “before”, the noun “process”, and the final positive evaluation introduced with “at the end”.

Another PST, when asked to evaluate the whole experience, further illustrates the concept of relational agency referring to the alignment of thoughts through the “interweaving of perspectives” and the final common aim of the RTs, which is working for the learners’ benefit:

I like this, that we can meet up here at university and that later when we get out into the world of work we’ll have this capacity to have conversations and interweave these perspectives to work together... for the students’ good. I think that’s what I learned from my colleagues’ having other perspectives that I can’t visualise. (PST, RT-B)

The entangled semantic fields of *different perspectives* and *togetherness* (both repeated ideas) are enriched through verbs like *interweave*. The idea of *colleagues bringing in new perspectives that a person on their own can’t visualise* illustrates the speaker’s positive final evaluation of this relational instance of professional learning.

Developing collective agency

Collective agency defined as the capacity of a group to become an affirmed, cohesive collective body and to accomplish tasks and solve problems together. The shared idea of “*gradually building something all together*” (PST, RS-C), the experience of mutual support and the feeling of working at the same level as everyone else in the research process were powerful facilitators of professional learning.

The common work on the research permitted the emergence of a *new “we” feeling*.

This is exemplified in the quote below, where a UT reflects on this new team constellation, which is different from the more traditional collaboration in ITE between UTs and SS, implying more separate roles for the different stakeholders:

So, it's been a learning process to be able to build a community among us, getting to know and integrating these new people from the school system that, even if we had already worked (together) before, it is different when you form a team together. (UT Special Ed, RT-B)

The nouns “community” and “team”, verbs like “build”, “form”, “get to know”, “integrate”, indicate a collective experience qualitatively different from the previous experience of working together. The noun “process” and the verb tenses including the present perfect “it’s been”, past perfect “had worked” and present tense “form” are illustrative of the speaker’s awareness of a temporal development achieved through the initiative.

Collective agency encompasses this “we” feeling in relationship to achieving a shared purpose. The shared research topic gave the teams a common purpose, which transcended the usual university-school system divide and helped the stakeholders to have more focalised reflections, giving them an opportunity to engage in reflective practice.

Collective agency was also experienced in the achievement of common aims, as is exemplified by a school teacher. This led one team to even visualise future possible research areas, which indicated a future projection of collective agency, too.

To be able to play and experiment was like the most valuable thing, and also, it consolidated in a product. We hope there will be a publication, there were presentations, concrete things, moving from theory to practice, to action... and it generated a product, a result. (SS, RT-C)

The semantic field of playful experimentation points to a shared pleasurable experience. Verbs of possibility and achievement, as well as nouns that refer to concrete end products to be able to and consolidate, indicate a positive evaluation of the collective achievement.

The codes, more *real experiences* and *more real learning* were applied to interview extracts of all types of participants, *suggesting that the* achievement of collective agency appears intertwined with an individual capacity to engage personally in and collectively exert leadership to resolve problems. This was mentioned by one UT reflecting on how the RTs offered a new vision for her work with PSTs to develop professionally as well as politically as agents of change.

Discussion

This study set out to develop and implement a model of collaborative research that crosses boundaries between university staff, PSTs in universities, and school teachers by supporting the development of an *Networked Learning System*. Findings

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3 suggest that the use of a shared language emerges as a result of building strong
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5 horizontal relationships by engaging in a diverse range of experiences and adopting
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7 a range of roles. Models of collaborative research are not just relevant as inquiry
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9 techniques but are deeply transformative because they offer a new set of ideas and
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11 concepts that configure and shape a language of collaboration around problems of
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13 practice as a place of theory generation and building expertise (Adler and Styhre,
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15 2004).
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22 The collaborative effort to overcome challenges, drawing upon a diverse array of
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24 actors and resources, underscores the cultivation of relational and collective agency
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26 within the initiative. This experience not only strengthens bonds but also broadens
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28 perspectives in the participants, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of
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30 the larger context in which they operate.
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36 Our findings illustrate the potential for university-school RPPs to foster relational and
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38 collective teacher agency, but also the tensions involved in achieving it. We question
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40 how the broader institutional contexts both at schools and universities played a role
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42 in some cases enabling agency whilst in others inhibiting the development of teacher
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44 agency. One key aspect in this regard is the issue of sustainability. The initiative
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46 offered support and resources over a limited period of time and with the expectation
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48 of specific outcomes. Therefore, there was uncertainty about the long-term future of
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50 the RTs project. This was identified as a potential inhibitor of the development of
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52 agency, and aligns with previous research on the absorptive capacity of institutions
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54 (Farrell et al., 2022), and the conditions to sustain school-universities RPPs in the
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56 medium-long term (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2007). This, in turn, confirms the
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idea that the achievement of agency is always a result of the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual factors (Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

Conclusion

The disconnect between university-based ITE and experiences in the field has been highlighted in the literature as a major barrier to the effective preparation of PSTs (Adoniou, 2013; Zeichner, 2010). As illustrated by this study, school-university RPPs seem to offer a potentially productive way forward in connecting university-based ITE and experiences in the field while enhancing teachers' collective agency through a NLS. This involves building new relationships with the power to connect and create new understandings of school and university knowledge and expertise, and fostering a professional culture where diverse theoretical and practical insights are valued equally by different actors in the system.

The relevance of this study relies upon the need to advance knowledge regarding the development of collaborative learning systems that encourage cross institutional relationships allowing the creation and flow of knowledge. As Zeichner et al (2015) note, by recasting who is considered an expert, and rethinking how teacher candidates and university faculty cross institutional boundaries to collaborate with communities and schools, teacher education programs can better interrogate their challenges and invent new solutions to prepare the teachers our students need. Our findings confirm that the RTs initiative facilitated collaborative ways of working, and opened new ways of connecting schools and universities during the pandemic.

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3 Through this process, all the involved actors could experience how relational agency
4 was developed, and collective agency could be enacted. However, a limitation of our
5 study is the use of retrospective as opposed to longitudinal data. Further research is
6 required to unpack the various processes that can expand our understanding of how
7 collective agency is developed through the initiative and the links between relational
8 and collective agency. Longitudinal studies could also trace relational agency in the
9 discourse produced during consecutive collaborative instances such as group
10 meetings, for example.
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25 The RTs initiative highlights the complexity of classroom life as messy, complex, and
26 socially contested. This perspective goes beyond idealised university preparation,
27 prompting questions about how practice is integrated into ITE programmes. This has
28 important implications for future teachers' agency development and benefits
29 students' learning outcomes (Tanner and Davies, 2009).
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