

# From Partnership to Ownership: Reflections on a Community-University Research Partnership

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Jayne Mercier<sup>1</sup> , Jackie Sanders<sup>1</sup> , Mary Ellen Takie<sup>2</sup>, Laura Kerr<sup>3</sup>, Donna MacNicol<sup>4</sup>, and Hinemoa Hall<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

This article presents an example of a community-university research partnership which was focused on issues of sustainability and long-term community benefit throughout. It documents a five-year relationship between an Aotearoa New Zealand based university and a number of youth and community organisations. The project aimed to co-develop tools and resources that would support youth and social service practitioners to maintain effective helping relationships with vulnerable young people. It also aimed to develop a kaitiaki (caretaker) group of community partners at the project conclusion so that they could continue to share the resources with others. The article documents reflections from both community and research partners, outlining relational processes of finding our way, negotiating and renegotiating, and shifting ownership that supported community partners to see themselves as kaitiaki of the research and the resources. The processes highlight learning that may be valuable for others working in long-term partnerships where post-project sustainability is prioritised.

## Keywords

partnership, community development, community-university partnership, long-term research partnership, community based qualitative research

## Introduction

Community-university research partnerships are important for undertaking research that is relevant, addresses inequities and is aimed towards social change (Bivens, 2016; Hall, 2016). Such partnerships focus on collaboration, combine knowledge with action, and draw on the strengths of all parties (Caine & Mill, 2016; Tandon & Jackson, 2016). A key tenet of community-based research partnerships is the democratisation of knowledge construction: that the community is well-placed to generate knowledge and solutions and universities do not hold a monopoly on research (Banks, Hart et al., 2019; Bivens, 2016; Bowers, 2017; Caine & Mill, 2016; Halseth et al., 2016; Tandon & Jackson, 2016). This belief lends a strong applied component to research; that it is driven by practically relevant topics and results in meaningful action (Fontan & Bussières, 2016; Hall, 2016; Halseth et al., 2016). In this way, the value of knowledge is measured by its impact on reality, rather than as a description of that reality (Hall, 2016).

Such partnerships can take many forms. Ohmer and colleagues (2023) describe a continuum of community engaged research which can include: community as participants, community as a research focus, community guiding research, community as active and equal participants in research, through to community as the driver of research. All require attention to the nature and quality of the relationship between parties, and when done well, a focus on social justice (Gutierrez et al., 2023; Ohmer et al., 2023). Research

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Work, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

<sup>2</sup>Tuilaepa Youth Mentoring Services, Auckland, New Zealand

<sup>3</sup>Innov8 Group Limited, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

<sup>4</sup>Te Aroha Noa Community Services, Palmerston North, New Zealand

### Corresponding Author:

Jayne Mercier, School of Social Work, College of Health, Massey University, 234 Tennent Drive, Palmerston North 4472, New Zealand.  
Email: [j.mercier@massey.ac.nz](mailto:j.mercier@massey.ac.nz)



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partnership approaches fit well in Aotearoa/New Zealand where the present study is set. Contemporary Aotearoa is built on a partnership through Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which grants rights and responsibilities to both Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa, and those who also call Aotearoa home (Burns et al., 2024). Participatory partnered approaches dovetail with kaupapa Māori approaches, which focus on actions by Māori, for Māori, and making meaningful transformation in Māori communities (Boulton & Gifford, 2012).

Several authors discuss partnership success factors. Tandon and Jackson (2016) note that many successful cases of community-university research partnerships find innovative ways to produce knowledge, respond to current challenges in communities, utilise technology in their approach and work alongside, rather than against government. These foundations help to prioritise the contribution of non-academic knowledge and position communities as full partners rather than as beneficiaries.

Others describe the relational components of partnership. For example, Lucero and colleagues (2016) explain the interplay of trust and power. They suggest that both are negotiated and changing throughout, with the aim that trust deepens to a level such that challenges can successfully be negotiated and differences discussed, whilst power requires ongoing negotiation of issues around governance, from design through to the end of the project and beyond. Writing in Aotearoa, Hāpuku and colleagues (2024) describe approaches to effective community and research collaborations, including: working in partnership with Māori guided by Te Tiriti o Waitangi; building projects around existing and diverse relationships so that parties are already primed for collaboration; reflecting on the relationship, values and power throughout; using iterative design and action research processes; recognising the value and contributions of all parties, including financial recognition; moving slowly so no one is left behind and prioritising listening to all partners, especially those who may be quieter and, importantly, allowing time for this (Hāpuku et al., 2024).

Banks and colleagues (Banks et al., 2019; Banks, Hart et al., 2019) describe successful research partnerships as values-based undertakings which are equally focused on research and community development. The research becomes the vehicle through which people come together to create social change (community development). From this perspective, there is dual focus on knowledge production and the co-development process and ensuring this is respectful, equitable and realistic throughout.

Considering partnerships as a community development process links to issues of long-term sustainability and ongoing community benefit (Ward et al., 2019), topics which Northmore and Hart (2011) suggest are infrequently discussed in literature, particularly in short-term project-based work. Sustainability is not only about maintaining partnership, which may or may not always be possible, but about maintaining community benefit and generating ongoing outcomes

postproject (Green & Kearney, 2011). Community benefit needs to be held front of mind to reduce the likelihood that university partners are the main beneficiaries of research, such as through publication, career advancement and additional funding (Halseth et al., 2016; Northmore & Hart, 2011; Ward et al., 2019).

Intentional partnership at all stages of research can enhance community development outcomes, including during scoping, design, ethics, implementation, writing and dissemination (Fontan & Bussi eres, 2016; Martikke et al., 2019). Fontan and Bussi eres (2016) describe the final stage as mobilisation of knowledge, which includes both dissemination and transfer to practice. Here, partners are actively involved in planning how, where and with whom to share knowledge, and in knowledge dissemination. Community partners having a stronger connection with research findings means the findings are more likely to impact practice, support change and long-term community benefit (Fontan & Bustiers, 2016). Lucero and colleagues (2016) note how indigenous methodologies can further enable greater community control throughout all stages, including after completion through practices such as community or tribal data ownership. Enhanced community control can reduce assumptions that participation in partnership is inherently empowering to communities and in so doing, can facilitate a clear focus on how this empowerment occurs (Halseth et al., 2016).

This article presents an example of a community-university research partnership which was focused on issues of sustainability and long-term community benefit throughout. It documents a five-year relationship between an Aotearoa based university and a number of youth and community organisations. The project aimed to co-develop tools and resources that would support youth and social service practitioners to maintain effective helping relationships with vulnerable young people (<https://www.youthsay.co.nz/>). The project built on previous research, the Youth Transitions Study, in which surveys and interviews with youth and file reviews identified a set of relational practices that supported effective service provision and improved outcomes for at-risk youth (Munford & Sanders, 2019). The current project sought to embed the use of these effective practices through co-developing tools and resources for practitioners, often with the same organisations that participated in the previous research. Reflecting the study's location in Aotearoa, some Te Reo words are used throughout, kaimahi for worker, mahi for work; in this case, work with young people, and rangatahi for youth.

One of the unique features of this partnership was how it tackled post-project sustainability. Part of the study design involved gifting the resources and tools developed to a kaitiaki (caretaker/guardian) group of partners at the project conclusion so that they could continue to share the resources with others. Kaitiakitanga is a concept in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) which relates to stewardship and safeguarding of treasures, including knowledge, and can relate to the management of research data (Boulton et al., 2014). This long-term

goal is reflected in the community development objectives of the research, to enhance kaimahi capability in developing effective relationships with rangatahi.

This article details reflections of both university and community partners on the partnership process elements of the project via three themes: finding our feet, negotiating and re-negotiating, and transferring ownership. In particular, it outlines the development process that all went through to reach the kaitiaki stage.

## About the Study

The study was initiated by researchers from Massey University who had undertaken the original Youth Transitions Study. The findings of this initial study had produced a relational practice framework called PARTH which detailed the values and approaches of effective helping relationships (See [Figure 1](#), [Munford & Sanders, 2014](#); [2017a](#); [2017b](#)). The study found that although having a significant impact on positive outcomes, rangatahi did not often experience their kaimahi as using these types of approaches ([Munford & Sanders, 2016](#)). The first study produced a poster, a quick reference resource about the framework and the lead researchers offered training about the framework to organisations that had been engaged in the original study and the wider community. Training participants identified the need for additional resources to support practice and broader access to the training.

Accordingly, the current study sought to expand the suite of resources available to further embed the use relational practices in youth-serving organisations. It involved three phases, an investigation phase, a resource development and testing phase,

and an embedding phase. It used a critical realist epistemology, which recognises that reality and our understanding of this may differ, and that reality can be shaped by the interaction of structure and agency, that is humans both shape and are shaped by systems and structures ([Longhofer & Floersch, 2012](#)). A number of organisations that had been involved in data collection in the previous study were approached to assist with scoping and design of the current study to ensure the research aims and tasks were relevant, meaningful and likely to generate resources and tools that would be used in practice. As with previous research, a mixed methods approach was taken in the current study. In this case, it included interviews, focus groups, reflective e-logs, observations and youth surveys ([Liebenberg et al., 2024](#)). Ethics approval was granted for the study and all participants provided written consent at each phase. The study was funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (Maux2006).

## Phase One

In the first phase, previous training participants were interviewed about their experiences of the training, how they had used relational approaches, and what additional resources they would find valuable. Data identified that although the framework and training were seen as useful, relational practices could be difficult to sustain if they were not embedded in the organisation, had resources to support their use, and were not supported by managers and supervisors. Follow up sessions, online tools, activities for teams and tangible resources, such as key-rings with key ideas, were suggested as support



**Figure 1.** The PARTH Framework

resources. This phase occurred from 2020–2021 and the findings provided a foundation for the second phase.

### Phase Two

In the second phase, a number of community organisations working with vulnerable rangatahi were invited to co-develop and test tools and resources to support relational practice, beginning with those who had been involved in research consultation and planning. This phase involved managers and staff attending training on the PARTH framework, intentionally using the framework in their mahi, providing feedback on these, via interviews, focus groups and reflective e-logs, and working with university partners to develop and test additional tools and resources. There were no set directives for what resources could or should be developed, and the resource development took an iterative approach.

Seven organisations across Aotearoa were recruited; five were involved in the original Youth Transitions Study and had existing relationships with the lead researchers. The two new organisations were known to participating organisations or researchers.

Organisations involved were intentionally drawn from different communities to gain a diverse range of views. We also recognised that we did not necessarily understand the dynamics between organisations within individual communities. We did know that because of funding issues, organisations within communities can often find themselves in competition with each other and over the five years of the project we would not be able to know how these dynamics would impact them and their involvement. Recruiting from different communities helped minimise these potential challenges.

During this phase, a range of resources were co-developed with community partners, including cards and worksheets for reflective activities, games to run in teams, brief theory documents about the knowledge behind relationship-based-practice, practice stories from participating organisations, and supervision resources. Tools were developed, used and refined based on feedback from 2021–2024. The resources were collated on a website for ease of access and use (youthsay.co.nz). Training in the PARTH framework was redeveloped to incorporate use of the new tools and resources and focus on application of the relational framework to practice. This training was tested and refined with partners.

### Phase Three

In the third phase, organisations were invited to shift from being community partners to co-researchers. This phase involved kaimahi who had previously completed training and used resources, delivering peer-led training and activities within their own teams, with other partners in the research, and externally. Not all organisations involved responded to this invitation. This was ordinarily because of workload pressures

and reluctance on the part of staff to pick up the training responsibilities. The community partner organisations that did respond to the invitation, formed a community of practice, and met monthly to share ideas and learning from their training activities and collaborate on a three-day training delivery. University partners supported these activities with resources and skill development to facilitate capacity to deliver training. The community of practice provided the basis for the kaitiaki group, which will maintain the website and resources and deliver training in the future. This third phase began in 2024 and is ongoing at the time of writing.

The following paragraphs reflect on some of the themes in the research process during Phases Two and Three of the project, from the perspectives of both university and community partners. Elucidation of these themes and key learnings highlight some of the key ingredients and concrete actions that have enhanced ownership and sustainability in this project and may be valuable to others seeking to create sustainable actions from community-university research partnerships.

## Process Themes

### *Finding Our Way*

*University Partner Reflections.* The project started with training about the PARTH framework to kaimahi and managers from partner organisations. This also introduced the research, the goals and possible tasks, including use and reflection on the framework, development and review of resources, and sharing examples of where and how these had been used. Community partners were encouraged to use the framework and any existing resources in their mahi and reflect on how this impacted their practice via e-logs (online reflections) or via interviews/focus groups with university partners. Through reflection and discussion, they were invited to suggest ideas for additional tools and resources, and test these as they were developed. Resource ideas suggested by any one partner were shared with others for testing and refinement.

During this time, two key lessons emerged for us as university partners. The first was about accepting the many faces of research in this project. Each partner approached the research differently and we had to learn about the organisation, build relationships, and find the best way to support the completion of tasks in each setting. Some organisations were self-led in their approach and set structured times to learn about and reflect on the framework and test resources, such as weekly or monthly team meetings, and would report back via reflective e-logs. Others invited university partners into their space to lead focus groups that would test resources, provide feedback and generate new resource ideas. Each partner wished to co-produce knowledge in different ways and in different timeframes. This meant we had to let go of our own ideas and timeframes for the research to flexibly support partners to develop their own approach and carefully present any new ideas or resources as offerings that could be used or

rejected. Creating space for and learning to see these many faces of research was one way community knowledge and solutions were prioritised in this early stage and reflects recommendations by Hāpuku and colleagues (2024) to move slowly and acknowledge all contributions.

The second area of learning was about the asymmetrical nature of the project. As university partners, our focus was the project, whilst for everyone else it was an adjunct to their other roles and responsibilities. Thus, many tasks, although shared were asymmetrical in terms of roles, resources used and time allocation. For example, one community partner identified that a set of reflection cards with questions that could be used in team meetings would be helpful. Discussions clarified their ideas, and the university partners developed a prototype that was then bought back to community partners for testing. Banks, Hart and colleagues (2019, p. 5) note that “*Co-production*’ refers as much to the spirit and philosophy of the research as it does to the mechanics of doing it.” This is noted in other reflections on collaborative or participatory research (see for example, Reich et al., 2017). Acknowledging that university partners had the time and resources to put community partner ideas into action helped to manage community partner capacity and maintain momentum because everyone could see themselves in the work and celebrate progress.

Acknowledging asymmetry also involves awareness and navigation of power differentials. For example, community partners were given the original resources developed from the first project and presented with some ideas for additional resources based on Phase One feedback. Some partners did not want to critique the resources and were unsure of how to provide feedback to university ‘experts’ about their work. To reduce this supposed expert status, we drew on the open nature of the project in order to ‘not-know’ alongside our partners, for example saying things like “I don’t know what the right resources are for your mahi. Can you tell me about what helps you to reflect on the relationship?”, or we could role model critiquing things such as “I am not sure about the wording of this resource here. This part doesn’t feel clear to me; does it make sense to you?” This is different from a neutral researcher position and reflects a state of *ako*, which is the Māori word for both teach and learn, describing a reciprocal knowledge sharing process where both parties gain insight (Manning, 2015).

The paragraphs below summarise a conversation between the lead author and the practice manager in a community partner organisation where they explore the way this organisation began to use the resources and test out what worked and what didn’t. They focus on the Theories and Ideas documents (<https://youthsay.co.nz/theories-and-ideas/>) and how they used them during team supervision to enhance their use of relational practice strategies and skills.

**Community Partner Reflections.** Our organisation works with Pasifika and Māori youth offering individual mentoring, transition to adulthood services, out-of-school education and

school-based programmes. As the practice manager, I had been looking for frameworks and models to support our work and spoke with a colleague from another organisation using PARTH. We got an opportunity to hear about what it was, how it worked, and how it might impact the work that we do. That convinced us, because it was already in practice and used by an organisation that has good practice. We spoke with the university and heard more about the research that had gone into the framework and the current project; it felt like a good opportunity to learn more and see how we could use it in our team.

Our team completed the three-day training, which was informative, but from there we needed to figure out how we were going to use it in our practice. The first step was recognising that it was for us, a reflective tool for our kaimahi, not something to use or do with rangatahi. I sat with the team, and we discussed how we were going to make it work in a way that it didn’t feel like extra work when they already had big workloads.

We decided to link the resources to our supervision sessions. We had to be quite structured about it and block out the time to make sure we had a specific focus on PARTH and our rangatahi. We decided to focus on one element of the framework each week. At the beginning of the week, I would send a resource about the element and a related theory document for the team. They would reflect on the element, the reading, and their practice over that week and relate this to their cases, for us to discuss in our meeting.

It was quite tricky in the beginning to understand how we could use all of the resources and give feedback. We got better at it as we went along and found the pieces that spoke to the way we work. I noticed that the team really focused on resources related to rangatahi experiences. It strengthened their ideas and their empathy for the rangatahi and how much they had been through. It gave us time to really focus on the work behind the scenes and validated their practice as well. An important part was the time that we put aside for reflection. We always go through caseloads and note challenges and highlights, but this gave us a specific focus on reflection and areas of practice you might not pick out on a regular basis. This process was in-depth and structured. Since then, we have been working to maintain momentum and orient new staff to this framework. We focus on one element monthly to keep the framework as part of our structured reflection.

### Creating Space

The example above identifies some of the tensions in getting started in a research partnership and allowing space for different ways of doing the research to emerge. In these early stages both partners likely wanted to ‘get it right’ by using the resources ‘correctly’ and by not ‘imposing’ ways to use them. For the community partner, finding their own way of using, integrating and providing feedback on the resources took time and was challenging, but was also integral to their

engagement. Had the university team suggested ways or structures for using the resources, the team's focus on the stories of rangatahi and integrating these with theory may not have had an opportunity to emerge.

On the other hand, this example also reflects some of the inevitable power dynamics and asymmetry in community-university research partnerships. In this instance, university partners worked to "resist the hierarchical meanings attached to roles like *researcher*" (Gutierrez et al., 2023, p. 291) by not providing uninvited direction. However, this could equally be seen as maintaining these dynamics by withholding ideas and suggestions.

Christophersen et al. (2024) describe the potential of community-research relationships as opportunities to create third-spaces, where different knowledge can be created that disrupts hierarchical boundaries, and diverse identities developed. In this situation, the intentional choice to prioritise time, space and process was an attempt to step out of pre-defined research roles and invite new identities for community partners as experts and partners who could drive the direction and process of the project. This in turn held space for different knowledge to drive the practice resources and research process.

### Negotiating and Renegotiating

*University Partner Reflections.* As a long-term project, activities and relationships were constantly evolving, creating many opportunities for negotiation and renegotiation. Renegotiation was inherent in the iterative nature of the project. Because we had seven different community partners interacting with the framework and resources in different ways, and producing new ideas, we were frequently inviting partners to try something new or shift direction. This left us with a dilemma; not wanting the project to feel overly burdensome to partners, or leave people out, at the same time as maintaining momentum and creative energy. We talked openly with partners about this and asked them to let us know when things got too much. Community partners could be highly involved at one point as their staffing and circumstances allowed, less involved at others, and then back again. It was important that we worked flexibly with their availability and capacity.

Other renegotiations happened because of contextual factors. For example, we had initially planned to develop a community of practice in Phase Two of the research. However, Covid lockdowns, subsequent travel restrictions, and the extra work placed on community organisations as a result of Covid disruptions meant the community of practice could not be established during Phase Two. Community partners worked more closely with university partners online during this phase than with each other. Phase Three of the research therefore, focused on addressing this gap by creating structured processes for community members to have shared learning and relationship building experiences, so that a kaitiaki group could be formed at the conclusion of the research.

Funding challenges also impacted the project. Whilst the research project funding was stable, community partner organisations faced uncertainty in their delivery contracts across the five years of the project. Some partners placed themselves on pause until their circumstances were clearer and then re-engaged at a later date. Again, these disruptions were not anticipated at the outset, and became matters needing a flexible approach to keep those who were committed to being involved for the whole project engaged.

From these types of renegotiations, we learned to go where the energy was. This involved recognising the flux of organisations and learning to focus our attention on the pieces of work and the groups of staff who were able to achieve project aims at that time, whilst maintaining relationships with those who were less active. We managed these energy flows by always inviting partners to test new resources and provide feedback, not feeling disappointed if they said no or did not respond, going back to ask again the next time and accepting if a particular tool or resource turned into a dead end. This allowed a small team from within the university to manage a large and complex project and further acknowledged asymmetry: although all partners were invested, university partners were ultimately responsible for project completion.

Not surprisingly, regular communication was a key tool for managing renegotiations both within our own team and with community partners. Within the university partner team, it was important to maintain clarity of purpose and ensure the varied activities were meeting project goals. We used three concrete strategies here. The first was to always copy each other in to email communication with partners. The second was to regularly refer back to the project plans in our ethics application to check that activities were aligned with the goals and methods of the project. Thirdly, we held multiple and frequent discussions within the university team about the direction of the project and how we were tracking towards the long-term goals. Lucero and colleagues (2016, p. 61) refer to these types of ongoing communications as providing "philosophical and conceptual integration".

Communication with managers in community partners was essential. Phase One identified that manager support was key to the use of relational approaches so that workers did not feel they were stepping outside the bounds of their role. Thus, managers were involved consistently and from the beginning to ensure they were always informed about the activities their staff were doing, the direction of the project, and invited to participate as their capacity allowed. In settings where managers were highly engaged, understood the relationship-based practice framework and were interested in the resources being developed and how they were being used, negotiation and renegotiation could happen with little disruption to the project. Where managers were more distant, i.e. supported the project at an abstract level, but were unaware of the details or where there were frequent changes in management, renegotiating could be more complex because staff were not always sure they had managerial support, whilst the managers did not

understand how specific activities or resources were beneficial to their teams and the project aims.

The paragraphs below summarise a conversation between the lead author and the lead practitioner in a community partner organisation. They explore the process of creating and testing new resources, and how this fitted into the partner's operations.

**Community Partner Reflections.** We are a small organisation that works with rangatahi, tamariki (children) and whānau (families). We run family care homes with both short and long-term placements, a high and complex needs home, a transition to adulthood service, supported accommodation, school-based programmes and a whānau resilience programme focused on domestic violence. We wanted to bring more knowledge to our work and our mixture of new and experienced staff and became involved in the research through another organisation that suggested the project to us. I completed the training not long after I started. At first, it was good to engage more with other services because we are so small. I didn't really think we would become so involved in the project, I thought we would do the training, try some resources and give feedback.

The actual project has been far larger than that, because when we gave feedback, resources would be adjusted straight away, and we would try them again. We could do whatever we needed. If we had an idea, there were no limitations, no 'nos', it was a conversation about how we could do it. This type of relationship made it comfortable to give feedback even if it wasn't positive. For example, we had an idea to develop a scrapbook resource to use with our rangatahi. We developed the content together, the university partner had it designed and made up and then we shared it with our team. In the end, even though we had all been involved in developing it, it did not work in practice for kaimahi or rangatahi, and that was ok. We moved on together to develop other resources.

One of the key things we developed in the project was a series of internal training packages for care home staff who could not easily be released for training. We worked with the researchers to adapt training materials into smaller pieces and develop case studies that were specific to our mahi. This has helped us to work with our staff where they are at. These materials have also been shared with others in the project. Being able to adapt and change things to work for us is what has kept us in the research, that and the fact that we know the framework has come from research with rangatahi and we know it works.

Because of our size, our participation hasn't always been consistent. When rangatahi need us or are in crisis, that must be where our focus is, and so there are times when we need to step out. This has been challenging for us, because when we are in, we are really enthusiastic and then when we need to step out, I worry that we could lose the essence of it. What has worked well is letting the university partners know where we are at, so they step things down for us by giving us space and then baby step us back in, for example asking us to reply or comment to one small piece of the work. These small steps that

don't require a lot of thought, make it easy to come back in and then we can pick up the other tasks where we left off. When our workload allows, that's when we can do the big pieces, like developing internal training.

My manager has been a big part of the project. She is on board with PARTH and she knows it is important, so she is supportive. She was involved in discussions about developing our internal training and we all wanted to do something and make it work. She puts a lot of trust in me and my colleague in the project, that we will make the right decisions. Managers need to be on board in projects like this because it can be time consuming, so they need to understand the bigger objective, that it is beneficial for the business. We are putting time and money into making our kaimahi better, which is then better for rangatahi and the community. It works when managers think of projects as aligned with our goals rather than an extra.

**Negotiating Tensions.** Bowers (2017) describes how university/community partnerships must manage paradoxical tensions. They are paradoxical, because they cannot be resolved, but rather must be negotiated and renegotiated. Some of these tensions may be obvious, for example tensions between individuals and organisational systems, such as university partners being slowed by travel bookings within the university system. Other tensions may be more covert, and arise as the project progresses, such as differing goals partners may have in research participation. Dynamic equilibrium is suggested as a way to manage these tensions by continually adapting to respond to pulls in different directions (Bowers, 2017). For us, following the energy and regular communication were the tools used to consistently adapt between all participant's desire to engage in the research and the internal and external factors that could make this difficult.

The community partner examples above demonstrate how the tensions inherent in engaging in long-term research within the context of business as usual were negotiated and renegotiated, requiring communication and flexibility from all parties. One of the factors that made this possible was the shared goals of both partners, to improve service experiences for rangatahi. In this way, university and community partners (staff and management) approached the research from the same community driven values base (Banks et al., 2019) with the research and the PARTH resources acting as the vehicle through which to achieve a shared social benefit. The shared drive towards community benefit created a platform for the flexibility required to sustain involvement.

Whilst these values alignments may be assumed, project experience suggested that this was not always the case, often highlighted by staff turnover in community partner organisations. Staffing changes could bring new energy and sometimes unexpected shifts as each partner and new staff member brought different lenses to their understanding of the partnership and its purpose (Banks et al., 2019). Community partner staff leaving or joining the project provided an opportunity to re-align goals, purpose and roles (Farrell et al.,

2019). It could also be disruptive when new staff brought ideas that did not fit with the project goals.

The project had the end goal of transferring the resources back to the community through a shared partnership group, and for partners to be leaders in sharing resources with others. Staffing changes brought these discussions to the fore, and in some cases resulted in renewed commitment to this purpose, whilst in other cases, partners recognised that they were not able to commit to longer-term aims. In these instances, dynamic equilibrium was maintained by respectfully recognising that while all partners made an important contribution to the project, not all partners would become kaitiaki.

### Shifting Ownership

*University Partner Reflections.* During the research we learned that the three-day training and ongoing team activities using the resources were key to consistently using relational approaches. Kaimahi needed to learn about the PARTH framework and how to use and embed the tools and resources in their mahi, this worked best when done through structured learning. Thus, it emerged that training delivery would become a key task for sharing and sustaining the resources post-project. Community partners needed to shift their view of themselves from co-developers and testers to legitimate researchers, knowledge owners and, importantly, trainers who could share this with others when university partners were no longer involved.

Phase Three of the project was developed to create this shift. We began by inviting each partner to nominate kaimahi to help co-facilitate a three-day peer-learning workshop in their organisation or within another community partner organisation. Each co-facilitator had to facilitate an introduction or closing, a game and at least one learning activity. All activities were set out in a manual which had been developed and tested collaboratively in the previous stage. We supported them in preparing to lead activities.

Having to step out of their comfort zones and share knowledge with colleagues created a big shift in their orientation to the project's larger goals. We observed kaimahi confidence grow as they learned that they could describe relational practice, the research, lead activities that used the resources, and assist others to reflect more deeply on the effectiveness of their relationships with rangatahi. They had viewed this as the role of the university team at the beginning of the project but now began to see sharing this knowledge as their legitimate role. As Banks and colleagues (2019, p. 44) describe:

Identities develop and change over time, and to see community development activities also as research, and ourselves as practitioner-researchers, emerges in the context of a group of co-researchers/practitioners undergoing a journey of discovery together, and coming to see their work as 'community development-research'.

To maintain momentum, these kaimahi became co-researchers and their task over the next year was to further embed the peer-led learning process by sharing training activities in their own teams. Some chose to deliver the full three-day training and others worked with university partners to develop a range of shorter sessions based on the three-day training to fit their needs. The benefits of this were two-fold. First, real-world revisions of the learning activities became possible because community partners were leading delivery of training material, and in this became experts. Second, community partner staff and organisations continued to grow their sense of ownership of the knowledge. In this, they came to see the PARTH framework and peer-led learning as a core part of their operations. All partners, including key staff and managers met online monthly during this phase to share knowledge and ideas. Community partners identified succession plans so that use of the framework and resources would be maintained in their practice, and they would have staff who were able to deliver peer-led learning. This meant that the processes were embedded in the organisation structure, not just certain passionate people.

In the following year, community partners worked together to jointly deliver a three-day training to an external audience, hosted at one organisation. This fostered greater collaboration between partners and provided the foundation for relationships that will continue after the research is completed.

The key learning for the university team at this stage was about staying with our purpose to prepare community partners to be kaitiaki. This involved a balance of being active and supportive, while at the same time letting go. Somewhat ironically, letting go of the resources and training into the care of others, required active direction, which was very different to the space afforded at the beginning of the project. Here, we needed to be very specific about the commitments and tasks required to achieve the goal, namely co-facilitation of training, embedding activities, and later supporting external delivery. It was challenging for university partners to hold boundaries around what was required, and simultaneously co-ordinate shared activities when each organisation had differing levels of capacity. However, it was also essential because shared commitment and activities will form the basis for the kaitiaki group at the end of the project. Co-researcher tasks were voluntary and organisations who could not commit to these activities were not in a position to become kaitiaki, which did not undermine the significant commitment many of these organisations had made earlier in the project.

For the university research team, letting go has been an academic and a personal exercise. The decision to entrust the resources to the community was values based. It was about research being used and adapted, and knowing that the community and ultimately young people benefit from research knowledge only when it is easily accessible. However, this also raises issues of fidelity and ensuring that the knowledge is shared and used as intended. Effective helping relationships can appear deceptively simple yet require deep reflection and

high levels of skill (see for example, Fyfe & Mackie, 2024; Kor et al., 2022). The length of the project, the training process, and the structured way in which community partners learned to deliver and embed peer-led learning were the keys to maintaining fidelity of the framework and feeling confident as academics to let go. The group who will become kaitiaki are identifying how they will maintain this fidelity into the future.

Personally, letting go is also about recognising that others will do things differently and the training and the resources will develop and shift over time, as they should. This can require a lot of consideration, especially when some members of the team have been engaged with this specific project since 2008. The university partners will no longer be partners and the ownership of this research into the future rests with the kaitiaki. Bowers (2017) describes top-down versus grass roots tensions as one of the paradoxes of community-university research partnerships, and this tension is evident in letting go, where the project will be fully grass-roots in the future.

The paragraphs below summarise a conversation between two managers from the same community partner organisation who describe their perspectives on the shift from partnership to ownership, as they prepared to deliver three-day training first internally, then externally and their current preparations to become kaitiaki.

*Community Partner Reflections.* We are a multi-disciplinary social service that supports the community in unleashing their full potential. We provide social work support, early childhood education, counselling and health services, rangatahi and young parenting programmes, several other trainings, and programmes and events. When we first came together to discuss the co-researcher stage, I knew the whakapapa of the project and had been connected with PARTH for a long time. I felt our organisation would be a good place to deliver training if we had the opportunity, and we wanted to be part of it, and I felt we could do it because we believe in the kaupapa (purpose, process). We first focussed on the full 3-day training for our whole team internally, and later hosting an external delivery at our site.

As we prepared to deliver our first training, that was when the rubber hit the road. It was something completely different, because we weren't just participating and being involved; we had to take ownership, learn new skills and get a sense of what we needed to deliver training professionally. It was challenging and we had to be totally immersed in preparing to deliver. One of the big learnings was about the difference between facilitating a group and delivering professional training. We have a lot of strong facilitators, but learning to be trainers, which is a lot more structured and has a lot more project management aspects, was good development for our staff.

We also saw how the framework and the resources could fit in lots of places. PARTH started specifically for rangatahi, but we could see how it could be adapted for all mahi and we wanted to prove that. Our first delivery to our multi-disciplinary team internally worked really well. We worked

with the researchers to adapt some of the activities to make them more relevant to a multi-disciplinary audience, such as creating discussions and examples that were relevant to early childhood educators, counsellors and whānau workers. There are always nerves about presenting to new people and it was good to test-drive the training with our own team. Then we were able to lead the delivery to a multi-disciplinary group in the community, alongside other community partners in the research, which was hugely successful. I think that success was about buy-in and commitment right from the beginning. We said we would do it, we made the commitment, and so we did it. We believe in the kaupapa one hundred percent, and that belief is a core part of being able to feel like we own it.

Taking this out into the community after the research has finished is close to our hearts because of the community focus of our organisation. However, it is a big investment and commitment from the organisation and staff too. The team are focusing on the research and the training whilst also keeping the business as usual alive. Because we have trained our whole staff, there is trust from them about what it all means. Our staff have a common language about their practice. Language is the thread that holds culture together and we know that everyone knows what they are talking about, from the early education teachers, the counsellors, social workers and youth workers as well as the finance officers and the programme leaders. We made the space to give everyone that strong foundational training, so they are also part of our commitment to own the knowledge.

We are now having to think to the future about what it means to be kaitiaki when the research ends. We are owning it, and we are also thinking about longevity and quality. We are thinking about succession so that we can intentionally keep this knowledge in our organisation and so are considering the risks when people leave organisations and shift into different roles. We are also continuing to build our relationships with the other community partners in the project. You need to have a shared belief in what you are doing and a shared commitment to being part of it. This can be challenging if not everyone is in the same place about ownership and what that looks like. For example, I am putting my best staff into this, if other partners don't in the future then how do we deal with this? These things affect the quality, and the researchers are trusting us with these resources, and we all have a responsibility. We are learning how to call each other out, how to affirm each other and how to champion each other as we go through this process together.

For other organisations looking to be involved in community-university research partnerships I think the first thing is to really believe in the project you are committing to because it is a commitment. There is accountability to see it through, communicate, and do what you say you will do. There is commitment to the relationships with the researchers and other organisations involved in the project to be part of a community of providers rather than focusing on our individual mahi, and commitment to relationships with the community around you if you want to share the knowledge with them. All these relationships require regular connection. The other thing

is to be courageous and lift your head above the front-line work, to think strategically. You need to inspire your staff, because research does take time out of the everyday mahi.

Having management involved right from the beginning is huge. We are the two most senior people in the organisation, and we lead it. If the organisation was involved in research and left it solely to practitioners, they are not held, and the research is not held. We had to be involved to make clear organisational decisions about what was best for the research and best for the organisation. We can't just focus on what's in it for us, to be owners we have to prioritise both the research and the organisation together. Finally, there is the values piece. For us, one of the foundational documents in our organisation is Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the associated sense of partnership, manaakitanga (showing respect, generosity and care for others), and rangatiratanga (leadership and self-management). So, these values shape the way we commit, stand by our relationships and stand by who we are as an organisation and who we are becoming.

### Changing Places

The university and community partner accounts of the process of shifting ownership highlight important lessons for both researchers and community organisations wanting authentic collaboration that will facilitate the transfer of research learning into community settings. Both came to the project with a shared set of values and a commitment to finding a way to transfer the research knowledge from the university to the community because the community was the place where it could have the greatest impact. However, neither knew what this would look like, and the two accounts touch on a careful, and uncertain process of learning each other's perspectives about how to accomplish this.

Shared values are important (Banks et al., 2019; Banks, Hart et al., 2019), but they do not necessarily equate to a shared view of how goals will be achieved; these need to be tested in the real world. The community partner's description of commitment to delivering the training and the university partner's description of letting go, reflect this process of moving the shared community development values from abstract ideas to concrete practice. Both included risks and they highlight another paradoxical tension (Bowers, 2017) around trust. Trust is needed to take risks, but trust is also built through taking risks together.

The university partners had to step back from the goals of the project and trust that by 'letting go' the goals were more likely to be achieved and achieved better than if they retained control. This involved holding the risk that the goals may not be achieved at all if community partners were unable or unwilling to pick up and deliver the training. Community partners had to trust that they could and would deliver the training, and to a high standard, even when they did not fully know what was required at the outset. They held the risk of committing significant staff and organisation resources to delivering training without assurance of success. This delicate balance of trust and risk was navigated through close communication between both partners, in order to understand

what each other's bottom lines were. University partners had to recognise community partner's bottom line around expertise and respecting their right to hold the resources in a way that was meaningful to them, such as the desire to train a multi-disciplinary audience. The university partner's bottom line was confidence that the training would maintain fidelity with its research base and that the learning activities would meet the highest standards of adult education in order to be seen as a professional learning programme (Ziegler & Bingman, 2010) within a community setting.

At the heart of both bottom lines was credibility and quality. For community partners, their shift in perspective was from knowing their staff were strong programme facilitators, to understanding that they also needed to become strong professional trainers. It helped that the research team included a highly skilled adult educator; this resource built confidence and trust. The university partner's shift was about recognising that the training needed to respond to the imperatives of community programmes. This expertise sat with the community partners. They had the skills to bring diverse groups together, to create safe group-work settings so people could absorb challenging information, and critically to build the relational environment needed for people to be open to learning new things in ways they could take away and integrate into their practice. They knew how practice really worked, the researchers did not.

Delicate negotiations of these bottom lines were not always comfortable and the commitment to the overall goals of the project was key to keeping the relationships going. From this process of negotiation and re-negotiation over the content and delivery of the training, confidence and a sense of deep ownership of the whole PARTH kete (set of resources) grew in the community partner. The internal and then external delivery were the pivots for this partner that potentiated their shift from co-researchers with a commitment to an idea of ownership, to an organisation that was confident to buy-into the reality of owning the materials. The active element, delivering training, appeared to be the critical point at which this inflection occurred. Their narrative above indicates that the opportunity for community partners to take on this highly engaged sort of activity is the mechanism by which community partners find their agency (Bucher, 2012).

The process is not yet complete. As the community partners note, the end goal is a kaitiaki; a group of organisations who take ownership of the PARTH kete. This final piece is still in progress—building relationships takes time and needs a focus. To this end, we are still creating a framework, a Memorandum of Understanding that defines how they will work together. Again, we are doing this as a group, considering how community partners work actively together on shared tasks to develop authentic ownership.

### Implications for Research – Practice Partnerships

Whilst this article describes a specific project, it also describes process themes that were key to the democratisation of

knowledge, a key aspect of community/university research partnerships (Bivens, 2016; Caine & Mill, 2015). The processes of finding our way, negotiating and renegotiating and shifting ownership were the relational steps between partners that led to confidence in community partners that they can be kaitiaki of the knowledge into the future. These processes were somewhat linear, in that we all had to find our way, negotiate and renegotiate to shift ownership. They were also iterative. Different parts of the process could take relationships back to earlier stages, reconsideration and redevelopment. But the first two (finding our way, negotiating and renegotiating) were key to building the foundations of trust for both parties to take bigger risks and feel confident that the training and knowledge could be successfully held by community partners.

Whilst the democratisation of knowledge is key to community-university research partnerships, the disruption of traditional hierarchies and structures doesn't just happen (Gutierrez et al., 2023). The process involves careful thought and action from all partners. The combination of thought and action is important. The thought aspect relates to the shared values base of prioritising both research and community development (Banks et al., 2019; Banks, Hart et al., 2019). This needs to be established at the outset. The action component relates to consistent testing and negotiation of what these values mean and look like in practice, as shared understanding cannot be assumed and the ways people wish to enact these will change over time. Crucially, we learned about the need for both university and community partners to have comfort with the ways each other viewed and enacted these values throughout the project. When this comfort was reached, university partners could let go, and community partners could confidently claim ownership.

Returning to the idea of research partnerships as third spaces, in which new relationships and identities can be created; the process is not always easy (Christophersen et al., 2024). In this setting, it often meant struggling together, letting go of ego, whilst holding bottom lines and learning what could be let go of. These spaces are also challenging to maintain when familiar hierarchies and roles can easily be resumed (Christophersen et al., 2024). Through concrete actions of training delivery and co-creation of resources that support practice we have worked together to cement these new identities into community partner organisations and staff. In this way, the third spaces become the ongoing structure after the research ends. This investment of time and resource into future sustainability is key.

The description of the three processes of finding our way, negotiating and renegotiating and shifting ownership provided here, may be useful for others undertaking community-university partnerships. Firstly, it is useful to consider how power and asymmetry may be understood in any given project and provide space for the project to be approached differently from different perspectives. Secondly, framing the challenges encountered as negotiation and re-negotiation, within an asymmetrical process, where different partners have different

levels of capacity and engagement at different times is necessary. Partnerships can still be productive and satisfying within this asymmetry when tensions and expectations are effectively navigated (Bowers, 2017). Thirdly, the exploration of risks, intentional action and values by both parties to disable or shift the asymmetry, enables community partners to feel genuine ownership of the knowledge.

## Conclusion

This article presents an example of a community-university partnership and the relational processes through which the research and practice knowledge generated can be consciously maintained by community partners in the future. The three processes of finding our way, negotiation and renegotiation and shifting ownership are described from both university and community partner perspectives. The processes highlight learning that may be valuable for others working in long-term partnerships where post-project sustainability is prioritised. Importantly, they reflect approaches to disrupting hierarchical boundaries, resituating roles and expertise, and developing new identities. Echoing the PARTH principles, this is best achieved in prioritising time, space and relationships. While this article reflects on one example in Aotearoa New Zealand, it represents the perspectives of those involved in this study. Given that it is often university partners who write and publish from research projects there is value in understanding different perspectives on the same project, which may assist others to reflect on or anticipate different relational processes in research partnerships.

## ORCID iDs

Jayne Mercier  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1552-7476>

Jackie Sanders  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3741-0794>

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