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Approaching Research-Practice Partnerships: Considerations for Equity-Oriented School Leaders

Introduction

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as a promising approach for school improvement and promoting equity. For the sake of this brief, we address RPPs as long-term commitments between a research organization (e.g., university) and an educational institution (school or district). RPP participants focus on using research to address problems of practice and are committed to mutualism and reciprocity among diverse experts (leaders, practitioners, and researchers).¹ RPPs are intended to provide locally relevant data, centering practitioners' perspectives, that can immediately inform practice. Equity-focused RPPs explicitly address relations of power and privilege both within problems of practice and the structures and relations of RPPs.² Yet, navigating their complexities can present challenges. This brief provides an overview of three considerations for school and district leaders to attend to with a specific lens on equity: 1) establishing relationships, 2) defining purposes, and 3) planning participation. This brief is not meant to be a how-to guide but rather offers an overview of important considerations for leaders approaching RPPs, particularly in realizing equity goals that often remain aspirational.

Equity-focused research-practice partnerships explicitly address relations of power and privilege.

Establishing Relationships

RPPs operate on the foundation of collaborative relationships among researchers, leaders, practitioners, and other stakeholders. Given their backgrounds and professional obligations, researchers and practitioners are differently positioned in RPPs. This can be a strength for school improvement, but establishing and nurturing multi-directional relationships across these differences, with attention to dynamics of power, identities, values, and trust, is crucial for success and sustainability. Partnering with university-based researchers can provide valuable resources such as legitimacy, research time, funding for researcher salaries, administrative support, and access to expertise for school and district leaders.³ Furthermore, research findings through RPPs may be more useful (than research done in other contexts) for educational leaders and practitioners, as findings are rooted in local conditions and districts' needs.⁴ However, recognizing and navigating natural power asymmetries in RPPs as well as gaps in assumptions and perspectives is critical.⁵ Power asymmetries may manifest in multiple directions and levels, including from universities to schools and among individuals within the RPP.⁶

Establishing mutuality, trust, and a shared commitment to equity are foundational values for successful RPPs. Developing trust requires time, patience, and deliberate efforts. Particularly when focused on racial equity work, given the personal and often emotional labor involved, spending time to

establish a politicized trust, or a trust that is attentive to power-laden relationships and histories, is all the more important.⁷ A politicized trust maintains awareness of not only a person's individualized trustworthiness as a partner but also of the institutions each party represents (e.g., universities, schools) and intersectional identities they hold. Strategies such as starting with small commitments, identifying resources and how they will be allocated,⁸ maintaining transparent communication, and prioritizing relationships over the agenda can facilitate trust-building processes. Furthermore, naming the diverse social positionalities, privileges, and inequities that RPP partners bring can support working across differences and keeping a critical eye on whose needs are being centered.⁹ For example, incorporating teachers into RPPs can foster critical perspectives on day-to-day problems of practice; however, teachers can often be less vocal in discussions with researchers, who influence the direction for funding, and leaders, who hold the ultimate responsibility for direction and continuation.¹⁰ Likewise, attending to racialization, racism, and linguistic diversity in social identities and institutions within an RPP can help establish racially just relationships.¹¹ For example, while researchers often enter RPPs from a position of institutional power, institutional power often can be rendered less (or not) legitimate for those who hold intersectional marginalized identities.¹² Overall, the long-term nature of RPPs can support the slow and crucial work of establishing trust, and creating courageous (versus safe) spaces of equity-oriented inquiry.¹³

Defining Purposes, Values, and Outcomes

Defining clear purposes is essential for guiding collaborative efforts and ensuring alignment with the goals of educational improvement and equity. While many RPPs name equity as a guiding principle, defining equity within RPPs can be complex.¹⁴ Addressing systemic injustices and disparities in educational contexts is always historically situated, culturally shaped, and politically charged.¹⁵ An equity approach may manifest in a focus on mission and achievement; identity, culture, and belonging; or addressing systems and structures of injustice and racism. RPP leaders must be responsive to the dynamic nature of equity, engaging in ongoing dialogue regarding diverse perspectives on equity in educational missions and outcomes as well as equity in the RPP process.¹⁶

Likewise, equity in the RPP process may vary for different members. It might entail coordination within traditional divisions of labor; collaboration, providing more opportunities for various stakeholders to weigh in; or transformation, challenging traditional roles of researcher versus practitioner.¹⁷ Sometimes these differences are significant and sometimes they are not.¹⁸ But with such varying meanings, it can be useful for participants to explicitly map out their different ideas and practices of equity for discussion among partners. In this process, explicit conversations about the values that underlie people's motivation for equity work within RPPs are essential.¹⁹ Additionally, it can be important to deliberately address politically complicated inquiries when relevant, rather than avoiding them, as inattention to the sociopolitical context can create significant barriers.²⁰

Clarity around desired outcomes is also an important component of defining RPP purposes. First, it can be useful to ensure that research is

needed. For example, research is not needed when the researcher already knows what they want to say, when it is constructed to convince a group of something they are not open to hearing, or when research findings have already been said by youth or other community members.²¹ If research is needed, RPPs can center goals on a specific program improvement, starting with a program evaluation, or might center on a problem of practice connected with student learning, instruction, or district organization.²² Alternatively, the RPP scope might initially be more open-ended. For example, RPPs might begin with an equity audit or ethnographic work, helping partners better understand the local context and the specific racial dynamics of the community. This preliminary exploration can lead to a collaborative equity plan and a future, more selective focus for continued partnership.²³ With a given focus, partners should establish goals across different time scales, thinking about desired short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.²⁴ This can support ongoing efforts for change rather than limiting an RPP to a one-time event.

Within this view of desired equity-oriented outcomes across time, partners should delineate specific deliverables with differentiated timelines.²⁵ Often leaders and practitioners benefit from quick reports that can inform practice, continuous learning, and re-design, whereas academic publications entail a much slower timeline. These differences necessitate intentional synchronization and planning. Outlining different research dissemination avenues such as reports to the district, in-service professional development, and public scholarship can happen in advance and even co-developed with RPP partners.²⁶ It is important to remember that while findings that suggest shortcomings or failure of initiatives may seem less appealing for dissemination, they can offer instructive learning for leaders, districts, researchers, and the public at large.²⁷

Planning Participation

As RPPs evolve and progress, it is essential to anticipate shifting roles, relationships, and challenges inherent to collaborative endeavors. RPPs operate within ever-changing environments, necessitating a willingness to embrace uncertainty and to make adjustments along the way.²⁸ One type of change is turnover, which can present challenges to continuity and cohesion. However, anticipating this possibility and implementing strategies for knowledge transfer and continued relationship-building can support RPP sustainability.²⁹ For example, establishing relationships with multiple leaders and partners can ease transitions.³⁰ Another challenge can be tensions that arise between RPP partners in values, perspectives, processes, and/or needs. Rather than regarding tensions as something to be avoided or minimized, engaging with tensions can help partners build knowledge and redesign RPP structures. This is especially true when partners have previously done the work to establish a shared common vision.³¹ RPPs might implement a system for monitoring tensions and outline a specific strategy for addressing them.³² Beyond explicit steps or agreements, RPP partners should continually pursue a “synchrony of being,” or an enduring attunement to the evolving nature of people, settings, and environments, through ongoing and dialogic engagement, listening, and response.³³

Overall, while the work of RPPs creates several challenges, advocates assert that their benefits frequently outweigh these challenges. RPPs can provide a collaborative ground for school leaders, districts, and researchers to make informed decisions about school improvement and change.³⁴ With intentionality, ongoing commitment, and awareness of evolving challenges, RPPs can bridge the gulf between research and practice in ways that improve opportunities for learning for schools, educators, and students.

Reflection Questions for Practitioners:

- **Overarching:** Have you, your school, or your district participated in a partnership designed around local research before? What characteristics from those partnerships (if any) would you want to emulate? What would you want to look different?
- **Relationships:** Imagine you’re just starting an RPP. What would your priorities be as you establish relationships? What dynamics of power and positionality for you and your community would be important to pay attention to?
- **Purposes:** Think about your local context. What might you want to explore within an RPP? How would you define those purposes?
- **Thinking Ahead:** What other stakeholders within your organization could you partner with to distribute involvement?

Next-Step Resource for Practitioners:

Penuel, W. R., & Gallagher, D. (2017). *Creating research-practice partnerships in education*. Harvard Education Press.

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Notes

1. Coburn et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2021
2. Vetter et al., 2021
3. Anderson, 2023
4. Coburn et al., 2013
5. Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; Diamond, 2021
6. Tanksley & Estrada, 2022
7. Villavicencio et al., 2022; Anderson, 2023; Vakil et al., 2016
8. Ryoo et al., 2015
9. Ryoo et al., 2015; Tanksley & Estrada, 2022
10. Coburn et al., 2013
11. Tanksley & Estrada, 2022; Teeters & Jurow, 2019
12. Tanksley & Estrada, 2022
13. Coburn et al., 2013; Tanksley & Estrada, 2022; Villavicencio et al., 2022. For a distinction between courageous and brave versus safe spaces, see also: Arao & Clemens, 2013; Singleton, 2015. In brief, the

former encourages engagement with relations of power and criticality, including challenging oneself and others. The latter may prioritize feelings of comfort and politeness.

14. Henrick et al., 2016
15. Teeters & Jurow, 2019
16. Farrell et al., 2023; Farrell et al., 2021
17. Farrell et al., 2023
18. Anderson, 2023
19. Ryoo et al., 2015
20. Diamond, 2021; Villavicencio et al., 2022
21. Denner et al., 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2014
22. Anderson, 2023; Coburn et al., 2013; National Research Council et al., 2003
23. Villavicencio et al., 2022; Teeters & Jurow, 2019
24. Penuel et al., 2013
25. Teeters & Jurow, 2019
26. Henrick et al., 2016
27. Cooper et al., 2020
28. Henrick et al., 2016
29. Coburn et al., 2013; Anderson, 2023
30. Coburn et al., 2013
31. Johnson et al., 2016
32. Ryoo et al., 2015
33. Akkerman et al., 2021
34. Henrick et al., 2016

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The research briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, research briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

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