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BUILDING SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS IN RESEARCH- PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS (RPPS) - A CASE STUDY



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Introduction

For over a decade, scholars have reported on the importance of research-practice partnerships (RPPs), particularly for bridging the gap between academia and K-12 institutions. Some authors have elaborated on RPPs' promise in facilitating data use in decision-making (Tseng, 2012) and improving problems faced by practitioners (Donovan, 2013). Henrick and colleagues' (2017) describe five dimensions of research-practice partnership effectiveness with the first dimension focusing on "Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships." This brief aims to contribute to understandings of successful relationship-building practices in RPPs via a case study involving an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) and a consulting company that provides training and professional learning around restorative practices (RP) in P12 schools.

Research around RPPs: Relationship-Building Matters

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have been characterized as long-term collaborations between researchers and practice-professionals for studies on processes, dynamics, and outcomes related to a particular practice (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). One common thread in research on RPPs in education (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Tseng et al., 2017) and health (Ovretveit et al., 2014; Riemer et al., 2012) has been the importance of relationship-building. Several authors have attested to the significance of strong relationships in RPPs. For instance, Reback and colleagues (2002) noted the importance of creating equal partnerships that provide all partners the opportunity to shape the research agenda. Similarly, Riemer et al. (2012) and Ovretveit and colleagues (2014) recognized that shared power in research design was essential to partnerships

between researchers and organizational leaders. Specifically, in terms of university-practice partnerships, Riemer and colleagues (2012) asserted that:

Several authors also noted that time commitments from partners (Riemer et al., 2012; Baker et al., 1999) and regular communication and information sharing (Baker et al., 1999) lead to strong relationships. These studies on RPPs show how developing bonds are fundamental to RPPs and lead to fruitful, mutually beneficial collaborations for both researchers and partnering organizations.

The idea of true partnership implies that the different stakeholders are equitably involved in establishing joint goals; contribute their unique strengths and expertise; and make joint decisions in all important aspects of the development, research, and implementation process.

(Riemer et al., 2012, p. 249)

Case Study Context: The Research Practice Partners

The Restorative Practices (RP) Consultant

The RP consultant partner in this case study was a professional development and coaching company that provides workshops and ongoing training on restorative practices (RP) to schools, teachers, administrators, and staff across the United States. This partnership specifically involved the RP consultant's CEO and founder and its Project Coordinator. For almost a decade, their organization has worked with several schools and districts across the country to train, professionally develop and regularly coach educators in terms of intentionally fostering safe, inclusive, and responsive learning communities for students.

The Institution of Higher Education (IHE) Partner

The Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) is a research organization within the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Delaware that utilizes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods to conduct research and evaluation studies in education, health, and social policy. The relationship between CRESP and the RP consultant began when the authors met at a workshop about restorative practices at a local high school in Fall 2018. The researcher attended the workshop out of interest in learning how restorative practices are implemented in a high school setting. The RP consultant led the session. When the researcher learned of a fellowship opportunity offered by her IHE, she reached out to the RP consultant to inquire about their interest in an RPP, with the IHE researcher directing the fellowship. The RP consultant had worked with university researchers and school partners in the past. However, the RP consultant had not had an RPP before that would produce mutually beneficial research protocols and findings. The researcher explained the intentions behind her RPP: 1) to develop a research study and tools that would be useful for both the RP consultant and the researcher; 2) to help the researcher gain access to schools for future studies; and 3) to develop a research study that focused on students and alternative approaches to school discipline. The RP consultant hoped to find out information that would strengthen its work in schools and to develop internal data collection tools, such as surveys to staff.

The School Partners and Settings

Three schools – two middle schools and an elementary school referred to here as Schools A, B, and C were sites for data collection. All three sites were public schools located in Delaware. School A, a middle school, administered a student survey co-developed by the RP consultant and the IHE. Schools B and C, the second middle school and an elementary school, served as sites for individual interviews with the RP consultant's Champions. RP Champions are educators who received intense training around RP and are expected to lead RP implementation at their schools. The RP consultant's work had been underway already in all three schools – in School A for two years, and in Schools B and C for one year.

Principals at all three schools agreed to the studies because they wished to learn from research how restorative practices was being implemented and received in their buildings. They hoped results would help them find out if RP was helping the culture at their schools.

Working under the IHE fellowship, the researcher set out to learn more about the restorative practices employed by the RP consultant in school settings. In order for her to develop this project, it was important to learn about the consultant group including its work, staff, mission, and practices. Detailing the process of forming a relationship and building trust during these early stages of partnership contributes to literature about RPPs.

The activities that the partners undertook to cultivate the relationship-building aspects of RPPs are described below.

Conceptual framework and analysis

The researcher and the RP consultant adopted Henrick and colleagues' (2017) five dimensions of research-practice partnership effectiveness to frame the analysis of their partnership work and add to understandings of relationship-building. They focused on the first dimension "Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships." Literature consistently showed how crucial this dimension is, as success in the other four dimension hinges upon success in Dimension 1. Henrick and colleagues (2017) offer five indicators that operationalize this dimension that can be used as a conceptual framework. They include:

- researchers and practitioners routinely work together.
- the RPP establishes routines that promote collaborative decision making and guard against power imbalances.
- RPP members establish norms of interaction that support collaborative decision making and equitable participation in all phases of the work.
- RPP members recognize and respect one another's perspectives and diverse forms of expertise.
- partnership goals take into account team members' work demands and roles in their respective organizations.
- The indicators are mapped onto partnership activities in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Activities of the Restorative Practices RPP based on Henrick and colleagues' (2017) RPP effectiveness indicators

Dimension: Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships	
Indicator	Case Study Activities
researchers and practitioners routinely work together.	<p>The partners in this case study worked together from December 2018 to April 2020. Before the partnership began, the researcher approached the RP consultants about her interest in conducting research on their model. In response to the researcher's pitch, the RP consultants offered to write a letter to support a PPE fellowship. UD's Partnership for Public Education (PPE) awarded the fellowship and the RPP officially began in January 2019. On their first call, the IHE and RP consultant shared personal stories on how they arrived at working on restorative practices. They then talked through meeting schedules and information they would need from each other. The RP consultant sent the researcher an overview of approach, restorative practices implementation rubrics, and descriptions of different components of their model. The researcher said she would use these to develop a logic model that Akoben could use to illustrate linkages between the organization's strategies and intended outcomes to different partners and that the IHE would use to develop research studies. The logic model showed Akoben's key objectives for Restorative Practices consultation and the resources, inputs, and processes for meeting those objectives. This model also helped illustrate components of the model that could be researched. The researcher shared a logic model draft during an early meeting that prompted a lively discussion on how they operationalize concepts, such as "affective statements," which express one's personal feelings in reaction to another person's positive or negative behaviors. The collaborators continued to refine the logic model in an iterative process both in person and via email. They also worked on a student survey, adapted from their existing staff surveys. Finally, the RP consultant asked the researcher questions about how to streamline their data organizing and analyses processes.</p> <p>Over several bi-weekly meetings, the RP consultant and researcher worked collaboratively to create a questionnaire for students and a protocol for interviewing Champions. As an indication of the growing relationship, the RP consultant facilitated the researcher's contact with one school for the student survey and two schools for Champion interviews.</p>

Dimension: Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships

Indicator	Case Study Activities
<p>the RPP establishes routines that promote collaborative decision making and guard against power imbalances.</p>	<p>The RP consultant and the research partner established a regular meeting schedule within the first week of communicating. They established that they would hold formal meetings twice per month. Specifically, the partners held conference calls via ZOOM within the first two weeks of each month and met in person at the RP consultant's offices within the last two weeks of the month. Between formal meetings, the researcher and RP consultant kept in contact through email and occasional phone calls, especially about contacting schools for research. To guard against power imbalances, they co-constructed meeting agendas and met regularly at the RP consultant's offices so that they were on the consultant's "turf" for at least half of their meetings.</p>
<p>RPP members establish norms of interaction that support collaborative decision making and equitable participation in all phases of the work.</p>	<p>This was not done proactively; however, since the partnership started, the researcher and RP consultant established norms that fostered collaboration "in the moment." This involved sharing resources with one another and checking in regularly in regards to decisions, such as collecting data in multiple schools around restorative practices. Through the establishment of a schedule in which they sometimes spoke via phone and sometimes met in person, they established a communication norm that allowed everyone to participate. In essence, this was the manifestation of restorative practices in action through the partner relationship. The partners also frequently emailed between meetings which gave another avenue for them all to weigh in on drafts and ask questions before revising materials.</p>
<p>RPP members recognize and respect one another's perspectives and diverse forms of expertise.</p>	<p>The researcher and RP consultant gave each other opportunities to provide input based on their different expertise. As a researcher with scant knowledge of restorative practices implementation, the researcher relied on the RP consultant to educate her on the approach and to provide feedback about survey measures, the logic model, and research design. At the same time, the RP consultant sought the researcher's support around developing tools for research. For instance, the researcher drafted a logic model based on meetings with the RP consultant and their organization's background materials. A CRESP colleague, who teaches a course about program evaluation, reviewed the logic model before it was given to the RP consultant for final review. The student survey was reviewed, revised, and edited by another CRESP staff member whose expertise is survey design. The RP consultant also sought technical assistance, asking the researcher for advice on keeping their staff survey data collection organized and prepared for analysis.</p>
<p>partnership goals take into account team members' work demands and roles in their respective organizations.</p>	<p>One of the researcher's major goals of the partnership was to create a study focused on students' perspectives of restorative practices, co-constructed by a research-focused university and a RP consulting company. This goal was realistic, given they had one year and a half to accomplish it. They had an IRB-approved student survey with months left in the researcher's fellowship. Given the long timeline, the goal did not interfere with day-to-day tasks and other demands. In fact, the goal fell in line with their demands, because the RP consultant liked to ensure that everyone, especially K-12 students, was seeing positive outcomes as a result of restorative practices. In addition, the researcher's role as a full time Research Associate positioned her to create useful research studies about topics she cares about, such as students' perspectives on climate. Thus, the goal did take into account their work demands and roles.</p>

Summary

Based on the application of Henrick and colleagues' (2017) Dimension 1 indicators onto partnership activities, this RPP experienced progress in terms of building trusting and mutual respectful relationships. At the beginning of the project, the IHE and the RP consultant were unfamiliar with each other's backgrounds and work. Mutual respect developed quickly as a result each partner's perceptions of the other's reputation – the IHE as a renowned research-focused university and the RP consultant as a responsive partner to local schools seeking to improve climate. By the end of the partnership, both parties not only were familiar with each other's expertise, but also benefitted from it through their creation of a logic model and other research tools. Respect grew as the two parties worked closely; they no longer needed to rely on second-hand information about reputations. The partners built trust and mutual respect by setting reasonable expectations,

communicating regularly with one another and by relying on each other's expertise: the IHE's research expertise and the consulting company's expertise around restorative practices. Ongoing communication and collaboration led to the production of a highly useful logic model that illustrates in clear and concise fashion the consulting company's existing resources, intended outcomes, and the mechanisms in place to achieve those outcomes. The partnership also produced a student survey that was administered at one school in 2020 and a Champion interview protocol that the researching partner used to collect Champion's perspectives on their experiences implementing restorative practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The RPP described here established a strong working relationship that yielded opportunities for future research studies as well as insights pertaining to the improvement of work occurring within P-12 schools. For example, the partnership produced a pre-post student survey that has the potential to shed light on how students' experiences with restorative practices change over time. Findings from the survey could help the RP consultants as they refine their model, schools as they implement restorative practices, and the researcher as she examines the value-added of RP in schools. The following actions proved to be keys to the success of the partnership and are offered as recommendations for those who might consider entering into RPP work.

- 1. Share resources.** Key to the success of this RPP, and possibly all RPPs, is the willingness of partners to share resources that are needed to advance the goals of the partnership. To help understand the consulting partner's approach to supporting schools around trauma-informed and culturally responsive restorative practices, the researcher read through the consulting partner's website and educator resources such as the Social Discipline Window document. The consulting partner's staff extended an invitation to observe whole-school trainings and one-to-one coaching. In kind, the IHE partner developed and shared a logic model for the project put together using software available at her university. The IHE partner also consulted with thought partners from her university to review a logic model and student survey that offered seeds of future research on restorative practices. Schools themselves benefitted from this work; the IHE held meetings with two of the schools' principals to discuss findings from Champion interviews. Importantly, the sharing of resources actualizes the goal of mutually beneficial partnerships in RPP work with the added benefit enhancing the university's reputation in the community.
- 2. Connect before and after content.** The researcher and RP consultant found "connection before content" to be a valuable approach to building trust and relationships. This involved brief and informal chats about their lives before diving into restorative practice work. This connection was part of the consulting partner's approach to relationship building in their RP work and it seemed fitting to incorporate it into their IHE/RP consultant meetings. Partners followed a set agenda after developing these relationship-building connections. An agenda ensured that they had clear and established goals for the meeting and a sense that the partnership was progressing. They set aside time in the agenda for topics that emerged as they talked, and often ended the meeting an hour after it was supposed to end. Being flexible with the end time for the meeting was important because often in those extended sessions, they were getting to know each other more personally and/or were going in-depth about a topic that needed the additional attention.
- 3. View partners as resources who might accomplish what you cannot.** There will be times in the early stages of RPP development when one partner is unable to accomplish a desired goal. For example, gaining access to P12 schools can prove challenging for academic researchers as additional research-related activities can present interruptions to school routines. Concerns around interruptions held by school administrators are legitimate, particularly when the "outsiders" are unknown and/or prior, trusting relationships have not yet been established. Fortunately, the consulting company which had been in the schools for some time was able to serve as a helpful intermediary that facilitated access for the researcher. Other examples of partnership benefits were described earlier.
- 4. Leverage established school-based relationships but avoid being disruptive.** While touched upon in the previous recommendation, the importance of minimizing potential disruptions for all partners demands a separate key takeaway. In this RPP, the researcher was working with two partners – an external consulting company and the school – both of which had long standing and well established norms, as well as important and worthy objectives. Excessive disruptions experienced by any of the partners runs the risk of closing doors on current and future RPP work. From the outset, all partners should include discussions of norms, objectives, and procedures and be explicit about agreements around what is and what is not allowable. Then, revisit and commit to honoring the agreements.

5. **Actively inform partners that the benefits of the partnership are not one-sided.** Avoid creating perceptions of one-sided benefits. A perception of universities or any large, resource-rich institution is that it receives all the benefits of a partnership and the relationship ends once the benefits are received. University partners should actively avoid developing or contributing to perceptions of one-sided, parasitic interactions. In this case, the IHE and consulting partner strived diligently to build trusting relationships by addressing the needs of the school first and foremost, then the consulting company. Then they would discuss how the University could help. In summary, the schools received information about how RP was “working” in their sites, the consulting company gained information about their Champions and their implementation of RP at specific sites, and the researcher gained an understanding of RP in practice. In turn, the researcher could design future studies based on these practices and existing literature. The RPP achieved its promise of an equitable and mutually beneficial relationship.
6. **Be prepared for the unexpected – not all activities will unfold as planned or perfectly.** On the morning of their very first in-person meeting, the IHE researcher travelled to the wrong address which was over twenty miles from the correct location. Upon realizing this, the consulting partner provided the researcher transportation to the proper address. Though the meeting started about 30 minutes after it was scheduled to begin, neither party allowed the delay to become an issue. After a few laughs and polite apologies, the work moved forward. These moments were reminders that in collaborations, particularly those that involve a person-centered framework like restorative practices, it is important to take any hiccups in stride and perhaps laugh knowing that you are building a relationship and partnering on important work that could change lives for the better.
7. **Collaborate on the creation of norms in advance of moving forward with the partnership.** Upon reflection of the partnership using the RPP effectiveness framework, the IHE partner and RP consultant realized that they did not proactively set up norms at the start. They ended up establishing norms along the way without saying they were norms, such as setting up agendas and sending them in advance of meetings, engaging in “connection before content” and using additional meeting time to talk further about important topics. If they had the opportunity to start this RPP again, they would intentionally discuss norms before their work got underway. Perhaps they would not have a full list at an initial meeting, but instead agree to develop them over the first few meetings and revisit as needed. Creating these might have helped them be more intentional about collaborative decision-making and equitable participation among all parties, including schools. They were fortunate that they were still able to achieve equity in participation due to the other RPP effectiveness indicators they met and actions they took to develop this research-practice relationship.

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The Partnership for Public Education (PPE) is inspired by a vision of excellence and equity in public education for Delaware's children and families. Our work is grounded in the belief that research, practice, family, and community are all needed in the systematic improvement of educational opportunities. This goal is most effectively achieved through collaboration and cooperation.

The *mission* of PPE is to bring-together members of the University of Delaware and the broader Delaware educational community—including educators, families, and community leaders—to *identify* shared needs and opportunities and to *facilitate* the exchange of knowledge.

Together, we can strengthen public education through collaboration and partnership.