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Building a Knowledge Base on Research-Practice Partnerships: Introduction to the Special Topic Collection

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Research-practice partnerships are collaborative research arrangements that seek to transform the relations among researchers, educators, and communities. There is a wide diversity in partnership forms and research methods used in them. In addition, there remain questions about the value of partnerships, given the time and resources they require to build and maintain. In this introduction to the special topic collection on research-practice partnerships, we provide an overview of how the collection adds to our knowledge of the dynamics and outcomes of such partnerships and identify areas for future study.

Keywords: *case studies, collaboration, educational policy, research utilization, research-practice partnerships*

The relationship between research and practice in education has long been the subject of self-questioning by scholars (Lagemann, 1997, 2002). The past two decades have been a particularly intense time of self-scrutiny, as researchers have asked questions about what makes research trustworthy for educational decision makers to use (e.g., Dynarski, 2006; Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002) and about what makes research relevant to practice (e.g., Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014; Miller, Drill, & Behrstock, 2010). It has also been a time of innovation and investment in new collaborations between research and practice, including in new, hybrid forms of research that integrates design and testing of innovations at the scale of districts, states, and networks (e.g., Bryk, 2015; Cobb, Jackson, Henrick, Smith, & the MIST Team, 2018; Donovan, 2013; LeMahieu, Nordstrum, & Potvin, 2017). Multiple federal agencies and private foundations have been particularly supportive of long-term collaborations focused on goals related to the improvement of teaching practice and student outcomes.

These *research-practice partnerships* (RPPs) share some common features, as identified by Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013). First, they are long term, lasting beyond a single project and reflecting an open-ended commitment of partners to one another. Second, they seek to give partners a say in the purpose and direction of the work. In so doing, they aspire to mutualism, though achieving mutualism requires attending to imbalances of power in existing relationships and institutional practices that make it difficult for partners to trust one another (Bang, Medin, Washinawatok, & Chapman, 2010; Vakil, de Royston, Nasir, & Kirshner, 2016). As such, partnerships require intentional organization to accomplish their aims. Research is a core activity of partnerships, which distinguishes them from collaborations that focus principally on service delivery (e.g., professional development, evaluation) and pure advocacy. In contrast to much research in education, however, the questions center not on advancing knowledge and theory for its own sake but on practice; that is, the research focuses on how to improve intermediate and long-term outcomes for students, their families, and their communities.

All of the partnerships described in this special topic collection met the criteria outlined above, and the articles met an additional criterion: They responded to a call for more empirical research into the dynamics and outcomes of partnership research. There remains too little research on whether partnerships can achieve their ambitious aims for change or on the dynamics with which all partnerships must grapple, from figuring out counternormative roles to navigating differences in power (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). This special topic collection is a modest addition, we acknowledge, to the evidence base, especially given the ever-present skepticism about whether partnerships are worth the investment of time and resources they demand of partners (e.g., Schneider, 2018).

A Diversity of Designs and Research Traditions

The partnerships depicted in the special topic collection reflect a diversity of partnership designs, as well as traditions of collaborative research on which they draw. This was a purposeful decision on our part as editors. We wanted to represent not a single model of partnership in order to illustrate just how much partnerships can vary in purpose and form. We also sought to include and represent different research traditions to show continuities with the past.

Partnerships can and do vary along multiple dimensions (Coburn et al., 2013). Some focus on developing and testing innovations that focus on improving subject matter learning (e.g., Donovan & Snow, 2018), while others focus on evaluating policy changes that seek to improve schools and districts as organizations (e.g., Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009). In some partnerships, researchers' principal role is to evaluate initiatives led by community, school, or district leaders (e.g., Durham et al., 2015; Kemple, 2015), while in others, co-design and testing of innovations is a core practice (e.g., Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Kwon, Wardrip, & Gomez, 2014). Partnerships also vary in their composition—whether they include, for example, students, parents, teachers, and central office administrators. And, partnerships can vary as to whether they focus principally on schools, on out-of-school contexts for learning (e.g., Bevan, Ryoo, Forrest, & Penuel, 2015), or on broader "ecosystems" of learning that include both schools and community organizations (e.g., Falk et al., 2016).

In part, the variation in partnerships reflects the traditions that animate researchers' commitments and methods. For example, participatory action research is a long-standing research tradition (Whyte, 1991) that inspires many community-based partnerships. Such partnerships often engage participants as co-researchers and include social action as part of their joint work (Kirshner, Pacheco, Sifuentes, & Hildreth, 2018). Freirean and critical perspectives are important to the work of partnerships that seek to challenge existing power relations through partnerships (Mendoza, Gutiérrez, & Kirshner, 2018). For partnerships in which co-design is a focal practice, participatory design principles and practices (Schuler & Tamioka, 1993) are often drawn on, as are approaches commonly used in the learning sciences to design and test innovations in classrooms (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Experimental and observational studies are likely to be used in partnerships whose primary objectives are to evaluate the efficacy of district and state policies and programs (Donovan & Snow, 2018).

Developing Understanding of the Dynamics of Partnerships

Several of the articles in the special topic collection focus on and help to advance our understanding of the dynamics of RPPs. Where past research has pointed primarily to challenges in role negotiation and addressing power dynamics in partnerships, two of these articles speak to how these can be confronted in partnerships. Two articles address how work to develop teachers' and principals' practice transforms, by including teachers and leaders as co-designers and co-researchers.

Farrell, Harrison, and Coburn's (2019) provocatively titled article "What the hell is this, and who the hell are you?" speaks to an important condition for partnerships' maintenance—namely, continuous role negotiation in the face of constantly changing school and district environments. Even if environments were not in flux, partnerships demand researchers and educators take up unfamiliar roles and change how they work. As new leaders enter a partnership, they are likely to ask for clarity on purposes and roles of partners. The article reminds us that in addition to roles, identities are at stake, and researchers committed to work in partnership are often called to defend their seat at the table in district change efforts.

Resnick and Kazemi (2019) employ a framework for studying co-design with principals in a partnership, the design tensions framework (Tatar, 2007), in the context of their design research partnership with a school district focused on improving mathematics teaching. The framework offers a theoretically informed way to investigate design decisions as a balancing of competing goals; here, the authors focus on goals that are typical to partnerships: improving practice. They focus on a practice used in teacher education to articulate specific pedagogical strategies in the disciplines, decomposition of practice (Grossman et al., 2009), in a partnership. Their application, though, is to principal practice, and their focus is on articulating fine-grained practices of principals *with* a principal team member rather than, for them, as a means to facilitate mutual learning within a partnership.

Thompson et al. (2019) present work of a multiyear partnership organized as a networked improvement community, according to principles of improvement science. In a Networked Improvement Community, a key goal is to develop, test, and iteratively refine specific practices to accomplish a particular improvement goal, such as increasing the quality of mentoring interactions with new teachers (Hannan, Russell, Takahashi, & Park, 2015) or relationship building with students in schools (Tichnor-Wagner, Wachen, Cannata, & Cohen-Vogel, 2017). Thompson et al.'s (2019) partnership is focused on improving teaching at the level of a school district and relies on networked teacher teams to develop and test what they call "foothold practices." These they define as a set of practices that can productively launch teacher teams into cycles of developing and testing strategies for improving the quality of science teaching. The team derived features of practices from a comparative analysis of different teacher teams, attending to commonalties across successful teams.

The intertwined dynamics of power and race in a partnership are the focus of Denner, Bean, Campe, Martinez, and Torres's (2019) article. This is an honest review of struggles within a partnership to grapple with the power researchers often unwittingly exercise in torqueing agendas of community organizations to meet their own ends. Even well-intentioned researchers, armed with theories that would presumably protect them from doing wrong, find themselves implicated in reproducing unequal institutional relations. Because these relations were bound up in race, these dynamics took on added significance. Importantly, co-analysis and joint writing facilitated coming to understanding of just how the work went wrong and helped the partners renew their commitment to working together, albeit in a different way.

Expanding Thinking About Partnership Outcomes

Three of the articles in the special topic collection address outcomes of partnerships. Measuring outcomes has been particularly challenging for RPPs, in part because the pathway from collaborative policy and program planning to improved student outcomes is a long one. But RPPs also can create measurable changes along the way, including how research is used, and they also develop researchers with particular knowledge, skills, and sensibilities for engaging in collaborative work.

Blazar and Kraft (2019) focus on an innovative model for engaging in randomized controlled trials with partners that test innovations, change them, and test them again over multiple years in ways that allow partners to modify designs to account for findings, without compromising the integrity of their designs. A number of partnerships have undertaken randomized controlled trials of interventions, and there have been proposals for formative evaluation of interventions in partnership like this study, but this study provides a powerful worked example for how an RPP's work can be evaluated. As the authors point out, traditional forms of program evaluation do not work in the context of RPPs. This article (and, we hope, others that will follow) begins to lay out realistic strategies for RPPs that seek to understand their impact on students. Importantly, the strategy employed did not yield its intended results—that is, the programs did not measurably improve. As such, this particular strategy comes with a warning that any RPP strategy should: Despite its promise, it may not yield expected benefits.

Hopkins, Weddle, Gluckman, and Gautsch (2019) examine research use as an outcome of RPP. Indeed, enhanced research use is an important outcome for funding agencies seeking to enhance the use of evidence-based practice (Tseng, 2012), and the long-term nature of collaborations between researchers and practitioners enhances the likelihood that research will be consulted in decision making (National Research Council, 2012). Hopkins et al.'s study looks at research use within a professional association of state leaders in science education that has long included researchers as affiliate members. They examine patterns of sharing of research within the network and show that not only researchers but also key leaders in the organizations play brokering roles in sharing and promoting the use of evidence in supporting implementation of new science standards.

Ghiso, Campano, Schwab, Asaah, and Rusoja (2019) address another key outcome of partnerships that is important when researchers are also part of higher education institutions and involved in the preparation of future scholars. Their article begins with a critical examination of how mentoring is typically framed—as faculty preparing students for success in the academy—and opens up a definition that recognizes the ways in which within partnerships faculty learn from and draw on new graduate students' knowledge and experience in the community. Their article also highlights the ways in which community partners mentor not just students but more senior faculty in the partnership. It richly highlights a set of skills and sensibilities for collaborative work that are not typical within graduate programs focused on the preparation of future researchers, as well as the need for programs to create contexts where young scholars can bring their "whole selves" into the academy.

Challenges to Building an Evidence Base Related to Partnerships

The opportunity to edit a special topic collection on RPPs has brought to the fore the challenges of developing a stronger empirical research base on partnerships. Many of the abstracts we initially received were proposals to develop first-person, retrospective accounts of partnerships. These, we reasoned, could not yield compelling answers to questions about how partners can navigate conflict, power differences, and failures, because if the partnership had survived, it would be too easy to lose the feeling of tenuousness and actual contingencies that lead some partnerships to survive and others to end. Furthermore, choosing only these kinds of studies would likely lead to problematic selection bias, only recording those partnerships that survived and proved effective. Also, only a few articles took up the challenge of exploring partnership outcomes beyond those that pertain to the efficacy of specific interventions studied by partnerships.

There are many reasons why studying partnerships is challenging. To begin, the field has open conceptual questions about what constitutes "effectiveness" of an RPP. The RPP Effectiveness Framework (Henrick, Cobb, Penuel, Jackson, & Clark, 2017) represents an important beginning point in mapping outcomes on which RPPs could be assessed. However, we lack a deep understanding of how each dimension of the framework might manifest itself or where, when, and how we might gather evidence to support claims of progress. Second, there is a lack of measures—beyond standard

ones for measuring impacts of interventions on student outcomes—for studying partnership effectiveness. Valid measures are a necessary component of evaluation of RPPs. Third, partnerships take time to effect changes in practice and outcomes—longer than might be expected from a targeted intervention, professional development program, or even a preservice teacher education program. The value they offer is different from these, say advocates, in that they seek more enduring changes over time through capacity building. Of course, in the long run, funders and policymakers may not give partnerships so much time.

The tendency of partnership research to be weighted toward first-person accounts of partnerships is understandable. Often, the dynamics are appreciated by insiders in a way that is difficult to ascertain for outsiders. But models of cross-partnership research exist that trade off depth for breadth and that can yield important insights about how and when challenges to partnerships can be overcome (e.g., Farrell et al., 2018). And the articles in this special topic collection illustrate an effective strategy for studying partnerships from within—namely, engaging in systematic, contemporaneous study of partnership dynamics and using collaborative analysis and co-authorship to highlight divergent perspectives on partnership activities. Such studies are necessary if partnership research is to identify means by which partnerships can be created and maintained by a wide variety of leaders in research and education and not by those with will, capacity, and resources beyond those available in most settings.

Still, we see a need for more systematic qualitative studies of partnership dynamics that study partnership development over the long term. Ideally, some studies would capture what an educational organization or research team looked like before undertaking a partnership to generate more persuasive evidence regarding how being in a partnership is consequential. Also, there's a need for studies that can connect partnership processes, adoption of new policies and practices co-designed in partnerships, and changes in outcomes (Tseng, 2017).

We hope this special topic collection offers a base on which to build future studies of RPPs. The base is necessarily wide, rather than deep, so as to encompass the breadth of partnership. Our hope is that studies of different kinds of partnerships and the breadth of outcomes of partnerships can become a reliable foundation not only for knowledge building but also for partnership design and development.

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