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# PARTNER RESEARCH SCHOOLS: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

Prepared by:

**Barbara Brown, Christy Thomas & Sylvie Roy**

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Werklund School of Education  
University of Calgary  
2500 University Drive, NW  
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4  
[www.ucalgary.ca](http://www.ucalgary.ca)

**Abstract**

Research in and with communities is emerging as a strategy to make research matter for everyone involved. One key condition for successful research-practice partnerships is to develop strong relationships among project team members. Partners also need to develop meaningful research projects that can withstand unexpected changes in the research plan. This working document is intended to support researchers and practitioners as they consider how to foster relationships when planning to partner and then continue to strengthen their relationships as they conduct research together in schools. The working document may also be applicable to those responsible for making decisions about conducting research in K-12 Schools, postsecondary institutions, graduate students and others involved in research-practice partnerships. Three fictitious scenarios are provided to guide beginning conversations about some common issues and questions raised by researchers and practitioners related to developing research relationships when involved in K-12 school research. The purpose of the discussion questions presented at the end of each scenario is to facilitate conversations about research relationships.

Keywords: research relationships, partnerships, researchers, practitioners

### **Research Relationships Scenario #1: Forging Relationships in the Beginning**

Research-practice partnerships are defined as “mutually beneficial and open-ended collaborations between educators and researchers seeking to improve educational practices and outcomes” (Ryoo, Choi & McLeod, 2015, p. 1). Partnerships can be reciprocal where partners can learn alternative perspectives (Woloshyn, Chalmers, & Bosacki, 2005) and share each other’s expertise (Stephens & Boldt, 2016). In a recent study in Alberta, partners in a research-practice partnership in an Alberta study described the benefits and reciprocity of research relationships:

*Partnerships between university researchers and leaders in school jurisdictions provide the opportunity for theory and practice to inform the work of all partners. Researchers have an opportunity to be immersed in the school-based life of leading and learning, thereby refining and expanding their understandings; leaders are exposed to research-based practices that can alter the ways in which they view their work and offer possibilities for enhancing their practice. Overall, the reciprocity that occurs as a result of partnerships has enormous potential to positively enliven professional practice and inform undergraduate and graduate curriculum in teacher and leader development.* (Brown et al., 2019, p. 28)

**Scenario:** School-university partnerships can be a means to generate meaningful research where practitioners and researchers collaborate and have a commitment to learn from both research and practice (Abodeeb-Gentile, Pedro, & Tapper, 2016). A call for proposals for projects involving a researcher(s), school authority, and other educational organizations was advertised. Researcher A reviewed the grant announcement but was uncertain about developing a proposal in partnership with a school authority. Researcher A currently conducts research in some classrooms, but does not know any school district leaders to collaboratively write a partnership grant proposal. At the same time, School Authority A received notice about the call for research proposals and noted some linkages to areas that could be researched in the district. School Authority A receives numerous requests for research projects on a yearly basis, but does not know who to contact at a University to collaboratively write a proposal. Researcher A and School Authority A decide to decline this grant opportunity and do not benefit from a research-practice partnership.

#### **Questions for discussion:**

In your experience, how are research-practice partnerships formed? How might researchers and school authorities cultivate relationships for research? How might researchers and school authorities develop compatible goals for research?

## Research Relationships Scenario #2: Change Impacts Relationships

Maheady, Magiera, and Simmons (2016) argue that practitioners and researchers can collaborate as a solution for solving contemporary educational issues and bridging theory to practice. Partners, including researchers, practitioners and possibly other organizations collaborate by designing research questions together; the partners establish research goals and aim to impact both research and practice (Abodeeb-Gentile et al, 2016). As noted by Snow (2015), in research-practice partnerships we are called towards “a new model that emphasizes the interconnections of research and practice rather than the gap between them” (p. 460). Traditionally, in exploring educational issues, the researcher was positioned in a role of knowledge producer and the practitioner was positioned in the role of knowledge consumer. Research-practice partnerships position researchers, practitioners, and other educational stakeholders in equal positions and as valuable contributors in exploring solutions for relevant educational issues (Snow, 2015). However, one challenge for partnership projects is turnover of those leading the project (Farrell et al., 2017).

In an Alberta study of research-practice partnership projects, participants noted the difficulties of change in leadership in the organizations involved and how this impacted their project (e.g., change in district/school leadership, research team, graduate research assistants, participant groups, other organizations involved in the project):

*There have been changes in who is working on this project within the network which has made it hard to build relationships with the teachers and community. (Brown et al., 2019, p. 29)*

**Scenario:** Research and school authority partners decided to engage in a research partnership project with a third-party organization. After the project was under way, one of the project leads changed position and was no longer involved in the project. The partners were not sure how to move forward with the unexpected role changes. This resulted in a delay for the project as planned. A new partner became involved in the project and immediately wanted to make changes to the original research plan (goals, research questions, methods for collecting data, etc.).

### **Questions for discussion:**

How will you be prepared for changes that may occur during a research-practice partnership? How will you plan for flexibility among the project team and an openness to change and building relationships throughout the project? How will you ensure the research partnership is mutually beneficial?

### Research Relationships Scenario #3: Relationships Take Time

Partnerships for research purposes are emerging in educational contexts as a “strategy to make research matter” (Denner, Bean, Campe, Martinez & Torres, 2019, p. 1). Research-practice partnerships are often referred to as a long-term collaboration between researchers and practitioners, with a focus on problems of practice, are committed to mutualism, use intentional strategies to foster partnership, and produce original analyses” (Coburn, Penuel & Geil, 2013; Coburn & Penuel, 2016). It also is important to invest sufficient time towards research-practice partnerships – “building a joint research agenda and process takes time, and trust building is ongoing” (Denner et al., 2019, p. 10). However, one of the key challenges in funded partnerships is the differences in researchers’ and practitioners’ typical timelines or pace of work (Farrell et al., 2017, p. 3; Tseng, 2017).

In an Alberta study of research-practice partnerships, one of the project participants noted the importance of taking time to regularly communicate with partners:

*Over the course of the research project, the partnership was maintained and strengthened through ongoing communication, clear designation of responsibilities, and consistent follow through by all parties involved. Scheduled monthly phone meetings were a cornerstone of the ongoing communication....The partnership was professional, collegial, supportive, and collaborative throughout the research process. (Brown et al., 2019, p. 30)*

**Scenario:** Knowledge mobilization activities can be a time to bring partners together and strengthen relationships throughout the project. In Project X, all the partners involved continually underestimated the additional time needed to properly engage in the research activities and knowledge mobilization activities to allow for sufficient input from all the project members. For example, one of the team members agreed to prepare slides for a presentation. However, the slides were not prepared with sufficient time to share them advance with all the partners before the presentation. The team members were frustrated with having limited time to review the slides and provide feedback or make changes to the slides before the presentation.

#### **Questions for discussion:**

In your experience, what strategies have you used to ensure partners are provided with sufficient time to provide input when collaborating? How will you build in extra time for partners to meaningfully contribute to the research and maintain relationships? What are some long-term strategies that could help teams continue to foster relationships among researchers and practitioners?

**Questions/Notes:**

*What research-relationship related issues have you experienced?*

*What supports do you need?*

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