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Conceptualizing a Foundation to Lead a School–University Research Partnership

Sarah Hamilton, Dana Braunberger & Barbara Brown

Abstract

Research within schools has taken place for decades, yet longstanding skepticism between researchers and practitioners has resulted in hesitation to work together to develop research partnerships. Two school-based leaders and one university researcher sought to conceptualize a foundation for their school–university research partnership. During the initial stages of the partnership development, terminology and interpretation of language used to describe research in schools emerged as both an area of concern and an opportunity for exploration. The partners recognized a need to revise their lexicon from terms that implied teachers needed assistance fixing “problems of practice” to terms promoting an approach embracing innovation and a strengths-based practice in schools. Through an action research approach, the authors draw on their meeting notes, reflections, and documentation to describe the process they used to develop a research-partnership model. Results from this inquiry explicate how partners reflected on their leadership approach, key moments, and a changing context to develop guiding principles and a partnership model with potential for sustainability.

Keywords: research–practice partnership, co-design, sustainability, strengths-based lexicon

Introduction

Wilson (1995) asserted that research and teaching are not two different roles but a relationship. Educational research serves several broad purposes and can be used for opportunities for innovation, challenge, and change to educational policy and practice. Additionally, research in education can address issues of equality, inform political decision-making and social agendas, and advance the practice of educators in all contexts (Lingard, 2013). In other words, educational research can use high-quality knowledge and practice alongside evidence to improve schooling (Desimone et al., 2016).

School-based research partnerships have been increasingly encouraged within educational communities as policy mandates advocate for greater use of evidence-based practices and partnerships serve to build capacity to engage in and with research (Godfrey & Brown, 2018). However, longstanding skepticism between researchers and practitioners has resulted in issues of trust and hesitation to embrace research practices within the classroom (Henrick et al., 2017; Nathan & Sawyer, 2014). Some studies have shown that partnerships between schools and universities have proven ineffective because they were episodic, not well understood, lacked clear ownership, and did not result in lasting changes to practice (Henrick et al., 2017). However, other studies have shown that research–practice partnerships can be effective when there is a lead team comprised of researchers and practitioners who collaboratively guide the project (Brown, 2021). Nonetheless, limited research exists examining research partnerships (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), particularly the moments that contribute to the conceptualization of a partnership.

Using principles of people-centered design, we (two school leaders and one university researcher) collaborated with an aim to co-design a foundation for an innovative partnership characterized as dynamic and responsive to the needs of both researchers and practitioners. The overall intent was to develop a mutually beneficial research relationship that looked beyond the familiar models of research–practice partnerships. Looking to seize emergent opportunities, integrate high-quality research into practice, and innovate partnership practices, the aspiration of our work was to develop a foundation to enact a sustainable partnership model to share with the broader education community.

Throughout the design process, discussion led us to reflect and negotiate the language for framing research–practice partnership (RPP). Frequently used terms such as *problems-of-practice* and *academic experts* can suggest that practitioners, such as school leaders and teachers, are unable

to solve the challenges they encounter in their schools and classrooms and rely on academic experts or contract researchers to find or develop solutions. We established a shared vision of a continuum of engagement by collaboratively engaging in cycles of action research; we identified how a deficit approach to establishing an RPP could result in missed opportunities to attract and promote rich dialogue about teaching and learning, and school leadership. As our partnership developed, we considered how we could shift conversations from exclusively solving problems to conversations with a strength-based lens and collaborative leadership approach. In this way, we identified a need to better understand the nuances of how RPPs can be conceptualized to provide a foundation for sustainability and contribute to a richer understanding of educational practice.

The purpose of this article is to provide an understanding of how a collaborative leadership approach was used to conceptualize a foundation for a school–university RPP. This article serves to inform researchers and practitioners seeking to develop sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships to impact student learning and teacher practice positively. The following question was used to guide our inquiry: *How do school–university partners conceptualize a foundation for their research–practice partnership using an action-research process?*

Literature Review

In this section we provide an overview of the literature related to RPPs that contributed to our shared understanding of university–school research partnerships.

Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) bring researchers and practitioners together in a partnership to identify and collaboratively explore opportunities for innovation identified by those who encounter them in their current practice (Brown, 2021). RPPs are often described as long-term commitments, mutualistic, and with a focus on problems of practice (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). RPPs have the potential to provide evidence-based solutions in an

informative, timely, and relevant manner (Henrick et al., 2016). Collaborative development of goals, strategies, analysis, and learnings that are the focus of RPPs allow for not only practical solutions and useable findings for practitioners, but they also contribute to research and theory integral to the work of academic researchers (Henrick et al., 2016).

Essential Components of RPPs

Researchers describe essential components for RPPs and recommend: 1) establishing trust between partners; 2) access to resources, inclusive of time, materials, and expertise; and 3) shared goals and purpose at the centre of partnerships (Butcher et al., 2011; Coburn et al., 2013; Harrison et al., 2017; Henrick et al., 2017; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). For partnerships to achieve desired outcomes and experience success in their research partnerships, Penuel and Gallagher (2017) describe five key dimensions that can contribute to the success of a partnership, including cultivating relationships, developing the capacity to engage in partnership work, impacting local improvement efforts, conducting and using rigorous and relevant research, and informing the work of others. Establishing common goals and purpose, developing mutual trust and respect, having timely and open sharing of contextually relevant learnings, and flexibility to provide the conditions within which productive partnerships can flourish are conditions noted in the literature that characterize successful RPPs (Henrick et al., 2017; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). Furthermore, “as soon as researchers co-design with teachers or other stakeholders in education (workplace trainers, school leaders, district leaders) then goals can become negotiable targets” (Bakker, 2018, p. 16) to ensure there is a shared purpose at the centre of the partnership.

An identified shortcoming of traditional research conducted in schools is the narrow scope of the work and often with limited input by the practitioners when driven by the university researcher and their research interests or research agenda (Davidson et al., 2020). Research work

can focus on a pre-identified problem of practice and can easily be decontextualized from the community in which it occurs. Though intended to move education forward with the research findings, traditional RPP relationships are often characterized as uni-directional, with few direct benefits for schools and systems within which they take place (Henrick et al., 2017).

Despite interest in further developing relationships between schools and researchers, Godfrey and Brown (2018) identified that “it is likely the case that no country has fully exploited the potential of research to improve education at all levels of the school ecosystem” (p.147). In a review of the extant literature, school practitioners identified that traditional approaches to educational research lacked guidance for school-based decision-making (Henrick et al., 2017), failed to provide timely results (Godfrey & Brown 2018; Harrison et al., 2017; Henrick et al., 2017; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007), lacked accessibility and usefulness of information shared (Harrison et al., 2017; Henrick et al., 2017; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007) and did not result in sustainability in process or resources (Godfrey & Brown, 2018). Furthermore, studies showed little sustained change in practice resulted from these types of partnerships (Henrick et al., 2017). The purpose of our inquiry was to conceptualize a foundation for a joint school–university partnership with potential for sustainability.

Research Design

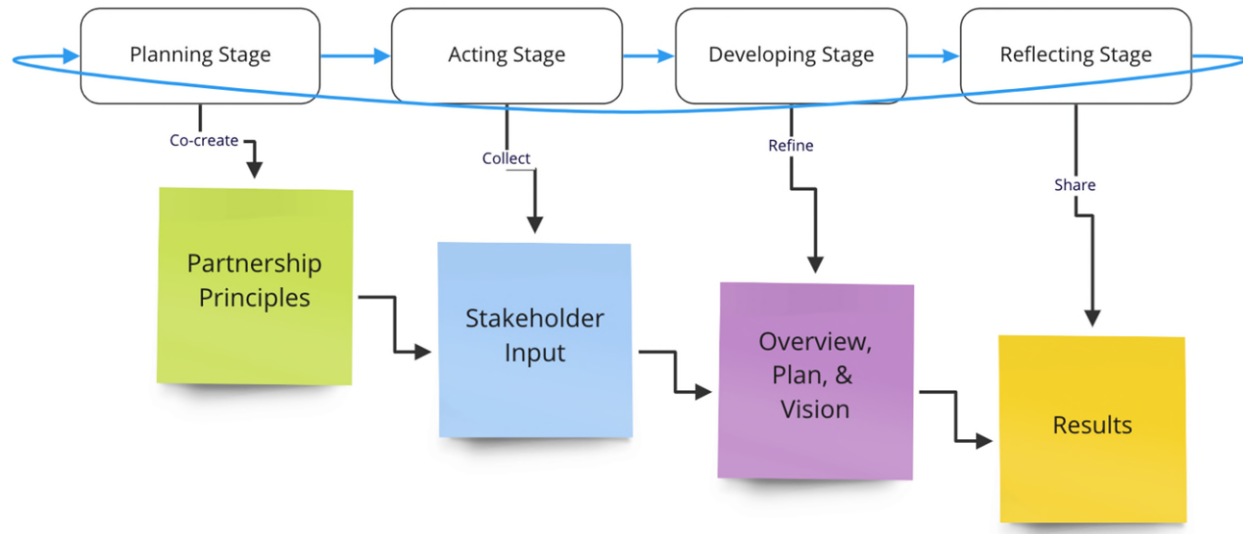
We aimed to develop a joint school–university partnership model with expansive possibilities. Using an action research approach, we documented our process and emergent learnings, examined our perspectives and understandings of our research partnership, and reflected on what made it different from our previous experiences with traditional research in schools.

Action Research Methodology

Action research offers a path to co-create knowledge with stakeholders in relational spaces (Mertler, 2019). Four stages in action research guided our collaboration and conceptualization of a foundation for our RPP (1) planning, (2) acting, (3) developing and (4) reflecting (Mertler, 2014). These four stages were not linear and occurred over a period of one year (Dec. 2019–Dec. 2020) as a recursive and cyclical process (see Figure 1). We met monthly to discuss goals and determine our next steps together during the planning stage. We leveraged previously established characteristics of effective RPPs to co-create a set of principles to describe and guide our partnership. During the acting stage, we shared these principles and our long-term vision for our partnership with other members in our respective organizations to gather input, provide us with critique, and help us clearly articulate our intended outcomes for the RPP. During the developing stage, we made refinements, elaborated on the principles to guide the development of a framework, and build a more detailed RPP conceptualization, including a three-year action plan with associated outcomes. The reflecting stage provided an opportunity to consider our process to date in developing a foundation for our RPP and share our results as we prepared to engage in further cycles of action research together.

Figure 1

Four Stages of Action Research Adapted from Mertler (2014) Action Research Process



Data Sources

Meeting notes, co-created documents and reflective journals were maintained over a 12-month period during the stages of action research and informed the development of our research–practice partnership. We used Mertler’s (2014) constant comparative method in gathering our data and conducting a critical examination and analysis of the iterative action research stages to reflect on our process and ideas throughout development (as depicted in Figure 1).

Meeting Notes

We met a total of 12 times between November 2019 and November 2020. Each meeting was concluded to determine the next steps and timeframe for the following meeting. Additional meetings were held to analyze data, member check, and formulate conclusions for knowledge mobilization.

Co-created Documents

As a result of our collaborative work, we co-created a partnership overview, determined our success criteria for the partnership, constructed a three-year plan, and designed a partnership framework outlining our work's vision and intended outcomes. These documents were used to share and communicate ideas with other members of each respective organization and to provide the long-term and short-term vision and actions plans for the partnership.

Reflective Journals

Each of us maintained a reflective journal with commentary about our individual experiences engaging in this co-created work, how we perceived the work developed throughout the process, and our impressions of the partnership as it emerged. These ongoing reflections were used during our meetings to inform the next steps and help develop our partnership's success criteria (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis using Mertler's (2014) constant comparative method took into consideration the necessity of broad consideration for the settings, the author participants and the contexts in which this action research took place. We used the four stages of action research to frame our reflections and perspectives to help conceptualize the dimensions of our RPP. The iterations and adjustments to the process and RPP development (planning stage) resulted from our ongoing reflection and dialogue, consistent with the reflecting stage of Mertler's (2014) action research design.

Our meeting notes, co-created documents and reflective journals were analyzed using a process of open coding, where we each individually engaged with the data to identify the main

themes from each researcher-participant reflection journal, axial coding, where we met and discussed their preliminary findings to determine commonalities and identify potential codes and categories, and selective coding, where we each took an identified category and re-engaged with the data to find exemplary cases and statements to support these identified ideas (Newman, 2011). These themes are presented in the next section, and their implications are further elaborated in the discussion section.

Our Reflections

The analysis of our reflections resulted in three broad themes: (1) the incorporation of established principles of effective RPPs, (2) how this partnership actively addressed shortcomings of RPPs, and (3) emergent key moments.

Established Principles of Effective RPPs

Our reflections noted that we leveraged the literature about research partnerships and the unique context of our partner institutions to help us form principles to communicate the nature of our partnership and guide our future research work together. We collaboratively designed a partnership model (see Figure 2) that reflected key principles of RPPs that were literature-informed and nested within our contexts and perspectives as researchers and practitioners. Our co-designed principles included:

- Positively impact student learning
- Cultivate a partnership relationship with a strong, unique identity, characterized by a mutual, open-ended commitment to ongoing partnership and respect for one another's perspectives

- Develop capacity to engage in partnership, norms of interaction, and collaborative decision making
- Allocate in-kind contributions or seek funds to provide needed human, social and material resources
- Use rigorous and relevant research to inform continuous educational improvement
- Conduct research relevant to opportunities identified together by the partners
- Inform the work of others through sharing our results with practitioners and researchers
- Demonstrate leadership in research–practice partnerships and share broadly to inform educational partnerships.

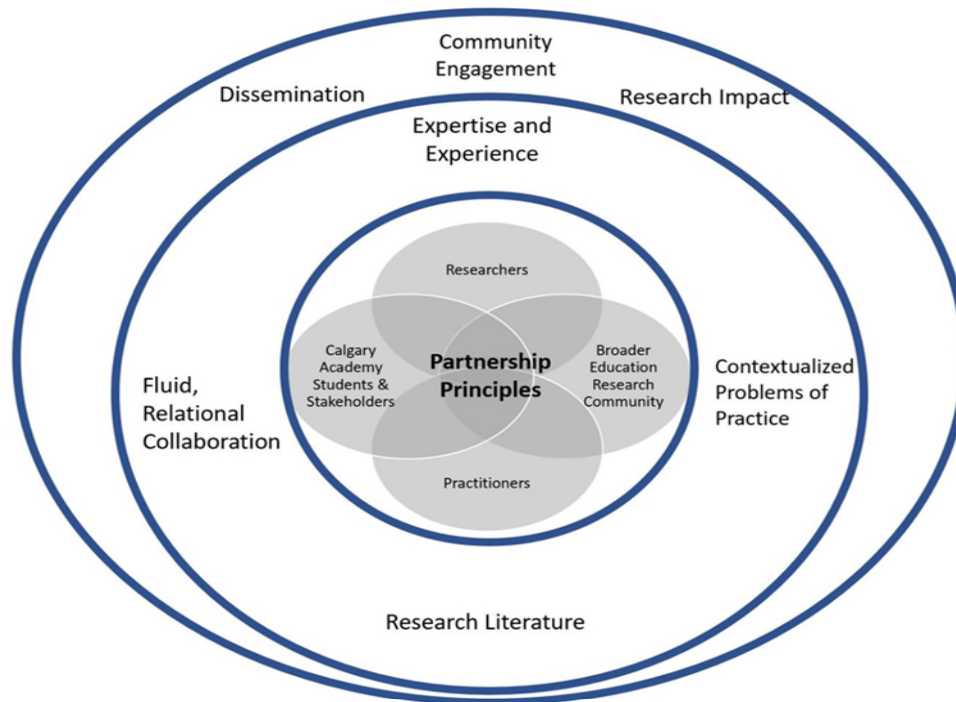
Throughout the development of the partnership model, we discussed the necessity to reflect on the literature and draw upon our previous experiences with RPPs to ensure our partnership would support openness to different ideas and viewpoints. This model provided a foundation to guide our partnership work. Accompanying this model, a three-year action plan was also developed, incorporating the key principles we established for our RPP (see Appendix B).

Addressing Shortcomings

Sustainability. We recognized that RPPs can become unsustainable when there is turnover of the lead researcher or practitioners. Sustainability became a focal point of conversation at each of our meetings as we considered ways to integrate research into organizational practice and leverage the shared and individual expertise of all partners to benefit our organizations and positively impact student learning. We noted that our partnership was designed to be responsive and adaptable; it was important to mitigate issues of turnover and establish relationships between our organizations that could be continued and sustained.

Figure 2:

Framework for a Co-Designed RPP



Mutual benefits. Another shortcoming in RPPs can occur when partners do not perceive any benefits from the collaboration. In co-developing both long and short-term goals for our partnership, we sought to ensure mutual benefits, noting “a true collaborative, common goal-driven partnership could make the difference” (Dana) in overcoming many of the previously identified limitations of traditional RPPs. By working together to co-create our guiding principles, partnership model, and action plan for our work, we recognized “each partner has a vested and personal interest in the research” (Sarah).

Key Moments

We reflected on key moments and how this prompted discussion and informed our dialogue and reflections about our partnership and future direction of our work.

Academics and Practitioners Leading Together. Previous experiences indicated that the initiation and conduct of research had primarily been the role of academics who were understood to have specialized knowledge and looked for partners to help provide a site for a study. In this way, practitioners were rarely the ones seen to identify areas for research, and the design and focus of research were not often based in the context of a particular school.

As an identified challenge in other RPP work was the perceived transactional nature of the partnered work, we identified the necessity to establish value for the contributions of both practitioners and researchers. This provided a basis for “sustainable practice” as well as “to prevent work from being opportunistic and possibly incoherent.” In our work, we collectively viewed the incorporation of different aspirations, seeing the needs and expectations of both academics and practitioners as an important aspect and honouring all contributions and perspectives, and identifying opportunities to “blur the lines” between research and practice.

Our reflections identified that one of the shared intentions was that our partnership would be co-created and led by all three of us in consultation with stakeholders in our respective institutions. To this end, one of us noted that “during the acting phase, we shared the principles with other members in our respective organizations to gather input, provide us with critique, and to help us clearly articulate our principles for our research–practice partnership” (Sarah). Initial meetings were held with representatives from both entities and feedback was sought and included in the acting phase to support our intention of co-design. In this way, one of us noted that “our

progression has been organic, ... it has been co-developed with a shared intention for it to be mutually beneficial” (Dana).

Therefore, the development process not only supported needs for learning and for research but helped to establish a “working culture of trust” where each step was intended to foster our relationship as partners in leading a partnership with a solid foundation. A shared reflection expressed “this trust has proven to be a building block of the foundation for the partnership as it continued to evolve” (Sarah).

Developing a Shared Lexicon. A key moment in the early stages of our inquiry focused on the development of a shared lexicon. Initially, the proposed design of the partnership was centered on identifying shared problems of practice, a common strategy and terminology used in educational research. This approach to partnership research offers a space where the intersection of practitioner and researcher interests align with an intent to generate new knowledge and practices. During the reflecting stage, it became evident that the language and use of the term ‘problem-of-practice’ might not be commonly understood by researchers and practitioners alike. For instance, beginning with a “problem” could be interpreted as a deficit within the practitioner’s context or their practice itself. This could undermine the equitable standing this partnership aimed to foster and fail to acknowledge the professional expertise practitioners bring to the partnership table.

We agreed to reframe our work from problem-of-practice to a strength-based frame and use terms that focus on unearthing opportunities instead of exposing challenges and deficits of practice. A strength-based lexicon could also build on existing successes, encouraging teachers to be engaged and open to research for learning and growth and for sharing with the broader community. We discussed the challenges associated with engaging teachers in research, including

the existing research narrative as an addition to teacher workload rather than a part of the work itself. In reframing the language to reflect the strength and innovation teachers can bring to the classroom, in contrast to suggesting teachers have problems which need to be solved by external ‘experts’, we considered how a strengths-based lexicon can increase engagement and willingness for practitioners to participate in research.

Responsiveness to a Changing Context. We viewed agility as an important feature of our partnership where our work could be adapted to meet changing circumstances. While designed to mitigate shortcomings, a purposeful responsiveness to our contexts was also critical to provide a foundation for the partnership. For example, we discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic and unanticipated disruptions impacted our collaborative work, both within our partnership and beyond. We agreed the pandemic “may have contributed to strengthening the relational connections yet delayed our progress in meeting some of the originally planned milestones” (Barb), but we continued to look ahead to see how we might emerge from this in a stronger position to promote and initiate school-based partner research. As we continued to meet throughout the COVID-19 pandemic virtually, we took time to share how crisis circumstances were impacting our work and our partnership. Despite the delay in conducting research together during the pandemic, we devoted our attention to establishing a foundation for our research–practice partnership and future work together.

Discussion

Our findings explicate four emergent ideas that permeated our reflections and experiences in building our research–practice partnership. These include leading through co-design, sustainability, and a strengths-based lexicon.

Leading through Co-Design

In this article, we noted key moments that we experienced during the development of our partnership principles and helped us develop and conceptualize shared partnership goals and success indicators. One of the defining moments for our team was when we recognized we were engaged in a participatory design method, which we identified as co-design, to describe our collective leadership approach.

The members of our co-design team could be considered as occupants of different professional worlds. Two of us occupy roles in schools as leaders/practitioners and one of us occupies a role in a university as an educational researcher. In this sense, we could be characterized as occupants of different professional worlds. However, all three of us also occupy similar professional worlds. We have experience conducting research (two of us as doctoral candidates and school-based researchers and one as a faculty researcher) and we have extensive experience working in schools (with a total of nearly 60 years in K-12). Hence, all three of us describe ourselves as educators who occupy both the researcher and practitioner worlds (Friesen, 2022).

Co-design is considered a participatory design method and is commonly used by researchers and practitioners in educational settings (Barbera et al., 2017). Co-design has been shown to deepen insights and the understanding by leveraging the range of experiences and multiple perspectives of the co-designers (Cober et al., 2015; Cook-Sather, 2014; Penuel et al., 2007). This study benefitted from drawing on our experiences as researchers and practitioners through the co-design process. As a co-design team, we collaborated to create a longitudinal partnership and vision for leading in a research-engaged school.

Although we acknowledge this study is limited to our perspectives, arguably, these results can be adapted by other researcher-practitioner teams and potentially serve to inform how teams can engage in leading through co-design.

Sustainability

Though identified to be “long-term, mutualistic” and collaboratively developed (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 49), RPPs are more often noted to take place sporadically and are not sustained in professional practice (Henrick et al., 2017). We identified the need to not only develop a sustainable model for continued work together, but a further necessity to create a process and structure to support long-term collaborations. Leveraging the symbiotic benefits of the partnership was identified as a way to promote a sustainable partnership. Ensuring our work was focused on shared interests, aligning with the principle of leading through co-design, would promote continued engagement in the collaboration. By sharing our partnership model and seeking feedback from other members of our respective organizations, we found this encouraged members to see themselves in the work and take ownership of the process. Rappaport et al. (2008), who noted, “relational strategies as guiding principles in an effort to analyze the components/obstacles to a viable community-based research partnership” (p. 700). By focusing on the relational strengths and commitments to each other and the work, the trust between organizations would continue to strengthen and develop, supporting a sustainable process for continued partnership research.

Along with considerations for ensuring our collaboration was based on trust and mutual benefit, there was a recognition of the need to be responsive to emergent concerns and situations for sustainability. As changes in education reverberated throughout every level of the system during the COVID-19 pandemic, this highlighted our need to be flexible and adaptable to change. Being attuned and responsive to the needs of each member was critical in maintaining the trust

and mutual commitment to each other during the development of our partnership. This responsiveness can help support a continuation of our partnership during instances of turnover, or to adapt to changing priorities or goals within our institutions, consistent with previously published findings (Coburn & Penuel, 2016).

Strengths-Based Lexicon

A further defining moment was the recognition of the power of a strength-based lexicon. The very definition of a RPP as a structure organized to investigate problems of practice (Coburn et al., 2013) became a point of learning. We came to understand our chosen lexicon was understood by some to perpetuate a distinction between academics and practitioners. From an academic perspective, the frame of “problem of practice” provided clarity in purpose and a solution orientation to guide the production of compelling and relevant work (Posner, 2009). This intended strength, to engage in research-driven learning that could inform a relevant issue faced by practitioners, might also be an obstacle to both practitioner engagement and taking up the eventual learning in a meaningful way. Feedback elicited from colleagues regarding the principles and partnership model indicated the term “problem” could be problematic and interpreted to imply practitioners were incapable of addressing the challenges experienced in their practice and subsumed their expertise to that of academics. This lexicon was interpreted as reinforcing the presumption of expertise residing outside of practitioners and practitioner settings. Practitioners could feel less as partners and more as providers of a “problem stream” for academic research and would serve as eventual clients of the resulting learning (Posner, 2009). Ultimately, this presupposed practitioner vulnerability rather than a collaborative, strength-based engagement. This was at odds with leading through co-design and the partnership's intent as it sought to cultivate practitioner engagement in all aspects of the research and the opportunity for practitioners to

position themselves as knowledge producers (Powell et al. 2018). This highlights a need for teams engaging in school–university research partnerships to develop a shared lexicon that is meaningful in both practitioner and researcher contexts. Through the collective construction of meaning and a common lexicon, we were able to develop principles, a partnership model and an action plan to guide future work for our RPP.

Conclusion

Although there is some research examining RPPs (Brown, 2021; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Friesen & Brown, 2021), we recognized that examining our partnership and reflecting on the development of the foundation of our partnership can serve to inform researchers and practitioners at the initial stages of forming partnerships. A shift from solving problems in the classroom to leading through co-design using a strength-based lexicon acknowledges the strength of practitioners in RPPs. In re-framing the terminology to recognize practitioners as equal contributors to partnership processes and inviting conversation as a place for seeding ideas to grow, this RPP conceptualization can provide a means to overcome the hesitation practitioners can have to engage in partnerships as previously observed (Henrick et al., 2017). We characterize this inquiry as a promising approach for conceptualizing research–practice partnership with the potential to help other RPP teams leading partnerships. As we continue to further develop our work and partnership, we also aim to understand what practices might contribute to sustaining a research-engaged school.

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Appendix A: Partnership Success Criteria

Our partnership will:

1

Contribute to the broader educational community

2

Cultivate relationships to collaboratively respond to emergent needs and learnings

3

Support collective inquiry with a focus on innovative practice

4

Build capacity to make evidence informed decisions

5

Focus on the alignment of academic and practical needs and goals

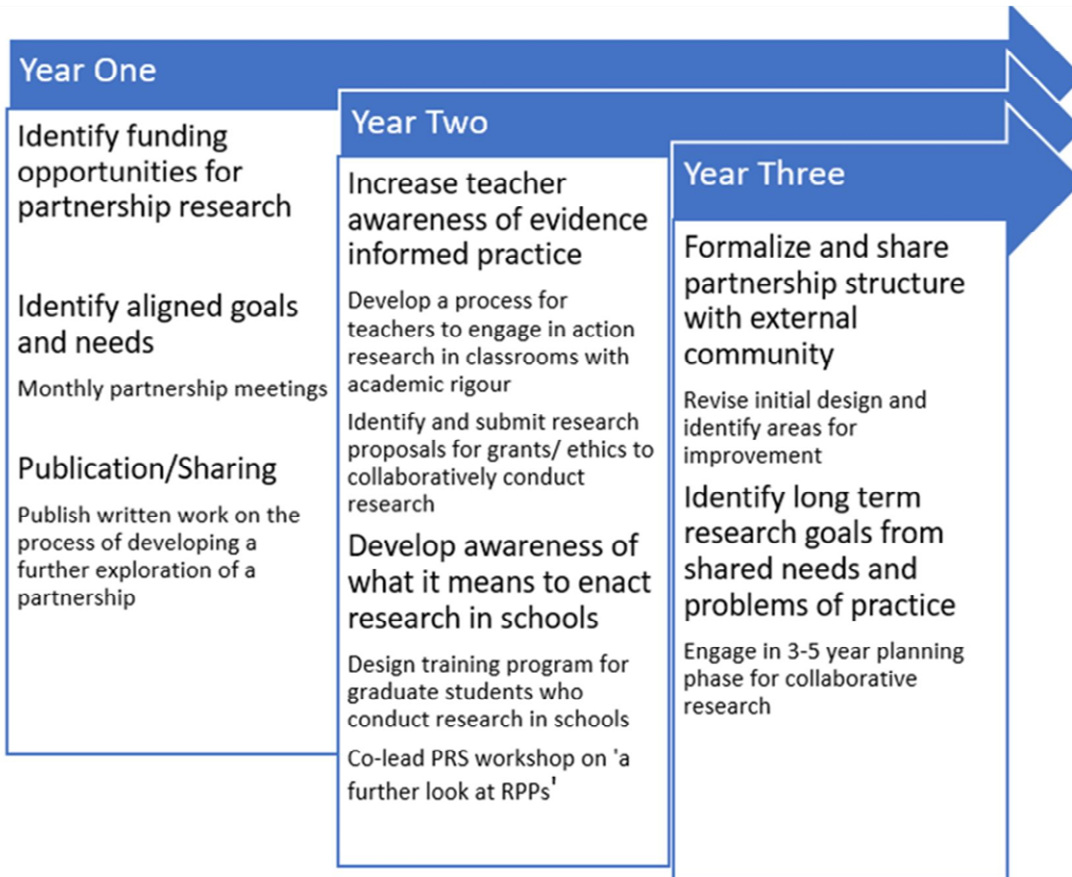
6

Actively contribute to knowledge building and knowledge mobilization

7

Advance the understanding of educational research for all participating partners

Appendix B: Three Year Action Plan



Sarah Hamilton is a doctoral candidate at the University of Calgary and Research Lead at Calgary Academy. She has over 17 years of teaching and leadership experience across Canada, working with diverse learners and educators. Sarah's research interests include mathematics education, self-regulation, executive functions, RPPs, collective knowledge building and professional learning.

Dana Braunberger is an education leader, researcher, and Doctoral Candidate at the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Her professional interests include leadership development, innovation in education and research practice partnerships that advance the collaborative integration of research into practice to benefit K-12 education.

Barbara Brown is Associate Professor and Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning at the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Her program of research is focused on research-practice partnerships and community engagement with an aim to advance innovations in teaching, learning, and leadership through interdisciplinary designs and online learning in K-12 and higher education contexts.