

Defining the Role of Evaluators in Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs)

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Research Practice Partnership (RPP)

Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) are long-term collaborations between educators and researchers. RPPs vary greatly in their structures and arrangements but typically share a common goal of addressing problems of educational practice through engagement with research (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). Through the establishment of RPPs, opportunities are created for practitioners to incorporate research into everyday decision-making; in turn, through direct involvement of practitioners, research is informed by and directed at addressing critical problems of practice. As RPPs have garnered increasing renown, investigating the outcomes and impacts of these initiatives through rigorous evaluation has become paramount to partnering organizations, potential funders, and policy-makers alike (Henrick et al., 2017).

Case Study

Improving Practice Together (NSF Award #1720930) is a research-practice partnership (RPP) among (1) a professional learning team from the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California, Berkeley; (2) researchers from Stanford University's Graduate School of Education; and (3) teachers and administrators from Santa Clara Unified School District (SCUSD) in California. This five-year partnership (2017-2021) seeks to support the district in teaching scientific argumentation in elementary school by developing sustainable teacher leadership. The goal of the project is to produce a scalable professional learning (PL) model that can be continually adapted to district objectives, while also examining how such RPPs can support improvements in classroom practices. The Lawrence PL team designs and implements professional development activities. SCUSD representatives coordinate the program within the district and co-create the professional development activities to fit within the needs of their district. The research team designs, implements, and manages the overall research study to understand the partnership, modifications to the PL model, and impacts of professional development activities on classroom practices. The project is framed around a Design-Based Implementation Research (DBIR) approach. All members of the partnership are committed to an iterative and collaborative approach to adaptation of professional development activities, informed by feedback from data collected during project activities.

Evaluation

As evaluators, we 1) provide formative feedback to the professional learning team to inform design, 2) document implementation and decision-making throughout the project, and 3) measure teachers' experiences and self-reported learning in professional development activities. Evaluation questions center on: the trajectory of the partnership itself, teachers' experiences in the professional development activities, and teachers' learning.

Improving Practice Together is a three-way research-practice partnership. Our project serves as a case study to demonstrate challenges that can arise in defining evaluators' roles and responsibilities within RPPs. Here we highlight three challenges that arose around defining the role of evaluators in an RPP, strategies taken to address these challenges, and our reflections.

CHALLENGE 1:

Disentangling the Roles of Evaluators and Researchers

Investigative goals of research and evaluation teams often overlap. In our project, there was particular overlap when studying outcomes of teachers' participation in professional development activities. This overlap resulted in a need to disentangle the roles of the research and evaluation teams to avoid inefficiencies and overburdening participants. The research and evaluation teams continually adapted and redefined roles, settling on an arrangement wherein the evaluators primarily focus on 1) providing impartial assessment of professional development activities and providing real-time feedback to the PL team, and 2) studying the experiences and development of teachers over time. The research team focuses on generalizable findings from this project about the nature of RPPs and the professional learning model. The two teams collaborate on data collection and analysis. This arrangement has increased efficiency in data collection activities and internal reporting. However, the evaluation team's focus on the professional development activities has limited opportunities to devote time to studying the partnership dynamics more broadly, one of the original goals of our evaluation.

CHALLENGE 2:

Evaluating the Partnership while Engaged as Project Members

As the partnership has shifted over time, the evaluation team has become increasingly involved in the decision-making around project activities. Members of both the research and evaluation teams regularly attend planning meetings with the professional learning team. The evaluators provide the professional learning team with insights from data collected during the professional development activities on participant experience. This information informs how the professional learning team adapts the next iteration of professional development activities. This type of ongoing communication between the professional learning team and the evaluation team has enabled the project to effectively meet the evolving needs of the district and participants. However, it has raised questions about how to maintain objectivity in evaluating activities that we actively helped design; and how to mitigate personal bias and the influence of our own personal experiences in the partnership when evaluating both the effectiveness of the professional development activities and the partnership dynamics.

CHALLENGE 3:

Evaluating Project Response to Changing Circumstances

The evaluation team is responsible for assessing the partnership's success in meeting its goals--particularly goals around teacher learning and building district capacity for a sustainable professional development model. However, the goals of the project have changed significantly, and consequently, our original goalposts are no longer relevant. The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to substantial shifts in daily operations and priorities in the district, and the project has shifted its goals and activities in order to meet the needs of the district at this time. The evaluation team has been documenting the ways the partnership has pivoted over time to address new priorities and commitments that were not part of the original plan. But, we have struggled with questions of whether and how we should evaluate the merit of the revised goals themselves. As a first step, we are collecting data from district representatives and participating teachers to learn whether the shifts in the project are meeting their needs.

The example of our project raises questions about the nature of the relationship between evaluators and researchers in RPPs and the responsibilities of evaluators in these type of collaborative projects:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of evaluators and researchers collaborating with one another in RPPs?
- How can evaluators contribute on-going feedback while maintaining objectivity in assessing the partnership?
- When project goals change, how can evaluators assess the merit of new goals and the merit of the adaptations?