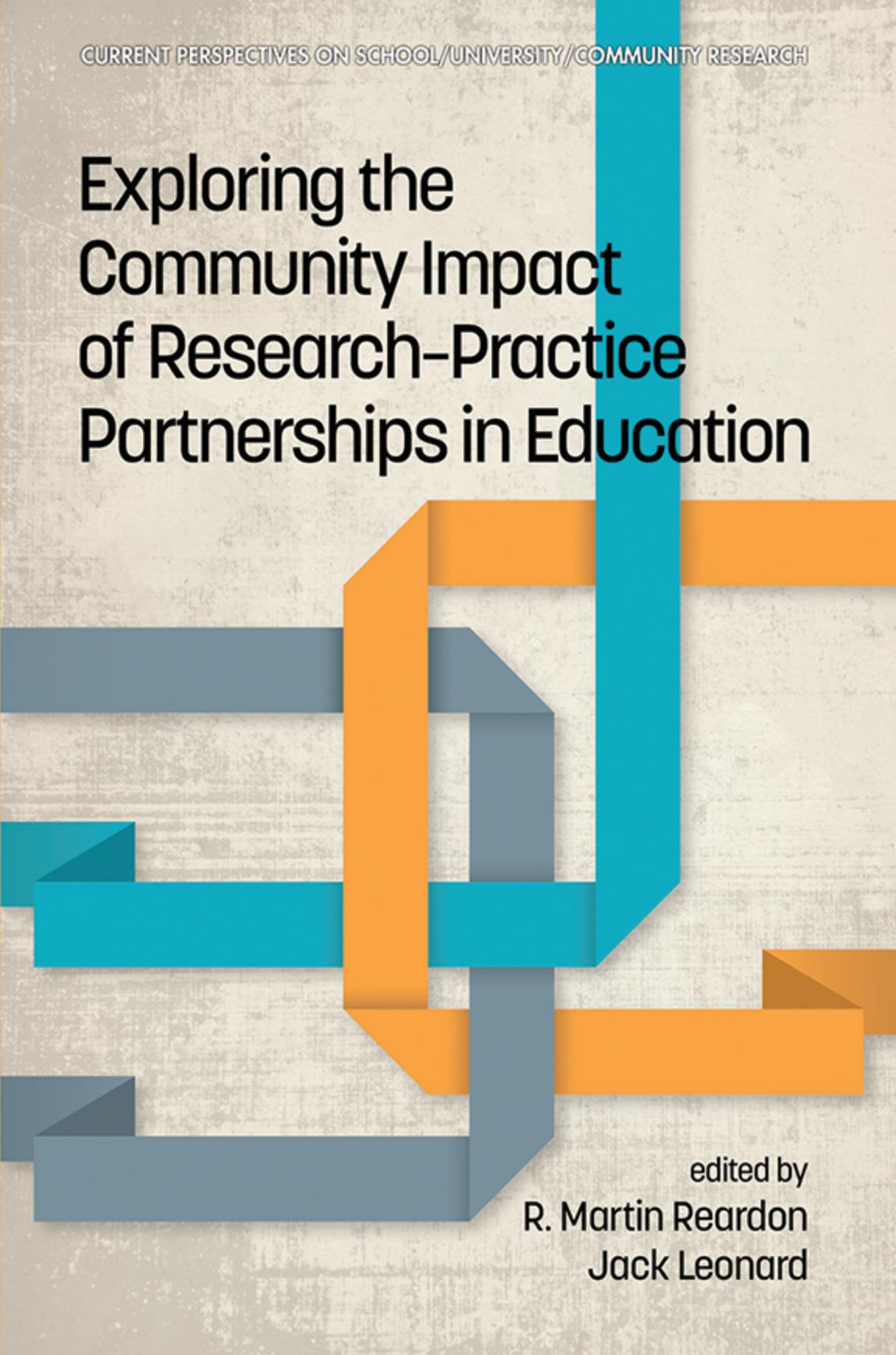


CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY/COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Exploring the Community Impact of Research-Practice Partnerships in Education



edited by
R. Martin Reardon
Jack Leonard

Exploring the Community Impact of Research–Practice Partnerships in Education

A volume in
Current Perspectives on School/University/Community Research
R. Martin Reardon and Jack Leonard, *Series Editors*

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Exploring the Community Impact of Research–Practice Partnerships in Education

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To my amazing wife Lisa and incredible daughter Tierney
—R. M. R.

To my patient and artistic wife Lee who always makes room for my writing
—J. E. L.

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INTRODUCTION

Academics regard their bodies as a handy way of getting their heads to meetings (Robinson, 2006). The analogous stereotype in the context of this volume is that academics regard communities as handy sites for research. Providing a counternarrative to the stereotype, the chapters in this volume highlight the impact of research that engages the community rather than regarding the community as a handy site for research.

This volume inaugurates what we envisage as a series of volumes intended to not only highlight the impact of research–practitioner partnerships (RPPs) in education on the specific problems of practice such partnerships set out to address, but also to extend the discussion beyond those problems of practice, to consider the implicit and/or explicit impacts of RPPs on the communities in which those problems of practice exist. RPPs in education are contemporary configurations usually involving universities and school districts that are widely regarded as well suited to interfacing the findings of educational research with the uncompromising realities of the “chalk-face” of practice (e.g., Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). The National Research Council (2012) lauded “research that works in close proximity to practice settings” (p. 47)—that moves “beyond transfer, diffusion, and dissemination and even beyond translation and brokering” (p. 46).

Coburn et al. (2013) defined RPPs as “long-term collaborations, which are organized to investigate problems of practice and generate solutions for improving district outcomes” (p. 1). Coburn and Penuel (2016) later refined this definition slightly to specify that the long-term collaborations

are between practitioners and researchers, and that the improvement efforts target schools and school districts. The one reservation that we have with Coburn et al.'s definition is the emphasis on generating solutions. We prefer to conceptualize RPPs as focused on the partners collaborating to *generate approaches* to dealing with problems of practice rather than *generating solutions*.

Research-based approaches to problems of practice are context-sensitive. With this in mind, it is problematic to label any collaboratively designed intervention as a success prior to its implementation and evaluation. Although Coburn and Penuel (2016) made the point that there is little research on the impact of participating in an RPP among the participants, we suggest that—as amply illustrated by the chapters in this volume—an unintended outcome of the collaborative environment is that it adds value to the professional relationships among the participants. Coburn and Penuel acknowledge the relevance of the collaborative environment themselves when they refer to RPPs as being mutualistic, by which they mean that “the focus of the work is jointly negotiated and there is shared authority” (p. 49).

This series aligns with our belief, alluded to above, that the change endeavor must take into account the context of the community in which the practitioner is immersed. A number of discussions over recent years at business meetings of the School–University Collaborative Research (SUCR) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) highlighted the fact that the title of our SIG did not specifically reference the community. Hence, we resolved to update the title of our SIG to take account of the role of the community context in initially establishing and then determining the outcome of well-credentialed and well-intentioned research collaborations.

As we referenced in the mission of the Current Perspectives on School/University/Community Research series, of which this is the first volume, Bryk (2015) referred to the discrepancy between the achievements to which reforms aspire and their outcomes as a chasm. Bryk envisaged the confluence of knowledge and the empirical warrants that together constitute practice-based evidence as offering a viable approach to dealing with high-leverage problems in education, thereby potentially narrowing the chasm. Cooper and Shewchuk (2015) referred to knowledge mobilization as “iterative, social processes involving interaction among two or more different groups or contexts (researchers, policymakers, practitioners, third party agencies, community members) in order to improve the broader education system” (p. 2). We are pleased to note that the 11 chapters of this volume elegantly highlight the extent to which knowledge mobilization is a key feature of the viable approaches shared by the chapter authors.

That said, even a cursory overview of the titles and abstracts of the chapters that constitute this volume suggests that an endeavor to pigeonhole RPPs into tightly defined categories is destined for failure. It is with a

healthy respect for alternative categorizations that the reader may discern that we have grouped the chapters into four sections that address RPPs for leading and learning (Part I), RPPs at scale (Part II), RPPs designed to fit specific contexts (Part III), and RPPs in the context of borderlands that evoke the role of boundary spanners (Part IV).

Although the call for chapters for this volume was issued prior to the publication of Coburn and Penuel (2016), it is an indication of the coherence of the work chronicled in this volume with the broad contours of the field that the chapters within each section address subsets of the multiple issues and questions raised by Coburn and Penuel. These include (with each chapter noted once only in parentheses)

- the value of the partnerships themselves (e.g., Newton & O'Dwyer),
- the impact of collaborative design on the viability of the RPP (e.g., Leonard & Daly; Vick & Reichhoff),
- the potential for generalizability of the RPP (e.g., Luter & Kronick),
- the mechanisms by which the RPP fosters improvement (e.g., Blacklock & Curry; Wolford, Reitano, Hill, & Desimone),
- success in overcoming the challenges, including the lack of a common language between researchers and practitioners, and differences in expectations, norms, and role definitions (e.g., Tecce DeCarlo, Klem, & Walker),
- successfully navigating turnover in leadership (e.g., Catelli, Marino, & Eschbach),
- successfully navigating highly politicized environments (e.g., Hardee & Rosa; Mull & Adams), and
- ongoing researcher engagement (McLaughlin, Rozzelle, & Hindman).

Just as the reader may disagree with our grouping of the chapters of this volume into categories, so the reader may disagree with our singling out of the notable examples above. Indeed, we struggled to refrain from listing the majority of chapters as examples in the majority of categories.

Some of the chapters in this volume highlight RPPs that conform to the designation of RPPs as long-term collaborations (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn et al., 2013)—although what it meant by long-term is open to conjecture—while others are of a more embryonic nature (in accord with our call for chapters). We consciously decided to invite the discussion of both well-established and embryonic RPPs because of our belief that longevity in itself is no guarantee of effectiveness. Some long-term collaborations seem invested in sustaining the status quo (clearly none of those discussed in this volume), whereas some embryonic collaborations are more nimble—even ephemeral. We concur with Coburn and Penuel (2016) that there are lessons to be learned from ephemeral partnerships (e.g., Shepperson,

Skepple, & Smith, 2016)—which is not to presage transience for any of the RPPs discussed in this volume. In the light of the above, we now turn to an overview of the chapters in each of the sections of this volume.

PART I: RESEARCH–PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS FOR LEADING AND LEARNING

In this opening section of three chapters, we highlight research–practice partnerships that engage and enthuse those who are further developing their roles as educational leaders and learners. In Chapter 1, Leonard and Daly discuss a 21-month satellite graduate program in which a university established a partnership with an urban K–12 school district. As Leonard and Daly recount, the school district’s administrators were interested in nurturing educators of color as leaders—an interest shared by the university’s faculty members. In turn, the university faculty members were also focused on attracting more academically capable students to the leadership program—an interest also shared by the school district’s administrators. At the outset of the partnership, the imponderable question was whether both goals could be achieved. As Leonard and Daly assert, the success of this venture hinged on an uncharacteristic reversal of roles.

In Chapter 2, Catelli, Marino, and Eschbach highlight a two-year, Race to the Top-funded offshoot of a 14-year-old professional development school partnership that they characterize as holistic in orientation. The Career Ladder Innovator Programs and Systems (CLIPS) grant project was oriented to preparing educators to fill emerging leadership roles in schools such as “teacher-leader innovator.” The university faculty members adopted new roles as “resident professors” and “resident researchers” as they worked with teachers and teacher interns to enhance their instructional practice.

Maintaining the focus on partnerships for leading and learning, in Chapter 3, Blacklock and Curry discuss the application of the professional learning community model in the context of a professional development school partnership. Blacklock and Curry feature their identification of effective instructional strategies and the key elements of school culture that support student learning in mathematics, science, and language arts.

PART II: RESEARCH–PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS AT SCALE

This second section of two chapters highlights research–practice partnerships that operate at a multisystem level. In Chapter 4, McLaughlin, Rozzelle, and Hindman focus in depth on a partnership that consists of a university school of education, the state department of education, and 28 local school

districts that has been in vibrant existence for almost a quarter of a century. With an annual budget of approximately \$1 million, the School–University Research Network brings the best of research findings to bear in crafting high-quality professional development opportunities for educators on topics such as effective teaching, principal leadership, and college transition.

In Chapter 5, Luter and Kronick recount how university-assisted community schools (UACS) constitute a broader and bolder approach to school reform, neighborhood transformation, community organizing, and the engagement of higher education with civic enhancement. Attesting to Kronick’s ability to adroitly navigate potentially perilous political seas, UACS provides a counternarrative to the pervasive assertion that researchers and practitioners lack a common language when it comes to problems of practice (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1998). Having demonstrated “proof of concept” as an intervention in a single urban school district in Tennessee, UACS has garnered impressive support and is poised to impact a wider range of educational environments.

PART III: RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS IN SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

Zooming in from research–practice partnerships that operate at scale to those that operate in specific contexts, in this third section we highlight four chapters in which authors discuss RPPs that are notable by the extent to which they have been shaped by the environments in which they exist.

In Chapter 6, Newton and O’Dwyer highlight how effectively co-designed and ongoing dialog between university researchers and school district administrators can contribute to the development of a sophisticated understanding of a problem of practice. In the RPP Newton and O’Dwyer discuss, they provide the data analysis that enabled a large group of practitioners to inform policy, while the practitioners provided them with the insights that guided their analysis. Through the action of this collaboration, a valuable community resource (a bilingual immersion program) came to be perceived as the asset that it was.

Tecce DeCarlo, Klem, and Walker, in Chapter 7, showcase an RPP collaboration in which the university partner worked in conjunction with social service agencies, education agencies, and community stakeholders to craft a context-sensitive approach to enhancing early childhood learning. Collaborating with such a variety of partners brought with it a range of challenges in terms of speaking the same language that were overcome by the methodical and patient dedication of all concerned. Tecce DeCarlo and colleagues highlight the ways in which their collaboration consistently focused on the long-term sustainability of their work.

Vick and Reichoff responded to the compelling need of a local school district for professional development for their elementary teachers regarding the updating of instructional approaches in science—particularly with respect to the implementation of authentic, inquiry-based approaches. In Chapter 8, they explain the design of their response (relocating a preservice methods course to one of six elementary schools in the district) and the benefits to each of the partners. In this instance, the concept of community impact involves the community that evolved between the preservice teachers and the established teachers as they learned from each other.

To conclude this section, in Chapter 9, Wolford, Reitano, Hill, and Desimone recount the success of Shared Solutions—a collaboration between a university and the large urban school district in which the university is located to develop and implement an online window into student achievement. Wolford and colleagues drew on a set of pertinent theories in developing a system that facilitated close to real-time use of data for decision making on the part of the school district while purposefully engaging the parents, students, teachers, and principals of the schools in the district schools to address “the complex layers of relationships that define a school building and the surrounding community.”

PART IV: OF BORDERLANDS AND BOUNDARY SPANNERS

We have chosen to conclude this volume with two related chapters. In Chapter 10, Hardee and Rosa describe an international RPP between a university and a school district in the United States and analogous institutions in Mexico. In a title that is particularly relevant to the contemporary political environment, Hardee and Rosa position their RPP as building bridges to overcome language and cultural barriers that would otherwise constitute walls. Their excursion across the borderlands of language and culture provides an impressive example of boundary spanners in action.

In Chapter 11, Mull and Adams bring this volume to a close by collaborating to provide an outsider’s perspective—upon which Coburn and Penuel (2016) place great store—on boundary spanning, as exemplified by Hardee and Rosa’s preceding chapter. Mull and Adams describe change agents who act (as have Hardee and Rosa) as boundary spanners. Boundary spanners play specialized roles that facilitate the initiation and sustenance of complex RPPs, and Mull and Adams thoroughly explore the theoretical ramifications of boundary spanning.

The chapters in this volume initiate discussions and provide some insight in relation to the following three questions:

- How, why, and when does the balance of power shift between researchers and practitioners? Is a shift in the balance of power crucial?
- How does the inclusion of “community” in a school–university partnership change the nature of the work? What are the challenges in terms of language, power-sharing, and sustainability?
- In what ways does the community context shape the RPP, and what factors enable the RPP to continue to be sensitive (and useful) to the community?

We are of the opinion that more remains to be said regarding these questions, and, in particular, regarding the gradual transition in research focus where an RPP is first focused on a problem of practice, but eventually begins to consider the nature of the RPP itself. How and why does this transition happen, to what effect, and under what conditions might this transition be facilitated—presuming that it is desirable? We look forward to providing an ongoing forum for reflection and discussion of these and other questions in the context of school–university–community collaborative research.

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As I alluded to earlier, the fertile ground in which the seed for this volume (and the series) grew was the School–University Collaborative Research (SUCR) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association, and I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the support of all my SUCR colleagues in this endeavor.

My co-editor, Jack Leonard, and I were greatly heartened by the response to our call for chapters (which, by force of circumstances, incorporated a short timeline). The downside of receiving more than twice as many chapter submissions as we could accept was the necessity to decide which to include. We deeply appreciate the efforts of all the authors who submitted chapter proposals. For those who may have noticed a the lack of focus in this volume on the rural environment—in which, by some accounts, six out of ten Americans live—we wish to prefigure the next volume in this series that will focus specifically on rural contexts.

Having mentioned my co-editor, Jack Leonard, in the previous paragraph, I want to more fully acknowledge his support as a colleague whose commitment to making a positive difference in the field of education I came to know when, in my role as Chair of the SUCR SIG, I was fortunate to have Jack as the program chair. Jack took the helm of the blind peer-review process that we incorporated in our design for these volumes over summer 2016 when I had the privilege of helping to lead a learning experience for a group of international educators in Bangkok. Jack's commitment to giving thoughtful and thorough feedback to all the authors/co-authors of this volume has contributed in no small way to the quality of the outcome. Thanks

xx ■ Acknowledgments

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