

Navigating the Early Stages of Research – Practice Partnerships: Affordances and Challenges of a New University – School Project

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Abstract

Research-practice partnerships (RPP) are long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners, organised to investigate current problems, engage in collaborative cycles of inquiry, generate findings, and communicate outcomes to key stakeholders. They are mutually beneficial and intentional and aim to produce original analyses of a problem or an issue. Advocates also claim that partnerships address the research-practice gap and challenge the roles of knowledge consumers and knowledge producers through sustainable and collaborative infrastructures. Ambiguity around the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved can arise and little is known regarding how roles are negotiated and with what consequence for the project outcomes. In addition, little is known about how post-COVID contexts impact the whole partnership project. In our conference paper, we have therefore focused on a post-COVID context that adds to the complexities of creating socially conscious models of working together. The paper is based on reflective pieces, vignettes, of individual academic members when exploring their key values, beliefs, and experiences when entering the RPP and how these shaped the steps undertaken when developing the partnership's identity.

Keywords: Research-Practice Partnership, Shared Aims and Mission, Roles and Responsibilities Negotiation

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Introduction

Negotiating and maintaining roles and responsibilities in a newly formed university and school research-practice partnership (RPP) requires ongoing effort, clear communication, and a commitment to collaboration and shared goals to ensure the partnership becomes successful. It is therefore paramount to commence negotiations with efforts to clarify expectations and address implicit assumptions about power imbalance and knowledge dominance. The clear understanding of collaborative partners' roles and responsibilities contributes to setting up a strong partnership identity that becomes a foundation for a successful and hopefully longitudinal relationship (Farrell Harrison and Coburn, 2019). In addition, partnerships with agreed knowledge co-production roles can contribute to 'a more democratised evidence system' (Sjölund, et al., 2022) and can address a perceived research-practice gap in educational research. However, as Farrell et al. (2019) suggest, though roles within an RPP between researchers and practitioners can be blurred and unclear, little is known about how these roles are negotiated and what the consequences are for collaborative efforts. This paper, therefore, examines the academic team members' experiences navigating the tricky terrain of roles and responsibility negotiations in the process of setting up a research-practice partnership between a university institution, the University of Bolton's School of Education (UoB) and Rumworth secondary special SEND school (RS) in Bolton, UK. Our experiences will be captured in autoethnographical vignettes aiming to reflect on our own values, beliefs, and experiences we bring to partnership and that underpin our decision-making processes, role negotiations, practical efforts, and accountability. The analysis from formal team meetings and 'away days' as well as from informal conversations between the members of both teams (the RS and the UoB), including reflections from the field visits to Rumworth School will also contribute to our interpretations of how the initial stages of RPP relies on careful planning and considerations of each participant's beliefs, experiences and values they bring to the project efforts. This paper can be considered a reflective piece that aims to contribute to discussions on how the initial process of role negotiation in research-practice partnerships should be understood, planned for, and executed.

RPP are defined as, "long-term, mutualistic collaboration between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving outcomes" (Tseng et al., 2017, p. 3).

They can be seen as strategies that build 'two-way streets of engagement' with research (Tseng et al., 2017, p. 3) in which research and practice inform each other in sustainable and mutually beneficial ways in the contexts of academia as well as school practice. RPPs are focused on challenging problems of practice, and they are less concerned with a theoretical or research gap as they incorporate multiple projects (Coburn and Penuel, 2016). They are believed to become promising ways for future educational research, having the capacity to bring 'research and practice closer together' (Sjölund et al. 2021, p. 1). However, it must be acknowledged that they present challenges due to assumptions about roles and responsibility distributions, financial needs and funding, the position of perceived power between researchers and practitioners, and sometimes due to deep epistemological differences (Marx and Saavedra, 2014).

The Context of the Study

The University of Bolton and Rumworth Special School are situated in the North West of England, in Bolton. Bolton belongs to one of the most deprived areas of the UK. Statistics

show, for example, that childhood poverty in Bolton exceeds the national average (Tooth, 2023). Rumworth School is a special secondary school that provides education for up to 340 pupils (11–19-year-old) who have a variety of learning difficulties and additional needs, autistic spectrum conditions, hearing and visual impairment, physical disability, and social, emotional, and mental health needs. The vision of the school is ‘Supporting young people to be more Confident, Resilient and Independent: *You can do it, we will help.*’ Rumworth School was also rated as ‘outstanding’ by OFSTED, (OFSTED stands for the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) which is a non-ministerial organisation that inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England. ‘Outstanding’ means that the school provides an exceptional level of care and education.

As literature suggests, partnerships can be initiated in diverse ways and can have several formats (Tseng et al., 2017). For example, a collaboration is already established between a university and local schools through teacher training programmes, or a university wishes to work with schools to demonstrate the research ‘impact’ that is part of the national research quality evaluation process via the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Cain, 2019). Partnerships can also be short-term when focusing on a particular problem, or they can aspire to become longitudinal when collaborative knowledge co-production, and mutually beneficial relationships are aimed for. The School of Education & Rumworth School have already developed strong links with each other via the university-led initial teacher education programmes for secondary and further education vocational sectors (ITT). However, it can be said that the idea of developing a mutual research-based partnership has come to light incidentally, when a wider academic team (not directly engaged in ITT) met the Rumworth School’s lead link tutor, Gina Stafford, at a meeting they were asked to attend due to other staff member’s unavailability. At this meeting Gina presented us with an idea of organising a teaching and learning conference with a SEND focus. It is important to mention that this idea sprang from the context of Rumworth School as it had already established a strong culture of action research that was part of their school and teacher professional development strategy. This culture is reflective of the policy trajectory in England since 2010 which has promoted evidence-based (or more recently evidence-informed) practice in schools (Coldwell et al., 2017 and Coldwell, 2022).

After a prolonged conversation with Gina about the purpose and aims of the proposed conference, in which she indicated that Rumworth School can be proud of the quality of their teaching and care and the learner achievements, the academic team suggested a different direction of mutual collaboration. We argued that collaboration would be based on a partnership between researchers and practitioners who could engage in research relevant to their practice. Investigating their own classroom challenges and key dilemmas would help practitioners co-produce new knowledge that could be shared with other school communities and practitioners from a variety of educational contexts. In other words, the partnership would offer practitioners more agency and autonomy and hopefully, they would appreciate this type of professional development more than listening to experts, however inspirational they might be.

Methodology

As we have mentioned above, the data analysed here include minutes from formal meetings, notes from informal conversations (Swain and King, 2022) and observational field notes (Emmerson et al., 2011), that informed the academic team’s reflective vignettes. All these can be understood as steps that have helped us to start building our partnership. In our conversations,

as a university team, we identified the importance of addressing power imbalance and the potential tacit understanding teachers might bring to the project. Our concerns were entrenched in the wider societal rhetoric that academics typically possess; specialised knowledge and expertise in their academic fields, which is sometimes seen as more prestigious or authoritative than the practical experience of a teacher. We were conscious these biases might result in us as academics being perceived as the primary source of knowledge and decision making. For the success of the partnership and to further embed our guiding principle of equity, we felt we needed to work hard to avoid a culture of top-down decision-making that would marginalise the teacher's voice in the coming stages of the research. We have therefore designed an agenda for our first partnership 'away day' that addressed expectations and roles perceptions, and that would result in the agreed formulation of our partnership's mission, shared aims, and objectives.

Ethical Considerations for the Dissemination of the Partnership Outcomes

The RPP project has been through the ethical processes required by both the University of Bolton and Rumworth School. Gary Johnson, the then School Head, and Jennifer Dunne, incoming Head of RS, including Gina Stafford and the rest of the school leading collaborative research team were adamant in waiving their own and the School's right to anonymity in reporting on the outputs from the partnership. This was done in favour of promoting and celebrating the School's research initiative and facilitating their ability to share their outcomes with other schools and also with potential employers for their pupils. In support of this, UoB and the academic team have taken the same approach. At the later stages of the project when data is collected from other teaching staff, pupils and parents, a new ethical procedure will be agreed. This will result in personal data safely stored and fully anonymized, using pseudonyms and other strategies (Emmerson et al., 2011).

Academic Team – Autoethnographic Vignettes

To make RPPs successful, researchers point out that they should be built on three key principles which include "mutualism, commitment to long-term collaboration, and abiding efforts to build and maintain trusting relationships" (Tseng et al., 2017, p.4). These principles are evident in our own vignettes as values we are bringing to the partnership and therefore give us assurance of being able to set strong foundations for our collaborative efforts.

Lucy's Vignette

I reflect upon my contribution within the initial stages of the research practice partnership and perhaps the most valuable lesson from this experience has been the importance of building trust and rapport. Building and maintaining a successful RPP has not been a quick process and subsequently this has determined a more organic and careful arrangement. My involvement and the involvement of others have required patience, persistence, clear communication, and adjustments to what is possible and what is not. As such, it has been essential to acknowledge the difference in our professional roles and our responsibilities within and beyond the partnership that both enrich the process yet have the capacity to pull us in competing directions. What has aided navigating this tricky terrain of professional responsibilities outside of the partnership has been to set aside time to agree and establish a shared vision and purpose.

Equity is one of my professional and personal guiding principles. Therefore, I have started to explore the significance of social justice values within our partnership and the ways in which they influence our work, experiences and decision making. During the first visit to the school,

Gina Stafford, the lead school practitioner within the partnership, showed us around the grounds. As Gina showed us around the school, I took pictures using my mobile phone. My pictures documented the outdoor horticultural area, creative gardens and communal forest school, the working indoor restaurant and the kitchen, the spaces that were often utilised to develop the students' life-long learning skills delivered through the 'Preparation for Adulthood Programme'. The digital images have since served to elicit (Yamada-Rice et al., 2015) other ideas, memories and questions that were not apparent on the day but have organically manifested as the partnership has evolved.

What has become apparent is the School's commitment to tackling the longer-term life chances of its students. For some this has resulted in success in securing voluntary or paid employment. Through our ongoing engagement with the school, it has become clear that some teachers work in a more outward-facing role with local employers. The remit of these roles is better understanding of the additional challenges faced by SEND students in the workplace. We simultaneously gathered insights into the apprehensions of employers in making posts available for students with additional needs. These personal insights from my time at the school have made tangible the shared aims of the partnership, in how we can raise awareness and develop further understanding around supporting SEND learners as they navigate their way towards adulthood.

Rumworth School's commitment to equity and social justice serves as a powerful reminder where my drive for success has become much more than my own professional development and research interests. My experiences are grounded in real-world encounters with the teachers and students, where I have first-hand experience of being caught up in the hustle and bustle of a thriving and diverse school community. Moving forward, I will pay closer attention to my dalliances within what would seem the more 'insignificant' and 'mundane' encounters I experience within the school community. I suggest, in bringing the 'mundane' and 'pedestrian' into sharper focus, this will contribute to a more nuanced and humanistic methodology.

Georgia's Vignette

Looking back at the inception of the RPP project that we are forming with Rumworth school, the critical moment was the initial meeting with Gina Stafford on her visit to the University. We intended to share our ideas, drawn from our review of the literature and our existing experience, for how the partnership might work in practice to become a shared and equitable endeavour. Listening to Gina's talk about the school, it quickly became clear that it already had a strong basis for how it approached research. Having worked on RPPs in other contexts, I had expected to have to explain and justify the basic principles of research, but it soon became evident how much of a 'partnership of equals' we could be from the outset. This was reinforced by our first visit to the school. I had worked in the SEND sector early in my career and had visited special schools for research projects that I supported during my PhD studies, so I had a good understanding of how provision in the sector had developed and the different working cultures at play. I understood how critical staff were in responding to student needs and aspirations. What surprised and delighted me was the culture of enterprise that had been fostered in the School and how this played into their staff development and research strategies. As a team, we could see very clearly how we could provide support for and learn from their aspirations for a research culture.

This relates directly to Lucy's reflections about building and maintaining successful and trusting relationships. It seemed important to me, and I think to the whole academic team, that

we recognise, respect, and applaud the work that had already been established and to envisage how we could fit into that, and enhance it with our academic experiences without losing the cultural gains that had already been made.

The second visit to the school, when we were asked to judge the previous cycle's research outputs, was critical to building these relationships and to giving this recognition and respect. It was also an opportunity for us to learn more about what drives the pedagogy of the School and to develop our understanding.

For me both visits were quite emotionally engaging, reminding me of how rewarding it could be to work in the sector and with SEND pupils. It was also inspiring to see how the pedagogic knowledge base had developed over time and encouraging to find that I still understood and related to the nature of teaching in the sector. This realization was invaluable in furthering communication between both the School and University teams and meant that we were able to develop a trusting relationship based on our shared understanding.

The 'away day' was invaluable in providing 'neutral territory' to build on that understanding to formulate aims and objectives for the partnership. It enabled us as a whole team to generate some aspirational values and to think in a more ambitious way than either would have been able to alone.

Daniela's Vignette

The values of collegiality, respect for practitioners' knowledge and professional autonomy as well as understanding of the importance of learning community with a shared vision are, I believe, at the core of my own professional behaviour, decision-making and personal agency within the RPP. Being incidentally present at the first meeting mentioned above with Gina, our conversation was underpinned by my previous experiences when working with school practitioners who wished to change or enrich their classroom pedagogical practice. Any teacher change, I suggested, would need to start with teachers' beliefs, values, and competencies they bring to this process, and that may tap into their emotional domain of teacher 'vulnerability' (Kelchtermans, 2009). Researching one's own practice, however, within a supportive learning community could help teachers critically review and reflect on their own personal theories of teaching (Cain, 2019) and thus, teachers could become more open to a change (Biesta, 2007). Equally central to this conversation was Rumworth School's aspirations to enhance the life chances and outcomes for SEND students and how we, through the partnership, could disseminate the successes the school is achieving.

Our later formal and informal conversations, as an academic team, led to more pragmatic decision-making steps, including securing internal funding for creating spaces for partnership meetings outside our educational institutions. These meetings carved-out uninterrupted time to be able to listen to each other's concerns, visions and aims. I was also keen to ensure the institutions' leadership agreement and ethical approval before starting to engage in any process of research dissemination (BERA, 2018).

The away day was carefully planned to take part in an environment that was conducive to collaboration, trust building and honest communication. We were conscious of the post-COVID contexts that developed efficient online meeting spaces; however, we were also aware of the need to have a physical space for personal, face-to-face communication that can be informal when sharing refreshments and personal anecdotes. One of the outcomes of the away

day was therefore an agreement that away days are to be strategically planned over the period of the academic year to ensure the longevity of our collaboration.

During the away day, when we started with the elicitation of the expectations and values for the partnership, the practitioners emphasised the impact on learners' independence and employability skills, on teachers' innovative practice, and on how the partnership would link with school and educational policy priorities. They also wanted the partnership to relate to the 'passion' they hold regarding SEND children's success in adulthood. The university team highlighted the value of 'curiosity' about where this partnership can lead to, we foregrounded equity and equality, reciprocity, collaboration, and sustainability. All these key values were often discussed in our formal and informal meetings and so we felt we needed to be transparent at this point of our partnership's identity formation (Farrell et al., 2019). This dialogue in turn led to a statement of the partnership's values embodied as the '5Cs': child-centredness, collegiality, collaboration, creativity, and continuous professional development.

Navigating the Early Stages of Roles and Responsibilities

As the partnership involves a cross section of professionals working within operational and strategic roles across the secondary and Higher Education sector, the academic team have identified the importance of addressing power imbalance and the potential tacit understanding teaching professionals might bring to the project. Our concerns are entrenched in the wider societal rhetoric that academics typically possess specialised knowledge and expertise in their academic fields which can be seen as more prestigious or authoritative than the practical experience of a teacher. We are conscious such biases can result in academics being perceived as the primary source of knowledge and / or decision makers. For the success of the partnership and to further embed our guiding principle of equity we are working hard to avoid a culture of top-down decision-making that marginalises the teacher's voice in the coming stages of the research.

A central concern has been to circumnavigate teachers' understanding around their roles that should not be regulated to mere data providers, nor must they see themselves as such. Instead, teachers have positioned themselves within the research as active agents within the design stage of the data collection process, which will lead to analysis and interpretation. They also defined their role as 'research champions' that enhances their research knowledge credibility and places them as research leaders and knowledge brokers in their school research strategy.

We (academics) are also conscious of our own evolving role. Cooper (2014) provides a cautionary note that knowledge brokers often remain stuck at the level of informing teachers about certain activities or describing the activities outcomes. He suggests hence knowledge sharing via active personal engagement. Moving forward, the partnership have agreed an itinerary of knowledge exchange activities that include attendance at the launch of the school wide 'teaching and learning' initiatives where dates have been planned by the senior leadership team over the academic calendar and where teachers are encouraged to work with colleagues to identify pedagogical and pastoral issues and undertake action research with tangible outcomes for evaluation. The university team plan to provide academic support and bring further credibility to research design, data collection and analysis whilst working closely with teaching colleagues to produce impactful outcomes.

We are conscious as an academic team we are imbued with more flexibility around our working schedules and have not been constrained by the daily demands of classroom teaching.

Effectively navigating around our professional constraints and workloads remains high on the agenda for ongoing success and the common goal of continued mutual respect. We suggest that mutual respect continues to be fostered through the different professional experiences each member of the team brings to the project. For example, two members of the academic team possess prior experience of teaching in a SEND school setting and have a deep understanding of the terminologies and documentation used by SEND teachers in their daily practices. In this instance, our colleagues have served as effective knowledge brokers often by mediation, boundary-spanning and bridging (Ryecroft-Smith, 2022) communication and collaboration between the different stakeholders. For others within the academic team, we took the opportunity to position ourselves as novices within the SEND arena of educational provision. This has helped to flatten the hierarchy between the academic and teacher relationship and thereby encourage a culture of mutual learning, where academics learn from teachers' practical knowledge and teachers gain insights into the research methods and approaches.

Conclusion

In presenting the initial stages of the RPP, we are conscious that the voices of our school colleagues are missing from our narrative here. This has been a deliberate strategy to analyse our journey as academics into the partnership prior to supporting the teachers to capture their own reflections on their experiences. We will then endeavour to navigate a collegiate approach to co-write the different perspectives of the partnership's development, ensuring equity and mutual respect. Our aspiration is for our teaching colleagues to develop their researcher habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), constructing their dual identity as researcher and teacher. The skills accrued within this identity will support colleagues in gathering evidence to inform and support their outstanding practice and justify aspirations to contribute to policy development.

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