An unexpected challenge: The impact of school district leadership changes on a research-practice partnership

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Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) differ from conventional ways researchers, district leaders, and teachers work together. RPPs instead are long-term collaborations aimed at education improvements through engagement with research and organized intentionally to connect diverse forms of expertise by shifting power relations so that all partners have a say in the work (Farrell et al., 2021). As a university-based researcher and teacher educator, I have been working since 2017 with a local public school district to establish and maintain an RPP focused on improving K-12 science teaching. As a former middle and high school science teacher, I am committed to a community-engaged approach to working with practitioners so that my research will be impactful to my field and local stakeholders.

After a year of exploring ideas, we decided to focus on developing district-wide science assessments. We used teacher co-design, an innovative approach that we hoped would also provide teachers with meaningful professional learning experiences to gain more knowledge with the state science standards. The district science curriculum coordinator recruited one high school biology teacher from each high school to serve as an item writer on the assessment development team, which included me as the science assessment expert and a district assessment specialist to support assessment development, secure storage, and distribution. We began our work in fall of 2018 and successfully developed and implemented a districtwide high school biology end-of-semester final exam that was aligned with the state science standards and would provide district personnel with data about areas of strength and improvement to identify appropriate curricular or pedagogical resources. The fall semester final exam was first administered in fall of 2019 and has been administered to approximately 5,000 ninth grade students annually since then except for 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our partnership work developing district-wide science assessments was significant for several reasons. First, without a common assessment, teachers were responsible for designing their own final exams, which varied widely in terms of quality and alignment with standards, even from teacher to teacher within one school, leading to issues of equity across classrooms and schools. Second, since the district had never implemented a districtwide assessment in science, we knew we needed to promote teacher buy-in, which we achieved by utilizing teacher co-design and being transparent about the assessment development process. All teachers were able to view and provide feedback on the assessment before it was implemented. Third, the development of the assessment could not have happened without both partners. As an outsider, I have no authority to dictate district policies or practices, especially one as consequential as

mandating a common final exam across all high school biology classes that counted for 10% of students' grades. On the other hand, I had experience developing large-scale science assessments aligned with the new science standards, and my expert status and university affiliation gave legitimacy to the work. Finally, in terms of research, I had the opportunity to design longitudinal research studies and contribute to my field's understanding of large-scale science education reform.

Due to the success of the biology assessment, we began work on developing a districtwide chemistry assessment in fall of 2021 and utilized the same teacher co-design process with one teacher representative from each high school. To help with content expertise, we recruited a chemistry professor from the university to join our team, which proved to be prescient as one of the teachers was cantankerous and openly disrespected anyone who did not have an advanced degree in chemistry. After a day of working with the teachers, we would debrief and strategize about how to proceed at the next item writing session. Despite this situation, we were making satisfactory progress when we encountered an unexpected challenge.

The district had hired a new superintendent from out-of-state in 2022, and the district personnel I worked with were hopeful that the superintendent would bring novel ideas and fresh energy to the school system. However, in August, a few days after we had finished providing a 12-hour professional learning course for biology teachers and before the start of the school year, my district partners and I learned that the superintendent had mandated that all teachers-on-special-assignment (TOSAs) would return to the classroom immediately to mitigate the teacher and substitute teacher shortage.

My two closest district collaborators were classified as TOSAs. One, an assessment specialist, was assigned to teach high school math. The other, the science curriculum coordinator, had accommodations for a medical disability and was assigned to alternative duties. I remember vividly the days following the superintendent's sudden announcement: There were flurries of text messages, expressions of disbelief and shock, hushed meetings in the dark corners of local pubs, and hugs and tears. I sent an email to the superintendent and my school board trustee and received the same response—the mandate would apply to all TOSAs and was necessary to ensure a qualified teacher in every classroom.

The superintendent's reasoning did not make sense to me on a practical level. If my collaborator had a medical disability and could not be placed in the classroom anyway, why could she not continue her district work? Instead, she was assigned to

assist with data entry for another department. Some TOSAs retired or resigned from the district rather than return to the classroom days before the start of the school year. I understand the district leadership's perspective—it was easier for them to apply the mandate to all TOSAs regardless of the work they were doing. But, all TOSAs do not do the same kind of work, and I thought it would have been more productive for them to be strategic about the reassignments.

The impact on our work was immediate. Reassigning TOSAs meant that we could not continue our assessment development work with the chemistry teachers. The biology exam continued to be given only because of the advocacy of the director of assessment and the fact that the exam was co-designed by teachers. However, because there were no TOSAs in curriculum and instruction, there was no district level support for science teachers that year. At the time, we did not know how long the reassignments would last, and we were worried that the TOSA positions might not return at all. Eventually, some of the TOSA positions were recreated and my collaborators had to apply for these new positions. They were both successful, but we had lost an entire school year, and the momentum we had built with the teachers was gone. We decided not to continue the chemistry assessment development work.

It is now late 2024. The superintendent resigned suddenly in early 2024, prompting much internal and public speculation about the reasons. Although there was a national search, the current superintendent was selected from within the ranks. The district science curriculum coordinator is now retired, and the new coordinator was a former item writer on the biology assessment development team and has committed to continuing the work and advocating for implementation of the common final exam. The RPP has a new collaboration with a nonprofit to pilot middle school science assessments, and we submitted a federal grant proposal to develop middle school science teacher leaders for the district and surrounding rural areas. In essence, we shifted our focus from high school to middle school to support the district's adoption of science curriculum materials for Grades 6–8. Additionally, we found that the middle school science teachers were more enthusiastic about working with us on district level initiatives. Thus, the RPP was able to shift direction, persist, and continue working on the goal of supporting science instruction in the district.

Reflections

One might think that because we have been able to move on, the lost year has been forgotten. Like any adversity that we humans might face in our lives, time has

helped to lessen the pain of the negative impacts of that year. But it was not that long ago, and we have not forgotten. Rather, we retain emotional and professional scars from the lost year that remind us of the pain we felt when our voices were ignored. I reflect on this unexpected challenge in my research and share my thoughts on points of tension and how they might help us better understand the work of engaging in research-practice partnerships with district collaborators.

When I shared the news of the TOSA reassignment with the dean of my college and how it had effectively stopped my research with the district, they asked me about whether it would affect my research productivity in terms of publications. As a tenure-track assistant professor in my probationary period, I am required to demonstrate my knowledge and skills as a researcher through scholarly activity such as publishing articles and book chapters, presenting conference papers, and securing grants. I said, yes, I had enough data at that point to publish some manuscripts. But I am also an emotional person, and I could not help but cry when I was telling them about the situation. At that moment, though, I realized that the dean was viewing the situation through the lens of research productivity while I was experiencing it emotionally through personal relationships.

Academic timelines for promotion and tenure and expectations for research productivity do not necessarily align well with research-practice partnership work that relies on sharing power in research projects with district collaborators. District leadership changes can produce changes in policies and practices that negatively impact the joint work of the partnership. There is a point of tension, then, between doing this type of work that matters for local stakeholders and doing work that counts for tenure and promotion in the academy. Years ago, when I was a graduate student, I shared my plans to engage with research-practice partnership work with a senior scholar, and they advised me not pursue RPP work as a junior scholar. In my head, I know this to be true because I know how academia works—publish or perish. But in my heart, I did not want to wait 6 or 7 years until I was tenured and promoted to engage in meaningful collaborative work with the local district. It is not impossible to do both, but the massive disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and then reassignment of TOSAs have been challenging for traditional measures of research productivity, especially when working with schools and districts.

As I reflect on my strong emotional response to this unexpected challenge in my research, I realize the depth of my relationships with my district collaborators and how

that connection has sustained me through the years. The academy is not necessarily a kind place, and one must find sources of strength and encouragement where one can. My source of strength came from my relationships with my district collaborators—our partnership work nourishes me in a way that other relationships in academia do not because of our shared goals, experiences overcoming challenges, and mutual respect for the different roles we play in our joint work. I could not have done this work without them, and they could not have done this work without me. Relationships are at the heart of research-practice partnerships, and anyone who wishes to pursue this type of work should be prepared to engage respectfully with their collaborators both professionally and personally.

Reference

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