

CHANGING THE CULTURE: FIVE STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING BRIDGES IN RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS IN THE EARLY YEARS

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Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) work to collaboratively generate relevant research that can be used in practice to improve education. As anyone in the RPP world knows, this is often challenging because this kind of work requires new ways of working for those engaging in the partnership, which, in turn, requires organizational shifts in policies and incentives so that collaborative work is valued and supported by the organizations that are involved. It also often requires practice-side organizations to build capacity in actually using research evidence in their decision-making.

Over the past two years, our ReadUp partnership, which is working to improve reading achievement and student success in schools, has been lucky to receive support in those two areas through the [Institutional Challenge Grant](#), awarded by the William T. Grant Foundation, Spencer Foundation, and

Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. We have learned a lot already about growing and sustaining partnership work. In this article, we share our five main insights that we hope can be helpful for other partnerships as well.

OUR PARTNERSHIP

The ReadUp partnership started in 2020 as a partnership between [Leon County Schools](#) (LCS) and the [Florida Center for Reading Research](#) (FCRR) to strengthen student achievement in reading and create conditions inside and outside of schools to sustain reading success for all learners. Starting in 2022, the Institutional Challenge Grant allowed us to extend the RPP to include an additional school district, the [Florida A&M University Developmental Research School](#) (FAMU DRS). Together, the project partners are focused on

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building capacity within the participating districts to generate and utilize research aimed at reducing disparities in student reading achievement and enhancing school success.

As three members of the project team, we each contribute our own unique perspectives and insights to this reflection on what we've learned so far: Janae brings a unique combination of practical experience and research expertise to the team. With a professional background as a K-12 teacher and former school district and state director, she recognizes the importance of applying



research and policy to guide educational practice. Most importantly, she values the power of partnerships and their potential to positively influence youth outcomes. Altamese, the district's Title 1 Coordinator, uses her experience as a journalist and former classroom teacher to communicate effectively with the faculty, staff, parents, and students of FAMU DRS. Janell serves as the District's Future Center Coordinator, leading efforts to amplify college and career readiness at FAMU DRS. She develops and implements tailored programs, workshops, impactful events, and strategic partnerships that empower students to navigate their postsecondary paths with confidence. Janell's diverse experiences as a classroom teacher, program director, and professional development trainer have shaped her to adopt an innovative, collaborative, and intentional approach. This allows her to create dynamic, student-centered opportunities that foster growth and readiness for life beyond high school.



Up to this point, our work in expanding the partnership to include two universities and two school districts and collaboratively working to produce and use research that reduces disparities in students' reading achievement and overall youth outcomes has led to the following insights:



(I) PRIORITIZING RELATIONSHIPS OVER RESEARCH AGENDAS

In academia, it's common to fall into the habit of approaching research with predefined goals, priorities, and agendas. If you've ever designed a study in the context of a traditional academic setting, you're familiar with the process:

crafting research questions or hypotheses, choosing samples, measures, and methods, and then conducting the study. After collecting and analyzing the data, you report your findings through scholarly publications and conference presentations, aiming to advance the field. Usually, by the time you're wrapping up one study, you've already shifted your focus to a new, exciting idea or theory that you're eager to explore, and the cycle starts all over again. The research process itself seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it?

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We experienced quite the opposite in our partnership work, not following a linear or cyclical process. As we worked to expand the ReadUp partnership, it was crucial for us to approach the partnership from a fresh perspective — one that emphasized intentionality, relationship-building, and trust. In the early stages of the project, we temporarily paused the research that was already in the works from when the partnership first started with the first two partners (FCRR and Leon County) to prioritize supporting our newest partners (FAMU and FAMU DRS). We focused on meeting their needs, working collaboratively, and consistently being present. It's important to highlight that during the initial stages of trust building, researchers were consistently present in partnership spaces and made a deliberate effort not to create additional meetings outside of the existing work. Instead, they remained flexible, attending meetings that partners had already scheduled internally. By integrating into these established agendas rather than adding "another task," they eased the process of building rapport and establishing an authentic collaborative working relationship. The development of the research naturally evolved from the commitment and effort we invested in the partnership from the beginning.

(II) PAYING ATTENTION TO THE POWER DYNAMICS IN THE PARTNERSHIP

Power dynamics can surface in RPPs in various ways, often shaping interactions, decision-making, and the overall effectiveness of the collaboration. Examples of power dynamics may involve subtle tensions between research and

practitioner knowledge hierarchies, differences in time and capacity devoted to the partnership, variations in reporting priorities, and communication barriers, such as excessive use of academic jargon. Addressing power dynamics such as those mentioned requires open communication, collaborative decision-making, mutual respect, and a commitment to equitable practices that recognize and value the contributions of both research and practice equally.

As it relates to our research-practice partnership, researchers were honest and transparent in assessing their assumptions about the practice-partners' context and the needs of its respective stakeholders. Furthermore, they were mindful not to assume a dominant role in leading and directing all project efforts. This ensured the equitable engagement of all stakeholders in the production and use of evidence to support decision-making. In the emerging years of our partnership, research team members worked to build the capacity of the practice partners so that all team members could provide input and contribute meaningfully. For example, they collaborated to equip district and school partners with the tools, strategies, and resources needed to make informed decisions regarding curriculum selection, intervention choices, and the evaluation of instructional practices to support positive student outcomes. On the other hand, practitioners collaborated to enhance the researchers' understanding and capacity regarding practical problems of practice and the needs of schools and communities. They provided insights into effective engagement techniques for

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communicating research to various school stakeholders and advised on contextual adaptations of strategies to ensure the research is relevant and relatable in real-world contexts. This resulted in the joint development of research questions and the capability to address local problems of practice with evidence collaboratively.



(III) ESTABLISHING NORMS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITH PARTNERS

Effective partnerships hinge on collaboration. This concept parallels co-creation, where collective input is essential for achieving shared goals. Collaboration is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it brings multiple ideas to the forefront, much like how a recipe improves with the harmonious blending of ingredients. Similarly, members of the partnership must collaborate to strengthen the partnership. It also prevents the burden of implementation from falling on a single member, which can cause frustration and burnout. When all members contribute equally, it not only alleviates the workload but also ensures that everyone feels valued and supported within the partnership.

In our context, this looked like the research team scheduling meetings with the FAMU DRS administrative team to collaborate on shared goals and objectives. At the forefront, collaborating to establish and determine partner roles and norms was pivotal in setting the tone for our partnership. These early meetings between the research-practice partners focused on exploring the purpose and overall goals of the partnership as a whole and created space for the partners to collectively outline how their work together would not only support the needs of the individual agencies that benefit from the partnership, but how that work would satisfy the objectives of the partnership overall. Given the general understanding provided by the key stakeholders and contributors involved in the partnership, it was essential to collaborate and identify the overarching needs of the agencies. This initiated the process of defining the main objectives for the collaborative work of all partners. By adopting this approach, the partnership was able to be genuinely reciprocal, as demonstrated by the mutual benefits gained from participating in various events and opportunities. This enhanced engagement fortified the relationship between the partners, making the collaboration more effective and conducive to achieving the established

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goals. Examples include getting an understanding of who the key influencers were on both sides of the partnership, their roles and responsibilities in their individual sectors, and how they could show up to do this work together. Additionally, we scheduled regular monthly meetings to monitor and discuss if each agency's needs were being met and to explore any adjustments needed to move forward if they weren't. This approach strengthened the trust factor between partners and assured agencies that the partnership was there to be of support to all of us.

(IV) SURFACING AND ADDRESSING BARRIERS AND BOUNDARIES

In working together, it was crucial for partners to also address any barriers that could potentially threaten the implementation and impact of achieving the established partnership objectives. In our case, consideration of the available resources, school calendars, and data privacy limits played a role in when, what, and how our objectives would be achieved. Additionally, the establishment of boundaries within the partnership were determined at the onset of the working relationship to outline how the objectives could be attained with respect to program, district, and university policy. Addressing these factors early into the partnership assisted in laying a solid foundation for the partnership to stand and ultimately thrive. When exploring boundaries in this context, we considered what the essential needs for the program were and collaborated on how, through partnership, those needs could be supported from both sides. In our monthly collaborations we frequently

referenced the needs and goals from the partnership, program, and research perspectives, which encouraged intentional dialogue, development, and plans for implementation. This approach encouraged us to consider when, where, and how we would collaborate as partners, keeping our "why" at the center. Having an ongoing understanding created the space for us to transform the traditional approach and execution for partnership to develop a dynamic way of work and partnership that was suitable for all agencies.

(V) UTILIZING DATA TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE PARTNERSHIP

As we approach the final year of our collaboration, we are undertaking evaluative measures to ensure that the grant's objectives have been achieved. Evaluation is an ongoing process, and we intend to employ various methods, such as surveys and town halls, to gather data. This information will be valuable for shaping future partnerships. One important learning that has emerged for us thus far in our evaluation relates to inclusive communication and planning: There were instances when crucial grant team members were not informed about certain steps in the partnership process. It is important to acknowledge and be aware that lack of communication can hinder the overall effectiveness and success of the partnership. Future partnerships with Florida A&M University and FAMU DRS could be enhanced by ensuring that all team members are kept informed throughout the grant and decision-making process. Additionally, creating

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opportunities for all partners to contribute their ideas could strengthen the partnership's objectives. Co-creation is vital to partnership success, as it allows members to leverage their diverse experiences and ideas in the planning and throughout the implementation process.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this partnership experience highlights for us the value of forming authentic relationships – building bridges! – with key K-12 and university partners to effectively set the tone for a culture of collaboration in a research-practice partnership. To date, the ReadUp partnership has influenced numerous district and program-related workshops, events, and initiatives and is instrumental in positively impacting students, families, and faculty. Together, in partnership, we celebrate the milestones achieved and eagerly anticipate the accomplishments ahead!

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