

**Title:**

Multiple Perspectives on Partnership Success: A Research-Practice Partnership in Early Childhood Education

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## **Multiple Perspectives on Partnership Success: A Research-Practice Partnership in Early Childhood Education**

**Background/Context:** Partnerships between university researchers and school districts are gaining traction as a means toward reducing the research-practice gap in education science. Alongside the growing presence of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) is a call to develop stronger knowledge about the processes and outcomes of effective collaboration (Tseng, 2012). Previous work has outlined the challenges confronting RPPs, such as overcoming organizational differences in goals (Firestone & Fisler, 2002), and developing trust, mutualism, and decision-making processes (Henrick, Munoz, & Cobb, 2016; Tseng et al., 2017). Most research on these processes and challenges includes data from the perspective on one partner institution (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). To date, little research explores variation in perceptions across partner institutions; this work may help to generate hypotheses into the processes underlying effective collaboration from multiple perspectives within the partnership.

**Objective:** In this paper, we examine: (1) overall perceptions of and satisfaction with the partnership (benefits, drawbacks, and progress), (2) differences in perceptions by partner institution, and (3) associations between partnership processes (resources, leadership, decision-making) and members' perceptions of and satisfaction with the partnership.

**Setting:** This study occurs within a large, multi-year partnership between university researchers and school district leaders to support the expansion of high quality, full-day pre-kindergarten to all four-year-olds in one large city. The RPP was established to support the city's expansion of universal pre-K and currently is engaged in research to understand implementation and impacts of differentiated professional development.

**Population:** All staff engaged in the RPP during the past nine months were invited to participate. 27 staff members (56%) completed the survey in the summer of 2018: one-half were university researchers, one-third were school district staff, and the rest were other members.

**Program/Practice:** In the current study, we assess partnership processes and outcomes rather than the program the RPP studies and supports.

**Research Design:** This study involves a single time point of survey data from an ongoing, mixed method, multi-reporter study that assesses the core elements of an RPP in early childhood education (ECE) and the association between those core elements and partnership outcomes.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Partnership staff completed the Adapted Partnership Self-Assessment Survey. This survey draws on items from the Partnership Self-Assessment Tool (CACSH, 2002), Coalition Member Survey (Coalitions Work, 2013), and Coalition Effectiveness Inventory (Butterfoss, 1998). A cross-institution working group selected items relevant to the local partnership and made adaptations to fit the ECE context and partnership focus. The survey includes subscales related to resources, leadership, communication, commitment, decision making, satisfaction with partnership progress, and benefits and drawbacks of partnership involvement. Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the percent of respondents overall and by affiliation that endorsed each item (benefits, drawbacks) or responded with a 4 or 5 (satisfied, very satisfied) for items assessing partnership progress.

Further analysis is planned to examine perceptions of resources, leadership, and decision-making, and their associations with the outcomes described above.

**Findings/Results:** In terms of benefits and drawbacks, most respondents (73%) experienced an increased utilization of expertise or services, particularly university researchers (86%) as compared with district staff (63%). Experience of enhanced ability to address an important issue was high overall (92%), both across the district (100%) and university (86%). Similarly, most respondents reported that an enhanced ability to bridge research and practice was a benefit of the partnership (88%). Fewer participants across institutions noted a heightened public profile as a partnership benefit (42%). Other items were considered benefits of the partnership by both district and university participants with a difference of, at most, 7 percentage points (see Table 1).

For drawbacks, about half (58%) of all respondents felt that the partnership was a diversion of time and resources away from other priorities; this was experienced by more university (71%) than district (50%) respondents. Few respondents overall (15%) felt the RPP was a conflict between their job and the partnership's work; this was felt largely by university participants. Few reported other drawbacks, and differences between groups were no more than 8 percentage points (see Table 1).

Regarding satisfaction with partnership progress, most respondents (78%) – particularly the district staff (100%) – felt the RPP is advancing knowledge about ECE in the city. Similarly, 78% of all participants felt the partnership strengthens impacts of ECE on children; all district participants (100%) indicated this compared to 69% of university participants. Most participants felt the partnership made progress on improving the quality of ECE in the city and in meeting partnership goals, with a difference across groups of 10 percentage points (see Table 1).

Results are pending on associations between core elements of partnership processes and perceived benefits, drawbacks, and satisfaction with partnership progress.

**Conclusions:** Overall, partnership members have positive perceptions of the RPP's success at this time point. However, for specific areas of focus, perceptions vary by organizational affiliation. Surprisingly, our findings suggest that constraints of time and priorities were felt more strongly by university researchers. Satisfaction with progress may be related to these discrepancies, as fewer university staff were satisfied with the RPP's strides in ECE. These findings differ from past examinations of partnerships, which emphasize the constraints of time and conflicting priorities felt by practitioners (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). In the current work, university researchers may be driven by the city's goals rather than their own goals, which in turn contributes to their views of the RPP success. We will explore this hypothesis by examining inputs from the survey data associated with such perceptions. The survey response rate is a key limitation of the study; we cannot state with confidence that these data represent all perspectives in the partnership. However, we believe this study contributes to the nascent literature on methods to assess RPPs, bringing to light challenges with their measurement and maintenance. To address limitations in future studies, we plan to collect data at additional time points to reveal whether these patterns remain consistent or change over time, as well as integrate the results from qualitative interviews to contextualize the survey findings.

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**Table 1:** *Percent of all respondents and school district and university research staff who experienced specific benefits and drawbacks in the RPP and were satisfied with the ECE partnership’s progress and outcomes*

		School District Staff	University Research Staff	Other
<b>Benefits:</b>	All			
Enhanced ability to address an important issue	92%	100%	86%	100%
Development of new skills	73%	75%	79%	50%
Heightened public profile	42%	38%	50%	25%
Increased utilization of my expertise or services	73%	63%	86%	50%
Acquisition of useful knowledge	85%	75%	86%	100%
Enhanced ability to affect public policy	62%	63%	79%	100%
Enhanced ability to bridge research and practice	88%	100%	93%	50%
Development of valuable relationships	96%	100%	100%	75%
Enhanced ability to meet needs of populations I serve	72%	71%	71%	75%
Ability to have a greater impact than on my own	88%	100%	93%	50%
<b>Drawbacks:</b>	All	School District Staff	University Research Staff	Other
Diversion of time and resources away from other priorities	58%	50%	71%	25%
Insufficient influence in partnership activities	27%	25%	29%	25%
Viewed negatively due to partnership	0%	0%	0%	0%
Frustration or aggravation	31%	38%	36%	0%
Insufficient credit	15%	13%	21%	0%
Conflict between my job and the partnership’s work	15%	0%	29%	0%
Reduced effectiveness of my organization	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Partnership Progress (satisfied or very satisfied):</b>	All	School District Staff	University Research Staff	Other
Contribution to advancing knowledge about ECE in NYC	78%	100%	77%	33%
Contribution to improving the quality of ECE in NYC	79%	88%	77%	67%
Contribution to strengthening impacts of ECE on children in NYC	78%	100%	69%	67%
Overall progress in meeting partnership’s goals	79%	75%	85%	67%