

Navigating turbulence: the impact of turnover on trust and sustainability in research-practice partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how leadership turnover influences trust dynamics and collaborative effectiveness within Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs), specifically examining a nine-year, equity-focused CSforALL initiative in K–8 education.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory, this study drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 31 diverse stakeholders, including principals, academic directors and project leadership. Data were systematically analyzed to identify themes related to trust and turnover impacts.

Findings – The analysis identifies three mechanisms through which leadership turnover reshaped trust within the partnership: (1) the loss of institutional memory and relational bridges, (2) the proceduralization of collaboration and (3) the repositioning of researchers from collaborative partners to external actors. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how leadership transitions alter the relational and organizational conditions under which trust is built and sustained, leading to shifts in communication, access and coordination across the partnership.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited to one specific initiative, suggesting a need for comparative studies across diverse contexts to enhance generalizability.

Practical implications – The findings suggest the importance of developing distributed leadership structures, establishing onboarding processes for new leaders and investing in relational infrastructure to sustain collaboration during periods of transition.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the RPP literature by moving beyond descriptive accounts of turnover to identify the underlying mechanisms through which leadership transitions reshape trust and collaboration in long-term partnerships.

Keywords Research-practice partnerships, Trust, Leadership turnover, Collaboration, Equity, Educational partnerships

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Achieving meaningful and equitable change in education requires sustained collaboration among stakeholders with different roles, responsibilities and institutional pressures. Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as structured, long-term



collaborations between researchers and practitioners that support collaborative problem-solving, shared learning and educational improvement (Henrick *et al.*, 2016). By cultivating these relationships, RPPs help ensure that research is both timely and practically relevant while laying the groundwork for sustainable improvement.

The RPP investigated in this study is a nine-year initiative that began with a pilot study in 2016 and progressed through two consecutive NSF-funded projects concluding in 2025. This long-term collaboration provided a unique opportunity to assemble multiple teams, involve various institutions and address complex challenges such as equity and inclusivity while fostering systemic change within the district. Notable successes include the state education authorities endorsing the curriculum as a statewide model, leading to district-wide adoption and integration, along with the hiring of additional Computer Science/Technology Coordinator (CSTC) teachers. Over the course of this nine-year initiative, the partnership experienced leadership and personnel turnover at multiple levels. The longitudinal nature of the project made it possible to investigate how these transitions were experienced and how they shaped collaboration over time.

This paper explores two central questions:

- RQ1. How was trust developed, maintained and challenged within the research–practice partnership over time?
- RQ2. In what ways did leadership turnover reshape collaboration practices, organizational structures and trust relationships within the partnership?

Drawing on in-depth, long-term data from diverse stakeholders, this study examines these pivotal issues to provide actionable insights for sustaining collaborative partnerships.

Theoretical framework

In our theoretical framework, we aim to accomplish three goals: (1) introduce RPPs through a brief literature review, (2) synthesize relevant research on trust and turnover in RPPs and (3) describe how grounded theory informed our analytic approach.

RPPs as Long-Term Collaborative Structures: RPPs have emerged as a promising approach for strengthening connections between educational research and practice. Rather than treating research production and implementation as separate processes, RPPs emphasize sustained collaboration between researchers and practitioners to address problems of practice and co-develop knowledge that can inform educational improvement (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Through long-term collaboration, RPPs aim to produce research that is both theoretically meaningful and practically relevant for educational decision-making.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the relational and organizational dynamics that shape how partnerships function. Studies have shown that successful RPPs rely heavily on relational conditions such as trust, communication, shared decision-making and alignment across institutional priorities. For example, Denner *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that issues of culture, trust and power play a central role in shaping collaboration within partnerships, often influencing how research goals and methods evolve over time. Similarly, Wentworth *et al.* (2024) highlight how researchers and practitioners often enter partnerships with different but complementary motivations, with sustained communication and reliable resources playing critical roles in partnership success. Other work has emphasized the importance of equity considerations in RPPs. Farrell *et al.* (2023) show that partnerships conceptualize equity in different ways, ranging from a focus on individual outcomes to broader commitments to justice, identity and power transformation. Anderson (2023) further argues that partnerships seeking to advance equity must explicitly engage with the political dimensions of collaboration, including institutional priorities, organizational structures and power relations among partners.

Within the field of computer science education, RPPs have become a pivotal strategy for advancing CS for All initiatives by fostering collaboration between researchers and

practitioners to tackle real-world challenges in K–12 computer science education (Dettori *et al.*, 2018; Bevan *et al.*, 2019). These partnerships often emphasize the development of inclusive curricula, professional development for teachers and efforts to expand equitable access to computer science learning opportunities (Adrion & Pektaş, 2024; Adrion *et al.*, 2022). Early RPP efforts explored innovative approaches such as remote pair programming in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to enhance collaborative learning (McKinsey *et al.*, 2014). More recently, NSF-funded RPPs have contributed to the development of integrated computer science and computational thinking curricula for elementary schools, with a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion (Green, 2019; Hadad *et al.*, 2021). Despite these advances, RPPs in computer science education continue to face challenges related to teacher capacity building, implementation fidelity and leadership support (Dettori *et al.*, 2018). Partnerships may also encounter systemic barriers that complicate collaboration across institutional boundaries and require ongoing adjustments to implementation strategies (Goldstein *et al.*, 2019; Korhonen *et al.*, 2024).

Taken together, this body of research suggests that while RPPs hold significant promise for improving educational systems, their success depends heavily on relational conditions such as trust, communication, leadership stability and alignment between research and practice communities. At the same time, relatively little empirical research has examined how leadership turnover shapes these relational dynamics within long-term RPPs. This study addresses this gap by examining how leadership transitions influence trust, collaboration and partnership sustainability within a multi-year CSforALL research–practice partnership.

Trust and Turnover in RPPs: Trust has been consistently identified as a foundational relational condition in RPPs. Prior studies suggest that trust supports sustained collaboration by enabling open communication, shared decision-making and the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and practitioners (Lash *et al.*, 2019; Kochanek *et al.*, 2020; Sexton *et al.*, 2020). Within these partnerships, trust is not simply an interpersonal attribute but a dynamic organizational process shaped through ongoing interaction, alignment of goals and the recognition of practitioner expertise.

Research has also highlighted specific practices that contribute to the development and maintenance of trust, including transparent communication, the cultivation of personal relationships and the inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives (Lash *et al.*, 2019; Kochanek *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, trust within RPPs must be continually negotiated as partners balance short-term institutional pressures with long-term collaborative goals (Kochanek *et al.*, 2020). These findings suggest that trust is both relational and processual, requiring ongoing effort to sustain.

Meanwhile, a growing body of research identifies turnover as a significant challenge for sustaining collaboration in RPPs. Leadership and personnel changes can disrupt established relationships, weaken shared understanding and complicate coordination across organizational boundaries (Coleman *et al.*, 2020). Turnover is particularly consequential in long-term initiatives, where continuity of leadership and institutional memory plays a critical role in maintaining momentum and alignment. Scholars have suggested a range of strategies for mitigating the effects of turnover, including formalizing governance structures, developing onboarding processes and distributing leadership responsibilities (Coleman *et al.*, 2020; Arce-Trigatti *et al.*, 2024). While these approaches may support organizational stability, they also point to an underlying tension: as partnerships respond to turnover through increased formalization, the relational conditions that support trust may be altered.

Taken together, this literature suggests that trust and turnover are deeply interconnected in shaping the dynamics of RPPs. However, relatively little empirical research has examined how leadership turnover reshapes the relational conditions under which trust is built and sustained over time. This study addresses this gap by examining how leadership transitions influence trust, collaboration and partnership functioning within a long-term RPP.

Analytic approach: Previous studies examining trust, collaboration and organizational challenges in RPPs have frequently relied on qualitative approaches to capture the complex

relational dynamics involved. For example, [Kochanek et al. \(2020\)](#) employed a grounded theory approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants across eight partnerships to examine themes such as trust, turnover and shared language, identifying strategies used by partnerships to address these challenges. Similarly, [Korhonen et al. \(2024\)](#) used qualitative content analysis and an abductive approach to analyze interviews with participants in Finnish educational RPPs, highlighting barriers and experiences associated with partnership work. [Lash et al. \(2019\)](#) examined interviews from six RPP teams to explore team behaviors, norms and structures that support trust and collaboration in local contexts. Beyond education, [Kristensen \(2015\)](#) applied a partnership-based framework to analyze proximity and collaboration in public–private partnerships, offering insights into systemic challenges that can also arise in research–practice collaborations. Collectively, these studies illustrate the value of qualitative approaches for examining the relational and organizational complexities of partnerships, particularly when issues such as trust, leadership change and collaboration are central.

Grounded theory has also been applied in a range of studies examining collaboration and participation in research–practice settings. For example, [Corr and Davidson \(2023\)](#) identified digital engagement, innovative trust-building and adaptive recruitment strategies as key themes in sustaining RPPs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, [Tong et al. \(2018\)](#) used grounded theory to examine Malaysian general practitioners’ participation in research, highlighting how personal motivations, institutional alignment and contextual factors shape engagement. These studies further demonstrate the value of grounded theory for examining complex collaborative processes where interpersonal trust and institutional relationships are central.

In this study, we draw on grounded theory as an analytic approach to support an inductive examination of how trust and collaboration evolved within the partnership during periods of leadership transition. Grounded theory is widely used across qualitative research traditions to explore social processes and organizational change ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). Rather than beginning with a fixed hypothesis, grounded theory allows categories and themes to emerge inductively from participants’ perspectives through iterative engagement with the data.

This analytic orientation was particularly appropriate for examining a long-term RPP in which leadership turnover, institutional roles and relational dynamics evolved over time and shaped partnership collaboration. Using grounded theory principles such as constant comparison and analytic memoing, we examined how participants interpreted and responded to leadership transitions and how these experiences shaped the development, maintenance and erosion of trust within the partnership. The specific analytic procedures used in this study are described in the Methods section below.

Methods

Data Collection: This study employed a qualitative research approach to analyze data collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The combination of these methods allowed for deep exploration of the experiences, perspectives and dynamics within the CSforALL Research-Practice Partnership (RPP).

Data were collected across multiple phases of the partnership, including periods preceding and following the concentrated leadership transitions in 2022, which enabled the team to examine how participants described changes in trust and collaboration over time. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted to gather rich, qualitative data. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across sessions while allowing participants to provide open-ended responses. All sessions were conducted virtually via Zoom due to logistical considerations. Participants were informed about the study’s purpose, and their consent was obtained prior to the interviews and focus groups. Interview and focus group prompts focused on participants’ experiences of partnership collaboration, communication, leadership transitions, access to project activities and perceptions of trust over time.

Interviews: Conducted individually with stakeholders such as the PI, Co-PI, Program Manager, Chief School Officers and the District Lead. Each interview lasted approximately 75 minutes and followed a standard interview protocol.

Focus Groups: Conducted with more than five participants per group, focusing on principals and academic directors from various zones. Each session lasted between 70 and 90 minutes, fostering dynamic discussions and collective insights.

The primary data consisted of audio and video recordings of interviews and focus groups, which were conducted via Zoom. Zoom's automated transcription feature was used to generate initial transcripts, which were subsequently reviewed and revised for accuracy by the research team. The final dataset includes verbatim transcripts of all interviews and focus group discussions, preserving the integrity of participants' responses for analysis.

Participants: The participants in this study included a range of stakeholders directly involved in the CSforALL project. These participants were purposefully selected based on their roles and contributions to the project, ensuring diverse perspectives from research, practice and management. The interviewees included: one Principal Investigator, one Co-Principal Investigator, one Program Manager, one former District Lead, two Chief School Officers, seven Academic Directors and eighteen Principals.

In total, 31 interviewees contributed to this study, each offering rich, in-depth insights into the implementation of CSforALL. The extended duration of the interviews and focus groups – lasting between 70 and 100 minutes – allowed for profound discussions and meaningful reflections. This extended format provided space for participants to share their experiences, challenges and perspectives in great detail, resulting in a depth of qualitative data that far exceeded typical expectations for such a sample size.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed using a qualitative approach informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This approach enabled the research team to examine how participants interpreted changes in the partnership over time and to identify processes through which leadership turnover influenced trust and collaboration.

Analysis proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts were reviewed multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. The research team conducted initial open coding, examining transcripts line by line to identify actions, events and experiences described by participants.

Next, through constant comparison, codes were compared across interviews and focus groups to identify patterns and differences across stakeholder roles (e.g. district leaders, principals and research team members). Analytic memos were written throughout the process to document emerging interpretations and relationships among codes.

In the final stage, related codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected key dynamics within the partnership, particularly those related to leadership turnover, access to schools, procedural changes and relational trust. These categories were refined through collaborative discussions among the research team to ensure that themes accurately represented participants' experiences and perspectives.

Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness: The authors of this study were involved in the broader research–practice partnership as university-based researchers. This positionality provided valuable access to participants and long-term insight into the partnership's development, but it also required careful attention to potential interpretive bias. In particular, the authors were mindful that their institutional role could influence how partnership dynamics – especially moments of tension or mistrust – were interpreted. We were especially attentive to the possibility of interpreting district-side procedural changes primarily as mistrust and therefore considered alternative explanations related to leadership transition, organizational uncertainty and inherited accountability demands.

To address these concerns, the research team engaged in reflexive discussion throughout the analytic process, explicitly questioning how our perspectives as researchers might shape the interpretation of events described by participants. Multiple team members reviewed transcripts, codes and emerging themes to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations.

In addition, the study draws on perspectives from multiple stakeholder groups, including district leaders, principals, academic directors and research team members. This diversity of perspectives enabled us to compare interpretations across organizational roles and to identify both convergent and divergent accounts of partnership dynamics. Together, these strategies helped strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

This rigorous, theory-driven approach allowed the study to uncover meaningful insights into the challenges and dynamics of implementing CSforALL, particularly in the context of stakeholder trust and turnover.

Findings

This section examines how leadership turnover reshaped trust, coordination and collaboration within the CSforALL research–practice partnership (RPP). Rather than treating turnover and trust as separate phenomena, our analysis suggests that leadership transitions altered the conditions under which trust was built, maintained and negotiated across the partnership. The findings are organized around three mechanisms through which turnover reshaped partnership dynamics: (1) the loss of institutional memory and relational bridges, (2) the proceduralization of collaboration and (3) the repositioning of researchers from partners to external actors. Before presenting these themes, we briefly describe the leadership transitions that provide temporal context for the findings.

Context: leadership transitions in the partnership

The CSforALL RPP began with a pilot study in 2016 and later expanded through two consecutive NSF-funded projects, the first beginning in 2018 and the second in 2022. During earlier phases of the partnership, some turnover occurred – for example, changes in program management roles in 2020 and again in 2021 – but participants described these transitions as manageable. During that period, the partnership retained continuity through relatively stable leadership on both the research and district sides, and the core team remained aligned around shared goals and routines.

Beginning in 2022, however, the partnership experienced a more concentrated wave of leadership transitions that had broader consequences for collaboration. Just before the launch of the second NSF-funded project in September 2022, six of the nine original core team members departed, accounting for approximately 67% of the leadership team. Between spring and summer 2022, three key leaders left the project: the district lead, who had been involved since the pilot phase, formally exited in the spring; in June, a university-based Co-Principal Investigator and key research leader unexpectedly passed away; and in late summer, the district's Chief Instructional Officer transitioned to a leadership role in another district. The following year brought continued changes, including the departure of the District Administrator for Digital Learning and Assessment in August 2023 and a period during which the project manager role remained vacant between winter 2023 and early 2024.

These departures occurred across both research and district leadership roles, resulting in the loss of strategic leadership, institutional memory and long-standing relationships that had previously supported the partnership's work. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the sequence of these leadership transitions and provides temporal context for the dynamics described in the themes below. Participants consistently described this period as a turning point in the functioning of the partnership.

Theme 1: loss of institutional memory and relational bridges

A first mechanism through which turnover reshaped trust within the partnership was the loss of institutional memory and relational bridges across organizations. Participants described several key leaders as essential not only for fulfilling formal responsibilities, but also for connecting the research team, district leadership and school-based personnel. These

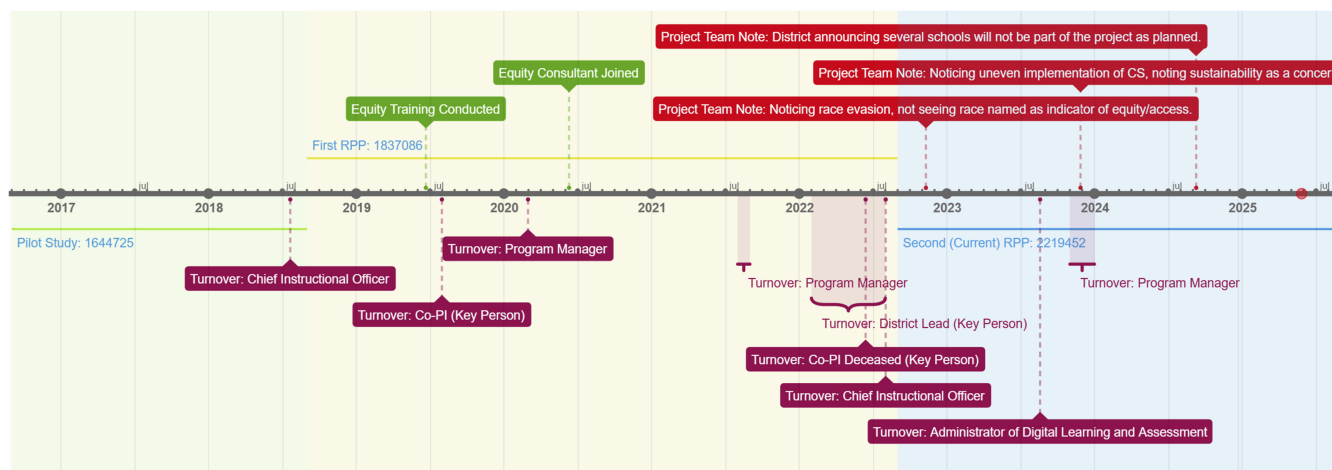


Figure 1. Timeline of turnover

individuals helped carry project history, maintain continuity and translate priorities across institutional boundaries.

One especially significant change was the unexpected loss of a university-based Co-Principal Investigator who had been deeply involved in the project since its early phases. Participants described this individual as a key connector between research and practice whose observational work in schools was central to both data collection and relationship-building. One research team member reflected on the impact of the loss, stating, “And then I think that, you know, she was a big loss.” Another colleague described her role more specifically: “She was very much an observational person, you know, go into work, really observing teachers in the classroom and interviewing them and videotaping them and owning the results of those.” These accounts suggest that her contribution extended beyond technical research leadership to include the relational labor of being physically present in schools and sustaining connection with practitioners.

Participants emphasized that her work had helped connect evidence generation to district decision-making. As one researcher explained, “The work that you did, and that she did during the first four years of the project in which we presented the results to advisory committees and talked about it at leadership team, and I think had some real impact on the district.” In this sense, her departure did not simply create a vacancy; it removed an important bridge through which the partnership had previously translated research into action.

A similar dynamic was described in relation to the district lead, whose departure in summer 2022 marked a second major turning point. Participants characterized him as a long-standing champion of the work who could align district priorities with project goals and help maintain momentum across schools. One team member noted, “He was a transformational leader. He had an inspiring vision... So when he left a vacuum was there.” Another researcher described the organizational consequences of his departure: “Last year was very difficult because we didn’t have a champion... that was well connected to the academic team.”

Participants also emphasized the relational dimension of this loss. One colleague reflected, “He was such a level and warm and accommodating person for everybody... After he left, I think we just had a sort of big hole in the relationship with the district.” This observation suggests that trust in the partnership depended not only on formal agreements or project structures, but also on individuals who could carry institutional history, cultivate warmth and mediate across roles.

Participants further distinguished the 2022 transitions from earlier, more manageable leadership changes. Prior turnover in 2020 and 2021 disrupted some routines, but those changes occurred in the presence of relatively stable senior leadership and intact cross-organizational relationships. By contrast, the 2022 departures were concentrated, simultaneous and distributed across both district and university roles. As one researcher observed, “The backup people are just not... positioned to do the type of transformational work that this grant is.” Taken together, these accounts suggest that the most destabilizing feature of turnover was not simply personnel change itself, but the loss of individuals who held institutional memory, relational trust and bridging capacity across the partnership.

Theme 2: proceduralization of collaboration

A second mechanism through which turnover reshaped the partnership was the proceduralization of collaboration. Before the major leadership transitions, participants described research activities as relatively flexible and easier to coordinate. Following the leadership changes, however, they reported increasing administrative oversight and new procedural barriers that altered how collaboration was carried out.

One of the clearest changes involved classroom access. Previously, the research team had maintained a regular presence in classrooms, which enabled data collection as well as ongoing interaction with teachers and school leaders. After the leadership changes, researchers reported that access became more restricted and more tightly managed. One researcher

explained, “I pushed really hard about doing classroom observations and [the district leader] didn’t want to have to go to the trouble of setting all those up – and she wouldn’t let us go alone. She always had to come with us.” This shift suggested a change not only in logistics, but in how research activity was regulated.

Participants also described changes in expectations around data-collection methods. Focus groups, which had previously been used to generate rich qualitative insights, became more difficult to organize, while more controlled methods such as surveys were increasingly favored. One researcher reflected on this tension: “I was pushing her [school side partner] way too hard to get things done, and she didn’t really want to, you know, to set these things up. Like she would try to work with [Researcher1] and [Researcher2] to do the surveys instead of focus groups.” When the team attempted to merge survey efforts for consistency, they encountered additional resistance: “Can’t you merge your survey with our survey? No, because we have done one round of surveys and the second one, which wasn’t very effective.”

A related shift involved the introduction of extensive paperwork and advance approval processes. After the departure of key district leadership, researchers found themselves required to submit detailed plans, including classroom observations, as far as six to nine months in advance. Even then, approvals were not always timely or clear. One researcher responded with frustration, “You signed off on these on the grant.” Another explained the disconnect more fully: “We designed the proposal with the district and with [District Leader P], actually. And so what’s in the proposal are all things that were vetted by P, when the proposal went in... but suddenly they see all the things we were wanting to do, and then tried to figure out how to do those.”

These procedural shifts did more than slow data collection. They altered the terms under which collaboration could occur. Activities that had once been jointly understood increasingly had to be re-explained, re-documented and re-approved. One participant captured this tension by noting, “I told her that focus groups were what we had in the proposal, and that’s what we should be doing – and she sort of didn’t like us telling her what to do.” From the researchers’ perspective, these changes signaled a move away from flexible coordination and toward a more compliance-oriented relationship. At the same time, they may also reflect the efforts of new leaders to manage inherited commitments and establish oversight in a context of transition. Even so, participants consistently experienced the proceduralization of collaboration as a barrier that reduced flexibility and slowed the work.

Theme 3: repositioning of researchers as external actors

A third mechanism involved a shift in how researchers were positioned within the partnership. Participants described a transition from a collaborative model – where researchers and district partners jointly shaped project activities – to a more distant relationship in which researchers were increasingly treated as external actors seeking access, approval or justification for their work.

Prior to these transitions, the RPP was characterized by more direct communication and a stronger sense of shared ownership. Participants suggested that this earlier arrangement allowed the partnership to function as a co-constructed endeavor rather than a set of separate institutional obligations. Following turnover, however, new district leaders appeared to approach the project more cautiously and, in some cases, more skeptically. One researcher reflected on this shift, noting, “They got a lot of stuff on their plate. And they’re trying to figure out how not to have this project.” This quote suggests not simply resistance, but also the possibility that new leaders were navigating competing priorities while inheriting a project they had not originally designed.

Participants described this new dynamic as one marked by distance, control and uncertainty. One researcher characterized it as “more of a control issue than it is a trust issue,” implying that the transition may have involved both mistrust and the reassertion of organizational authority. Another explained how prior agreements suddenly seemed less stable

under new leadership: “We designed the proposal with the district and with [District Leader P]... everything would work fine if [District Leader P] were still there, but suddenly they see all the things we were wanting to do, and then tried to figure out how to do those in a way. It’s a trust issue, as well as a communications issue.”

This repositioning had practical as well as relational consequences. Researchers described being expected to demonstrate project impact while simultaneously encountering obstacles to conducting the research needed to generate that evidence. As one researcher put it, “[District Leader D] always saying, so what’s the impact? Well, let us do the research. You can tell you what the impact is, but if we can’t get the research, then we can’t tell you anything.” Such experiences contributed to a sense of stagnation and peripheral status, as the research team felt increasingly excluded from the collaborative decision-making processes that had once defined the partnership.

Participants also expressed a desire for more direct conversation and joint problem-solving. One researcher stated, “If we have to go through this jumping through hoops to get approval to do anything, I would feel better if we had a conversation about what needs to be done and what things we can test for them to give them some evidence about how to move forward.” This statement suggests that the issue was not only about procedures or access, but about the weakening of mutual engagement as a mode of working together.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that leadership turnover did not simply disrupt existing routines; it also changed how the research team was perceived and how the partnership itself was enacted. What had previously functioned as a collaborative relationship increasingly became experienced as more formal, more distant and more transactional.

Summary of findings

Across these themes, participants described leadership turnover as reshaping the partnership through interconnected mechanisms rather than through a single event or isolated disruption. First, turnover removed individuals who had served as relational bridges and carriers of institutional memory. Second, collaboration became increasingly proceduralized, with more formal oversight and less flexibility. Third, researchers were repositioned from trusted partners to more peripheral actors whose presence and activities required renewed justification. Together, these mechanisms help explain how turnover altered the conditions under which trust was maintained in the RPP and why transitions in 2022 proved more destabilizing than earlier personnel changes.

Conclusion

This study examined how leadership turnover reshaped trust and collaboration within a long-term RPP. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, our analysis identified three mechanisms through which leadership transitions altered partnership dynamics: the loss of institutional memory and relational bridges, the proceduralization of collaboration and the repositioning of researchers from collaborative partners to external actors.

First, the findings highlight the importance of relational leadership and institutional memory in sustaining long-term partnerships. Key individuals in the partnership served not only as administrators or researchers but also as relational brokers who connected organizations, translated priorities and maintained trust across institutional boundaries. When these individuals departed, the partnership lost critical historical knowledge and relational continuity, making it more difficult to sustain shared understanding and coordinated action.

Second, the findings demonstrate how leadership transitions can lead to the proceduralization of collaboration. In the absence of established relationships and institutional familiarity, new leaders may rely more heavily on formal oversight and documentation processes. While these

procedures may be intended to provide accountability or clarity, participants in this study often experienced them as barriers that reduced flexibility, slowed research activities and weakened collaborative relationships.

Third, turnover contributed to a shift in the relational positioning of researchers within the partnership. Researchers who had previously been embedded collaborators were increasingly treated as external actors requiring approval and justification for their activities. This repositioning altered the relational dynamics of the partnership and contributed to a growing sense of distance and mistrust between research and practice partners.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the impact of turnover in research–practice partnerships extends beyond the loss of personnel. Leadership transitions can reshape how collaboration is organized, how trust is maintained and how partners perceive one another’s roles. In long-term initiatives such as CSforALL, where sustained relationships are central to the work, the loss of relational expertise and institutional continuity can significantly alter the conditions under which partnerships operate.

These insights have several implications for the design and sustainability of research–practice partnerships. First, partnerships may benefit from developing leadership redundancy and distributed expertise, ensuring that relational knowledge and institutional history are not concentrated in a small number of individuals. Second, partnerships should consider establishing structured onboarding processes for new leaders, allowing incoming administrators and researchers to understand the goals, commitments and collaborative norms of the partnership. Finally, partnerships should invest intentionally in relational infrastructure, including regular communication channels and shared decision-making structures that can withstand leadership transitions.

Future research should examine how different partnership structures and governance models influence the ability of RPPs to navigate leadership turnover. Comparative studies across multiple partnerships could further illuminate how relational, organizational and institutional factors interact to sustain trust and collaboration over time.

Sustaining long-term RPPs requires not only shared goals and resources but also deliberate strategies to maintain trust, continuity of relationships and institutional memory during periods of transition.

Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Massachusetts Amherst and was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Protocol #3570; Approval Date: May 20, 2022).

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Interview and focus group data were collected and stored confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

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