

Reflections about RPP sustainability: a duoethnography from the border

School-University
Partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – In this paper, we offer the reflections of our work as researchers engaged in research–practice partnerships (RPP). We examine the reasons for engaging in RPPs and challenges to the sustainability of a P-12 and a higher education RPP situated along the US-Mexico border.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used duoethnography as the methodology. As researchers engaged in RPPs for the past 5 years, we engage in conversations about our experiences around this work, focusing on two questions: (1) why do we engage in RPP work? and (2) what have been the challenges in developing and sustaining our RPPs?

Findings – The conversations illustrate how borderland identities and community-rooted commitments shape the researchers' motivations and promote relational, equity-centered approaches to collaboration. Through shared decision-making, intentional role negotiation, partners cultivated trust, reduced hierarchical barriers and co-constructed meaningful agendas. At the same time, structural constraints, including time scarcity, institutional logics, shifting priorities and uneven participation, posed challenges to authentic collaboration and long-term sustainability. This work demonstrates that creating and sustaining partnerships is dynamic, non-linear and requires ongoing learning and reflexivity.

Originality/value – This study surfaces nuances in what the research shows are best practices of RPPs, particularly around issues of equity and sustainability. Our findings contribute to narrowing the gap that exists when organizations such as universities and P-12 school systems, with distinct cultures and institutional logics, collaborate. This work is also a contribution to the growing research that points to the role that researcher positionality and self-study incorporating reflexivity play in the effectiveness and longevity of RPPs.

Keywords Reflexivity, Sustainability, Duoethnography, Research practice partnerships

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Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) between institutions of higher education and school districts continue to evolve as a strategy to deal with different local educational issues. Despite the growing interest and ongoing research, there continues to be a need to explore multiple facets of RPPs. We draw upon our experiences as P-12 educational practitioners, our work in academia for the past several years, and more recently, our efforts in developing and sustaining RPPs with rural districts in the El Paso region. Most of this work has been conducted without funding and, more recently, with the support of a DRK-12 National Science Foundation grant.

Engaging in RPP work presents multiple challenges with often limited or nonexistent infrastructure and resources to promote and support the work. Adding complexity are P-12 schools engaged in educating marginalized children in areas of high-poverty and underfunded schools and a rapidly changing higher education context, with an emphasis on a culture of high-stakes accountability. The education landscape where we work, as professors and researchers engaged in RPPs, reflects these conditions.

Within that context, we have worked to establish long-term, mutual collaborations organized around problems of practice and improvement outcomes. We have diligently

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organized efforts to build capacity in both practitioners and ourselves, grow our skills, diversify and adapt routines and establish systems to support work beyond a singular project. We have tried to be intentional about building sustainable collaborations where co-creation persists. Moreover, we have tried, given the context in which we work, to be intentional about foregrounding equity and power dynamics ([National Center for Research in Policy and Practice, 2024](#)) to enable effective and sustainable partnerships. To this day, this goal has been challenging and elusive, and we have wondered constantly about how to best create and sustain effective and sustainable partnerships that reflect equitable and shared power dynamics.

The research in education RPPs, in which authors interrogate their own roles, views, values and the significance of doing RPP work, has been limited and recent. Across studies, authors argue that reflexivity and positionality are productive, not peripheral and that explicit self-study of roles, assumptions and commitments is instrumental in partnership work. [Denner et al. \(2019\)](#) show how naming power and culture reshaped research goals and methods within their RPP; [Arce-Trigatti et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Farrell et al. \(2021a, b\)](#) frame values and researcher stance as defining features of the field, urging researchers to continuously interrogate their contributions to equity and improvement. Authors also caution that good intentions do not automatically flatten hierarchies in RPPs. [Datnow et al. \(2025\)](#) quantify who talks in RPP meetings and find that researchers still hold most of the floor, prompting self-correction in facilitation. [Denner et al. \(2019\)](#) similarly document how surfacing power and culture changed partnership practices, while [Farrell et al. \(2021a, b\)](#) re-center power-shifting as a principle of RPP design. These recent studies also point to equity commitments requiring ongoing self-interrogation. [Arce-Trigatti et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Denner et al. \(2019\)](#) emphasize that equity is enacted through reflective practice, questioning whose problems get prioritized, whose knowledge is valued and how research processes are adapted when authors confront their own positionality.

Purpose and context of the study

We understand that this type of work signifies a paradigm shift not only in how educational research is perceived but also in how it is conducted. Thus, in this quest of establishing long-term collaborative relationships with school districts and knowing that research processes are shaped by researchers' histories, identities, access to resources and institutional power, which collectively influence what questions are asked, whose knowledge is centered, and what counts as evidence, institutional culture and logics, we turn to interrogate ourselves about these issues. To that end, the purpose of this study was to engage in and share the critical reflection of our work as researchers engaged in RPP work. From our perspectives as higher education researchers with P-12 practitioner experience, we focused our reflection on the following questions: (1) Why do we engage in RPP work? and (2) What have been the challenges in developing and sustaining our RPPs?

For this purpose, we adopted [Cunliffe's \(2003\)](#) call for radically reflexive research to explore "how we as researchers and practitioners constitute meaning through our own taken-for-granted suppositions, actions, and linguistic practices [. . .]" (p. 989). We use [Warwick's and Board's \(2012\)](#) definition of reflexivity that "involves an essential unsettling of beliefs, ways of acting and being, in order to notice those deeply engrained assumptions that characterize how people work together (p. 149). By challenging our assumptions and questioning our beliefs, we recognize and welcome the opportunity to transform our ways of thinking and operating as researchers. Simultaneously, we are excited about the possibility of engaging in "more critical, responsible, and ethical actions" ([Cunliffe & Jun, 2005](#), p. 225) that can then become the "basis for organizational transformation" ([Cunliffe & Jun, 2005](#), p. 225) both within our higher education institutions and P-12 systems.

Given the emphasis on researchers' histories and the importance of the institutional culture and logics to our study, we provide a brief overview of the educational landscape in which we operate. We are researchers at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), a Hispanic-serving

institution located along the US-Mexico border, in far west Texas. UTEP serves over 26,000 students, of whom 85% are Hispanic. (University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.). It offers 169 bachelor's, 68 master's and 26 doctoral programs; has 8 colleges and schools; and has more than \$162 million in research expenditures. UTEP has been awarded the community engagement classification and R1 status from the Carnegie Foundation. El Paso, designated by the Texas Education Agency as Region 19, consists of 12 public school districts ranging from large urban to small rural districts. Over 160,000 students are enrolled in the region, of which 90.4% are Hispanic, 76.7% are economically disadvantaged and 34.4% are English Learners (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). UTEP's geographic isolation from other large urban areas in Texas coupled with the fact that historically, it had been the only four-year institution in this area, create a closed loop system where local high school graduates attended and graduated from UTEP, going on to serve as teachers in local school districts, returning to UTEP for graduate degrees to then serve as school and district leaders in these same districts (Peña *et al.*, 2024, 2025). This closed loop creates conditions for relationships to exist between UTEP faculty and these individuals, carving pathways for partnerships to form.

Our account is rooted in a border context and in our own roles as university-based researchers. The findings draw from dialogic self-study with embedded reflections on partner interactions through our lens as the researchers in the partnership; our conversations privilege depth over breadth and may not generalize to systems with different contexts, resource profiles or organizational histories. We also recognize that the topics related to RPPs overlap and are often intertwined. For the purposes of this article, we are isolating why we engage in the work, challenges and issues of sustainability to engage in the analytical process of duoethnography and give each meaning.

Background literature related to RPP sustainability

While recognizing that most duoethnographies do not include a traditional literature review, opting at times to instead integrate the literature into the conversation or dialogue, we stray from that practice. Instead, we offer a brief overview of relevant literature to help orient ourselves and the reader on concepts of sustainability, positionality and reflexivity and duoethnographies in educational research that are central to the ongoing conversations we draw from for this article.

Why sustainability matters in P–12 and higher education partnerships

P–12 school systems and institutions of higher education increasingly relying on RPPs to address persistent educational problems while narrowing the longstanding gap between research production and school-based decision-making. Although RPPs are compelling, sustainability remains one of the most difficult challenges for P–12 and higher education partnerships (Farrell *et al.*, 2021a, b; Weddle *et al.*, 2025). Partnerships must endure leadership turnover, shifting district priorities, evolving university incentives and resource constraints, conditions that frequently disrupt collaborative work. For this reason, the literature increasingly treats sustainability as an ongoing accomplishment requiring deliberate relational work (e.g. trust, reciprocity) and organizational supports (e.g. governance structures, stable routines, connector roles) (The Collaborative Education Research Collective, 2023; Senechal, Parkhouse, & Naff, 2025). This review synthesizes key scholarship on sustaining P–12 and higher education partnerships, emphasizing the conceptualizations of sustainability, the relational conditions that support long-term collaboration, the organizational and structural features that help institutionalize partnership work.

Defining sustainability: sustaining the work and the relationship. A consistent finding across partnership research is that sustainability is multifaceted and frequently misunderstood

as simply maintaining funding or continuing a single project. [Coburn et al. \(2013\)](#) define RPPs as “long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving outcomes” (p. 2). In long-standing community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnerships, sustainability is explicitly defined as sustaining both the partnership’s work and the relationships among partners that make the work possible. For example, [Chandanabhumma et al. \(2023\)](#) emphasize that sustainability includes pursuing a shared goal over time and producing enduring changes that persist beyond initial projects or funding cycles. This distinction is highly relevant to P–12–higher education partnerships where the work may include data use, implementation support or instructional improvement cycles, while the relationship includes trust, credibility and shared ownership.

Similarly, [Israel et al. \(2006\)](#) identified three dimensions essential to sustainability: (1) sustaining relationships and commitments among partners, (2) sustaining the knowledge, capacity and values generated by partnership work and (3) sustaining resources such as staff, programs, policy changes and the partnership mechanism itself. While this study is in a public health context, its framework maps onto K–12 and higher education partnerships, where long-term viability depends not only on relational goodwill but also on durable organizational infrastructures and the embedding of partnership practices in routine systems. Within education, [Henrick, Muñoz, and Cobb \(2016\)](#) define RPPs as long-term, mutual collaborations organized around problems of practice and improvement outcomes, a design that implicitly requires sustainability to be built into the partnership model from the outset. Thus, sustainability in P–12–higher education partnerships can be understood as maintaining the collaborative capacity to jointly produce and use evidence over time, even as contexts change and become more complex.

Relational dynamics such as trust, communication, shared understanding, interpersonal connection and power relations, consistently emerge as foundational to forming, maintaining and sustaining effective partnerships ([Arce-Trigatti, 2021](#); [Denner et al., 2019](#); [Farrell et al., 2021a, b](#)). In many P–12 districts, prior experiences with researchers may involve minimal reciprocity and limited responsiveness to district timelines, which can undermine trust and reduce willingness to collaborate. RPPs respond to this challenge by emphasizing mutual benefit; practitioners gain timely evidence and practical guidance, while researchers gain access to authentic contexts of practice and opportunities to generate usable knowledge.

Evidence from partnership sustainability research underscores that intentional relationship building and equitable participation help partnerships persist. [Denner et al. \(2019\)](#) explicitly demonstrate that trust, power, culture and interpersonal negotiation shape the functioning and evolution of RPPs. Their empirical analysis shows that as partners critically examined power relations, their research processes, methods and goals shifted, highlighting how relational dynamics fundamentally sustain (or destabilize) partnership work. [Hall et al. \(2021\)](#), examining patient-centered outcomes research partnerships, report that sustainability is fostered through relationship-building, shared motivation, reciprocity and attention to equal power dynamics. [Chandanabhumma et al. \(2023\)](#) similarly highlight that sustaining relationships depends on adherence to partnership principles such as mutual respect, transparency and power sharing, as well as interpersonal connections that go beyond transactional obligations. Although the contexts of these collaborations are different, these conditions are analogous to P–12 and higher education settings where power imbalances can emerge through differences in expertise claims, research language and institutional authority.

Importantly, relational sustainability is not passive. Effective partnerships often establish clear communication routines and formal agreements early on, which supports trust by reducing ambiguity about roles, expectations and commitments ([Adam et al., 2022](#)). Sustainability of RPPs also depends on institutionalization by embedding partnership practices into organizational routines and structures so that collaboration is not dependent on a single champion or grant period. In P–12 and higher education partnerships, these relational and procedural agreements can protect the collaboration when there is staff turnover or when

district and university timelines become misaligned. Also important is pausing and recalibrating to re-align goals and team structures, identifying champions and advocates to build buy-in across stakeholder groups and aligning partnership activities with district and state mandates to reduce burden and strengthen relevance (Adam *et al.*, 2022). These strategies purposefully design systems that can endure further turnover and evolving priorities. Farrell *et al.* (2021a, b) identify conditions that support RPP success, drawing attention to how enabling conditions in both the university and district shape whether partnership work influences policy and practice. RPP sustainability is more likely when the partnership is supported by leadership buy-in, clear governance structures and stable processes for decision-making and communication.

In community–university partnership work, Northmore and Hart (2011) argue that although funding is important, sustainability often depends on reciprocity, mutual learning and creativity in partnership-building, especially when resources are limited. For P–12 and higher education partnerships, this suggests that durable collaboration may require negotiating university reward structures (e.g., tenure expectations) and district operational pressures (e.g. accountability timelines) while keeping the partnership’s shared purpose visible and meaningful.

A major theme in the sustainability literature is that partnerships last when they build capacity, skills, routines and infrastructures that remain in the system beyond a particular project. Alonzo *et al.* (2022), describing a nine-year journey establishing and scaling RPPs within educational systems, show how sustainability can be strengthened by supporting practice partners’ goals while building organizational capacity through implementation of supports, shared tools and responsiveness to emergent challenges such as COVID-19. Their examples illustrate a key sustainability mechanism for P–12 and higher education partnerships; the partnership becomes valuable not only because it generates research but because it strengthens the educational system’s ability to implement and sustain improvement efforts.

Similarly, Israel *et al.* (2006) highlight sustaining knowledge, capacity and values as one of the three major sustainability dimensions. In P–12 settings, this may include strengthening data literacy, developing routines for continuous improvement and building internal evaluation capacity so that use of data becomes part of the district’s culture rather than an external add-on. Adam *et al.* (2022) reinforce this idea by recommending that partnerships align with existing district responsibilities; doing so increases the likelihood that partnership work will be adopted and maintained as part of routine practice.

A defining feature of long-standing partnerships is their ability to adapt without losing coherence. Sustainability research consistently shows that partnerships must respond to shifting contexts such as policy changes, leadership turnover, funding shifts or crises like pandemics. Alonzo *et al.* (2022) provide an education-focused example of adaptability by describing how partnership priorities and strategies pivoted during COVID-19, demonstrating commitment and responsiveness as a pathway to long-term viability. Donovan and Snow (2017) similarly describe the long-term partnership between the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) and the Boston Public Schools, emphasizing that complex contexts of practice often required significant adaptations to the partnership model. Yet the partnership remained productive because it maintained genuine collaboration and a coherent research and development agenda while adjusting to district realities. The recommendation to “pause, reflect, and recalibrate” (Adam *et al.*, 2022, p. 7) formalizes this adaptive stance as a routine sustainability practice rather than an emergency response.

Challenges in building RPP sustainability in P–12 and higher education partnerships

In the previous section, we offered an overview of some of the foundational aspects for building sustainability in RPP’s. Yet the literature shows that there are several challenges when

creating and sustaining partnerships between P–12 systems and higher education institutions. The sustainability of RPPs is shaped by a combination of relational, structural and contextual factors.

P–12 school districts and universities operate under different organizational cultures, routines and incentive structures (Adam *et al.*, 2022). Districts typically prioritize immediate, practical solutions to addressing pressing instructional and operational challenges, while universities prioritize generalizable knowledge and longer-term research objectives. This misalignment in the focus but also the pace of the work frequently creates misunderstandings that erode early trust. These divergent institutional logics make it harder for partners to fully understand each other, delaying the formation of authentic trust. District leaders often perceive that researchers do not provide usable or timely guidance and that traditional academic research timelines do not match district decision cycles (Henrick *et al.*, 2016).

Trust requires consistent, transparent communication, yet communication breakdowns are common in P–12 and higher education partnerships. Adam *et al.* (2022) identified communication challenges as a major obstacle, including differing languages, unclear expectations and inconsistent communication routines. Without structured, predictable communication, partners may misinterpret delays, feedback or decisions as a lack of interest or commitment. Patterns of miscommunication can create skepticism and undermine the trust needed in these partnerships.

When partners perceive that power is unevenly distributed, trust weakens (Hall *et al.*, 2021). Historically, universities have been viewed as the experts in the room, which can lead P–12 practitioners to feel that their knowledge is undervalued or overshadowed. In P–12 and higher education RPPs, power imbalances can manifest in control of data, analysis and the dissemination of results, all of which influence trust. Sustainability research identifies equal power dynamics as essential to maintaining trust but also notes that imbalances are a persistent barrier (Alonzo *et al.*, 2022; Chandanabhumma *et al.*, 2023; Hall *et al.*, 2021; National Center for Research in Policy and Practice, 2024). Many districts have had previous experiences in which researchers entered their systems, collected data, and left, often without providing actionable findings. Henrick *et al.* (2016) note that district leaders often feel research engagement is not mutually beneficial and that traditional research rarely aligns with district needs. These extractive research experiences foster wariness on the part of P–12 partners (Gaudry, 2011).

Because trust is often built between specific individuals, when superintendents, principals, district research directors and university researchers leave their institutions, the partnership can lose continuity. In P–12–higher education partnerships, this is especially problematic given the high rate of leadership turnover in many districts. Trust may weaken due to unequal or insufficient capacity to sustain the partnership or an ushering of different goals by new leaders. Adam *et al.* (2022) identify limited time, additional responsibilities and competing priorities as common internal challenges that strain partnerships. District staff may struggle to balance partnership work with their core duties, while researchers may face constraints tied to grants, IRB processes and publication and tenure expectations.

Positionality, reflexivity and values in research practice partnerships

RPPs and related community-engaged collaborations are increasingly recognized as sites where knowledge production is inseparable from relationships, institutional constraints and competing value systems (Oyewole, Karn, Classen & Yurkofsky, 2023). In partnership-driven research, research processes are shaped by researchers' histories, identities, access to resources and institutional power, which collectively influence what questions are asked, whose knowledge is centered, and what counts as evidence. In this view, partnership research is not merely a technical exercise in co-design; it is a social practice where equity, governance and accountability must be actively negotiated across roles and institutions (Cadman *et al.*, 2024).

Across the literature, positionality is commonly conceptualized as a researcher's situated social location and worldview encompassing identity, biography, institutional affiliation and epistemological commitments and how those positions shape research choices and interpretations. Holmes (2020) describes positionality as "one's worldview and the position one adopts in research and its social and political content" (p. 1). Reflexivity, by contrast, is generally framed as an ongoing practice, a continuous interrogation of one's assumptions, values and power relations throughout the research lifecycle, from question formation through dissemination (Cadman *et al.*, 2024). This distinction is central in partnership scholarship; positionality statements can disclose where the researcher stands, but reflexivity addresses how researchers act in relation to that standing, especially when partnership contexts shift, tensions emerge or harms are possible (Lencucha, 2025).

One concern about positionality is that it can be reduced to a performative identity disclosure, an itemized list of categories that signals virtue without demonstrating how equity is enacted in the research process (Sibbald, Phelan, Beagan & Pride, 2025). Lencucha (2025) proposes shifting from positionality as identity disclosure toward reflexive statements of principle-informed process, emphasizing how researchers applied equity-and justice-oriented principles during collaboration, decision-making and interpretation. These critiques are highly relevant for RPPs, where partnership legitimacy often depends less on stated identities and more on demonstrated practices of shared governance, respectful engagement and accountability to partner-defined priorities.

Reflexivity as relational and structural. While reflexivity is sometimes treated as personal introspection, multiple authors argue for forms of reflexivity that more directly engage relational and structural dimensions of knowledge production. Thomas (2024) cautions that reflexivity can inadvertently re-center the researcher by focusing too narrowly on personal experience; instead, she advances a relational reflexivity that foregrounds the co-constitutive relationship between researcher, participants and the wider social structures shaping the research encounter. This is consistent with partnership-driven accounts emphasizing that reflexive practice must extend beyond individuals to the governance and institutional design of collaborative work, especially when academic timelines, funding rules, authorship norms and ethics procedures reproduce inequities. Reflexivity becomes not only personal but collective: teams revisit how authority is distributed, how expertise is recognized and how accountability is structured to prevent the reversion to default academic hierarchy (Cadman *et al.*, 2024).

Despite strong consensus on the value of reflexivity, the literature also underscores its limits (Cadman *et al.*, 2024; Sibbald *et al.*, 2025). Partnership accounts describe how structural constraints such as funding mechanisms, academic reward systems and institutional ethics processes can compel "business-as-usual" practices even within collaborations explicitly aiming for equity. Methodological critiques (Thomas, 2024) similarly warn that reflexivity can create uneven risk. For example, minoritized researchers may face disproportionate pressure to disclose identity or represent communities, while such disclosures may not materially change institutional power dynamics. A key gap, therefore, concerns specifying institutional reflexivity. Specifically, how universities, funders and journals might adopt structures that support principle-driven partnership processes such as governance templates, equitable authorship policies and resourced time for relationship-building rather than merely demanding positionality statements at publication.

Methodology

Duoethnography is a collaborative qualitative research methodology in which two or more researchers use dialogue, juxtaposition and reflexive storytelling to interrogate their lived experiences in relation to a shared phenomenon (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Across fields including education, social sciences, humanities and health professions, researchers use it to generate transformative insights, deepen reflexivity and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. We utilized duoethnography to explore our shared experience of being

engaged in RPP work with local P–12 school districts, created a path “turn the inquiry lens on ourselves” (Sawyer & Norris, 2015R. Sawyer & Norris, 2015, p. 1) and explored and made meaning of our own experiences as researchers engaged in RPP work. Our research role in RPPs served as the context for meaning-making. Our conversations have been ongoing since we began RPP work. From the outset, we have engaged in self and joint reflexivity about how our values aligned to RPP work, the mutual benefits of RPP work, the structures and systems of supports necessary to sustain this type of research effort, who should be involved and the short- and long-term impact of our work on research and P-12 practice. In these conversations, we have continually challenged our assumptions, values and beliefs (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) around the role we play as researchers in RPPs and the role the P-12 districts should play in RPPs.

Duoethnography offers a powerful methodological frame for research conducted across institutional boundaries, such as partnerships between P–12 schools and higher education. Existing literature shows how the method positions researchers and often practitioners as co-inquirers, engaging dialogically to interrogate shared problems of practice while bringing distinct histories, identities and assumptions to the conversation. (Burleigh and Burm, 2022; Lowe *et al.*, 2021; Peña *et al.*, 2024). As such, duoethnography establishes a shared epistemic space in which participants of RPPs can frame problems, interpret experiences and generate actionable insights without privileging one perspective over the other.

Since our first collective RPP efforts began in the Fall of 2021, we have engaged in numerous critical conversations as part of the effort to reflect on the progress of the RPP work and strategize over next steps. Over the last year, as we pursued some grant opportunities to support our RPP work, we engaged in targeted conversations. In what follows, we begin with a brief introduction of our collective professional backgrounds as related to our RPP work and experience and provide a brief history of our RPP work. We then present portions of the conversations that ensued from our reflections.

Researchers’ experience

Given that we are the subjects and main source of information, we offer a brief description of our experiences relating to this study’s purpose.

Author 1 – I am currently an Assistant Professor. Before moving into higher education, I worked at various levels of P–12 systems. Through these opportunities, I recognized the value of partnership and collaborative work. Taking this perspective into my current role, I have engaged in RPPs, considering them as important components of my role as a researcher and bridge builder between P–12 and the university.

Author 2 – I am an associate professor. My professional expertise spans over thirty years in both P–12 and higher education systems, where I have established partnerships and conducted collaborative work with school districts and universities throughout the borderland region of El Paso – Cd. Juárez, and more broadly among universities from the USA and México.

Our first RPP efforts began in fall 2021, with one large urban and two rural school districts focused on studying educator well-being. From there, we expanded the work with one of the rural districts and studied the implementation of a 4-day school week policy. We then had an opportunity to establish a new RPP with a rural district specifically to conduct a study on their organizational culture. Throughout this time, we pursued funding opportunities with some of these partners to support our work. We successfully secured funding for the latter RPP from NSF to study specifically partnership development. While we continue to learn and grow our understanding of RPP work, we believe the work to date, combined with our collective professional experiences, provides robust material to draw from for our reflection.

Findings

We present the findings through excerpts of the longer conversations we engaged in over the course of the past five years, where we explored questions aligned to the research topic of this study. We emphasize the four targeted conversations we had during our most recent RPP work with a rural district on a project focused on specifically developing an RPP. Each conversation is prefaced by a short introduction of the theme the dialogue represents, related to the research question addressed.

Why do we engage in RPP work?

Drawing from early conversations we had around why we engage in RPP work, we found the common thread running through our individual researcher positionalities was a strong grounding in our geographical context defined by the US–Mexico border. At the core of who we are, we see evidence of how the border has shaped and defined us. More importantly, we each see ourselves reflected in the communities that our P–12 systems and university serve. Responding to the question of how our geography, the border, is connected to who we are as individuals and our perceptions of RPP work, we had the following exchange:

Author 2: I consider myself a borderlander, a transborder-lander where I move at ease in both countries of Mexico and the US. Half of my life I spent in Mexico and probably more years here in the US, where I have had to adapt to many things. I mean, language issues certainly, still an issue and navigating culture and all of those things. But then as an academic, I have always been very interested in the border. When you look at border regions, we live in probably the largest contiguous borderland zone in the world. I mean, this metropolitan area is probably the largest one in the world where a lot of things happen and collide, and some people call it the social laboratory of the world because many things are happening here. They come and study here and then they go somewhere else ... And so, to me, [the border] has always been part of my life. When I see the border as an academic, not only as I experience it myself, I always wanted to come back because I went away from the border and I decided to come back because, my life, my people are on the border, in Ciudad Juarez and El Paso.

Author 1: For me, it's the same thing. In echoing your thoughts, on a very personal level, I grew up right across the Chamizal National Park, so I could see the international bridge to Juarez, the daily border crossers, the collision of these two countries. My world existed in Spanish for the first years of my life, and I didn't transition to an English only classroom until the third grade. So, the work is very personal, and I too see myself reflected in the student body we serve. Whether it's in P-12 systems or the university, you know, those brown faces of our students, that's who I am too. And education has provided so many opportunities for me and sort of created these avenues for experiences that have enriched my life. But in terms of the work and sort of putting on my researcher hat, I think we are sort of for whatever reason, historically, the times, the demographic shift, we (this border community) are primed to serve as an example for so many other communities about the things that can be done. For example, how can you support students? And as a researcher, I think who should research us? We also deserve to research ourselves. And so, when we talk about, you know, why RPP work? It is because we deserve to tell our stories as well, rather than to have external parties come, researcher us and then say, oh, well, this is what we found out about them in a publication or at a conference presentation. I think there's value in the knowing, the knowledge that we already have, in the relationships that we've created with our partners, that adds to the research. Even if research hasn't been constructed in that way, traditionally. And so that's what I would offer in terms of geography. For me, my heart beats half in Mexico and half in the United States. So, I'm very much, the borderland as well, a *fronteriza*.

Recognizing that our roles are privileged and the power differentials that often exist between the researcher and the research participant, we purposely seek opportunities to redistribute power and recognize and elevate sources of knowledge. We aim to build that bridge between theory and practice, often letting practice serve as the guide. Our efforts center on a strong desire to recuperate the experiences of the people who inhabit this community and share these on a large scale. Believing that knowledge worth sharing can be created from the margins, from the border. In response to the question – How do you see your personal beliefs in this work we are doing around developing an RPP? – posed by Author 2, we had the following dialogue:

Author 1: One of the things that is coming across for me, that is resonating with my personal beliefs is this sort of shared decision-making. And I think we saw that yesterday [during an RPP workshop]. The shared decision making but also giving them [P-12 partners] the space to sort of push the agenda or create the agenda that we are going to follow. I think that is super important. As researchers, as university people, because we have our own agenda and goals around the grant, data, publications, it can be easy to go in and say we are the experts, let's do this. And it serves our needs as researchers. But I think here, we are really saying look, here is a grant opportunity. Here is what we got funding for and here are some tools that we can use to do this work. And then giving them the opportunity to engage with that information, to think about it and but then to develop the agenda. Ultimately they are in the better position to know what they need. So for me, that sort of personal belief of you know learning occurs collaboratively, it's not unilateral, it's sort of one to the other, and that idea of no hierarchy, all of us have something of value to bring, all of us are at the same level, and we are exchanging learning, knowledge and skills and learning as a result, that I think for me, is surfacing a personal belief, and also the collaborative nature of the work. I don't think this work happens individually, somebody sitting in an office looking at data and saying here are the priorities. Our work as professors, in developing knowledge and best practices that can be shared with the research community, what we take back into our classes, that doesn't happen in isolation. So those things, those sort of beliefs around knowledge creation, for me, I think are surfacing in our interactions.

Author 2: Yes, I think in a similar way, I heard somebody mention this yesterday, that they felt very differently working with professors. Which I thought was a compliment, because they felt very comfortable working with us, which to me that's just a corroboration of my beliefs and the work we should be doing in academia. Specifically, in the area of education, it should be in collaboration with school districts, to make it more relevant. It is difficult, yes. We need to learn a lot, yes. But if we want what we research about to be relevant, it needs to be done in collaboration. So, this [NSF] grant is allowing me to put to the test a lot of what I believe. And that's what I think I am looking forward to, and to learn from the process. We have our own goals and intentions, and they [the district] have theirs. But when you come together, how do those things combine and merge? We have the opportunity to see that in real life.

We also see these efforts as one way to help dismantle inequitable educational systems. We see ourselves as resources to help engage others in sensemaking around the systems in which they operate at the macro, mezzo and micro levels. When this becomes the approach to collaborative work, members of the RPP derive mutual benefit, namely in the form of learning and growth (Gomez *et al.*, 2020). The work under the NSF grant included a series of workshops with the district leaders, campus leaders, teachers and us as the researchers, focused on establishing an RPP. As we reflected after the first workshop, where we focused on team building, the following conversation ensued:

Author 2: [The district partners] started analyzing their own reality and how the superintendent was listening, and the assistant superintendent was engaged, and questioning some of the practices and how the educators were also engaged. It feels like we are providing the space through the grant to have the conversations to improve what they do. They are really talking about meaningful things. I felt like an outsider, which I am, but at the same time, I felt this is great! This is wonderful!,

Author 1: I felt the same way. I felt like we were outsiders, but we were invited guests. But I think it is not just the grant, I think it was our facilitation. We brainstormed about how we were going to create a morning session where we are using Liberating Structures, and aligning them to the goals for the day, I think that helped to set the stage. I don't think it was accidental or happenstance. Our agenda, the activities, our facilitation created an environment where they felt comfortable to talk. Because think about the dynamic of what was going on. You had the superintendent, the associate superintendent, the assistant principal, and teachers, and yet, they felt comfortable to have honest conversations about what was going on at the campuses, about their needs, what had happened in the past, and what they need in the future. And to cultivate that kind of environment in less than a day, I think we deserve a pat on the back. We did something right yesterday in terms of creating that environment. I think it happened because of the Liberating Structures. They had the opportunity to talk, that tone of the day helped them get to that afternoon conversation.

Author 2: You know, I had not thought about that, but it is right. Because I saw how, as we were going around in the different dynamics and answering questions, when I was in the group with the superintendent and two teachers, how difficult it was at the beginning for the teachers to address the superintendent by his first name. But then after a few rounds, they were calling him by his first name, and I was like, oh ok. And sometimes, they'd say oops, I said your first name and the superintendent would say you can call me that; that is my name. So, I saw how that hierarchy started dissipating and said well, it is part of what we are doing here. But I had not seen the bigger picture that you are mentioning, and it is true that the dynamics, 2 or 3 hours that we did, set the tone for the rest of the discussion.

Drawing from a separate conversation, we continued to explore the issue of equity in RPPs:

Author 1: That leads us into the second question: Have we developed an authentic RPP? And connected to that, an equitable RPP.

Author 2: Well. . . Yeah, let me see where to start there. I'm going to probably address the equitable part. I think we've been very conscientious about the roles and the balancing of those roles. I want to say power, but by that I mean us professors are not imposing our views and our knowledge. That we have created processes and norms of the group in such a way that they feel like they all can contribute and express their opinions. And in terms of participation, I think we have established at least internally rules that I feel are fair, equitable. In terms of authentic, I think. . . If by authentic I think about being relevant to the practitioners, the people who are experiencing the issues are being part of the effort, and what we're doing is relevant to them, then I will say it's authentic. We are not forcing anything. The work that we have done so far, I think it's been based on a need that has been collectively expressed by them.

Author 1: Yeah, I think we have definitely been authentic. I think the work has come from a place where there's a genuine interest in trying to identify ways to deliver those STEM lessons better, train teachers, all of that I think, even if we're not part of the P-12 system. I don't know if it's because we were practitioners at some point, but I think there's an authentic desire to help this cause. And I think that's coming across in the work that we do. Because there's a lot of different ways that we could do research that wouldn't require as much time and attention and even interaction with a P-12 system. We both have decided this is a way that we want to work. And I don't think it comes from a place of, oh, there's a great opportunity for funding, or you're going to get this or that. It really is an authentic desire to do this work. And I think one of the things that has helped us also sort of elevate our level or willingness to be authentic with each other when we come together has been the Liberating Structures. When we have talked about the issue of equity, we talk about breaking down the hierarchical traditional way of doing this work, where we come in as professors and we have the expertise and we sort of guide the direction of the work. By including the Liberating Structures, through being very open and transparent, even I think in the grant writing process, including their voices, honoring their voices, because I think the grant itself does reflect work that they are interested in doing that they felt was necessary. But I think we have made efforts when we have come together as a group, and we've thought about the types of activities, Liberating Structures that we're going to use. I think equity has been sort of front and center in our minds. And so, I would say that, yes, we do have an equitable RPP. Is it perfect? No, but I definitely think that there's equity being centered at the heart of the work.

Challenges to developing and sustaining partnerships

One challenge to developing partnerships is understanding the organizational structures and cultures of each partnering organization to maneuver through them. We often see that within these two types of organizations, P-12 and higher education, there is a different rhythm to the pace of work, and a different language is spoken. It is challenging to cross the institutional boundaries of our respective organizations. We see the boundaries between both organizations as a learning opportunity (Gomez *et al.*, 2020). Each institution also has its own logic. Recognizing the constant presence of boundaries and the logic in our work, the question for us is how we bridge that divide in a way to meet the RPP's goals. During our conversations, this issue surfaced in the context of the time partners have available to do this work.

Author 2: Professors, as compared to the time that the school teachers have, I see a big difference there. And in order to develop a partnership, you have to have the common time to come together to meet, to have conversations, extended conversations and teachers do not have that time. I mean, to them every minute counts. And although they have been very good attending the workshops and you know being there present and being there working, I feel that that is a challenge that is there. Unless you do this on weekends or after school hours which will probably make it more difficult, we all have families you know weekends people do other chores and they want to rest And so you have to do it during school time and that is just one of the aspects that I see is challenging in doing this kind of work. At least with the type of organizations that are involved here in this partnership.

Author 1: When you do partnerships particularly with P-12, we've talked about this numerous times, the calendars, the things that have already set that they can't move around, the accountability element, reports, all of those things. Their time is a little more fixed maybe than ours, and sometimes I think we give them deference for when they can meet, or if they have to move a meeting to an earlier time. Sometimes it feels like our role is to sort of be flexible and meet them where they are at. But I don't know that should be the true spirit of the partnership.

Author 2: Yeah, and perhaps that's the evolving part. I feel the same way. We as professors probably have more flexibility; we can accommodate more changes, like this last one for the workshop. And that's okay. It's just perhaps the first impression. Now, whatever we knew about forming collaborations, now it's hitting reality. That reality is hitting us in our faces. I guess that's okay. But we need to probably document and be prepared to do that.

Reflecting on who was taking the lead during the workshops, despite our efforts as researchers to distribute the roles and responsibilities, the conversation that follows reflects a hesitancy from the P-12 partners to step into those roles:

Author 1: But again, it's interesting because we took the lead on all of those activities based on their [P-12 partners] requests. We said, hey, do you want to take the lead on this? Maybe somebody else wants to take the lead? As much as we try to give them that space, they still deferred to us, like, no, you all take the lead in that. And that may have something to do with just time. They may have not had the time to be able to plan.

Author 2: Planning time, preparation time for them is just not there,

Author 1: I just wish they participated more in developing some of the areas of the narrative, for example. But again, we go back to time constraints, you know, given the timing in which we did this, teachers would have probably needed to have worked on weekends or overnight, burn midnight oil to get this done and for us, that was probably a little easier. Not that we had all the time in the world, but we have more time than perhaps they do.

In developing the partnerships, there is a constant learning curve for us researchers and our P-12 partners. While we can take lessons learned from one RPP project to another, replicating the exact process may not work. Given the context of ongoing learning, we find that we must also remain flexible and humble ourselves, as we are not always able to enter the room as experts.

Author 1: Our conversation, the day before the workshop, you said we are going to try this, we are going to be flexible. This is sort of an experiment. We are going to hope for the best and if we need to adjust, we are going adjust. And so, moving away from like a rigid agenda, a rigid way of following the meeting, you also saying that also helped to sort of free, like free the feeling of the meeting. It was like we are engaged in this, we are going to give it a go, and I think setting it up like we are in this journey learning together. I think all of those elements helped. Our intention in how we set up the day, despite not having more time to plan, reflects our belief in how we engage with practitioners. And maybe it's because we have practitioner experience in our background, I don't know. Maybe it's because we want to honor and value people's time. Maybe it's because we recognize that this NSF is really a gift. An opportunity to learn and engage.

Author 2: All of the above.

Author 1: Yeah.

Our conversations revealed that we also have to make room for our partners to lead the learning and recognize that they, too, are a source of knowledge. This sometimes requires peeling off our professor identities.

Author 2: I always have a hard time, not because I have not done it before, but I guess it's more the impression of how I am seen as a professor. And I don't want to be perceived as a professor. I want to be like another person in the group. And sometimes that, not limits, but sort of creates a sense that I don't want to come too much as a professor. And I need to find a way of listening more and perhaps intervene when I feel like I can contribute more. Obviously, I won't have a chance because I need to open up the meeting, which I have no problem doing. What is it that we can do to fail? Not to take the backseat. Listening is good. We can learn and let others express themselves. I don't feel like I can take the back seat and listen. I feel like sometimes, being a professor, I come across too forceful. Like this, is the way you need to do it. I don't want to do either of those things. For me, it's a process of learning how to communicate differently and when to intervene and when to participate when to contribute. That's a learning at the personal level. But I'm cognizant of that.

Author 1: I had the same thought too, during the afternoon session interactions and in the conversation, I caught myself at some point, in the afternoon, am I speaking too much or interjection too much. In part, because I'm not the practitioner. But I hadn't thought about it as you are describing it, tied to your identity as a professor.

What we have learned

Returning to our opening question of why do we engage in RPP work?, our answer is now nuanced but not complete. Our work is rooted in a border context and our shared commitment to centering equity in our interactions with our partners. Through our ongoing conversations about our RPP experiences, we learned that who we are as researchers, where we conduct our work and how we work are inseparable. In an attempt to answer the question of the sustainability of RPPs, we recognize that our duoethnography leaves more questions than it provides answers. We do, however, recognize the reality that sustainability is connected to the RPP structure and funding for the work. While not all RPPs exist in this context and not all researchers share our positionalities, engaging in reflexivity exercises to examine the role their respective contexts and positionalities play in their RPPs is paramount. We perceive this process as ongoing sensemaking of the roles, the boundaries and logic of the organizations and the goals of the RPP work. In this respect, we find that communication and being fully present as we engage with each other is a critical component if our goal is sustainability.

Context is important in identifying what needs to be studied and how it should be studied. As we have reflected above, context shapes our identities, the identities of our P-12 partners and the communities we serve. Embedded in the context and our collective identities, particularly for us who live and work in a physical border and operate within the borders of our organizations, are questions of equity and opportunities to explore how we help address these inequities. We believe our critical reflection surfaces nuances in what the research shows are best practices of RPP work. For example, when we think about having a common purpose or good communication, we ask ourselves: What does that mean? What does this look like on the ground, and more importantly, how do you navigate a situation when things do not go as planned? When we consider the notion of mutual benefit that is often touted as a best practice in RPP research, we wonder what this looks like. In our experience, creating and sustaining partnerships is dynamic, nonlinear and requires ongoing learning. Often, you are taking one step forward and two steps back and working in such a context requires ongoing reflexivity about the work and the structure of the partnership and about how you show up as the researcher in this work and why, to begin with, you engage in RPPs.

Our dialogues confirmed that sustainability is hard to achieve. Time is the currency most in need as turnover, shifting priorities and accountability systems routinely step in and reorder

partners' attention. Even with funding, sustaining engagement requires relational infrastructure, cadenced communication reflecting the P–12 partners' needs, routines for agenda co-construction, norms for balanced participation and transparent and explicit mechanisms for role renegotiation. Each of these elements is challenging on its own and even more so collectively.

We leave the reader with a reminder that the border shapes our impulse to research with, not on, communities; it invites us to recuperate and amplify stories and practices that have long existed at the margins of conventional research. Our positionalities and geographies are catalysts for this work. We invite other researchers to engage in their own reflexivity to reveal what shapes and fuels their work as an entry point to moving closer to the sustainability of their RPPs.

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