Research-practice partnerships in education: Future directions

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It has been a pleasure and a fantastic learning opportunity to be involved in this Open Dialogue for the Psychology of Education Review. As my own thinking around research-practice partnerships (RPPs) in education continues to evolve, I feel very fortunate to have received responses from researchers and practitioners who have made a considerable and important contribution to education, research, and RPPs, both in the UK and beyond. I have learnt so much from each of these articles – thank you. I will conclude this Open Dialogue with a reflection of some of the points raised by each of the contributors and conclude with what I believe are the key considerations and components required for us to create a culture of RPPs in education within the UK.

Reflecting on the responses in this Open Dialogue

In his response, Macpherson (2023) reminds us that the gap between research and practice is narrower than it has ever been and believes that there is momentum on both sides to continue this trajectory. He also believes that a new approach to research is needed, not because what we are doing is failing, but because there is so much promise in closer collaboration between those working in educational research and practice. Macpherson draws upon his experience as a teacher, school leader, education writer, and research event organiser. In his article, Macpherson proposes the idea of a Research Lead within schools as a possible model to ensure research expertise is embedded within schools, to support school

staff, and to be a link to HEI's to engage with research projects. Macpherson notes the importance of research-informed practice being underpinned by three sources of information: research evidence, context specificity, and teachers' professional judgement (Stafanini & Griffiths, 2020). As a result, researchers need to recognise the importance of contextual information (e.g., school priorities) for schools' engagement with research. Furthermore, teachers need sufficient time to engage with research and professional development to support their professional judgement. Macpherson also makes links with policy, which is often relegated in discussions of research-practice partnerships, but which is clearly essential as policy typically informs schools' priorities and, to a lesser extent, researchers' research agenda. Macpherson notes that a systems wide change (which will require policy input) may be required for RPPs to achieve their ambitions, with policy impacting considerably on teachers' time and ability to engage with research/RPPs. He also notes possible tensions between top down (i.e., policy led) research projects and bottom up (i.e., curiosity led) projects. Indeed, working in RPPs may require a compromise in research priorities (also discussed in McGeown et al., 2023) yet surely such a compromise is worth it if it results in research which is more educationally relevant, more likely to be used in practice, and more likely to improve children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes.

The response from Dixon (2023) is framed by her role as a teaching practitioner, school leader, and PhD researcher, therefore someone who works routinely at the intersection of research and practice. Dixon discusses different models used within the UK to support schools to engage with research (e.g., Teaching Schools Alliance, Teaching Schools Hubs, Research Schools Network), many of which may be unfamiliar to academic researchers, which illustrates very clearly the different knowledge that educators/practitioners have compared to researchers. In her article, Dixon shares how she believes research is used by teachers: 'for prompting reflection, deepening knowledge and experience; challenging beliefs

and assumptions about teaching and learning and using the research findings to spark changes…'. I think this is a superb description of the role that research can play in supporting teachers' professional development and improving classroom practice, and one that challenges the assumption that for research to inform practice, it must do so in a prescriptive way. In her article, Dixon encourages us to 'walk a mile in each other's shoes'; to do so, gives us insight into the different experiences, priorities, and contexts of the other, which should foster greater understanding. She discusses this within the context of RCTs and their incompatibility with the aims of schooling, recognising the tensions that can arise when schools engage in RCTs led by researchers.

Related to this, Prof. Snowling (2023) draws upon her experience of intervention design and evaluation, reflecting on the dominant role that RCT's have had as the 'gold standard' for evidence in education, and stressing their value for developing our understanding of effective teaching practices. However, she also rightly recognises that issues regarding acceptability, feasibility, relevance, and teachers' perspectives of impact (regardless of research results) all have consequences for whether or not the findings from RCTs are implemented. In her response, Prof. Snowling discusses recent methodological shifts in how we evaluate educational interventions, with more complex evaluations which evaluate both effectiveness and implementation/process; the latter focusing on considerations such as acceptability and feasibility. Indeed, practice partners have an important role to play in evaluation. For example, researchers and practitioners may have very different interests or priorities when asked about key outcomes of interest from a specific intervention (see also Macpherson, 2023, and McGeown et al., 2023). Failing to evaluate interventions from practitioners' perspectives means we fail to ask the questions that they want answers to, which may have implications for their interest in the research and its outcomes. Therefore,

RPPs can also play an important role in the evaluation of interventions, in addition to their development, providing input into both effectiveness and implementation dimensions.

This focus on implementation process evaluation is also raised by Dr Vardy (2023), who in her article discusses the importance of this aspect of evaluation, which, when done well, provides rich data which aligns with questions often posed by teachers. In her article, Dr Vardy shares her experiences of working in RPPs, or teacher-research partnerships as she refers to them in her own work. Indeed, the use of different terminology and/or definitions of these collaborative structures illustrates the many different ways in which researchers and practitioners are working together and, as said by Dr Vardy, there is arguably a spectrum of work that fits under the umbrella term of RPPs. Dr Vardy's experiences of working with practitioners mirror some of my own. I too recognise that the onus is often on individual researchers to be proactive to initiate and sustain relationships with practitioners, and that there are few external incentives for doing so. Indeed, often other academic activities are more highly incentivised (as also discussed by Sjolund, 2023). In addition, in the UK, there are poor structures in place to support, initiate and sustain RPPs. On this issue, I will turn to some of the points raised by Sjolund, who argues that research infrastructure is currently biased towards more traditional research.

Sjolund (2023) begins by providing a clear example of change in research infrastructure at his own University to incentivise and support RPPs, by prioritising practitioners' perspectives, creating more equal and democratic partnerships between those in research and practice, and training researchers to work effectively in RPPs. In his article, Sjolund raises an important point about how we judge research quality: that the quality criteria we use needs to be different depending on whether research is collaborative or more traditional (i.e., independent of practice input) in nature. I think this is an essential point, and funders, researchers, and stakeholders need to recognise that the purposes and practices

associated with collaborative and traditional research are different. Therefore, to judge them by the same criteria is unfair, although there is likely to be overlap in quality indicators (e.g., robustness of research design, contribution to practice) which may be weighted differently depending on the nature of the project. In raising this point, Sjolund draws upon the significant contribution that Prof. Penuel and his collaborators have made to our understanding of RPPs. Sjolund also points out that currently research quality is judged by research peers (i.e., via the journal peer-review process); however publically funded research should also be accountable to other stakeholders, and other outputs may, in some instances, be the main contribution of the research conducted.

In her response, Prof. Norbury (2023) shares details of the research-practitioner network (LiLaC) she established early in her academic career, recognising the important and distinct contribution that educators and other professionals would make to her research. More recently, her research has also began to actively involving children and their families. A key project to arise from the LiLaC network is the 10 year longitudinal Surrey Communication and Language in Education Study (SCALES), which has created an opportunity for ongoing collaboration and intellectually exciting ideas and discussions to evolve over time. In her article, Prof. Norbury shares her wealth of knowledge and experience from working in partnership with others, but also stresses the value of researchers spending time in classrooms or on school governing bodies as these provide invaluable opportunities to understand school pressures and priorities. Indeed, working in a RPP should not mean researchers are reliant solely on their practice partners for practice insights; RPPs cannot substitute the value that comes from researchers also gaining their own knowledge of classroom practice. In her article, Prof. Norbury reminds us of the importance of implementation fidelity for quality outcomes, but recognises the challenges schools have in implementing interventions with fidelity or sustaining implementation over time. Aligned

with my own experiences, she also recognises that educators and clinicians typically prefer to use interventions or programmes in more individualised ways to suit their students/classes, drawing upon their own professional judgement and/or preferences when doing so. Importantly, Prof. Norbury raises questions about the purpose of school-based interventions, and what their priorities should be, recognising the importance of focusing on improving children's educational and life experiences and not focusing solely on attainment outcomes.

Similar to Prof. Norbury, Dr Crane (2023) begins by sharing her experiences of working in a long-standing research-practice partnership – the Pan London Autism Schools Network (PLASN-R), which interestingly was initiated by schools who wished to improve student support and classroom practice through greater engagement with research. Central to this RPP is inclusivity and non-hierarchical relationships, with the network co-chaired by individuals from research and practice, and meetings balanced to reflect both practitioners' priorities and recent research insights. In her article, Dr Crane highlights that while RPPs are often described to consist solely of 'researchers' and 'practitioners', in reality, there is often greater diversity in terms of the roles and experiences of its members. Furthermore, there can also be fluidity between roles, for example, if those in practice are inspired to engage more actively in research through postgraduate study. In describing the long-standing PLASN-R network, Dr Crane is describing a RPP which can support practitioners' sustained engagement with, and use of research, and researchers' continued ability to be informed by practice priorities. It is, in many ways, ideal. However, these types of networks are typically unfunded and therefore rely on the goodwill of its members, as I know from my own experience of co-founding the LALco network (https://lalco.org.uk/) with Lynne Duncan. A benefit of this, of course, is that the RPP/network has to continue to meet the needs and interests of all its members for continued engagement, which puts a demand, albeit a useful one, on those leading it. Of course, funded projects can also support with sustaining network

activities, but in effect, its longevity will rely on it being regarded as a source of value to all. Another point raised by Dr Crane is the distinct contribution and value that children and young people can make to educational research, as also mentioned by Dr Vardy and Prof. Norbury. Typically described as 'participatory research', there are many parallels between participatory research and RPPs, with similar considerations (e.g., power imbalance, built-in flexibility) and principles (e.g., inclusion of diverse perspectives) underpinning them.

I will finish this Open Dialogue by reflecting on the article by Prof. Penuel (2023), who, along with his colleagues and collaborators from both research and practice, have had profound impact on our understanding of RPPs in education. In his response, Prof. Penuel raises an important and yet often neglected point – that while we continue to argue for the importance of research-informed practice, experience and evidence tells us that how research is actually used in practice does not align with researchers' aspirations. The complex process of translating research into practice has been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Solari et al., 2020) and Prof. Penuel argues that RPPs have much to offer in this regard, by offering sustained interactions with researchers to make sense of research and to ensure research is integrated effectively into discussions about changes to practice. Importantly, Prof. Penuel argues that understanding the 'evidence behind evidence use' is essential to developing RPP practices and outputs (see https://research.shu.ac.uk/rmple/ for a recent example of this in the UK). I would agree wholeheartedly with this and feel that there are clear connections between the research literature on research-practice partnerships, and the literature on teachers' use and engagement with research. Finally, in his response, Prof. Penuel defines what he means by RPPs, recognising that although they can take different forms, they share common features. He outlines four common features of RPPs: that research is the leading activity within the collaboration; that RPPs are intentionally organised to engage diverse perspectives and challenge power dynamics; that they should result in actions aimed at educational

improvement; and that they are long-term collaborations designed to span multiple projects. In relation to this last point, while I appreciate that a long-term collaboration may be an ultimate vision for RPPs, without sufficient infrastructure or funding to support this, many researchers working within RPPs (at least in the UK) are sometimes doing so in a more ad hoc fashion. In my own research, while many of the practice partners I work with are long-standing and we have worked together across multiple research projects (often linked with the LALco network), I also value that flexibility that comes from being able to bring in new practice partners (from different sectors) for specific projects, where their expertise or insights are particularly relevant for these specific projects. That said, as discussed by Prof. Norbury and Dr Crane, there are clearly benefits of having sustained relationships with practice partners which allows relationships to evolve, individuals to become more comfortable with each other, and more informal and intellectually exciting and productive discussions to arise. While it may therefore be difficult to reach a consensus on how we define RPPs, I am in no doubt that we all agree that the same values and principles underpin successful RPPs (e.g., respect, trust, non-hierarchical relationships). Indeed, I would like to conclude this summary to responses with a point made by Prof. Penuel which really resonated with me, that in working in RPPs we need to be humble, and approach partnership work with a learning orientation ourselves. Indeed, like many of the other contributors to this Open Dialogue, I have found working in RPPs to be hugely enjoyable, intellectually stimulating, and professionally rewarding. We need to strive to ensure RPPs provide these experiences for both researchers and practice partners, and that we learn together as we research ways to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people.

Research-practice partners in education in the UK: What next?

In my original article, I set out what I felt were priorities to guide and inform RPPs, and in earlier work (McGeown et al., 2023) summarised the benefits and challenges associated with RPPs. Therefore to conclude this Open Dialogue I will summarise by outlining what I believe are the key enablers required for us to create a culture of RPPs in education in the UK, drawing upon the excellent contributions to this Open Dialogue. While outlined separately, these enablers are not mutually exclusive, with some (e.g., funding) enabling (or not) others (e.g., infrastructure). I hope these help to support future thinking and discussion as we start to more seriously consider the role that RPPs could play in UK educational research.

1) Funding

Raised by many contributors in this issue (e.g., Macpherson, Sjolund, Dr Vardy, Prof. Norbury), and in my original article, RPPs are not self-sustaining and do require funding to allow members to engage, and act on research projects arising from the partnerships. Currently research funding in UK does offer opportunities to establish RPPs (e.g., via research centres or network grants); however the majority of funding is for discrete research projects (many of which allow, or even encourage, practice/policy partners), so there are opportunities available. However, almost all funding is allocated to higher education institutions to distribute, meaning those in research hold the 'power'. However, as Macpherson notes, it is typically those in HEI's who have experience in grant writing making it difficult for schools to initiate or write research project proposals. A further consideration is that funding is primarily allocated on the basis of well-formed research proposals and detailed outputs, making it difficult to respond to innovations in project design or outputs as a result of practitioners input during the lifetime of the project (also raised by Prof. Norbury, and illustrated by McGeown et al., 2023). Another consideration is that if RPPs are to be funded in their own right, we will need to evidence the 'value-added' contribution they make

to educational research, policy and/or practice. Building in an evaluation of new RPPs from the outset, and not simply evaluating the projects arising from the RPP, will therefore be important, and could also lead to sharing of learning and experiences arising from RPPs.

2) Infrastructure

Raised by many of the contributors in this issue, and with examples provided from the UK (e.g., Prof. Norbury and Dr Crane), US (Prof. Penuel), and Sweden (Sjolund), the infrastructure required to support and sustain RPPs so that those in research and practice can work collaboratively in the design, execution and communication of educational research can take different forms. Given the diversity of actors in the education system, and the complexity of issues facing education, a 'one size fits all' approach to RPP should be avoided. In terms of infrastructure, there could be a space for national (potentially with high-quality training) and regional/local RPPs in the UK, with policy involvement as appropriate. These different options (i.e., national and local) should not be considered hierarchical, but rather designed with different purposes in mind, both bringing together groups of individuals with shared interests in particular areas of education (e.g., literacy, language, numeracy, inclusion, etc – although I recognise that there could also be disadvantages in creating such silos). While RPPs will differ in structure and features, they are likely to be underpinned by common principles, values, and ways of working. Our increasing use of technology in our work will be invaluable in creating RPPs with national representation, reaching geographically dispersed members, while the time savings afforded by meeting online will also support those with time pressures. However, it is essential that any infrastructure created is inclusive and ensures those typically underrepresented or marginalised are not done further through new RPP structures. Indeed, creating infrastructure that actively and successfully encourages participation from those who are often harder to reach (for whatever reason) and challenges power dynamics (as also raised by Prof. Penuel) may be difficult, but is worth

pursuing to ensure RPPs do not solely represent and reproduce the views and experiences of those who already have a voice in education and research.

3) Training

Raised in the original article, and also mentioned, for example in this issue by Dixon and Sjolund, researchers would benefit from training in RPPs, in the same way that training in quantitative and/or qualitative research forms part of postgraduate research (PGR) study. Indeed, Prof. Norbury warns that RPPs are likely to challenge researchers' core beliefs and ways of working, therefore development of skills but also dispositions are important. In addition, training to raise practitioners' research literacy is important (e.g., within initial teacher education or career-long professional development), to allow them to more confidently contribute to, and potentially challenge, the research process and research decisions. As raised by Prof. Norbury, Dr Crane, and Dr Vardy in this issue, aligned research (e.g., participatory research, which involves working with children, young people or those with 'lived experience' of the phenomenon under study) shares similarities in terms of methods, skills, and dispositions, and therefore RPP training could form part of a wider focus on collaborative research practices. Unlike research training in quantitative or qualitative research, training in RPPs is likely to be less prescriptive and focused more on values, dispositions, promoting innovation, exploring diverse approaches to design and evaluation, effective communication, sharing examples of good (and poor) structures and practices, as well as ethical and legal considerations. In the delivery of RPP training, a reliance on researchers only should be avoided: indeed this would reproduce dominant researcher-only perspectives of what makes an effective RPP. Practice partners' perspectives and experiences must be embedded into training to ensure the next generation of researchers understand the value and challenges associated with RPPs from all perspectives, thus increasingly the likelihood that they will be able to work effectively within RPPs.

4) Time

Raised in this issue by Macpherson, Prof. Norbury, Prof. Snowling, and Dr Vardy, time is a very limited resource and ultimately can impede RPPs from being initiated or sustained, even with sufficient willing, infrastructure, training etc in place. While Macpherson notes that time is always the resource that is in shortest supply in schools, Prof. Norbury raises issues around the initial time investment required from practice partners to develop funding applications, which typically have low success rates. In my own experience, even if projects are funded, while funding can allow buy-out or new posts to be created, it is possible that these will not always fully compensate for the time investment required for RPPs to flourish. For those with autonomy over their time, perceptions of benefits (e.g., to professional development, depth of knowledge, quality of research or practice, improvements to children's or young people's experiences or outcomes) will be essential to whether or not engagement in a RPP is maintained. Research focusing on teachers' use and engagement with research, as also discussed by Prof. Snowling, provides us with good insight into the importance of research being educationally relevant and meaningful, and aligned with teachers' perceptions of priorities for them to continue to engage in RPPs.

5) Incentives

Raised in this issue by both Dr Vardy and Sjolund, at present, there are many barriers to UK researchers working in RPPs (e.g., lack of time, infrastructure, experience, contacts etc) and few incentives for UK researchers or teachers to overcome these barriers. Alternatively, existing incentives in academia could lead to invited tokenistic contributions (discussed in an earlier article: McGeown et al., 2023) or undermine the desire to engage in RPPs (Dr Vardy and Sjolund, this issue). Ultimately, the greatest incentive is likely to be a genuine belief that RPPs make a difference – to researchers' and teachers' professional development, quality of research and classroom practice, and children and young people's

educational experiences and outcomes. Greater understanding of how we create effective and productive RPPs that produce these outcomes, along with sufficient funding, training, and infrastructure, is likely to incentivise researchers and practice partners, who feel more confident working this way and identify measurable positive outcomes.

6) Accountability

Questions regarding accountability, for example, who is research for, who judges the quality of research, and what outcomes would be considered a measure of success, are all essential questions to ask. Indeed these questions will, to some extent, determine what the future looks like for educational research and RPPs in education within the UK. We need to create a system that fairly appraises and enables both traditional and collaborative forms of research. Furthermore, we also need to think about the role of policy in RPPs (Macpherson). These points, raised in this issue by Prof. Norbury and Sjoulund and previously by Penuel et al. (2020) highlight that we need to think more about the purposes and priorities of our research and how funders, researchers, and researcher users/beneficiaries judge research quality and value.

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