

# **RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

THE LEARNING SCHOOLS MODEL



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# **Research-practice Partnerships for School Improvement**

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# Research-practice Partnerships for School Improvement: The Learning Schools Model

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# Contents

List of Figures and Tables	ix
About the Authors	xi
Foreword	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvi
<b>Chapter 1 Ambitious Aims: Research for Solutions and Knowledge</b>	<b>1</b>
Solving the Big Five – Variability, Scalability, Capability, Acceleration and Sustainability	2
<i>Variability</i>	2
<i>Scalability</i>	3
<i>Capability</i>	4
<i>Acceleration</i>	5
<i>Sustainability</i>	6
A New Approach	6
Compelling Reasons for Having Research Embedded in Practice	8
<i>'Real-World' Impact</i>	8
<i>Increases Utilisation of Research by Practitioners</i>	9
<i>Develops Research Knowledge That Cannot Be Gained in Controlled Settings</i>	9
<i>Addresses and Repositions the Big Five</i>	9
Our Contribution	10
<i>Evidence from a Variety of Educational and Policy Contexts</i>	10
<i>Training of Researchers in Research-Practice Partnerships</i>	11
<i>The Improvement of Valued Student Outcomes</i>	11
The Learning Schools Model	12

<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>The Learning Schools Model (LSM)</b>	17
	Key Concept 1: Contextualisation of Effective Practice to Local Contexts	17
	<i>Understanding Contexts</i>	18
	<i>Knowing the Problem in Context</i>	19
	<i>Why Context Matters to a Partnership</i>	20
	<i>Going Beyond the Local</i>	21
	Key Concept 2: Collaborative Analysis of Data	22
	<i>Understanding Collaborative Analysis of Data</i>	22
	<i>Data and Data Literacy Skills</i>	24
	Two Case Studies	25
	<i>Phase 1: Profiling</i>	26
	<i>Phase 2: Resourcing</i>	28
	<i>Phase 3: Sustainability</i>	30
	Sequence of the Model	31
	The NZ Context and its Affordances	32
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Collaborative Data Analysis</b>	37
	The Analysis Process	38
	1. <i>A Focus on Both Valued Student Outcomes and Practices</i>	38
	2. <i>Co-designed Solutions from the Analysis</i>	40
	3. <i>Agreed Criteria for Evaluating Hypotheses</i>	41
	4. <i>Pedagogical Content Knowledge</i>	42
	Principles for Data Collection	42
	<i>Data Fit for Purpose</i>	42
	<i>High-Quality Data</i>	44
	Principles for Data Analysis and Use: An Extended Example	45
	<i>Typical Analyses: Achievement</i>	46
	<i>Typical Analyses: Teaching and School Data</i>	49
	<i>Typical Analyses: The Relationship between Teaching and School Data and Achievement Data</i>	51
	Artefacts for Collaborative Analysis	54
	Caveat	55
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Partnerships for Design and Sustainability</b>	57
	Partnership Purposes and Roles: Why Collaborate?	58
	Principles of Partnerships	59

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	61
<i>PLC Setup</i>	61
<i>Structure and Focus</i>	62
<i>Within-Schools Sites</i>	63
<i>Across-School Sites</i>	63
Research into the PLCs	64
Knowledge and Skills for Collaboration	67
<i>Skill Set 1: Teaching Expertise and PCK</i>	67
<i>Skill Set 2: Research Knowledge</i>	68
<i>Skill Set 3: Leadership</i>	69
<i>Skill Set 4: Analysis and Use of Data</i>	69
<i>Skill Set 5: Deliberate Dialogue and Facilitation</i>	70
<i>Skill Set 6: Cultural Expertise</i>	71
<b>Chapter 5 Resourcing and Professional Learning and Development (PLD)</b>	<b>73</b>
Why Focus on PLD to Improve Teaching Practices?	74
PLD as Resourcing: Key Principles	75
<i>Key Principle One: Profiling Before Resourcing</i>	75
<i>Key Principle Two: Engaging Teachers in PLD</i>	76
<i>Key Principle Three: Collaborative Analysis of         Data Cycles, Not Silver Bullets</i>	78
<i>Key Principle Four: The Social Construction of         New Forms of Expertise</i>	79
Resourcing as Bespoke	80
<i>Tensions</i>	80
PLD Model: Cascading Structure	81
<i>Mitigating the Risks</i>	81
<i>The Role of School Leaders</i>	83
<i>Issues with the Cascade</i>	84
Other Forms of Resourcing	85
<b>Chapter 6 Sustainability of the LSM</b>	<b>87</b>
Why Is Sustainability so Important for the LSM?	88
Designing for Sustainability: How Sustainability Is Developed Through the LSM	89
<i>Sustainability in Phase 3</i>	89
What We Have Learnt from Sustainability Studies	92
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	92
<i>School Practices</i>	93

<i>School Leaders' Beliefs and Supporting Structures</i>	94
<i>Conditions for Sustainability</i>	95
Issues	96
<b>Chapter 7 Learning to Learn</b>	99
Contributing to Methodology	99
<i>Learning about 'What Works, for Whom, under What Conditions and at Scale'</i>	100
<i>Our Solution: A Flexible but Robust Design</i>	102
Contributing to Theoretical Knowledge	106
<i>Example 1: Instructional Risk in the Teaching of Comprehension Strategies</i>	106
<i>Example 2: Explaining Digital Pedagogies</i>	107
By What Mechanisms Do We Learn to Become Better?	109
<i>Thinking and Testing Ideas</i>	110
<i>Feedback Loops and Associated Disposition</i>	113
What Do We Still Need to Learn?	114
References	117
Index	127

# List of Figures and Tables

## Figures

Fig. 1.	The Learning Schools Model Design	14
Fig. 2.	Typical Data Analysis Process	39
Fig. 3.	Reporting Template for Inquiry Projects	91
Fig. 4.	Cross-Sectional Data at Time 1 Which Shows the Achievement Predicted for Each Year Level at the Start and End of the Year	104
Fig. 5.	Stanine Means of Time 1–6 Cohorts against Projected Baseline	105

## Tables

Table 1.	Digital Schools Partnership PLC Structures	65
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## Foreword

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) constitute a novel and valuable model for doing educational research, one that is growing in importance and in vitality. I celebrate that shift and greatly value the information presented in this book about one successful instantiation of the RPP model. We have come a long way beyond the metaphors ‘applied research’ and ‘translation from research to practice’ that dominated educational researchers’ thinking as recently as 20 years ago.

I have myself worked in those more traditional models, developing tools that proved their worth in experimental trials but then were handed off to teachers who never used them. The difference in uptake when we can provide tools to solve problems that teachers themselves nominate is enormous and deeply gratifying. Thus, I am a strong supporter. The partnership approach of developing tools in response to practitioner needs (and to the extent possible in collaboration with practitioners) is much more effective in leading to high-quality implementation, to measurable impacts and to sustainability.

The intuitive appeal of this common sense approach should not, though, blind us to the risks associated with it. The sudden popularity of the RPP model, and the consequent expansion of funding for research carried out in this tradition, threatens to transform a very good idea into a fashion or a trend. Thus the RPP label is now used for many different approaches to doing educational work in the real world, not all of which are equally authentic exemplars. We should be cautious not to let the heterogeneity of what people are calling RPPs dilute the construct and obscure the importance of the central principles, which are so well incorporated into the work presented in this volume, on the Learning Schools Model (LSM).

This model displays particularly robustly one of the basic RPP principles – that the work be done locally, with a rich understanding of the context. In the work of the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP; [www.serp.org](http://www.serp.org)), with which I have been involved, we have found that approaches to an urgent problem of practice developed for a specific school district always end up being useful to and adopted by other districts, sometimes but not always with minor tweaks. In other words, as discussed extensively in Chapter Seven of this book, working locally does not mean jettisoning the potential for broader impact, or for contributing to research knowledge. But anticipating those more global contributions prematurely can undermine the local commitment.

In the SERP work we have experienced many of the tensions and challenges associated with adopting the RPP approach, some of which are brilliantly illustrated for the New Zealand context in this volume:

- SERP is committed to starting with the practitioners' definition of the problem, but sometimes find that characterisation is not helpful. For example, in our early work in the Boston Public Schools we were asked by the superintendent to 'solve' the problem of middle-grades reading comprehension. The teachers, on the other hand, characterised the challenge as academic vocabulary – a much more tractable issue. We found, after many years of work, that tools to improve academic vocabulary did indeed improve reading comprehension (Jones et al., 2019), but had we started focussing on interventions for reading comprehension itself we might never have gotten there.
- The collaborative data analysis that is a core practice in the LSM is costly in time and can limit the sophistication of the analyses. An alternative model, adopted within the longstanding partnership between the Department of Early Childhood at the Boston Public Schools (DECBPS) and a team at the University of Michigan headed by Christina Weiland (Weiland, Sachs, McCormick, Hsueh, & Snow, in press) displays an alternative, in which Weiland's advanced quantitative analytic capacities are deployed to answer urgent DECBPS questions, such as whether investment in summer school for lagging students was justified. Collaboration focussed on refining the question to that BPS got the answer it needed, rather than on engaged in the actual analytic process.
- The LSM centres its activities inside schools, with a focus on professional learning and development as the lever for improvement. SERP also works inside schools, but has focussed its efforts on developing tools that are immediately useful to teachers and that have the potential to change classroom practice; many of the SERP tools are designed to 'carry the training with them,' in part because the organisation does not have the capacity to deliver professional development at large scale. Other robust RPPs have focussed much more outside schools on structural and policy issues. The Chicago Consortium for School Research, for example, and the New York City Research Alliance have access to district data and respond to district requests for specific analyses, but also develop their own questions in discussion with the district. Collaboration in these cases is characterised by regular communication and adherence to a 'no surprises' rule before findings are made public. But the basic model of educational improvement puts more emphasis on district and school policies than the RPPs that do their work mostly with teachers, inside schools. A recurrent challenge, and one that the LSM team has solved brilliantly, is the sustainability of the partnership model. In the US context, where individual districts have considerable autonomy, where the tenure of district leaders rarely lasts more than a few years, and where new leadership is free to bring in new practices and curricula, the work that is needed to keep partnerships alive across transitions is daunting, and not always successful. There are great advantages to systems of education more like New Zealand's, where there are fewer layers

between schools and central government and centralisation of curriculum and policies, which can promote a level of coherence that is rarely reached in US public schooling.

In short, this book can be read in many ways: as a primer in the advantages of RPPs as a new structure for engaging in educational research; as an analysis of the epistemological underpinnings of reliable knowledge about educational practice; as an encouraging story about educational improvement; and as a demonstration that lasting improvement in any complex system requires an unending cycle of learning how to learn.

by

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Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi  
(With your basket and my basket, the people will thrive)  
Māori Proverb

To our school, policy, research, and community partners,  
and to those who support them

To our families