

Strategic Planning and Research-Practice Partnerships as a Dynamic, Generative Duo?

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Strategic planning refers to a deliberative approach to producing decisions to major challenges. Research-practice partnerships (RPP) are long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners organized to investigate solutions in school districts. Authors make the argument that RPPs could be, and in many cases ought to be, explicitly developed/focused around assisting educational organizations in their strategic planning endeavors—in terms of the development of these plans, and/or in terms of their execution.

Last year, as part of graduate-level educational leadership/policy coursework, this commentary's first author (Joel) invited a highly-regarded school district superintendent to speak with Muna and fellow students about his role, function, and current areas of focus. What struck us most was the extent to which this superintendent's comments centered around his district's *strategic plan*—highlighting both the process by which it was developed, and the activities and initiatives that had subsequently emerged. It was apparent to all of us that, at least for this superintendent and district, strategic planning is fundamental. This insight piqued our interest, refreshing our own memories about strategic planning and motivating us to further explore the academic literature around strategic planning, both generally and in the education sector.

Strategic planning, as understood here, is “a deliberative, disciplined approach to producing fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it” (Bryson, 2015, p. 515). It can be thought of as a “way of knowing” to help leaders and managers know “what to do, how, and why” (Bryson, 2018, Para. 15). It is perhaps best suited to addressing major challenges/issues versus those that can be solved with simple fixes (Bryson, 2018).

Strategic planning is now quite common in a wide range of private, public, and nonprofit organizations (Bryson & Edwards, 2017). Moreover, and key given our interests, it is now pervasive in both primary/secondary and higher education. This is true not only in our current contexts (Ohio, United States) but when we look further outward as well. In our communities, our employer, Miami University, is in the midst of an elaborate and ambitious strategic planning process, and our respective local school districts have recently developed strategic plans.

Why, though, is strategic planning so pervasive? In some cases, strategic planning is undertaken mandatorily. For example, Balkar and Kalman (2018) describe how, in Turkey, strategic planning must be undertaken by all public (including educational) organizations. In the United States, too, closely related processes (e.g., school improvement planning) are mandatory under certain circumstances. It is also true that strategic planning in education has sometimes emerged organically at the local/organizational level—e.g., it is pursued because it is viewed as being useful, and/or as being important for public legitimation or other political purposes.

There is evidence suggesting strategic planning can be, indeed, a worthy process: A recent meta-analysis by George, Walker, and Monster (2019, p. 810) found strategic planning to have “a positive, moderate, and significant impact on organizational performance.” These researchers also identified certain key conditions within which strategic planning tends to be particularly advantageous—e.g., when it is well-funded, includes careful internal and external environmental analysis, and includes stakeholders who possess knowledge of the organization from various vantage points (George et al., 2019).

In sum, key points from the literature related to this commentary are that:

- strategic planning is quite common in public (including educational) organizations;
- it is revealed as a positively impactful management approach, at least under certain conditions;
- as such, strategic planning is well worthy of educational researchers’ attention

We are also researchers who see the potential of *research-practice partnerships (RPPs)* for enhancing the connections between research and practice and for improving educational processes and outcomes. We understand RPPs as “[l]ong-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district outcomes” (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013, p. 2). We acknowledge the research basis regarding RPPs is modest, which stems in part from the fact that they are a relatively new strategy (Farrell, Harrison, & Coburn, 2019). In education some research has shown the efficacy of interventions developed within the context of RPPs (see review by Coburn & Penuel, 2016). However, many other potential RPP outcomes (e.g., their ability to support systems’ capacity to improve; their ability to support increased research use), are as yet scarcely explored (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Still, we concur with those who argue strong RPPs focused on various aspects have potential to yield important benefits. Well-functioning RPPs, for instance, may help to increase/enhance the use of research to support decision-making and, ultimately, improve key educational outcomes (see Farrell et al., 2019).

We are encouraged by recent calls, like the following, to think more expansively about the various forms RPPs could take:

The possibilities for partnerships are greater if we push ourselves to think far more broadly about who can participate in them, the roles they can play, and the potential focus of their work (Penuel & Gallagher, 2018, p. 157).

We are inspired by this appeal and, as scholars in educational leadership, are particularly interested in the prospects of RPPs centered around supporting/enhancing organizational leadership and learning. In this essay we thus lay out several new ideas regarding how such RPPs might be brought about. Broadly, we make the argument that RPPs could be, and in many cases ought to be, explicitly developed/focused around assisting educational organizations in their strategic planning endeavors—in terms of the development of these plans, and/or in terms of their execution.

As Muñoz (2016, p. 182) observed, “school districts have their own research needs/agenda typically articulated in strategic plans.” Accordingly, if researchers are truly interested in identifying/forging mutualistic collaborations (a key feature of RPP’s; see next section) with schools/districts, it would make a good deal of sense to focus in on strategic plans/planning. Troublingly, however, in our review we failed to identify extant scholarly or gray literature detailing the intersection of RPPs and strategic planning. To be clear, we are not suggesting that RPPs and strategic planning have *not* intersected in practice—in fact, given that RPPs often involve supporting school district improvement efforts (e.g., Henrick, Muñoz, & Cobb, 2016), such intersections are probably not uncommon. Nonetheless, we are arguing these intersections need to be more deeply considered, explicated, and encouraged.

We contend that researchers (current and potential members of RPPs) adopting such a focus will open up a wide array of mutualistic and high-value partnership possibilities. This essay thus aims to encourage such moves, and includes description of several possible entry points and ways in which various prospective partners might assist educational organizations as they engage in strategic planning and execution.

This essay is divided into two main parts, corresponding with the two main aspects of strategic planning—these plans’ *development*, and their *execution*. First, though, we provide a short section to further detail RPPs. As we will aim to make clear in the main sections, there are numerous partnership possibilities within both development and execution; the examples we provide are necessarily selective in nature, representing just a fraction of what may be possible.

Research-Practice Partnerships: Additional Background

Applying the previously shared definition, we can see that there are three main criteria that determine whether any given arrangement is a bona fide RPP; there should be:

1. *An intention that the partnership will be long-term.* In other words, though these may begin as one-off projects, an RPP “should be working toward establishing long-term relationships around multiple projects” (Arce-Trigatti, 2017, n.p.).
2. *Mutualistic collaborations between researchers and practitioners.* Both parties should receive benefits from the work. For example, practitioners may expand in their ability to engage with or co-conduct important research, while researchers might develop deeper understanding of concepts that are important to their agendas (Arce-Trigatti, 2017).
3. *Research organized around addressing problems of practice.* As such, research questions will be developed jointly and research being conducted will almost certainly be relevant to partnering educators (Arce-Trigatti, 2017).

Considering these criteria, we can now ask whether ‘bona fide’ RPPs might realistically be forged and deepened in relationship to strategic planning. The answer, we believe, is an emphatic ‘yes.’ Strategic planning—especially when we consider both plan development and execution—is by its nature *long-term* (e.g., see Bryson, 2018). It also seems quite likely that certain ‘types’ of researchers could identify *mutualistic* collaborative opportunities within and around strategic planning; after all, many researchers possess expertise around strategic planning or certain pieces

of it, and many other educational researchers will find their expertise to be apt given the specific strategic areas that are identified. And finally, we expect that any RPPs forged around strategic planning will almost by definition and without exception be addressing (or at least partially addressing) problems of practice—strategic planning is fundamentally, albeit not exclusively, aimed at addressing such problems.

RPPs now often revolve around the development and assessment of instructional activities and/or curricular materials (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). Likewise, though RPP ‘outcomes’ research has documented positive effects of some such interventions (see review by Coburn & Penuel, 2016), there are “myriad interventions” (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 50) that can be developed within the context of RPP and we currently know little about their effects. Thus, though an emphasis upon curriculum and instruction is certainly not bad —after all, curriculum *is* central to teaching and learning—we suggest there are certain issues, especially relative to our interest in exploring and furthering RPP-strategic planning linkages:

1. There is more to the provision of education (e.g., finance, budgeting, human resources, extracurriculars, communications, community outreach and programming, leadership and organizational development) than curriculum and instruction; and
2. For those RPPs that are focused around curriculum and instruction, we suggest that when such shifts are linked to strategic planning, they are more likely to be sustainable and successful.

Altogether, then, we contend building RPPs around/within strategic planning processes will: a) open up RPPs to being forged around a broader array of ‘problems of practice,’ extending beyond the typical focal areas (i.e., curriculum); which b) will enable a wider diversity of potential researchers to forge and work within such partnerships; and c) partnerships forged closely around/within strategic planning will be less vulnerable to the types of shifts (i.e., leadership shifts, tensions related to mismatched goals) that can sometimes disrupt or abort them.

Strategic Planning: Development

As noted earlier, strategic planning is an intentional and disciplined way to make decisions and shape key actions within an organization/entity (Bryson, 2018). We can further subdivide strategic planning into two main parts—first, these plans’ *development* (via deliberative, planning, visioning, and analytic processes) and their *execution* (i.e., the implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and evolution of the plan itself). In this subsection, we emphasize the first part (development) and how RPPs might fit.

First, broadly speaking, there are researchers whose expertise and experience squarely relate to strategic planning development. Such researchers might be most likely to reside in schools of business, given strategic planning’s origins in business management (Altinkurt, 2010). Certainly there are challenges in terms of transferring strategic planning processes/protocols that are tailored to the business world to education. However we are inclined to think many such individuals would still possess the ability (if permitted) to adjust/adapt and to make contributions that could facilitate improved planning/processes. Some such individuals might reside in schools of public or non-profit administration; these individuals presumably could apply their expertise

with greater ease. Likewise, we assume some individuals in schools of education or other education-centered research organizations have experience with, and do or could possess or develop expertise with respect to, the application of strategic planning *in education*. Such individuals would also be obvious potential partners to school districts.

Assumptions we make here are that a) such individuals are strong candidates to partner with school districts as they engage in strategic planning processes, and b) these individuals might sometimes continue and expand upon this initial work by developing a RPP (e.g., perhaps to test out particular strategies or aspects of the plan that emerges, to support and examine the district's efforts to move from development to execution, and so on). In that way, we suggest researchers' initial involvement in supporting strategic planning development might sometimes naturally develop into full-fledged RPP.

Beyond these initial suggestions, we offer that researchers who have *particular* areas of content expertise (e.g., related to literacy development, social-emotional learning, bullying prevention, hiring, professional learning, etc.) could—depending upon the district's focal areas—be particularly valuable to strategic planning development. Of course, their ability to contribute is dependent on their inclusion in these processes. Along these lines, we suggest the following:

1. If an RPP is already in existence, research partners are encouraged to inquire whether their involvement (or colleague/s whose expertise are well aligned with the district's focal points) in strategic planning might be permitted; and/or
2. Districts and/or research partners are advised to be thinking about research colleagues (both inside and beyond schools of education) whose expertise might be beneficial to school districts, given the status and focus of their strategic planning.

In any case, we suggest engagement in strategic planning will make it more likely that RPPs develop, deepen, and/or evolve along with the shifting priorities of the school district.

Even beyond these obvious possibilities, we suggest there are additional aspects in which even researchers who do not fit the aforementioned profiles could potentially be assistive with respect to the strategic planning process. In general, for example, researchers are likely to benefit strategic planning development by virtue of their ability to point educators to useful knowledge and material relative to their aims (Malin, Brown, & Trubçeac, 2018)—i.e., helping to infuse more research evidence into the decision-making process. Likewise, RPP members participating in strategic planning might be able to influence the selection/refinement of goals, objectives, or strategies in beneficial ways. For example, perhaps a research partner could serve to refocus the team's attention toward equity considerations while a particular goal or objective is being discussed. To sum up, researchers are likely to be able to enhance school districts' strategic planning development in a variety of ways, including but not limited to the examples provided here.

Strategic Planning: Execution

In this section, we shift our attention to the execution of the strategic plan. Here, we generally mean putting the plan into practice. The emphasis during this portion is upon capacity building,

implementation, monitoring and evaluation and monitoring, and ongoing learning and readjustment (Sandfort & Moulton, 2014).

It would be difficult to over-estimate the importance of execution as construed here. In relation to ‘the best laid plans’ adage, extant research suggests failures are relatively common when it comes to executing plans and securing planned changes (Tasler, 2017). Among the keys to success are strong communications, continual attention to and nurturance of relationships, and attention to operational details (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015).

Where might researchers come in? Broadly speaking, we suggest there are a few main ‘buckets’ defining the roles that researchers could take. These include:

1. Adding value by providing pertinent expertise relative to one or more key goal/objective areas
2. Adding value in terms of operational, decisional, and/or implementation *processes*, broadly speaking
3. Adding value in terms of evaluative aspects

In terms of *providing expertise*, it is invariably the case that school districts will pursue certain goals and objectives that also overlap with researchers’ interests and expertise. For example, one local school district has identified four objectives for their 2018-2021 strategic plan. These revolve around instructional excellence, valuing diversity, student and family wellness, and communication and community engagement. Nearly all colleges of education, for example, include one or more faculty members possessing expertise in these areas. Conceivably, such individuals could add considerable value in terms of further specifying these objectives into tangible decisions and actions that might enable these objectives to be met with greater success. Likewise, we can imagine researchers outside schools of education who might have useful expertise in some of these areas (e.g., communications researchers, or scholars of community engagement).

Third, in terms of adding value with process aspects, here we see a good deal of potential for diverse researcher contributions. For example, regarding implementation, researchers within the emerging field of implementation science could provide tremendous guidance and support, while at the same time being able to conduct meaningful research that fits within their research agendas. Likewise, there are leadership and organizational scholars who potentially could make major contributions (and simultaneously could pursue meaningful research) relative to *how* to restructure/reorganize and how to *lead* particular strategic-plan driven changes.

Also, it is clear that communication is key in so many regards. Those adopting new approaches will need to develop shared meanings and common language, and must hear about proposed and enacted changes (see Bryson, 2018). Accordingly, could communication-focused scholars provide meaningful supports and interventions? Might communication and knowledge mobilization scholars be able to advise and/or assist the district in terms of how to spread clear and helpful knowledge through the organization (Malin & Brown, 2020)? If a teacher is acting in a particularly positive and illustrative manner relative to a particular objective, for instance, are there ways to document and communicate this shift with other staff members, such that this new,

desired approach can spread more efficiently and effectively? Educational organizations are loosely coupled systems, which makes it hard to spread innovations (Mitra, 2018; Weick, 1976) in ways that might be desired by schools. Accordingly, we encourage attention to knowledge mobilization (Ward, 2020) and investment in communication activities (Bryson, 2018) as a means of strengthening change efforts—and we propose that certain researchers are well positioned to add value here, if given the opportunity.

Finally, researchers with particular expertise in terms of *evaluation* methods (and, sometimes, with interest in the particular reforms being undertaken) certainly could add value to districts. This is a straightforward point that probably does not require any elaboration, but we wish to emphasize this as a key area around which mutualistic relations could occur.

Of course, everything is predicated upon researchers actually being invited to partner and make contributions along the lines suggested above. Such invitations and opportunities invariably will require considerable trust, as such partnerships generally will bring about conflicts and challenges (Malin, Hackmann, & Scott, 2020; Malin, 2019) alongside more clearly beneficial aspects. Given these realities, we suggest the following entry points might be the most common or realistic: 1) via an existing RPP, which synchronizes and recalibrates its activities given changing strategic priorities; or 2) an existing or incipient RPP in which researchers invite (or suggest inviting) different research colleagues whose expertise and interests are synergistic with districts' focal areas.

Summary and Conclusions

In this essay, we laid out our thoughts regarding the intersection of RPPs and strategic planning. Broadly, we make the argument that RPPs could be, and in many cases ought to be, explicitly developed/focused around assisting educational organizations in their strategic planning endeavors—in terms of the development of these plans, and/or in terms of their execution. Our argument hinges on the understanding that RPPs require mutualistic and long-lasting collaborations, and the realization that—for many schools/districts—their long-term research interests and agendas are embedded in strategic plans (Muñoz, 2016). Accordingly, researcher involvement around strategic planning strikes us as sensible, if not inevitable. Given this understanding, we provided several examples and ideas about how researchers and educators might work together as part of strategic planning, and how this might fit into the RPP concept. In so doing, we hope we have also contributed in relation to recent calls to think more expansively about RPPs, including who can participate in them and what participation might look like. For example, we explained how researchers residing outside schools of education could in some cases be ideal partners.

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