

Developing Practitioner-Scholars through University-School District Research Partnerships

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University-community partnerships have gained popularity in the United States as a means of extending university research resources and collaborative opportunities. However, research-driven partnerships between universities and K-12 school districts that prioritize the research needs of K-12 schools are unique. Recently, education scholars have been exploring partnership models with potentially greater benefits for various school district stakeholders. To date, there is limited research on how these partnerships can be leveraged as a pedagogical approach to effectively support the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) students who are emerging as practitioner-scholars. This qualitative study helps fill that gap by examining the impacts of one newly formed research-practice partnership that utilized a service-learning model. Our findings suggest that conducting authentic K-12 district-driven research projects may be one avenue for providing transformative learning experiences to practitioner-scholars while also meeting the needs of the school district partners in the community through the production of public scholarship.

Keywords: research partnerships, practitioner-scholars, transformative learning

Introduction

In today's field of education, a growing number of practitioner-scholar educators, who are often practicing teachers, principals, and district administrators, choose to pursue a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree in lieu of a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). These practitioner-scholars differ from traditional Ph.D. students in that "only a fortunate few can leave their jobs and work intensely on research projects where they can learn first-hand through trial and error about connections among research problems, research methods, and research outcomes" (Barnett & Muth, 2008, p. 5). New and innovative pedagogies may be necessary to prepare practitioner-scholars for their new or continuing roles as leaders in education (Barnett & Muth, 2008), as the rigor, commitment, and time constraints of an Ed.D. program add additional pressures that must be considered when student participants are balancing high-demand careers and other outside responsibilities. In fact, the work of Shulman, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), the Carnegie Foundation, and over 80 institutions nationwide have called for a rethinking of the Ed.D. program with an objective focused on the "preparation of professional leaders competent in identifying and solving complex problems in education" (Young, 2006, p. 6). Thus, practitioner-

scholars should engage in action research that directly relates to real-world problems, such as problem-based learning (Bridges, 1992; Schon, 1995).

This hands-on, relevant problem solving can lead to reflective learning, which then “gives rise to new forms of knowledge” (Schon, 1995, p. 31). The application of this new knowledge begins in the classroom, and over time, students can apply learning to daily experiences, engaging professionally in a transformational learning experience (Pugh, Linnenbrink-Garcia, Koskey, Stewart, & Manzey, 2010).

Transformative Learning Experiences

Providing such transformative learning experiences to practitioner-scholars involves continuously adjusting pedagogical approaches to reflect their unique needs (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Pugh’s (2011) framework, on which this research is based, defines these transformative experiences as having three characteristics: (a) experiential value — the content gains value through its daily application; (b) expansion of perception — viewing daily events and content through the lens of the learned content; and (c) motivated use — applying learned content into daily experiences, even when it is not required. Transformative learning experiences cause students to view the world in a unique and meaningful way, because they actually use what they have learned and experienced. Similar to Pugh’s (2011) framework, Dewey (1938) contends that learning can transform students when it connects to their daily experiences and students develop new attitudes and capacities. Within this context, a transformative learning approach to graduate-level coursework challenges practitioner-scholars to assume unfamiliar roles in school district improvement that fundamentally reorients their approach to leadership work (Ginsberg, Knapp, & Farrington, 2014). Participating in real-life research experiences may cause practitioner-scholars to question existing educational norms and outcomes and advocate for change. Learning in this context promotes reflection-in-action, which allows students to reframe problems in a new context and create innovative strategies to solve them (Schon, 1995).

Providing Transformative Experiences through Research-Practice Partnerships

One potential method of providing transformative learning experiences to doctoral students involves funneling this work through a research-practice partnership. Within the last decade, university-K-12 district partnerships have gained popularity in the United States with the goals of making research relevant and meaningful to district leaders and educators, thus improving practice and student outcomes (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). These new research-practice partnerships include the following characteristics: “1) long term, 2) focus on problems of practice, 3) are committed to mutualism, 4) use intentional strategies to foster partnership, and 5) produce original analyses” (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013, p. 2). Butcher, Bezzina, and Moran (2011) report that research-practice partnerships achieve these mutual benefits by building common goals, shared purposes, collaborative leadership, mutual openness to learning and change, and feelings of trust. These partnerships can “expand the capacity of each institution for educating students, conducting research, and serving communities” (Sutton, 2010, p. 62). Allowing Ed.D. practitioner-scholars a role in these partnerships provides them with opportunities to solve real-life, district-identified problems with innovative, research-based solutions.

Research-practice partnerships may be valuable to not only the educational experiences

of practitioner-scholars, but they also may provide numerous benefits to the participating school districts, especially in the current age of accountability and restricted budgets. District budgets became even tighter during the recent recession, resulting in the need to slash personnel who performed research functions. This district belt tightening occurred at the same time pressure increased to make evidence-based decisions. There are still residual effects from the recession, as many school districts have still not replaced personnel who can evaluate program efficacy, or conduct literature reviews about best practices and promising innovations that raise student achievement. Additionally, there are time pressures to produce data analysis to determine whether district programs are cost effective at a time when there is limited capacity to do so, making large-scale studies unattainable (Turley & Stevens, 2015). Furthermore, districts are challenged to make sense of the student data produced by federal and state-mandated testing, but research produced in-house by the districts is often viewed with skepticism. University research partners that utilize the person power of practitioner-scholars can be an impartial resource to help districts manage, analyze, and utilize data to make it meaningful for administrators, teachers, students, and families. They can also provide over-burdened district leaders with literature reviews of current educational research to help drive policy decisions (Turley & Stevens, 2015). While district leaders have anecdotally placed value on the research deliverables produced through this research-practice partnership, the effects of these learning opportunities on the development of emerging practitioner-scholars remain largely unknown.

Case Study: Practitioner-Scholars in a Research-Practice Partnership

This qualitative study investigates the role of practitioner-scholars within one research-practice partnership in order to determine whether participating in K-12 school district-driven research projects provides a transformative learning experience for Ed.D. students; and if so, what components make the experience transformative. Given that the majority of the doctoral students are employees within these districts and are familiar with the goals and demographics of their districts, is the research meaningful, relevant, and targeted to their professional lives outside of the university classroom?

This particular research-practice partnership has three distinct features. The first is a collaboration with a non-profit evaluation association and six public school districts that serve over 90,000 students. These six districts are some of the most diverse and high-needs districts in the state, with up to 74 different languages spoken in these schools. The second feature is the creation of a new Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program, and the third is the development of an associated specific partnership-centered Ed.D. course, Research for Evaluation and Action, at a small, private university in the Pacific Northwest. This course is held during the summer in the second year of the Ed.D. program. It is the culmination of a year-long sequence of research methods courses. Students take this course after successful completion of both Advanced Qualitative Research and Advanced Quantitative Research.

In recent years, the six districts involved in this research project have faced reduced funding and changing community demographics, challenging their ability to provide more services and programs to meet the needs of a diverse population of students. The districts no longer have the people or resources to learn about the most effective programs to implement for these new student populations, nor do they have the personnel to analyze student data in order to learn more about the programs that they are currently using to meet student needs. This partnership seeks to address

these needs by providing high-quality research with a focus on learning, equity, and results. The endeavors of the partnership are not consulting work; no funds change hands with the districts. The research questions stem from the districts, not the university; and these research questions are answered during the summer in the Research for Evaluation and Action course by the practitioner-scholars in addition to work during the school year by two doctoral fellows and a faculty member. Despite the infancy of the partnership, the investigation of this particular model of developing practitioner-scholars within an Ed.D. program can contribute to the literature and provide meaningful guidance for the development of similar programs, as demonstrated in the data gathered through this study.

District-Driven Research Projects

This research-practice partnership follows particular guidelines in its collection and dissemination of research. In the spring of each year, district administrators provide a Request for Proposal (RFP), either verbally or in writing, to the partnership. The RFPs are then distributed to two-person teams of practitioner-scholars. During the six-week summer course, up to 19 Ed.D. students (i.e., the first two cohorts were 19 and 14 each, respectively) participate in hands-on learning experiences by providing answers to research questions from real school districts. These experiences may include developing one or more of the following skills: refining research skills when conducting in-depth literature reviews, using authentic data for analysis while honing statistical analysis skills, and learning how to design an evaluation to assess the effectiveness of currently functioning educational programs. With faculty oversight, students work in pairs to complete the projects, attending 12 sessions of 3.5-hour classes during the 6-week period, with additional work completed outside of class. For example, one pair of students might conduct a literature review on digital curriculums, while another pair of students analyze longitudinal attendance data, and finally another pair of students design an evaluation to investigate the effects of a new computer-based program for English Language Learners. The project involves providing the district a professional, aesthetically pleasing report that is comprised of an executive summary, a literature review, data analysis (if applicable), and recommendations for action. University faculty members meet in person with cabinet-level school district personnel to present the research report and summarize the findings. Often, the district submits a follow-up RFP in the same subject area to extend the research question. For instance, a literature review on social-emotional learning might lead to implementing a new program or new teaching strategies, which then leads to a need for analyzing the collected data.

Participants

Participants in this study were the Ed.D. students who completed these school district-driven research projects. The perspectives of 33 emerging practitioner-scholars—the members of two cohort years of an Ed.D. program—were examined to investigate if participating in the previously described district-driven research projects had the potential to be a transformative learning experience. Of these 33 practitioner-scholars, 24% ($n = 8$) were males, while 76% ($n = 25$) were females. The majority of the practitioner-scholars were experienced education professionals (the mean was 17 years of experience in education), currently holding teaching/faculty/administrator positions at all levels in a school district: elementary, middle, high, university, instructional coach,

counselor, assistant principal, principal, superintendent, or directors of various offices.

Practitioner-Scholar Perspective

The perspectives of student participants were investigated by analyzing the reflections completed at seven time points during participation in the Research for Evaluation and Action course. Reflections were collected weekly during the six weeks of the course, as well as one final, culminating reflection. Reflections were both open-ended and included prompts which changed weekly. Sample prompts included: (a) Describe the experience of participating in the Research for Evaluation and Action course, (b) Describe what you will do as a result of participating in this experience, (c) How will you use the information you learned, and (d) What did you learn about yourself and others? All reflections were completed electronically outside of class and were not part of the course grade. In order to ensure credibility of the data collection, feedback prompts were written without direct reference to pre-determined thematic analysis about transformative learning.

Data Analysis

The data analysis included numerous methods of coding. Researchers both at the university and at the non-profit evaluation association analyzed the data to increase dependability. The first round of analysis involved open or inductive coding, where researchers identified emergent themes without a preconceived coding scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second round of analysis involved deductive coding, where data were lumped into preset themes using Pugh's (2011) three factors of transformative experiences: (a) Experiential Value — Which conditions of the district-driven research experience do students characterize as transformative? (b) Expansion of Perception — Do students characterize the district-driven research experience as transformative, or as perpetuating a fundamental shift or change in their perspectives? and (c) Motivated Use — In which ways do students describe the district-driven research experience as changing their future actions? These two rounds of coding were then compared to investigate their consistency. Coding results were also compared across the two cohort years to ensure codes were consistent in participants from both cohorts. All coding was completed by at least two, and in some cases, three of the authors, to ensure reliability and agreement.

Results

Several important findings emerged from the practitioner-scholars' responses. Findings have been disaggregated into the three components of Pugh's transformative experience framework: experiential value, expansion of perception, and motivated use. Although the practitioner-scholars were not taught explicitly about Pugh's (2011) transformative learning framework, they detailed how the pedagogical elements of the research project experience, including the scaffolded approach to course sequencing, the integration of authentic tasks and embedded service-learning components, and the collaborative learning environment, echo Pugh's (2011) model. Below is an elaboration on the responses.

Experiential Value

The experiential value code was further disaggregated into three sub-categories to provide insight into the impact of this model of learning. The most common theme that arose during the analysis was that this approach to an Ed.D. program resembled a service-learning model that engaged doctoral students in authentic, project-based learning experiences. Feedback from participants provided evidence of the experiential value of this opportunity, in that when a learner values a newly understood idea or approach that enriches everyday experiences, the learning experience becomes transformative (Pugh, 2011). The practitioner-scholars saw value in the content they learned during the completion of the K-12 district-driven research project. For instance, by providing a district with an analysis of the impact of disciplinary exclusions on high school graduation that separated data by ethnicity, gender, and special needs, a practitioner-scholar gained insights relevant to the individual's own practices in the school where she was in a leadership role. The analysis also led to a full class discussion about the social justice implications of exclusionary practices. The course's authentic research tasks were not only a way to provide a much-needed service to the school districts but also a way to provide real-world insights for practitioner-scholars.

The authenticity of the research projects lent meaning to the content and experiences of the student participants. Real projects in real districts are inherently a bit messy, and are more complex and difficult to complete in comparison to some contrived projects often assigned in doctoral qualitative and quantitative research courses. Therefore, it is imperative to prepare doctoral students for their careers as practitioner-scholars using this partnership approach. For instance, one practitioner-scholar commented on the value of being able to see the real world application of quantitative techniques she had learned in a previous course, "It was great to see an ANOVA [Analysis of Variance] applied directly to our investigation." Another stated, "I found the format of this class to be valuable as a practical application of the theoretical topics covered in Qualitative and Quantitative Research courses." Thus, the district-commissioned projects provided an opportunity to apply what the students had learned in their previous courses, Advanced Qualitative Research and Advanced Quantitative Research, in a new and interesting context. They realized there really are good reasons beyond doing well on the semester exam for learning how to understand and calculate an ANOVA. The practitioner-scholars also learned the importance of including how they will analyze the collected data during the project-planning phase. For this project, the complexity of analysis arose when data was recorded haphazardly on Excel spreadsheets or in Microsoft Word documents and without consistency among the various schools in the sample district. Doctoral students learned "the hard way" what happens when there is no up-front planning for the data analysis and reporting stages of a project.

These data provide evidence that participating in these projects allowed practitioner-scholars to develop intellectual and practical skills as recommended by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, including inquiry and analysis, quantitative and information literacy, teamwork, and problem solving (AAC&U, 2008). Furthermore, these projects help satisfy the AAC&U's principle of excellence, which entails connecting knowledge with choices and action by "prepar[ing] students for citizenship and work through engaged and guided learning on 'real-world' problems" (p. 6). Feedback from graduate student practitioner-scholars supports the practical use and application of classroom knowledge.

The "messiness" of real world projects can provide emerging practitioner-scholars a more authentic experience and challenge them to develop the skill set and vantage point of an evaluator.

Schon (1983) perhaps said it best, describing the experience of solving real-world problems as being in the “swampy lowlands” of professional practice. One practitioner-scholar reflected, “By using real data and completing a program evaluation from start to finish, we were able to experience real-world problems when it comes to conducting research and learn how to address challenges in all stages, from data collection to literature review to presentation of findings and recommendations.” Others were frustrated along the way by this messiness, but in the end recognized that they learned perseverance by pushing through the muck; they recognized that the setbacks were a good experience and made them stronger. They also led to a discussion about the state of the school district databases, and whether they were set up with any thought given to the end goal of using the data to answer district problems of practice. Students also reported valuing the personal learning in ways that they will apply in their future experiences. For example, the practitioner-scholars discovered their capacity building was extended far beyond writing literature reviews or crunching data. Students indicated learning the “nuance” of writing with integrity and respect, “what good communication looks like in doing research” and “the value of patience and perseverance as a key research disposition” in the face of muddled data that needed extensive cleaning. They learned that analyzing data can actually be “fun”!

Furthermore, many students reflected on the relevance and importance of understanding context, which would not have been revealed in a contrived and artificial project or even a personal project where the context is superficially understood. One scholar-practitioner articulated this revelation:

I think the most crucial thing I learned in this process is the importance of understanding the context. The recommendations we make, or even how we go about studying a topic, as researchers must be appropriate for the school or district with whom we are working . . . Our recommendations change based on the needs of the districts and their resources (financial, emotional, political) and understanding those needs and resources is a necessary first step towards an evaluation report that is helpful versus one that simply sits on the shelf.

This take-away supports recent research on the collective nature of district leadership and emphasizes the importance of understanding the education system across its multiple levels (Marks & Printy, 2003; Spillane, 2005).

It also appears that this project provided a degree of fulfillment for the practitioner-scholars; they thought the experience had utility value. This service-learning model created a mutually beneficial scenario for the district, the practitioner-scholars, and the university. One practitioner-scholar called it a “moral obligation to see the project through to the end.” It appears that practitioner-scholars viewed the authenticity, with accountability beyond the professor and the grade, as a crucial part of the model: “The work felt important and useful because I knew that there was a purpose driving the process. This purpose made this research class seem more relevant than any other we have worked through during this doctorate program.” Students felt empowered by the fact that their work could “affect change for teachers and hopefully, students.” Students felt “a well-earned sense of pride because we all contributed our time and talent to urgently needed information.” This feedback supports research that advocates for service-based learning, in which academic course learning can be connected meaningfully to community service experiences (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993), often resulting in improved academic understanding of subject matter, skills learned,

and the ability to apply knowledge and reframe complex social issues (Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007). Service-learning can provide practitioner-scholars with research topics that are pertinent to schools and communities.

Finally, it appears the students were highly engaged in the research tasks, likely due to the fulfillment and experiential value. Students reported the process was “powerful,” “engaging,” “meaningful,” and that:

Having the opportunity to complete an authentic report – one consisting of real data from actual students and programs – brought the experience to life in a very concrete way. It also underscored the importance of the findings themselves, since the data will be used to provide feedback and inform future practices.

Expansion of Perception

A transformative experience includes the expansion of perception by seeing issues, objects, or events through a new lens (Pugh, 2011). Mezirow (1992) argues that to achieve transformative learning, critical reflection is necessary, which then challenges the validity of presuppositions generated in prior learning. This experience occurred for the practitioner-scholars in several ways. First, it seems many participants realized that all too often evaluations are conducted in hindsight, without prior planning, or new initiatives or practices are put in place without any literature review or plan for subsequent evaluation of their effectiveness. Through this experience, these practitioner-scholars began seeing the problems that arise through those practices, and their perceptions began to shift about how to change these practices via their leadership roles in their districts. For example, one practitioner-scholar said:

My experience in 10 years of teaching is that we so often latch onto new programs and initiatives that may or may not have a solid research base. This practice is frustrating and exhausting to teachers who want the best for their students. Universities that provide districts with literature reviews and data analysis can serve as a grounding and validation that what they are doing is on track and where it may need adjustment. This relationship is key for moving students forward academically and socially and improving pedagogy.

Additionally, students gained perspective and a new frame of reference on how hard school districts are working to overcome issues requested in the reports. Students also discovered how to write to their audience, as explained by one practitioner-scholar, “The writing had to be sensitive to the needs of the district and respectful to the efforts they have already made, but at the same time, push movement forward.” This type of work also seemed to change student perceptions of researchers. One student felt “greater respect for those who do this work regularly . . . without falsely representing the findings, as can so easily be done especially when statistics are involved!” Ideally, these new perspectives will carry over as the practitioner-scholars continue with or take on new roles of leadership within their own districts.

Students reported their perceptions expanded through learning from each other’s experiences: both through working in pairs (i.e., “I am a better student for working alongside [my partner] and learned tremendous amounts about logic models and work ethic from him; he inspires

me to be a better person”) and the cohort as a whole. For example, one student said, “It is great to work together with those that have different views from myself; it’s a great way to expand my view and challenge me to rethink my own biases.” Another practitioner-scholar experienced a revelation about group work:

I realized that this is not a report done by just two of us. It’s a product with group work spirit. It shows me how a project or research can be done with presentation of multiple people’s wisdom and experiences. It has totally reversed my original thought of an individualized culture here in America. In my own culture there is a saying, study is done within the door, and accustomed to that I was not sure what to do for this project in the beginning. This summer demonstrated to me how research can be done by groups, and work can be divided and discussed and supported. It’s a new experience for me.

In sum, it appears this student experienced a personal transformation in her perceptions of group work in completing research. Further, she was able to reexamine her own cultural beliefs. These changes directly relate to transformative experiences described by Dewey (1938), Pugh (2011), and Schon (1995).

The most commonly reported expansion of perception appears to be in the ethical realm. Groups repeatedly reported their growing view of the importance of revealing their own biases and how struggling to overcome such biases provided helpful learning lessons for the whole class. For instance, one student said, “It reminded us that we must take ourselves out of the process and set aside any preconceived ideas we bring to the table.” Another practitioner-scholar elaborated on this concept, “We learned early in this course that every decision we make has ethical implications, and this was a profound piece of wisdom that I bore in mind during the journey. This was particularly salient in light of the fact that this project centered on real children, not numbers.” Overall, there was significant feedback about the individual changes in student thoughts and perceptions.

Motivated Use

Through conducting these service-learning projects, these practitioner-scholars were motivated to transcend the instructional context and apply what they learned to a new task or problem-solving situation (i.e., motivated use; Pugh, 2011). Of course, this component of transformative learning is the most difficult to support empirically, as one cannot truly know if this occurs without follow-up and observations of true practice. However, an initial inkling of this change in practice was indicated in the reflections.

Students repeatedly described how helpful, useful, and important it was to work through a real life evaluation and how “working through an actual evaluation was very helpful in understanding how to complete work that is directly pertinent to my current and future career.” For example, several students discussed how they plan to do things differently, such as plan and collect clean, accurate, and important data in the future:

I know that one group in particular was frustrated with the quality of the data they received. As a future elementary principal potentially leading and guiding data collection for evaluations, it is critical that I advocate for consistent and thorough in-

formation. In fact, this course has given me a new perspective of the challenges and possibilities of school district and university partnerships. I think communication of needs is key for meaningful evaluations.

Another practitioner-scholar was very grateful for the opportunity “to make a real difference in the lives of others instead of a theoretical dataset. I feel like I could go out and do another program evaluation right now, or at least hope to get a job doing it in 2017.” Perhaps most importantly, practitioner-scholars also seemed to begin understanding “the importance of developing a program evaluation strategy at the launch of a new program, rather than implementing it and deciding at a later date how it is to be evaluated.” It appears these leaders and future leaders gained motivation for actually implementing this new knowledge in their work context. “If a program has an evaluation process in place at the beginning, it will help ensure that the data that will be collected is meaningful, complete, and relevant to well-developed research questions.” Given that our scholars are also practitioners, often in leadership roles in districts and schools, this knowledge gained is critical.

Further, students gained knowledge about the individual project topics that they are motivated to use in their own professional contexts. Many discussed the meaning and impact of some of the topics, such as those on equity, disciplinary practices, and parental involvement. Several mentioned the new learning; one practitioner-scholar said this experience “caused me to reflect on my own practice as an administrator and consider what adjustments can be made at my school to better support students.” Another one said that “this project caused me to reflect on my own disciplinary practices and where I philosophically fall on the continuum of excluding students for behavior.” An additional student comment was “Perhaps the most immediate gain to myself and my current professional endeavor is the advancement of my knowledge of how to increase involvement among parents.”

These findings overlap with both the experiential value and the expansion of perception findings. It is expected that these will be reflected in the practitioner-scholar’s future research work and impact their daily interactions in their current and future leadership roles.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This study examined if, and in what ways, conducting district-driven research had the potential to be a transformative experience for emerging practitioner-scholars in a doctoral program as part of a new research-practice partnership between a university, a non-profit research organization, and six public K-12 school districts. We understand that true transformation involves deep reflection and impact, grows over time, and takes years before being fully realized in any organization. However, early evidence found in this research demonstrates that this partnership may serve as a model of a successful pedagogy, especially within an Ed.D. program that also meets the Ed.D. degree objectives, as stated by the UCEA and Carnegie Foundation, aiming to develop thoughtful and reflective practitioners (Young, 2006). The findings of this research revealed numerous benefits for emerging practitioner-scholars, namely facilitating a potentially transformative experience using a service-learning model for completing authentic K-12 school district-driven research projects. It does appear that Ed.D. students reap the benefits of hands-on problem solving with service-based learning, as found in prior research (i.e., Bridges, 1992; Holen & Yunk, 2014; Schon, 1995).

The model explored in this research is influenced by previous literature on effective uni-

versity practices. For example, the work conducted by the American Council on Education project on leadership and institutional transformation has found that the most successful institutions were guided by four understandings. First, they saw the value of being consistently reflective about the change process, learned from their experiences, and developed new capacities with which to face the future successfully. Second, leaders were guided by recognition that change is not an event, rather an ongoing, organic process. Third, comprehensive change requires holistic and integrated thinking about the institution. Fourth, successful change requires shared leadership and open communication (Hill, Green, & Eckel, 2001).

This research is a pilot project to reflect on the experiences of our practitioner-scholars in an effort guided by these principles. Although we recognize that change is a process, initial evidence suggests that transformative change has started within the practitioner-scholars—in perceptions, values, knowledge, and practice—and research should continue to reflect on the meaning of this model of service-learning for graduate students. Perhaps this research-practice partnership can serve as a model for other university-district partnerships as well as a vehicle to provide authentic learning experiences for practitioner-scholars.

It is clear that more research is needed. Subsequent phases of research should track long-term perceptions and outcomes of practitioner-scholars as well as ask the practitioner-scholars explicitly and specifically about transformative learning. Although several methods were used in an attempt to reduce response bias, it is possible the comments offered by the practitioner-scholars were efforts to please, although they had little to gain by doing so. Longitudinal research is currently underway, and early anecdotal findings reveal that this experience may be influencing these students' dissertation work in different ways, including the lens with which it is approached, the methodology utilized and data collection procedures undertaken, and in some cases even the actual content area pursued. For example, one practitioner-scholar's literature review on a district program revealed little to no third party quantitative research on the program, which led her to pursue such a project in her dissertation.

Additional investigations are necessary to continue assessing the impact on other stakeholders (e.g., district leaders, students, and teachers). This research is also currently underway, and initial observations reveal the school districts not only find the results valuable, they truly use the results and apply them to real-life problems. At the time of publication, during the current stage of this process, the work is best summarized by one emerging practitioner-scholar, who said, "I really appreciate that the university designed such a high-level research course that integrated theories and practices in a synergistic and dynamic way through authentic tasks that we could directly contribute to the educational frontline." We continue to investigate the impacts of these types of experiences. In an era of tightening education budgets and the reduction or elimination of research and evaluation departments, a university-K-12 district partnership that engages multiple community partners may be a viable method to provide school districts with needed research resources for developing effective instructional practices and evaluating their current programs in a time-sensitive manner.

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