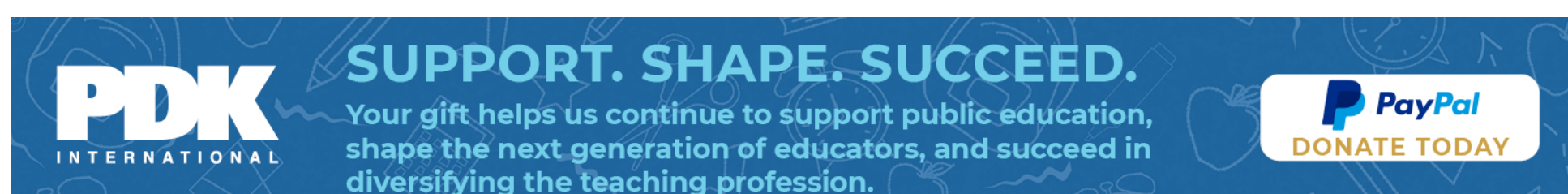


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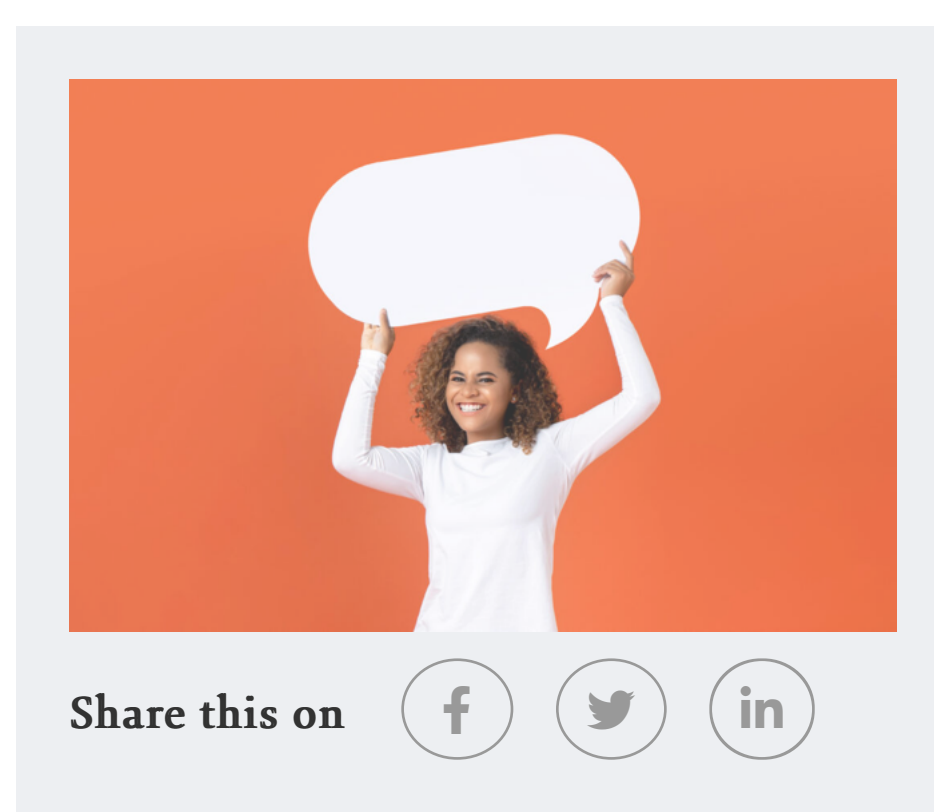
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Students as collaborators in research-practice partnerships: A commentary on Kappan's April 2021 issue

Ted Domers and Erika M. Kitzmiller
May 3, 2021

The April issue of *Kappan* offers a series of articles about the ways in which educational researchers are becoming more responsive to practitioners' needs, as well as the ways school and district practitioners are integrating research into their daily work. As practitioner-researchers who have been engaged in a four-year research-practice partnership (RPP) funded by the National Science Foundation, we were excited to read the pieces in this issue and consider their relevance to our own work.



Our research project explored ways to strengthen classroom instruction, school structures, and cultural norms at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's Carver High School of Engineering and Science (where one of us, Ted, is the principal), so that the school can more successfully prepare its students — primarily Black and Latinx youth from low-income immigrant families — to apply to, enroll in, and graduate from four-year colleges. Like those described in *Kappan*, our RPP was challenging and sometimes messy, but we were able to generate findings that led us to make significant improvements at our school. Unlike the projects described in the April *Kappan*, however, our study included and gave voice to a critical group of stakeholders who tend to be missing from most discussions about RPPs: students.

In their article on the Houston Education Research Consortium, [Daniel Potter, Erin Baumgartner, and Ruth Lopez-Turley](#) write, “[I]t is impossible to move from merely *studying* inequality to taking action to *reduce it* unless researchers already have this sort of long-term partnership with the local educators who can put their findings to use” (p. 29). Having worked as educators and researchers in the School District of Philadelphia for more than a decade, we know firsthand the importance of long-term relationships to drive a robust RPP. We have a deep respect for the skills and talents that all parties bring to this work, we understand the value of collaborative inquiry, and we know that research findings tend to be more useful when a wide range of people have been involved in designing the study and interpreting the data. And that's precisely why we invited students to participate in our research process from the beginning. They, too, are long-term partners in the success of our school. And, as educators, we have always encouraged student voice and agency in our classrooms, in our school community, and in our school decision making — so we also included students in our RPP.

Our students turned out to be ideal partners right from the start of the process. Nobody was more deeply engaged and committed. Moreover, nobody else could have seen the school from their perspective. Many times, when the adults in the RPP struggled to articulate a research question or make sense of the data, students clued us in to our blind spots, showing us solutions that they took to be obvious, but that we couldn't see. And when we missed the mark, they kept us in check.

The quality of their contributions shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, young people have been taking the lead on gun control, climate change, the #MeToo movement, and Black Lives Matter. Countless times, in recent years, they have challenged educators, policy makers, community leaders, and researchers to hear their concerns and take them seriously. They've testified before congressional committees, led marches and rallies, and organized successful efforts to make sustainable changes in their schools and communities. Nobody who aims to improve educational research and practice should overlook them.

In their article, [Cynthia Coburn, William Penuel, and Caitlin Farrell](#) write, “RPPs offer a locally driven, collaborative approach to education improvement and transformation, in which researchers, schools, and community partners pursue improvement goals they define together, drawing on the expertise of each partner.” Collaboration, they argue, builds the capacity of individual practitioners “to analyze and address the specific challenges that they face.”

When we began our RPP, we thought we had a strong sense of Carver's strengths and the challenges it faced. But we also recognized that our students spend just as much time in the school as we do, and they have a very different kind of expertise from ours. They have their own understanding of which practices and policies are effective and which are not, and they have their own ideas about the school's curriculum, pedagogy, and structure. When we ask them questions about how to improve the school, they never fail to provide insights and ideas that wouldn't have occurred to us.

From the start, then, Ted (the principal) recruited a dozen students to meet regularly with Erika (the researcher) during lunch to discuss their ideas about classroom instruction, school structures, and cultural norms. Also, Erika shadowed several students, gathering their insider views of what it's like to shuffle through their day from class to class. Time and again, they helped us gain a better understanding of the myriad ways that the school worked well for students and the ways it didn't.

For example, through our lunchtime conversations we gained two key insights from our students. The first was that they experienced much more anxiety about the college application process than we knew, especially when it came to applying to highly selective colleges. Thanks to students' participation in the research, we learned that the school simply hadn't done enough to demystify the process and guide them through it. Second, we learned just how much our students relied on their classroom teachers to give them informal advice about their college planning and decision making, mainly because they weren't receiving enough formal support from the school. This led us to overhaul our senior seminar course to include much more intensive and strategic college advising, to recruit recent alumni to serve as precollege mentors to our current students, and to build closer relationships with college admissions offices, who've become more responsive when our students reach out to them with questions.

Students were not just sources of insight and data, though. They also served as active partners in conducting the research. For instance, to gain a better understanding of their peers' sense of belonging at the school, students took the lead in creating a survey, conducting it across multiple lunch periods, and analyzing the results. Because of their involvement, the survey questions were provocative and meaningful, the response rate was high, and the analysis was nuanced, calling attention to specific concerns that we adults probably wouldn't have noticed.

In short, our student partners were essential to the success of our RPP. They pushed us to think more deeply about the aims of our work. They demanded that we pay attention to problems we had overlooked, but that they viewed as critically important. And they questioned our interpretations of the data, encouraging us to see things from their perspective. This was no traditional researcher-subject relationship, then. Students were essential co-creators and vital participants at every step. From start to finish, they took the research seriously, met their commitments, and were just as engaged as the rest of us (teachers, administrators, staff, researchers, and parents) in figuring out how to increase the number of Carver graduates who not only enrolled in college, but who persisted to earn their four-year degree. No one cared more about the project's success than the youth who helped lead it.



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