Relational Principles for Enacting Social Justice Values in Educational Partnerships

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Abstract

Drawing upon a long-term partnership between a university and a Title I middle school, we outline relational principles that guided our justice-oriented approach to collaborative research. We conceptualize relational principles as intentional strategies for equitable relationship cultivation and infrastructure development, grounded in the values and sociocultural backgrounds that each stakeholder brings to the partnership. Five principles emerged from our reflections, represented by the following adages: "don't assume neutrality," "recognize the means create the ends," "move at the speed of trust," "broaden ideas of benefit," and "strive for responsiveness, not perfection." Each principle is presented and described using examples that illustrate how these principles can be enacted within educational research partnerships. We conclude with a discussion of potential implications for fostering coherency among community-engaged research perspectives, with relational principles acting as a potential bridge between value-driven community-based participatory research (CBPR) approaches and practice-oriented tools from the research–practice partnership (RPP) field.

Keywords: community-university partnerships, social justice, community based participatory research, research and practice projects, community engaged research

Between 2018 and 2022, a collaborative group of researchers, administrators, and teachers built a partnership with a local middle school that sought to intentionally center social justice and equitably distribute decision-making power. Each participating stakeholder implicitly or explicitly brought their own values and beliefs to the work, which manifested in discussions during the early days of the partnership that had lasting effects on our relationships with each other. Our interpersonal practices fundamentally shaped the characteristics and processes of the collaboration, as well as its long-term research directions and outcomes. Through reflective analysis on our joint work, we generated five relational principles that connected our values to partnership processes, combining insights from both community-based participatory research (CBPR) and research–practice partnership (RPP) fields to advance social justice approaches to community partnerships.

Jennifer (first author) and Stephanie (third author) built a partnership with a Title I middle school in California (approximately 1,300 students in Grades 6–8, 69% Latine, 66% low-income, 31% English language learners) as part of a larger community-based initiative created by our university to better serve schools in the surrounding geographic area. In summer 2018, a philanthropic donation provided financial support for the partnership by funding a graduate student researcher until summer 2022. The research foci of this RPP emerged organically from the priorities of the school, including topics such as perceptions of school climate (Renick & Reich, 2020) and experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Renick & Reich, 2023b). Participating school stakeholders included administrators, counselors, students, and

teachers, with occasional involvement from district staff, based on the particular needs of the specific project.

When facilitating our partnership, we drew from CBPR approaches that seek to embody a "commitment to critical conscious-ness, emancipation, and social justice" (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008, p. 28), aligned with Freirean traditions. CBPR literature tends to focus on social justice values (e.g., power sharing, resource building) grounded in core beliefs of human dignity and empowerment (Fawcett, 1991; Israel et al., 2005), but the ways in which these values shape educational partnerships are underexplored. Through reflecting on how we worked to build an RPP guided by social justice values and congruent with CBPR approaches, we established a set of justice-oriented *relational principles*, showcasing how we cultivated relationships and estab-lished equitable processes within our work together.

Consistent with recent work to advance *community-based professional norms* (Campano et al., 2015) and *everyday ethics* (Banks et al., 2013), we aim to provide a pragmatic model of how community-en-gaged researchers can connect values with partnership strategies by merging CBPR and RPP veins of scholarship. The values prioritized by CBPR scholars (e.g., Fawcett, 1991; Israel et al., 2005) can be abstract and challenging to enact into practice. Although these values of authentic collaboration and prioritization of community needs are pres-ent across much CBPR literature (Fawcett, 1991; Israel et al., 2005), they cannot nec-essarily be applied consistently, due to the highly contextual nature of engaged re-search (Silka & Renault-Caragianes, 2007). Broad values of diversity and inclusion will manifest differently depending on the com-munity with which one collaborates, as well as the academic partners involved (Tryon & Madden, 2019). In contrast, RPP scholars tend to foreground the systematic use of tools, and design instruments to evaluate and guide the development of partner-ships (Henrick et al., 2017). For example, conjecture mapping can be instrumental in shaping educational improvement ef-forts in partnerships (Sandoval, 2014), but it does not inherently invoke social justice values. Grounded in a rich tradition of tool-based partnership strategies (e.g., Coburn & Stein, 2010), RPP scholars have increasingly turned their attention toward value-based

applications of tools for educational equity (Farrell et al., 2023).

In our partnership, we drew from both CBPR and RPP scholarship to guide our ap-proach, as both fields' respective emphases on social justice values and tools foster a productive cross-pollination useful for advancing knowledge and practice of edu-cational partnerships. With relationships centered as the common core of both CBPR and RPP models, our relational principles functioned as a bridge between theoreti-cal values and practical tools. In this sense, relational principles may be broadly salient across CBPR and RPP initiatives where interpersonal interactions are central, especially at the initial stages of relationship development.

A wealth of research has validated the im-portance of early work in the beginning of a partnership (Christopher et al., 2008; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017; Silka & Renault-Caragianes, 2007). For instance, initial actions and discussions are important for developing trust between stakeholders and setting routines that provide a foundation for continued collaboration (Brown & Allen, 2021; Tseng et al., 2017). Similarly, we found that early work in our partnership was es-sential for establishing equitable relational processes and mutual commitment to social justice values. The development of an eq-uitable partnership required reflection and action before even our first interactions with our partners. Our experiences high-light the necessity of researchers' work up front to cultivate awareness of assumptions, epistemologies, and values, as well as how these may affect collaborative interactions and partnership formation. The early work of our partnership had lasting effects and provided unique opportunities to enact relational principles.

Through reflecting on our partnership and reviewing documents created throughout its duration (meeting notes and agendas, facili-tator reflection memos, etc.), we generated five justice-oriented relational principles for researchers that were crucial to the forma-tion of our partnership, represented by the following adages: "don't assume neutral-ity," "recognize the means create the ends," "move at the speed of trust," "broaden ideas of benefit," and "strive for responsiveness, not perfection." The process of creating these principles, as well as identifying key examples of them in practice, was performed through iterative rounds of examining our

partnership materials, drafting and sharing initial ideas, and discussing emerging themes. This process was completed over 29 different work sessions and informed by approaches of ethical reflective practice (Fernández, 2018). Below, we describe each principle, situating them within previous research and providing illustrations of their application to our partnership. These principles are discussed in roughly chronological order, corresponding to particular phases in the partnership during which they were most central, though all remained relevant throughout the partnership. We conclude by further connecting our five relational principles with existing literature and discussing broader implications for community-engaged research.

Relational Principles for Social Justice Research Partnerships

Don't Assume Neutrality

Positivist approaches typically consider research to be a neutral activity in which researchers are framed as objective outsiders whose identities do not influence the scientific process (Campano et al., 2015; Tuck & Guishard, 2013; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). Rather than framing our partnership as a blank slate, our social justice values required an epistemological perspective that attended to the histories of harm that many communities have suffered at the hands of "neutral" researchers (Chávez et al., 2008; Denner et al., 2019; Minkler, 2004; Tuck, 2009). As an alternative to assuming neutrality and adopting its accompanying ahistorical objectivity, we sought to recognize and reckon with power dynamics inherent in community work. Prior to initiating our partnership, we anticipated that we might hold power (or could be perceived as holding power) conferred by our education level and professional status (Riemer et al., 2020), in addition to other features of our identity (e.g., ethnicity and gender) that may contribute to our privileged status within systems of oppression (Chávez et al., 2008; Denner et al., 2019).

Relational work with our partners began well before our initial meeting through two internal tasks: educating ourselves on the community context and interrogating our own identities. Specifically, we spent time learning about the participating site and its sociohistorical context, rejecting an ahistorical approach. First, we reviewed the school's website to learn about existing initiatives and conducted general internet searches to identify any newsworthy events concerning the school in recent years. We also accessed government data about the school to familiarize ourselves with student demographics and characteristics of the local area. Among the findings from our background research, we learned that the school was one of few Title I school sites in an otherwise affluent district.

Second, we engaged in reflective work to understand our privilege, contextualize our positionality, and contemplate potential power imbalances related to our role as researchers. This task was oriented toward potential relationships with the specific partners that we sought to cultivate, but the foundation for this intensely personal work was laid over the course of many years earlier in our careers. For example, the first author, a White woman, had spent substantial time involved in grassroots organizations that focus on helping White people develop antiracist identities. She also had received training in ethical community engagement through involvement in both academic and practice-oriented organizations.

In contrast to partnerships built from pre-existing relationships, ours was sparked by a philanthropic donation and an introduction to a school with which we had no prior interaction or preexisting relationships. Additionally, this partnership had no predetermined focus or content area as specified by the funder, meaning we could be open to any interests of the school and prioritize their desires. These factors, as well as our preliminary work, informed our behavior and expectations at initial meetings with the school site, helping us to anticipate our potential partners' concerns.

When we initially met with the school's principal, she started the conversation by asking what *we* wanted to do. Because of our prior training and awareness that our role as researchers was not neutral, we were cognizant of the relational power that was implicated in her statement (Riemer et al., 2020). Adopting a neutral, "objective" stance would have ignored the power dynamics present in the interaction. Similarly, in early meetings with school staff, we noticed they used language describing us as "experts," an assignment of status based on our education level. During such moments, we uplifted the expertise of the staff in an

effort to distribute power and position the community members as mutual participants, again rejecting a neutral approach that would divorce such interactions from a broader sociohistorical context. If we had not interrogated our own identities and power as researchers, we might not have been conscious of the nuances present in our conversations and our partnership would have started on an unequal footing (Denner et al., 2019). Through critically reflecting on our privilege and positionality, we approached our new collaborators without assuming that our partnership would be a priority to the school or that the community partner sites would serve our needs.

As the partnership went on, we continued to prioritize not assuming neutrality by developing relational routines and norms that were imbued with the social justice values we had considered prior to initiating the partnership, such as focusing on empowerment rather than evaluation and building community capacity. For instance, when the first author was invited to share survey results at a school staff meeting, she recognized that such meetings are not neutral spaces and her role in that setting was also not neutral, due to her close collaboration with school administration. Administrators typically set the agenda for the faculty meetings, which directly impacted teachers. As a university-based scholar sharing data about the school, the first author could be positioned as an evaluator of teachers' performance, with the power to shift school policies based on her perspectives. Awareness of this power led to intentionally designing the presentation to be very clear in how data were collected and why, as well as potential interpretations and limitations. By keeping close to the data and staying humble, she attended to potential risks and inequities implicated by the power dynamics present in that meeting. More generally, and consistent with critical scholarship on community-engaged research (e.g., Tuck & Guishard, 2013), we recognized that our status as researchers could never be neutral because of the inherent power imbalances in the work, but our set of relational principles could help us proactively navigate these imbalances.

As our partnership expanded and we began to conduct larger research projects, we maintained our nonneutral orientation toward research by intentionally engaging in power sharing and addressing power imbalances through explicit conversations about goals. Our social justice values of prioritizing community interests and needs not only shaped the broader structure and foci of the research, but also the interpersonal interactions and relationships with school partners. For example, a few years into the partnership, we undertook a study that was codeveloped with a core group of school staff, many of whom were administrators who held power on campus. A staff member outside the team contacted the first author with concerns about the accessibility of the research methods being utilized in regard to including families on campus who did not speak English, a concern that was possibly informed by previous negative experiences with researchers and the broader sociohistorical context. The first author's response was informed by her understanding of histories of harm caused by researchers and her interrogation of her privilege as someone who spoke English as her first language. She took the staff member's concern seriously, clarifying with whom the project was intending to collaborate (students, not parents like the staff member initially thought), confirming the team's plan to offer materials in multiple languages, and affirming that her worries were valid. Jennifer concluded her response with an expression of gratitude that the school staff member was willing to come to her with these critiques; through her ongoing work in activist groups focused on antiracism, she recognized the generosity and bravery required to "call out" others for causing harm.

Throughout our partnership, our social justice values highlighted that assumptions of researcher neutrality fail to consider oppressive systems we inherit and the ways in which contextual factors can influence relationships (Tuck & Guishard, 2013). Not assuming neutrality as researchers means making an intentional choice to consistently interrogate the ways in which power manifests within our community-based work, particularly related to our own identities, in contrast to a power-blind approach (Minkler, 2004; Tuck & Guishard, 2013). From framing early conversations to structuring the dissemination of results to responding to staff concerns, we relied on perspectives that were developed during our prework to center the implications of power and historical inequities in relationships with our partners. In our reflective conversations with our community partners, we found that these strategies help to create

more balanced partnership norms and allow them to have more agency in our collaboration. Overall, this approach provided a foundation to employ other relational principles and further cultivate a partnership centered on values of justice and equity.

Recognize the Means Create the Ends

In recent years, many research–practice partnerships have focused on using research to address pressing issues of educational equity (e.g., Penuel, 2017; Potter et al., 2021). Although our partnership similarly aimed to advance equity through our research *outcomes*, we also sought to embed equity in our research *processes* (Denner et al., 2019). Relegating equity to our desired research outcomes or our choice of research topics would not accomplish our goal of supporting the capacity-building of community members; rather, it would risk reproducing inequities within the partnership. Scholars of participatory action research have noted the tendency for researchers to exclude community members from certain aspects of the research process (even in community-based research), such as defining the questions or designing the methods. The exclusion of community members from such tasks can reinforce existing power hierarchies that limit knowledge production to academia, fail to build communities' capacity to conduct their own studies, and limit the utility of research (Stoecker, 2003). Accordingly, we chose to integrate a participatory approach into our RPP and sought to infuse equity into not just *what* we researched but *how* we researched (Denner et al., 2019). Specifically, we fostered relational equity and laid groundwork for justice-oriented research, first by establishing shared values in our partnership relationships, then by developing inclusive and flexible participation norms, and finally by framing relational equity as an outcome itself.

As previously referenced, during our first meeting with the school's principal, she expected us to pursue our own preexisting research agenda rather than seek her direction and guidance on what we should study. Our participatory approach entailed a shift in her expectations toward working with researchers; thus, we first had to collaboratively redefine and clarify what could be accomplished through community-based research. Articulating this difference helped us identify shared values and explore potential differences in beliefs. We intentionally held our first meeting at a coffee shop near the middle school, outside either of our workspaces, to establish equal footing and balance in our meeting context. We spent our first hour together discussing potential alignment between her goals for the school and the opportunities a partnership might offer (Suarez–Balcazar et al., 2015), concluding that we were a compatible match for collaborating on participatory research projects. We agreed to prioritize power sharing and inclusivity with school stakeholders, which facilitated the involvement of other school staff in following conversations. Although we were not aware at the time, this initial interaction established our shared social justice values as the foundation for all other relationships in the partnership, an experience the principal affirmed.

With the help of school administrators and teachers, we sought as much stakeholder engagement as possible in all of our partnership projects, aligned with the participatory ideal that "if community participation is seen on a continuum, then CBPR can be understood as an orientation to research that aims at maximum feasible community participation in all phases of the research" (Buchanan et al., 2007, p. 153). For example, each of our partnership projects began with suggestions from school staff and community members. With researcher support, school staff created data collection tools, which the researchers used to investigate topics that informed practices. In our youth-participatory action research (YPAR) project, students were coresearchers in all tasks, including data analysis and dissemination of results (see Renick & Reich, 2023a for more information). Our research processes prioritized equity through broad inclusion of stakeholders and power sharing in partnership decision-making. Importantly, this process required that we actively limit our own power as researchers to create space for other voices to be heard in knowledge generation tasks.

We found that flexibility was equally as important as inclusivity. Our partnership was designed to allow stakeholders to participate in ways that accommodated their needs and constraints. Administrators and teachers were involved to varying degrees and often opted to participate based on their availability or interest. This flexibility served multiple purposes related to equitable relationship building and collaboration on projects. Importantly, flexibility and fluidity in participation levels

helped minimize impositions on practitioners' time or resources, which enabled the partnership to be responsive to the diverse experiences and circumstances of school community members. Some of our university colleagues commented that our focus on inclusivity and flexibility made our work more time consuming and challenging than other partnership models, but we found our approach essential for fostering equitable environments that could provide a template for other initiatives at the school.

The relational processes we employed in our partnership helped support the capacity building of stakeholders and, accordingly, equitable outcomes in our partnership extended beyond just research goals—our collective commitment to justice-oriented "means" created expanded opportunities for equitable "ends." For instance, when working on our YPAR project, students reported that they enjoyed getting to share their data with teachers and felt like their voices were heard on campus. Prioritizing both equitable processes and outcomes is consistent with tiered layers of benefits conceptualized in the YPAR field, capable of not only impacting youth positively, but also improving entire settings and generating better research (Ozer, 2017). Similarly, we heard from school stakeholders over the years how our partnership supported a range of benefits to students and teachers through processes guided by equity and inclusion. Examples include improving students' sense of belonging and increasing teachers' capacity for knowledge production, which in turn supported research that informed school practices. Our research aims, grounded in broader social justice values, required that our relational processes prioritize equity, which supported benefits for students and teachers. Over the course of our partnership, we recognized that our intertwined goals of research and impact were dependent on the quality of our relational processes, and consequently, the equitable *means* we utilized were as important as the equitable *ends* we sought to achieve.

Move at the Speed of Trust

In order to build a partnership where school stakeholders felt comfortable engaging in collective research efforts, we found it necessary to "move at the speed of trust" (brown, 2017). This relational principle acknowledges that equity-oriented research entails cultivating trust between researchers and community members, which is often a slow process. We sometimes felt pressure to expedite research in order to meet normative expectations of our academic institution, but we recognized that authentic relationships with our school partners (who were often busy with the demands of working in a school) could not be rushed without compromising our core values. Conducting ethical research grounded in equity and justice required that we create opportunities to cultivate trust while resisting the impulse to advance our projects at a pace that might strain our relationships or erode our commitment to collaborative work.

For example, our partnership was in its second year when the COVID-19 pandemic began. The subsequent lockdown brought dramatic shifts to our routines and relationships. We adapted by attending to our partners' circumstances to ensure we were not placing an undue burden on them or overlooking their perspectives. By fall 2020, there had been substantial turnover among staff at the school, and we began the cycle of relationship development with new community members. Rather than allow our agenda to be driven by publishing pressures or research timelines, we moved forward only when there was sufficient trust in our relationships with our collaborators. We also identified immediate needs of the school with which we could assist, such as examining students' experiences with emergency distance learning. Although the pandemic is an extreme case, we sought to be "light on our feet" throughout the entirety of our partnership.

Earlier in our collaboration, we began cultivating trust by clarifying our intentions for collaboration and establishing shared values with the school stakeholders. We followed these conversations with actions that embodied our values and our commitment to equitable partnership work. Rather than simply *say* we weren't at the school to push our own agenda, we needed to *show* our partners with our actions. Consistent with our relational principles described previously, building mutual trust was not a means to accomplishing our research goals, but necessary to authentically position community members as holders of knowledge and power. In this way, our relational process of moving at the speed of trust was focused "not on establishing trust, but on being trustworthy" (Tuck & Guishard, 2013, p. 21).

We primarily demonstrated that we were trustworthy by embedding ourselves

within the school community, which entailed taking the initiative to learn about the school, getting to know the staff, and providing support in tangible ways. For example, any time a staff member invited us to join or observe a school activity, we attended. This practice communicated that we would prioritize their suggestions and participate in tasks that were not essential to our own interests. Similarly, while on campus, we went out of our way to get acquainted with stakeholders (e.g., accompanying teachers on lunch runs or bringing homemade baked goods to meetings as a way to break the ice); they later shared that such gestures helped them feel more comfortable collaborating with us. We also anticipated community members' needs and helped whenever possible, including tasks like stacking chairs after assemblies or taking notes during meetings. Throughout these activities, we expressed our sincere interest in being members of the community and did not advertise or push our research projects, showing our partners that our commitment to equitable partnership values was authentic. We continued these routines for the duration of our partnership, even after school stakeholders demonstrated that they trusted us (e.g., indicated by referring to us as colleagues, excitedly connecting us with a staff member they thought we could assist, or readily giving us more sensitive tasks to undertake on projects). For each stakeholder, trust came at different points in time. We had no preset timeline for advancing the partnership, as our work was dependent on whether our partners found us to be trustworthy enough to deepen our relationships and collaboration.

In addition to building trust with our initial staff partners, embedding ourselves at the school also helped expand our network of school relationships. The partnership began with meeting the principal, then involved the school's Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) team, and finally expanded to include teachers, assistant principals, counselors, district staff, and students. The equitable values we brought to school activities helped establish a practice of power-sharing in both our partnership and the school at large (Wallerstein et al., 2019). For example, the activities that we joined were led by school stakeholders, and in participating we deferred to their decision-making and expertise. After regularly participating in activities with the PBIS team, we became visibly in community with a larger group of

staff, attending (and eventually presenting) at full staff meetings. Our partnership was supported not only by deepening trust with our core group of collaborators, but also by broadly developing trust with a more extensive team of staff through our presence at schoolwide events. Once we earned trust with a wide range of school stakeholders, we expanded our core group of staff partners and began our YPAR project, which involved direct interactions with students and district staff. The school stakeholders demonstrated that they considered us to be trustworthy by encouraging our engagement with both students and high-level district officials.

During the first months of our partnership, we dedicated a substantial amount of time to the school. Faculty and administrators noticed this, and they reciprocated by increasing their willingness to dedicate time to the partnership. Rather than a formal agreement or exchange, we sought buy-in from school stakeholders through our development of trusting relationships. By initially focusing solely on building relationships, we felt we could build a better foundation for future research, especially when it required school stakeholders to cede some time or resources. Firmer and more trusting relationships would support a greater belief that the research was worthwhile and would benefit the school. Consistent with our efforts to center the needs of our partners, we sought to limit impositions on staff members' time, which further developed trust. Throughout our partnership, we ensured that all our requests for time or resources were proportionate to the amount of trust present. We conceptualized this as a *relationship bank*, aligned with Gottman & Gottman's (2008) theorization of a relationship bank account (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Every time we offered direct assistance to the school, spent time on site, or deepened our personal connections with stakeholders, we were putting a "deposit" into our relationship bank—building their trust in us and the partnership as a whole. Any time we asked for their assistance, time, or resources for a project, we were making a "withdrawal" from the relationship bank.

This model helped ground our work in mutual respect and kept us from advancing our projects faster than the trust-building of our partnership could sustain. Specifically, we could not "overdraft" from the relationship bank; if we did so, our research would be moving too quickly and inconsistent with

our commitment to equitable processes. Though this banking metaphor can imply that relationships are transactional, that is not how we sought to apply this framework. As described earlier, we sought to develop trusting relationships centered on values of care and respect. Rather than utilizing our relationship bank as a way to tally and track interpersonal dynamics, we instead adopted it as a way to apply our potentially abstract value of moving at the speed of trust tangibly to our actions. Academic norms tend to prioritize researchers' goals over those of the community (Tuck & Guishard, 2013), meaning the "status quo" of research can often be burdensome to communities. This framework helped us to be consciously aware of and reflective on the burden we might be causing to our community partners, by mentally monitoring our "bank account" and ensuring we were always considering impact on the community when pursuing research projects.

The process of building trust, growing our network of relationships, and increasing buy-in from stakeholders required gradual scaling of our projects. For example, the first notable research task we undertook was a schoolwide survey, which occurred about three months into our partnership. Because we had only a small balance in our relationship bank at the time, we kept the survey under 10 minutes to avoid imposing on stakeholders' time. We illustrated that their investment of time was worthwhile by quickly processing and sharing the results in a format that was useful and informative, less than 6 months after data were collected. This process resulted in another "deposit" into our relationship bank. Only after we shared results with the school staff did we begin turning the study into a publication. The survey was one of many research tasks that we conducted over the course of our partnership, and as our relationships continued to build over several years, we were able to make bigger "withdrawals." In the third year of our partnership, we undertook a YPAR project that required substantial time, resources, and increased interaction between the research team and students. This was possible only due to the foundation of trusting relationships and the hefty relationship balance that we had accumulated. The YPAR project was successful and the school stakeholders were pleased with its outcomes, which further sustained our partnership. Ultimately, trusting relationships provided the foundation for the ex-pansion of our collaborative research, but required patience and long-term commitment from us. Spending time at the start of the partnership to learn about the school and build relationships with a wide variety of community members was crucial for the long-term health of the partnership.

We found that "moving at the speed of trust" was necessary to actualize our values of inclusivity and power-sharing in our partnership (Wallerstein et al., 2019). If we had instead prioritized academic productivity over authentically demonstrating trustworthiness, our partnership would not have been aligned with our social justice values that required attending to stakeholders first. Trust entailed foregrounding the needs and desires of our partners throughout the duration of our partnership, above other pressures to publish or produce more research, in order to ensure we were building equitable and reciprocal relationships. We are cognizant that this principle may be challenging to apply in less hospitable academic circumstances than the ones in which we were placed. For instance, grant-funded projects with highly specific deliverables and short timelines may lead to pressure that undermines the capacity to build relational trust (see Renick & Turchi, 2024 for more information). This contrast highlights the importance of those with institutional power (e.g., funders, promotion and tenure committees) supporting partnership-based research (Ozer et al., 2023). Fortunately, in this collaboration, we were able to pursue research tasks commensurate with the concurrent depth of our relationships and solely when our partnership members found that a particular research project would be mutually beneficial.

Broaden Ideas of Benefit

Generally, research-practice partnerships seek to offer mutual benefits to both researchers and practitioners (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), but the particular conceptualization of benefits enacted depends on the values that underlie each collaboration. The social justice values that motivated our partnership led us to broadly conceptualize the benefits we received as researchers. We centered the needs and goals of our school partners throughout our research processes, consistent with social justice values and community-based research approaches that provided the foundation of our work together (Campano et al., 2015). We pursued ideas for new projects that were surfaced by

our partners—not by us—to ensure that all research was relevant and valuable to the school stakeholders.

For example, early in our partnership, the principal asked if we would support the school's PBIS team by conducting analyses of data that the team had previously collected. The analyses would inform the school's future PBIS initiatives, but the data were too limited to be useful for an academic study. Although the project did not have the potential to produce peer-reviewed publications, which are valued within academic norms, we felt it was important to take on this task, not only because it helped the school, but because our social justice framework shaped our perceptions of benefits that we would receive from it. The project afforded us the opportunity to learn about PBIS practices at the site, and as a result, we gained valuable insight that we would not have otherwise obtained. Our experience is aligned with CBPR literature asserting that community members have expertise that researchers often lack, and further, such expertise should be acknowledged in collaborative research (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). In addition to these learning benefits, our PBIS project also facilitated the development of relationships early in the formation of the partnership.

The studies we took on became more formal and involved as we established trusting relationships and robust routines in our partnership. After we completed several smaller projects, we began our first major research initiative at the school site: a campuswide school climate study. During conversations with school partners early in the codevelopment of the study, we explicitly communicated our desire to publish the results and explained that a publication would benefit our academic careers. At this point in our collaboration, we had developed strong relationships with school administrators and teachers, who trusted that we would not leave after completing our project ("parachute research"; see Heymann et al., 2016). Although we undertook the climate study with the intention to conduct publishable research, the purpose of the work was not only to advance knowledge, but also to be useful to the community involved in producing the knowledge. Before we focused on our manuscript, we presented the results to school stakeholders and created infographics in English and Spanish that the school could disseminate, then shifted to sharing

findings with the broader academic community through a peer-reviewed journal, a process for which community members expressed appreciation.

As we moved toward more substantial research projects within our partnership, we sought to allocate our time congruent with our social justice values. Specifically, we prioritized benefits to school practitioners, and the benefits that practitioners received from projects were generally proportional to the amount of time invested. For example, our initial PBIS project did not require a substantial investment of time from us or practitioners and was intended to provide more benefit to our school partners. In contrast, the school climate study involved analyzing rich qualitative data and was very time-intensive for the research team, but both we and the practitioners benefited substantially from the project. Across the two studies, we and the practitioners benefited in different ways, and both parties were aware of (and acknowledged) their respective benefits. This dynamic balance of investments and benefits was maintained through transparent conversations about needs, desires, and tradeoffs. It took significant time for our partnership to develop a mutual understanding of benefits, but due to each stakeholder's commitment to long-term collaboration, the partnership was able to endure unexpected events that otherwise might have disrupted the balance. As researchers, we always remembered that the primary functions of the school would take precedence over research projects, and we had to approach this work with humility, understanding that we were effectively guests in someone else's home.

During the third year of our partnership, the principal with whom we originally collaborated retired and a new principal was hired. At this stage, our partnership had substantial organizational momentum and was resilient to change. We built relationships with many staff members at the school, and through centering social justice values of reciprocity in our content, process, and goals, we sought to retain a balance of partnership benefits. However, the change in school leadership presented an opportunity to revisit our practices to cultivate trust, as outlined in the previous sections, while also building upon our partnership history and progress thus far. Changes in school staff are not uncommon in RPPs (Farrell et al., 2019), and for partnerships focused on social

justice, these changes can be an opportunity to review the routines and values embedded in relationships. In our partnership, the new principal brought fresh perspectives to our research and offered an opportunity to build a relationship with her and explore new projects. For instance, she was interested in analyzing students' grades to learn about academic disparities, an area we had not explored. Conducting this research with her and sharing findings that were relevant to her interests allowed us to foster trust and demonstrate the value of the collaboration to this new team member. Onboarding the principal into this partnership when it was already in motion required the integration of all five of our relational principles. By attending to her needs and interests, we began to build her trust in us and the partnership, which allowed existing research to continue and set a foundation for new projects.

By maintaining a broad perspective of the benefits that we could gain from partnership projects, we enhanced our capacity to conduct equitable and impactful research. Our work was driven by an imperative to put the needs of practitioners before those of researchers; ensuring that the school community would benefit was a precondition to conducting research, and having consistent, open dialogues allowed us to regularly assess whether our work was, or was not, serving the school. However, even when centering our community partners, it was still possible that we might make mistakes and inadvertently cause harm. This reality was crucial to embrace as our partnership continued to grow.

Strive for Responsiveness, Not Perfection

Amid the changes and challenges that occur in the everyday practices of partnership work, even with the best of intentions and principles to guide our decisions, we found that it was unreasonable to assume that we could avoid all mistakes and that harm would never occur (Denner et al., 2019). Power is complex and dynamic (Gaventa, 2019; Riemer et al., 2020), and our approaches to promoting equity in one specific setting at a particular moment might be ineffective in another (Tryon & Madden, 2019). Accordingly, we sought to employ Prilleltensky's (2003) *psychopolitical validity*, which both includes "the incorporation of knowledge on oppression into all research and action" (p. 199) and "demands changes toward liberation at personal, interpersonal, and structural domains" (p. 200). Rather than relying on our relational principles as a checklist to prevent harm, we found that the principles of psychopolitical validity helped us (1) minimize harm, by creating a partnership that centered social justice and equity; (2) be more responsive to feedback when we unintentionally caused harm, by encouraging prework and personal reflection to understand systems of oppression; (3) build relationships with partners wherein they felt empowered and supported to say if harm occurred, rather than feeling silenced, letting resentment build, and having more harm occur; and (4) design partnerships to ensure that our relationships were strong enough to withstand some degree of harm, if it did transpire.

For example, when conducting the first round of our YPAR project, we developed a recruitment plan with a team of school stakeholders to ensure that information would be shared with a wide range of students. The plan included outreach to students participating in classes focused on learning English, but no teachers of these classes were included in designing the recruitment plan. When information about the project was given to teachers of English language classes, a staff member shared that they felt our recruitment plan would be ineffective at reaching the parents of their students (as described in the Don't Assume Neutrality section). This omission was a clear oversight on the part of the research team; our partnership group was not as inclusive as it should have been, which had caused psychological and relational harm to some staff. We failed to include their expertise in a project that sought to include their students and implicitly expected them to support the effort (by passing along project information) without being a part of conversations about the particular partnership initiative.

In that moment, it was important for us, as researchers, to pause and reflect on the mistakes we made, rather than pushing the project forward. The first author retraced all the decisions that led to the situation, taking notes and reflective memos on her mistakes in this process, in order to ensure it would not happen again. She engaged in conversations with aggrieved staff members, listening to their criticisms and apologizing sincerely, as well as integrating their feedback into the recruitment strategy. Lastly, she also reached out to other members of the partnership team about this incident,

to foster transparency and openness about the mistakes that occurred, and share why our approach needed to be adapted before the project continued. The interaction highlighted the complexity of power's various levels, spaces, and forms (Gaventa, 2019), not only from personal identities and systems of oppression, but also from the hierarchies that exist in schools.

Because we had established deep relationships with our partners and made many investments in our relationship bank (Gottman & Gottman, 2008), our partnership was able to withstand this error and our principles helped us to responsively repair harm. Rather than admonishing ourselves for our imperfections, we reflected on how they provided valuable lessons about attending to equity in all processes. More broadly, we likened responsiveness to a muscle that required consistent practice and attention to strengthen over time. To this end, throughout the duration of our partnership, the first author collected all of the lessons she learned from efforts that didn't go as planned into a running document that she could regularly reference and reflect upon.

Focusing on responsiveness—attending to the realities of our context and developing consistent practices for addressing changing needs and integrating lessons learned—was an important orientation for centering equity in our partnership. Striving for perfection in partnerships can erase the messiness inherent in community-engaged work, especially in spaces with complex power dynamics. Educational contexts include diverse individuals with varied needs, which necessitates a continuous process of reflection in order to build equitable relationships. Perfection suggests an end point to this work, rather than ongoing evaluation and adaptation. Adopting a position of humility and reflection, especially in regard to nuanced power dynamics, can provide an antidote, and our school partners shared that they were grateful for our humble approach. Further, perfectionism can be a barrier to equitable partnerships, excusing researchers from trying to improve relationships if they feel unable to do so *perfectly*, rather than engaging in the complex work of trying to collaborate with communities.

Our emphasis on responsiveness rather than perfection included both sides of the partnership—the researchers' and the practitioners'. When we entered our partnership site, we acknowledged that school practitioners might have their own challenges and issues regarding equity (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). Our partnership approach was not completely deferent to our school partners and did not assume their perfection on issues of social justice or ignore the power they held in certain settings (Gaventa, 2019). Rather, we focused on building relationships that prioritized equity, which in turn laid a foundation for us to name concerns about inequities and act as critical friends when needed. Challenging conversations were more likely to be productive and well-received because of the rapport we had developed through successful projects, service to the school, and meaningful personal connections. For example, the YPAR project we undertook did not develop in a straightforward manner. From the beginning of our partnership, school staff consistently expressed a desire for greater student voice on campus, but after a couple of years, no action had been taken toward this goal. After significant relationship building and accumulating a healthy balance in our relationship bank, we gently brought up our observation and offered a possible solution that we could execute. Our suggestion was positively received and led to a new project that brought students' input to decision-making. We did not critique our partners for being imperfect; instead, we were responsive to their current contextual reality, which they said they appreciated.

We also did our best to be mindful of existing power dynamics at the school in order to prevent reproduction of inequities. For instance, when we worked with the school's academic counselors to analyze their data, we qualified and framed our research work to avoid devaluing their work or suggesting that the administration raise expectations for school staff. Specifically, we advocated for the counselors, clarified to the administration that such data analysis was not a responsibility of staff in their position, and circumvented the addition of more responsibilities for staff. We aimed to avoid negative effects on stakeholders' prospects for employment or promotion; we were aware that the free labor we contributed to the school could shift budgets, make some staff positions redundant, or result in the school's reliance on a temporary partnership, which we accounted for whenever we made decisions about the tasks we engaged in at the school. Consistent with justice-oriented partnership practices (e.g., Denner et al., 2019), we explicitly framed our roles and

responsibilities at the outset of the partnership, which helped to facilitate equitable outcomes in the long run. Our partnership impacted the structures and hierarchies of the school, but our attention to potential risks helped to reduce unforeseen consequences. By being deeply and consistently embedded in the school community, we felt prepared to endure mistakes and navigate politics of interpersonal relationships. In sum, creating and utilizing relational principles derived from social justice values guided us away from idealizing perfection and toward prioritizing responsiveness to potential harm and partnership challenges.

Conclusion

Using examples from our partnership experiences, we illustrated five relational principles that helped us build equitable, productive, and meaningful relationships with school stakeholders. Our work responds to recent calls for advancing pragmatic and socially conscious approaches to working with communities to which researchers do not initially belong (e.g., Campano et al., 2015). We conceptualized relational principles as imperatives for equitable relationships in our partnership (which necessitate infrastructure to support equitable interactions) that emerged at the intersection of our particular social justice values, critical epistemology, and partnership approach. In this sense, our relational principles could be considered an "axiological innovation" (Bang et al., 2016) that may have utility for both CBPR and RPP fields.

Despite overlap between scholarship on CBPR and RPPs (and their shared goals of partnership and mutuality), the respective fields may benefit from greater coherence. Potentially complementing CBPR's focus on values, RPP literature often centers tools (e.g., tools for improvement, Bryk et al., 2015; codesign facilitation, Fishman et al., 2013; and assessing partnership quality, Henrick et al., 2017), in addition to extensive attention to routines through which collaboration occurs (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Merging applied tools with theoretical values to develop systematic approaches for cultivating relationships with community members may yield innovations that advance both literatures. In our partnership, a singular focus on either values or tools would have led to different decisions about relationships with our partners and, ultimately, diverging outcomes. For example, Principle 5 ("strive for responsiveness, not perfection") helped us connect our values of prioritizing community needs with practices of reflection and adaptation. If we focused only on the values, we might have been ineffective at translating them into action, whereas a focus only on the practices of reflection and adaptation might have divorced the activity from the ethical imperative behind it.

Our effort to conceptualize and enact relational principles was partially motivated by a perceived need for a value-driven strategy to guide our relationship decisions and tool implementation. Social justice values typically invoked in literature on CBPR (e.g., Israel et al., 1998) include core beliefs of human dignity and democratized knowledge (Strand & College, 2003), as well as power sharing, strength and resource building, and equity in all aspects of the partnership's research activities (Israel et al., 2005). Although such values have been operationalized into ethical principles for participation, colearning, and cooperation (Minkler, 2004), much work remains to develop frameworks that pragmatically connect values to practices with community members. In our partnership, we found that a framework of relational principles was useful (and at some points necessary) for actualizing our values interpersonally. Establishing a theoretical and empirical foundation for principles that center relationships in partnerships offers a potent direction for research. Future work could formalize relational principles as a theoretical bridge between existing scholarship on CBPR and RPPs.

Taken together, our relational principles represent a loose progression that highlights the significance of intentional reflexive work early in the partnership formation process (Christopher et al., 2008; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). We found that each of the principles was particularly salient at different points in our partnership. Our preparatory work prior to the start of our partnership was guided by the first principle ("don't assume neutrality"), which provided a foundation for our social justice goals and routines. Next, we committed ourselves to "recognize the means create the ends" and "move at the speed of trust," which facilitated the establishment of equitable norms early in the partnership. After we began designing research projects with our partners, we embraced our obliga-

tion to "broaden ideas of benefit" to ensure that our work was continuously meeting our partners' needs. Lastly, as our partnership matured, we aimed to "strive for responsiveness, not perfection" in order to sustain reflexive practices and equitable outcomes. Overall, consideration of relational principles and their potential implications prior to engaging in a partnership may be a valuable form of prework that could help researchers ground themselves in their social justice values, while also offering utility throughout partnership work.

Our relational principles were also relevant when our partnership ended after 4 years, due in part to Jennifer graduating and moving out of state, as well as the cessation of philanthropic funding. Although some strong routines and relationships had been established over this first cycle of the partnership, there had not been stability in involvement of certain school stakeholders, due to significant administrative turnover. This lack of consistency in involvement meant that a continuation of the partnership with a new research team would have required returning to the preliminary stages of relationship building to establish new norms. This evaluation of the context of the partnership highlights the sometimes cyclical nature of relational work and the need to view such work as ongoing, rather than stable and static.

A nuanced examination of our partnership surfaces the dynamic nature of such collaborations rather than a linear evolution. To some degree, all of our relational principles were relevant at any point in our partnership. We practiced an iterative consideration of the relational principles depending on the changing sociocultural and contextual features of our partnership. Our relational principles were mutually reinforcing and complementary to each other. For example, "don't assume neutrality" provided bounds for "strive for responsiveness, not perfection." If we did not consider our power and privilege relative to the community's sociohistorical context, or if we did not consider the potential harm of research activities, then our "responsiveness" might not have been conducive to social justice. Our principles were conceptually and pragmatically linked because they were a product of our underlying ideology aimed at promoting the enactment of social justice values in our partnership practices (Fawcett, 1991). Although our relational principles

were nested within our particular style of CBPR and approach to RPPs, we expect that our conceptualization may be applicable to educational partnerships more broadly, as interpersonal relationships form the basis for all community-engaged work.

Our relational principles allowed us to structure a collaboration that built stakeholder capacity, fostered an environment of community empowerment, created a rich learning experience for graduate students, produced valuable scholarship, and improved educational outcomes at a local school. Further, we found that the relational principles helped us adopt practices informed by the school community, navigate the complexities of the social environment, and maintain an awareness of the complex web of relationships between people, cultures, and histories in which our partnership was situated. Building from work on ethical and professional norms in educational research (Campano et al., 2015) and everyday ethics (Banks et al., 2013), we utilized the concept of relational principles to generate guidelines for cultivating justice-oriented research partnerships in educational contexts that are both value-driven and amenable to systemization. This work is ongoing, and we will continue to refine our partnership approach, revisiting and revising our relational principles as necessary in future endeavors. We aim to be nimble enough to adapt to changes and humble enough to understand the need for constant reevaluation of our assertions. Though this work can be challenging and time-consuming, the years that we have invested in our partnership have shown us that the outcomes are well worth the effort. Ultimately, intentional focus on relationships with community members is essential to attend to the complex experiential and contextual factors necessary to support equity and justice.

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