



Establishing Authentic Collaboration During the Early Stages of an RPP

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ABSTRACT

Our poster addresses the focal area of Building Partnerships and Collaborating by examining how The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and Fabens Independent School District (FISD) partnership was created and how collaboration developed among the partners. We examine the implementation of Liberating Structures to develop authentic relationships, establish interaction norms, and open and transparent communication. These three elements of our partnership development resulted in flattening the traditional hierarchy often present in research-practice partnerships.

OBJECTIVES

Present partial findings we uncovered in the reflections engaged in by the RPP members. Explore how the use of Liberating Structures (LS) impacted the partnership development.

CONTEXT

- **Partnership:** UTEP, an R1, Hispanic serving institution, and FISD, a rural school district located in the El Paso region.
- **Place:** Located along the U.S.-Mexico border. El Paso is a geographically isolated city in Texas, as it is very distant from other metropolitan areas in the state.
- FISD is located in Fabens, TX, a rural community, approximately 30 miles east of El Paso, 2 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border.
- **Demographics:** The population of El Paso County was 868,763 people; approximately 83% were Hispanic or Latino. The median household income in 2021 was \$50,919, and 20.1% of individuals lived in poverty. (2022 U.S. Census Bureau)
- FISD includes one elementary school (PK-3rd), one intermediate school (4th-5th), one middle school (6th-8th), one high school (9th-12th), and an Early College High School (9th-12th). The approximate enrollment is 1,983 students of which 99.3% are Hispanic, 90.7% are Economically Disadvantaged, 50.5% are Emergent Bilingual/English Language Learners, and 75.1% are At-Risk.

METHODOLOGY

Case Study

This design will allow for gathering in-depth information about a unique case. A case study is most appropriate because it allows the collection of extensive data while "investigating a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (Yin, 2017, p. 18).

Participants

- 2 university professors
- 8 FISD employees, specifically:
 - 3 central office leaders, 1 campus administrator, and 4 STEM teachers representing the elementary, middle and high school levels

Data Sources

- Individual written and group verbal reflections during and after 6 working sessions held during fall of 2024 and spring of 2025
- Questions for the reflections focused on examining the progress of building an RPP and the progress of the work

Data Analysis

Inductive coding was utilized to develop themes presented in the findings. There were two cycles of coding: individual holistic coding and collective coding. (Saldaña, 2016)

Liberating Structures (LS)

- is based on thirty-three microstructures (techniques) to foster team building and group interaction, based on open communication
- focus on how people work together and "are methods for a purpose: to improve performance" (McCandless & Lipmanowicz, 2014, Prologue)
- "productively disrupt conventional patterns in how we work together. They change dramatically the way results are generated without expensive investments, complicated training, or dramatic shifts in macrostructures [i.e., policies, organization structures and core operating processes]" (McCandless & Lipmanowicz (2014p. 47).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

These three elements of our partnership development resulted in flattening the traditional hierarchy often present in research-practice partnerships.

1. Authentic Relationships

"The brainstorming was upfront, clear and authentic in the process. The entire process was authentic." - Segovia

"I pick some strategies from our meetings that I will incorporate into our district needs assessment." - Galaviz

2. Interaction Norms

"Analyze what we need to do as a group. Better understand what is my role in this project. Learn how each of us can contribute to the success of the team." - Rebecca

"As I interact with the team, I am seeing my personal beliefs guiding my interactions by being open to new ideas, collaborative work, being positive." - Valeria

"Meetings are very democratic, we address each other by first name, and allow everyone to have a voice" - Galaviz

3. Open & Transparent Communication

"The team is becoming more open and communicative." - Rincones

"Ready to start with shared responsibilities." - Lety

OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT

1. What are the challenges present in your RPP around the following:
 - joint decision-making
 - creating space for all voice to be considered
 - sustainability
2. How would you describe the hierarchical structure of your RPP?
3. What opportunities can you identify to incorporate LS (or elements of LS) into your RPP work?

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