

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Building Beneficence: School-Academic Research Partnerships in the Study of Adolescent Lives After Migration to America (SALaMA)

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In this article, we reflect on an eight-year partnership we established between a public school system and a university-based research team for the interdisciplinary Study of Adolescent Lives after Migration to America (SALaMA), including perspectives from both the research team and school partners. The study used qualitative, quantitative, and participatory approaches to assess the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing needs of high school students resettled to the U.S. from conflict-affected countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. Such a complex study with a potentially vulnerable population required close and flexible collaboration between school-based staff and the research team throughout the project. This article recounts the story of this collaboration, discusses its predominant challenges and tensions, and identifies the principles we used to overcome them to achieve more effective school-academic partnerships. Throughout, we make the case for research partnerships guided by (1) building engagement and trust from day one, (2) balancing rigor and adaptability, and (3) creating relationships that extend beyond data collection. What braids these principles together, we argue, is a commitment to beneficent research that gives back to partners and participants in meaningful ways that can be used to advance their goals. By juxtaposing school and researcher perspectives over the course of SALaMA, this article offers insights about the values, costs, tradeoffs, and potential rewards at play in participatory applied research aimed at building beneficence.

Collaboration is the bedrock of much applied educational research, as well as school-based studies in other disciplines such as psychology, social work, and public health. Depending on the study design, researchers may engage students as survey respondents or participatory co-investigators, enlist administrators in developing sampling frames and recruitment strategies, engage educators in communicating the study's purpose to students and cultural liaisons in interpreting assent forms for English language learners. Researchers may reach into the wider school community as well, requesting parental consent for student participation, recruiting youth leaders for participatory mapping projects, or establishing referral systems for responding to acute student needs identified during the study. Studies have documented a range of challenges in such school-academic partnerships, from school resource constraints and restrictions on accessing students, to more fundamental misalignments between school and university organizational

cultures (Bevins & Price, 2014; Bonnell et al., 2018; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). Yet, the literature providing guidance on addressing these challenges remains underdeveloped. What makes for an effective school-academic research partnership, and how can applied researchers and evaluators cultivate mutually beneficial and lasting relationships with collaborators?

In this article, we draw on our eight-year experience developing an enduring research partnership between Harrisonburg City Public Schools, Columbia University, and Washington University in St. Louis for the Study of Adolescent Lives after Migration to America (SALaMA) to draw key lessons for applied researchers working with schools and other frontline service organizations to help solve problems in an evidence-based manner. SALaMA is a multi-sited, mixed-methods study examining the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of high school students resettled to the U.S. from conflict-affected countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The study has involved classroom-based surveys, participatory focus group discussions, and a PhotoVoice project with students, as well as key informant interviews with educators, counselors, administrators, and caregivers. School faculty and administrators have been central to planning, implementing, and disseminating the study. By juxtaposing our perspectives as a school administrator (Jeremy) and an applied researcher (Cyril) involved in SALaMA, we aim to offer pragmatic insights about the values, costs, tradeoffs, and potential rewards at play in establishing participatory school-academic partnerships.

In the following section, we offer a brief, illustrative sample of our early collaboration, as we were in the initial stages of developing SALaMA. These records provide contemporaneous detail on our initial contact, first impressions, negotiations, and procedures for refining the study design and data collection process. We then reflect on these records, and our collaboration on this study more generally, to propose three key principles for establishing strong research partnerships, each guided by an overarching commitment to building beneficence in applied research. These principles include (1) building engagement and trust from day one, (2) balancing rigor and adaptability, and (3) creating relationships that extend beyond data collection. Next, we provide a summary of SALaMA and its key methods, as well as a background on Harrisonburg, VA, the study site that is the empirical focus of this article. We then reflect on the three guiding principles as they have applied to SALaMA in Harrisonburg, alternating perspectives between the school and the researcher, before concluding with a discussion of the commitments required by both sides of the partnership to apply these principles continuously.

Laying the Groundwork

Jeremy's Email to High School Principal, October 23, 2017

"A request has come [for Harrisonburg High School] to participate in a research study about Arabic speaking refugee/immigrant students. Are you okay with proceeding on this?"

Principal's Response to Jeremy, October 23, 2017

"All studies involving our students happen only if [the Superintendent] approves. Aside from that, how many kids, how many times, in what language, what questions/kinds of questions will be asked of them? Will we need to debrief with the kids afterwards? Is it all anonymous? What is done and who has access to the data? I've got lots of questions."

Cyril's Field Notes, February 27, 2018

"Everyone [at Harrisonburg High School] was very supportive of the study and committed to making it work, but had some concerns especially about reaching our target survey numbers, both for the refugee and the general student populations [...]. They talked about (a) not having the survey take place after class or on the weekends, but instead during the school day. They highly recommended concentrating the survey over the course of two or three days, and [...] taking kids out of class to complete it. They also wanted to discuss (b) providing incentives to participate (gift card raffle)."

Jeremy's Email to Superintendent, February 28, 2018

"I met yesterday with [Cyril] about migrant youth from Arabic-speaking countries. We are working through some of the logistics and I am going to make a special effort to be sure that [Harrisonburg High School] team members who already feel overstretched do not need to do any extra work for this study - that is their intent and they have the resources to do things needed to make that work."

Jeremy's Letter to Columbia University Medical Center Institutional Review Board, March 20, 2018

"We believe that, after consulting with us, the Columbia University [CU] research team has incorporated several critical measures to safeguard our students. In order to minimize the risk of participation, the CU team will work with our administration and personnel to identify eligible participants, will provide parents/guardians an informed opportunity to opt-out, will engage students in a child-friendly informed assent process, and will be prepared to refer students to the appropriate services should they need them."

Cyril Field Notes, July 9, 2018

"Discussed procedure of asking students to conduct survey during their classes, and Jeremy says the easiest way to have students do the survey was by pulling individuals from their classes – they do this all the time for testing

[...]. Jeremy was extremely helpful in providing us with a space to conduct all the key informant interviews for the day, and getting us set up with water, and internet.”

SALaMA IRB protocol, November 19, 2018

“In Harrisonburg, the research team will create a sampling frame using the school’s roster, and students for each of these two strata will be selected randomly. The Harrisonburg survey will be self-administered to a mixture of students from both strata in the school’s computer lab [...]. Data collection has been designed to avert possible stigma associated with isolating one particular study stratum on the basis of their citizenship status [...]. Participating students will have the option to enroll in a free raffle for a \$10 gift card.”

At first blush, these segments, taken from internal documents over the course of a year, reflect the standard procedures of a conventional school-based research project: introductory meetings, letters of support, and IRB protocols. But, upon closer inspection, these records reveal the seeds of a relationship that would blossom into a profoundly collaborative research partnership that endures eight years later. Through the constant give and take, adaptation, and mutual generosity previewed in these early interactions, we were able to execute a complex, mixed-methods study that has already yielded over a dozen publications and generated numerous insights into everything from suicide risk factors among newcomer students (Meyer et al., 2024; Stark et al., 2022) and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on school engagement (Meyer et al., 2023) to culturally responsive social and emotional learning (SEL) for a diverse student body (Bennouna et al., 2021; Stark et al., 2021).

In 2018, Jeremy was the Director of Teaching and Learning at Harrisonburg City Schools in Virginia, while Cyril was a Senior Program Officer at Columbia University, where he was helping to launch SALaMA. Qatar Foundation International (QFI) initially contracted the study as a one-year, mental health needs assessment of refugee students from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other war-affected countries in the MENA region. QFI’s Arabic language programming in schools like Harrisonburg High School had identified cases of psychological distress among students from this region, and QFI’s team wanted rigorous data on this population’s needs to inform their programming efforts.

When Cyril walked into Jeremy’s office on February 27, 2018, the SALaMA team was in the early stages of designing its research instruments and ethics protocol. The purpose of the visit was to consult administrators, educators, mental health counselors, and other potential study partners from Harrisonburg on the best approach for conducting the study. Early engagement would ensure the research aims and data would be useful to those most equipped to serve student needs. The research team was also intent on collecting data in ways that showed respect for stakeholders,

recognizing both the careful choreography required to run a school and the potential risks of conducting research with a population that has so often been mistreated.

As the segments above demonstrate, this early engagement had a formative influence on the research design, informing everything from data collection timing and logistics to informed consent processes, recruitment strategy, and instrumentation. More importantly, it laid the groundwork for a collaborative and exceptionally fruitful partnership that continues to this day, guided by the principles of (1) building engagement and trust from day one, (2) balancing rigor and adaptability, and (3) creating relationships that extend beyond data collection. What braids these principles together is a deep commitment to beneficence in applied research.

Beneficence, a pillar of ethics for research with human subjects, obligates researchers to avoid doing harm and to maximize the potential benefits of research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The principle is most often applied to research participants, or to the populations to which they belong, but researchers may also alternatively harm or benefit the partners with whom they work to plan, implement, and act upon their study activities. School faculty may experience educational research as extractive, taking advantage of captive audiences for purposes that primarily benefit the researcher and taking up faculty time amid widespread teacher burnout (Mijakoski et al., 2022; Smith & Petosa, 2016). Beneficent research, by contrast, gives back to partners and participants in meaningful ways that can be used to advance their goals. In this article, we reflect on our collaboration and explore the role of these three principles—and beneficence more broadly—with the hope that it may serve future participatory research and evaluation partnerships.

Scholars have described numerous challenges in developing effective partnerships between researchers and practitioners, whether in education or in other relevant disciplines, like public health and refugee studies (Bevins & Price, 2014; Bose, 2024; Erwin et al., 2023; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). Often, these are rooted in conflicts between the contrasting roles of those who study and those who serve. Researchers are driven to maximize methodological rigor. This requires time for careful data collection, analysis, and writing, even if the windows of opportunity for data collection are narrow, often during breaks in the academic calendar. University norms, moreover, reward detailed—and for the most part publicly inaccessible—reports, which take months, if not years, to publish in academic journals. Applied too rigidly, many of these parameters clash with the imperatives guiding educators.

Public schools are institutions where myriad stakeholder groups have inserted their own objectives, and in which educators may feel unable to meet the demands placed upon them (Scherer et al., 2020). Even when they are motivated to participate in research, educators may have neither the time nor

the authority to do so (Richard & Bélange, 2018). When they can engage in research, teachers and other practitioners often discover the findings are not readily accessible or actionable. At the risk of oversimplifying, contrasting these typical roles highlights several of the tensions that frustrate university-school partnerships—tensions that too-often cause studies to fail or to serve one side of the relationship unfairly.

SALaMA, A Methodological Overview

Led by an interdisciplinary team of researchers initially at Columbia University and then at Washington University in St. Louis, with Dr. Lindsay Stark and Dr. Ilana Seff as primary investigators, SALaMA aims to assess the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing needs of high school students from the MENA region, including those resettled to the U.S. as refugees, Special Immigrant Visa holders, and immigrants with other statuses, as well as children of resettled parents. In addition to characterizing the prevalence and distribution of symptoms like suicide ideation, the study also focuses on identifying the sources of mental distress and the ecologies of care that can protect students from these risks and promote their overall wellbeing (Bennouna, Ocampo, et al., 2019). In partnership with school systems and local resettlement agencies across the U.S., SALaMA has conducted research in Harrisonburg (Virginia), Austin and Dallas (Texas), Chicago (Illinois), and the Detroit Metro Area (DMA) (Michigan). Most recently, partners at Maynooth University in Ireland have launched a corresponding study named SALaM Ireland.

In order to meet its research aims, the study has used a combination of qualitative interviews, classroom surveys, and participatory methods ([Table 1](#)). The team conducted 101 semi-structured interviews with key informants, such as educators, school counselors, administrators, refugee resettlement staff, and community leaders. Researchers also visited students' homes, interviewed 67 caregivers, conducted in-class surveys with 465 students, and held participatory focus group discussions with 69 students across six schools in three states. Using the Participatory Ranking Methodology (Stark et al., 2021) focus group participants developed and voted on recommendations for how schools could better support refugee students from the MENA region. Sixteen students also participated in PhotoVoice studies in Chicago and the DMA. These participants took photographs in response to a series of prompts, after which they completed two group-based reflection sessions, as well as four participant-led qualitative analysis sessions using the transcripts of those previous reflection sessions (Seff, Bennouna, et al., 2024; Smith-Appelson et al., 2023). Through this project, the students also produced a PhotoVoice gallery, which has been exhibited in Chicago and Monterey, California.

To inform school strategies, the study team paired student recommendations with the perspectives of educators at the same schools (Bennouna, Ocampo, et al., 2019), as well as with a review of school-based programs for supporting refugee newcomers across the U.S., U.K.

Table 1. SALaMA Data Collection Activities

Data collection activity	Sample	Sample size (n)	Locations
Classroom survey	General high school student population and MENA high school student population	357	Austin Harrisonburg DMA
Key informant interviews	Professionals engaged with resettled refugees, such as educators, counselors, therapists, and resettlement agency staff	101	Austin Chicago Dallas DMA Harrisonburg
Caregiver interviews	Adult caregivers of MENA adolescents	67	Austin Dallas DMA Harrisonburg
Focus group discussions	MENA adolescents	69	Austin DMA Harrisonburg
PhotoVoice	MENA adolescents	16	Chicago DMA
Survey-based <i>FORWARD with Peers</i> evaluation	Arabic class students	108	DMA

E.U., and Australia (Bennouna, Khauli, et al., 2019). Drawing on results from these data collection activities, the SALaMA team also worked with partners in Michigan to develop, pilot, and evaluate a culturally responsive SEL curriculum for Arab newcomer students named *FORWARD with Peers*. Early evaluations of the intervention, which was piloted in three participating schools with an outside instructor, demonstrate its potential for boosting perceived social support and resilience among students (Seff, Stark, et al., 2024). Finally, recognizing that the state of mental health needs and school-based support options is dynamic rather than static, the SALaMA team has on several occasions worked with school partners to understand acute challenges, such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the surge of youth suicide around the country (Meyer et al., 2023, 2024).

As SALaMA prepares to sunset, the team is working with school partners, such as Harrisonburg City Public Schools, to draw additional actionable insights from these various research activities and to translate these into classroom, school, and community practices that can better support newcomers and their families. The study team recently also convened scholars and practitioners from around the U.S. to develop a consensus research agenda to guide future scholarship on welcoming refugee and other newcomer students (Gillespie et al., under review).

Background on Harrisonburg

Harrisonburg is a small city in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with a diverse population, which is driven by its diversified local economy and a history of serving as both a refugee resettlement site and a hub for various immigrant communities (Garcia & Carnock, 2016).

The public schools in Harrisonburg reflect the community's diversity. The student body is predominantly Hispanic, with significant representations of White, African-American, and MENA students. Although a large proportion of the students is economically disadvantaged, robust community support ensures access to comprehensive programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), fine arts, and dual language education.

The MENA population in Harrisonburg began to expand in the late 1990s, primarily due to the resettlement of Iraqi Kurdish refugees. Subsequently, the area has attracted additional immigrants and refugees from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and other MENA regions (Bearinger, 2017). While most MENA students in Harrisonburg identify as Muslim, there are also communities of Christian and Yazidi backgrounds. Currently, MENA students constitute approximately 8% of the school-age population in Harrisonburg. Notably, the majority of MENA students, similar to most multilingual learners in the city, are U.S.-born. The SALaMA team selected Harrisonburg as a key study site due to its considerable MENA population and its ongoing relationship with QFI, which has supported the district's Arabic language program.

The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia is home to multiple higher education institutions. Three are within or just outside Harrisonburg's boundaries, and five more are within an hour's drive. This geographical proximity to colleges and universities fosters opportunities for collaboration and research and generates frequent research requests involving the local school population.

As is typical in many public school divisions, the research review process involves securing the permission of the school superintendent, who checks with building administrators and other key staff to determine whether the request is feasible. In the case of Harrisonburg, requests run through a district-based IRB that makes a recommendation to the superintendent. The school division, however, frequently turns down research requests. Why? There are three common reasons why the school system says "no." First, many research proposals include excessive requests for staff or student time or class disruption. Instructional time is precious and giving up even an hour for an activity that is not clearly connected to the school's learning goals is viewed as inappropriate and irresponsible by many educators and families. Second, most proposals fail to clarify the benefits to students or staff from either the process or outcomes of the research. From the perspective of many educators and school administrators, research conducted in schools often seems to go into a "black hole" of published papers behind paywalls, and conference presentations for other academics that no school staff will ever see. Third, many research proposals do not have an insider in the school division who is invested in the research. SALaMA was able to secure initial permission from the superintendent and school administrators after considerable negotiation, once the school division was confident that the research requests could be reasonably accommodated, would have clear benefits for students, and had the involvement of school staff.

Table 2. Applying the Three Principles for School-Academic Partnerships in SALaMA

	Lead with trust and meaningful engagement	Balance rigor and adaptability	Cultivate enduring partnerships
Main research stage(s)	• Conceptualization • Design • Planning	• Data collection • Analysis • Translation	• Analysis • Dissemination • Translation • Conceptualization of subsequent cycles
Application	• Conducted formative conversations and field work • Modified IRB protocol and recruitment procedures • Added study group	• Postponed survey and reordered data collection • Conducted data collection in accordance with class schedule and classroom availability • Devised new intervention in response to identified need	• School partner engagement in analysis, interpretation, and publishing • Presentation of preliminary results to school faculty and staff • Involving partners in conceptualizing and planning subsequent research cycles • Partnership for piloting intervention
Researcher considerations	• Enhanced community outreach and tracking • Added Spanish language translation	• Extended data collection timeline • Additional field work costs	• Extended publication timeline • Additional costs to share findings back
School considerations	• Clear and honest communication about stakeholder concerns • Identify who “owns” responsibility for the school’s side of the partnership	• Provide appropriate access to space, student time, and data • Additional staff work to de-identify data shared with researchers	• Include a range of school leaders in information sharing, even as people change roles • Make staff available for ongoing collaboration

In the following sections, we describe three principles that emerged from our ongoing partnership and then present reflections from both researcher (Cyril) and school administrator (Jeremy) points of view ([Table 2](#)).

Principle 1: *Lead with meaningful engagement and trust-building*

From the beginning, the SALaMA research team initiated conversations with multiple district stakeholders, including school administrators, counselors, and family liaisons. These discussions were not merely formalities but were integral to shaping the study’s design and implementation. The early discussions were wide-ranging, covering everything from the study’s objectives to the specific wording of survey and interview questions. The research team also conducted an online survey with administrators to learn more about the schools before conducting in-person data collection. This level of detail ensured that the research tools were culturally sensitive and relevant to the local student population. By tailoring the methodology to meet the needs of school stakeholders as much as possible, the collaboration minimized disruptions to instructional time and reduced the burden on school staff. The depth of this engagement also paved the way for securing permission from other administrators, since many of the likely objections had already been addressed in the revised study design.

A school perspective (Jeremy): One of the most significant differences between SALaMA and many other studies conducted in our school system was the team’s commitment to early and continuous engagement with us. This approach not only demonstrated their respect for the school staff’s

expertise but also their openness to collaboration and feedback. By involving school partners early in the process, the research team showed that they valued the importance of local context and that they were willing to adapt.

The adjustments we requested were not always simple. Early on, we asked the research team to change the informed parental consent process for the classroom survey from opt-in (i.e., active) to opt-out (i.e., passive) consent. Our internal team understood the potential value of this research, and we wanted to make sure that it succeeded. School staff strongly believed that a typical opt-in approach to the survey was not going to reach the target number of participants. We were especially concerned that students whose caregivers had the most difficulty regularly engaging with school faculty would be systematically underrepresented in the study, resulting in an underestimation of student need. For this reason, we asked for an opt-out survey design instead. This required the research team to return to their IRB for permission, mail opt-out consent forms to all parents of selected students, and enhance participant tracking to ensure that students and families had opportunities to understand the research and opt out if desired. These kinds of modifications complicated the study but they likely increased the survey's response rate and deepened the partnership between the researchers and the school.

Our school team also saw the survey as an opportunity to understand the needs and perspectives of students in the “comparison” (non-MENA) group and negotiated with the SALaMA team to make sure survey questions would yield meaningful data from students who were not necessarily the main focus of this study. The team's willingness to make the survey available in Spanish opened an opportunity for Spanish-speaking newcomer students to participate as well.

Trust is crucial in any participatory research study (Jagosh et al., 2015), and it was clear from the outset that the SALaMA team was committed to fostering a genuine partnership. It certainly helped that the study funder, QFI, was already a trusted partner for our school division and made the initial introductions between us and the research team. The team listened to stakeholder concerns, incorporated the feedback they received, and maintained open lines of communication throughout the study. Mutual respect was built one conversation and decision at a time, and developed into a collaboration that could overcome many types of challenges. The research team's adaptability also highlighted their respect for our school division's primary mission: educating students.

A researcher perspective (Cyril): It is difficult to overstate the importance of establishing a trusting bond with SALaMA's school partners from day one. We never viewed Harrisonburg High School's requests as concessions for securing permission from the school administration. Instead, we viewed their feedback as indispensable local knowledge that would improve the eventual

quality and impact potential of our findings. For all the administrative costs of repeated IRB protocol revisions, the ideas we received from Jeremy and his team often made our field work easier and more effective as well.

For example, an internal field note reporting on Jeremy's idea about opt-out consent received the following comment from SALaMA leadership: "I mean, this would be amazing" and "would make inclusion so much easier." The school team also recommended that we include students from Sudan—which is often not classified as part of the MENA region—substantially increasing our eventual sample. Similarly, school staff recommended translating our survey to additional languages beyond English and Arabic in order to reach other English language learners. Given budget constraints and time considerations, we were only able to create a validated survey in Spanish, but this too drastically increased our survey sample.

We conducted these preliminary site visits and made research design modifications not simply to court a reluctant school partner but because we trusted the team's expertise on their local context. Their suggestions not only facilitated data collection but also enhanced the quality of the data and local relevance of the results. For example, they connected us with an enthusiastic and insightful home-school liaison from Iraq who helped the school connect with families from the MENA region on a contract basis. Through the school, we were able to recruit her as a cultural consultant and interpreter, and she helped us build trusting relationships with the Iraqi community, who might otherwise have been reluctant to work with non-Iraqi outsiders asking potentially sensitive questions about family relationships, stressful life experiences, and youth mental health. Collaborative relationships with school community members like her—who shared cultural identities with student and caregiver participants—helped to shape the wording of our data collection instruments and the manner in which we conducted interviews and focus group discussions. Through routine debriefs and ongoing consultation, she also enriched our understanding of the qualitative data.

Principle 2: *Balancing rigor and adaptability*

When researchers describe their research methods as 'rigorous,' they often forget that this word originates in the Latin word for 'stiffness,' as in the phrase 'rigor mortis.' Although research should be conducted with care, exactitude, and integrity, stiffness often creates more limitations than it redresses, like a concrete sidewalk cracking on shifting soil. Still, flexibility imposes costs on the research process, whether in terms of desired research output, budget, timing, or publishing prospects. Beyond conducting formative meetings and maintaining continuous dialogue, the SALaMA team took several measures to balance the input of its various partners and stakeholders with the original research aims and to harness those inputs into a stronger study.

A researcher perspective (Cyril): One measure that reflects both the importance of adaptability and its costs was our decision to extend the timeline for the study. Despite originally intending to conduct the key

informant interviews, focus group discussions, and in-class surveys during one data collection trip, the team postponed the survey to accommodate Harrisonburg High School's schedule. This adjustment not only allowed the school to prepare for the in-class survey with less pressure, but it also allowed the study team to feed lessons from the qualitative data collection into the survey implementation. This decision also allowed the SALaMA team to work with QFI to expand the study in light of its initial findings. We not only added new study sites, like the DMA, but also returned to initial sites, like Harrisonburg, to review findings, follow up on identified issues, and pursue new data collection activities to accomplish shared objectives. Again, these measures imposed additional costs, but they improved the research, allowing the study team to deepen its understanding of refugee students' education and mental health and advance its ability to contribute meaningfully to their care.

Several conditions beyond the immediate relationship between the study and school teams enabled SALaMA to take such an adaptive approach. Having a study donor with a similar commitment to flexibility and its many virtues was an indispensable factor in SALaMA's success. QFI's team participated actively in research design, data interpretation, publishing, and dissemination, giving them direct insight into the requests of our partner schools.

Having an interdisciplinary team also enabled the SALaMA team to respond to identified needs. For example, Arab students often described a lack of belonging in their schools, whether because of their English language skills, race, or religion, in part revealing a limitation to the conventional SEL approaches being implemented. Several students noted, for instance, that teachers implored them to "speak English," even when they used Arabic to ask their peers for clarification on course content. "After you learn English even," a Yemeni boy in Michigan explained, "you're gonna get bullied when you have that accent. You have that not a Black-looking person and not a white. You have that Asian look or Middle Eastern, especially Yemeni look. And it's hard because you're not accepted by the white people or the Black people. You're not accepted by the Americans, because you don't speak the language" (Stark et al., 2021, p. 8). Several of the schools we visited were taking measures to address such concerns and foster a more welcoming school climate, such as by hiring Arabic-speaking faculty and providing sheltered English education, but educators often agreed their schools could do more to advance cultural responsiveness.

To this end, our team drew on core competencies in psychology, public health, social work, and education to develop *FORWARD with Peers*, a culturally responsive SEL curriculum tailored for MENA students. We engaged an education specialist from the DMA's Arab community to lead this cultural tailoring process and to develop a manual to ensure the curriculum could be adapted for additional contexts (SALaMA EMPOWER, 2022; Seff, Stark, et al., 2024).

A school perspective (Jeremy): Researchers cannot expect schools to be sterile laboratory environments; researchers have to be adaptable. At the same time, schools cannot expect researchers to set aside scientific rigor merely to make things easy. Schools must be clear, both with internal stakeholders and with their research partners, in distinguishing needs versus wants. In this study, our school *needed* to conduct data collection in places (e.g., computer labs that were not off-limits for summer cleaning) and at times (e.g., when students were available to participate) where we could actually function as a research site; otherwise we could not have participated at all. Our school *wanted* data collection to be at times that would be least disruptive to the flow of the school year, and while the team worked with us as best as they could, they also had their own timelines to consider.

Respecting the rigor of a well-designed research study had several payoffs for our school. Most obviously, rigor resulted in valid research findings that can be applied to better the lives of students and staff. Perhaps less obviously, methodological rigor created better participant experiences and opened a window for many to the scientific process. SALaMA provided students and staff with a firsthand experience of how structured inquiry works. Focus group participants experienced meaningful structured conversations on issues they cared about. Survey participants knew their perspectives and experiences with sensitive topics were handled responsibly. And when school staff see the direct benefits and practical applications of rigorous research, it can enhance their engagement and support for future studies, creating a more research-friendly environment that values evidence-based practices and continuous improvement. I am a case in point: at the start of the study, I was in the middle of a doctoral program and the up-close view of SALaMA's methodologies was instrumental in shaping my understanding of research.

Principle 3: *Translational research requires partnerships that endure beyond data collection*

Translational research seeks to turn research findings into practical applications. But that outcome fundamentally demands an effort to continue partnerships beyond the data collection phase. Effective translational research involves ongoing collaboration, continuous dialogue, and shared responsibility for the dissemination and application of results. The SALaMA team engaged its research partners in a variety of activities beyond data collection. In addition to the preparatory activities discussed above, Harrisonburg and partners from other school districts contributed to interpreting the data during and after the analysis, contextualizing the results within the broader school ecosystem. Partners also participated in publishing activities and in presenting the results to various audiences. Schools also informed the research team's next steps in the research cycle, for example supporting the development and evaluation of the *FORWARD with Peers* curriculum.

While each research project has a life cycle of its own, the partnerships that emerge can feed into long-term, sustainable relationships that are mutually beneficial. This could include additional collaborative research projects, using the researcher partners as “experts on call” for the school, or sharing new grant opportunities with partners.

A school perspective (Jeremy): The SALaMA team involved district staff from various study sites, including our team in Harrisonburg, in the dissemination of findings. We were invited to present at conferences, to participate in local presentations about findings, and to contribute to educational workshops. By engaging school partners in these activities, the researchers ensured that the knowledge generated was effectively shared with both the academic community and the wider public, maximizing the impact of the research. Further, the team invited district staff to be co-authors in publications resulting from the study. This inclusive approach not only recognized the valuable contributions of school partners but also ensured that the findings were communicated in a way that resonated with K-12 educators. Co-authorship fostered a sense of shared ownership and commitment to the research outcomes, making the partnership more sustainable and impactful. This underscores a crucial lesson for applied researchers: Your school partners are more likely to remember and use your findings if they feel a sense of shared ownership.

SALaMA also demonstrated the importance of building on initial research findings through follow-up work. An unanticipated finding from the study was the prevalence of suicide ideation among MENA youth. Rather than treating this discovery as a standalone result, the research team recognized the need for further investigation and action. In response, the partnership extended into a new phase focused specifically on understanding and addressing the risk of suicide and its underlying determinants among MENA students. This involved investigating risk factors and finding models of targeted interventions. By pursuing follow-up research, the partnership not only deepened its impact but also demonstrated a commitment to addressing emerging challenges in the school community.

The collaboration with the SALaMA team has been going for eight years and has weathered job changes for most of the team members, as well as the difficulties of conducting and disseminating research during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the time-intensive collaboration during the data collection phase, we have spent many more hours together online and in person co-authoring articles, presenting our findings, and exploring additional ways to understand and act on the needs of students and families. As we come to the close of our formal partnership through SALaMA, most of the researcher and school partners are still finding new ways to collaborate and to carry on our personal and professional relationships into the future.

A researcher perspective (Cyril): It is worth considering that the highly participatory research we are describing risks imposing more time and energy demands on school partners than would be expected of typical school-based

research, during which the majority of the partner's time is concentrated in the lead-up to data collection. Yet, the full value of research only accrues *after* data collection, during the analysis and dissemination—when researcher engagement with school partners tends to drop off. By continually engaging our school partners at different points in data interpretation, write-up, presentation, and subsequent rounds of research design, we hoped to share all the benefits of the research with them, as well as to sustain our trusting partnership over the long term.

Practically, involvement in data interpretation meant that our partners played a role in making sense of the findings soon after data collection, rather than only seeing the polished findings after publication. During this process, our partners helped to refine and deepen how we understood the findings, which sometimes drove us to further analysis. In the case of the suicide ideation finding described earlier, discussing the initial results with school administrations in Harrisonburg actually prompted another round of data collection altogether. For example, internal field notes from these discussions list the following next steps, among others: “Dig deep with the people who are most informed to really understand the precursors” of suicide ideation, and “Bring together various school partners so that they can share what they’ve learned and what has worked for them” in terms of supporting student mental health. Before long, these tentative next steps would inspire an in-depth follow-up investigation with 26 participants across Harrisonburg, Chicago, and the Detroit Metro Area (Meyer et al., 2024). Faculty and staff participants in Harrisonburg identified after-school programs and extracurricular activities as protective factors for newcomer students. “When [students] feel that they could contribute,” one key informant explained, “they feel good about themselves” (Meyer et al., 2024, p. 11). However, these key informants also helped us to recognize that restrictive gender norms prevented many girls from participating in these protective activities, as parents and other caregivers required them to return home after school, often to fulfill gender roles, such as taking care of their younger siblings. We drew on these insights to offer the following recommendation in a subsequent article: “When designing programs and policies to support newcomers from the MENA region, school-based practitioners should consider the challenges that girls in particular face in balancing family, community, and peer expectations and work to mitigate minority stress and suicide risk using an intergenerational, intersectional approach” (Meyer et al., 2024, p. 14).

Involving partners like Jeremy in the publication process served as recognition for the role they played—and continue to play—in the study. Their co-authorship also ensured that our publications stayed true to the local contexts. Moreover, presenting our findings alongside school partners, whether in conferences or in podcasts, helped build credibility for the findings with practitioner audiences and prompted valuable—and all-too-rare—moments of exchange between educators, administrators, and

researchers from across the world. In fact, it was at one of these presentations that we came up with the idea for this article, as it builds from a series of remarks Jeremy gave about the importance of meaningful partnership in education research.

Discussion

During this research journey, the SALaMA researchers and school partners followed three key principles of beneficent research partnerships. First, the team built early and trusting relationships with as many school stakeholders as possible to build buy-in for study goals and to benefit from their local knowledge. This early engagement also prepared the research team to anticipate problems that could be addressed early. Second, the team remained flexible and responsive to partner needs and ideas, whether they were related to the data collection timeline, the instruments used, the data analysis, or the research outputs. The team also member-checked the preliminary findings as part of a ‘ground truthing’ process to validate their findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the context where it was most relevant. And third, they routinely considered ways to include their partners in presenting research findings and in finding new project opportunities. These principles are rooted in our lived experience and the tangible benefits to the participants as well as to the quality of the research itself.

From the researcher’s side, this required a commitment to understanding and addressing the needs and constraints of educators in public school settings. This happened through early and continuous dialogue, doing the work to build mutual trust, and making adjustments to align methodologies with the hard-earned wisdom of school partners. From the school side, this required honest communication about what was and was not feasible, and a hopeful attitude about the benefits of a rigorous research process and the research outcomes for students and staff. By taking a role as an active participant in the design and dissemination of research, school partners can help shape studies that are not only scientifically robust, but also practically relevant and actionable.

We recognize that not every school-based study will have the flexibility and resources to replicate the kind of school-academic partnership we have described here. Whether because the funder imposes more constraining conditions, the school’s leaders make less faculty time available for research, the research questions demand more rigid designs, the timing of the study requires more rapid results, or any number of additional limiting factors, the particular application of the three principles we have proposed will have to be adapted to the research context. Nevertheless, we maintain that these principles can be applied across a range of contexts to guide more beneficent research in schools, as well as in other public service organizations, such as community health centers, community development corporations, or immigrant-serving organizations, to name a few examples, where we have

conducted research. To this end, we encourage researchers and their partners to discuss, negotiate, and co-develop means of adapting these principles to their particular aims and context.

As Zora Neal Hurston (1942) wrote, “Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.” We hope that the principles and practices we outlined here will serve to support those who wish to poke and pry with the purpose of making people’s lives better. By fostering relationships built on trust, adaptability, and an enduring commitment to shared goals, researchers and educators can better address the complex challenges facing our schools and communities.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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