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Kooperative Handlungspraktiken im Kontext digitaler Bildungsprojekte.
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Trust in Digitisation-Related Research-Practice-Partnerships

Precondition, Outcome and Limiting Factor?

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Abstract

Research-practice-partnerships (RPP) aim to make research more relevant and knowledge transfer likelier (Schuster et al., 2024) through mutual across-stakeholder learning (Holzer et al., 2025). Based on nine focus groups (FG) and a group interview with representatives from digitisation-related RPP, this paper empirically investigates how research and practice cooperated in digitisation-related projects and what enabled their cooperations. Based on participants' experience, this paper focuses on the roles of trust (Lezotte et al., 2022; Karlsen et al., 2008).

Honest, transparent communication in a project proved central for good cooperation and requires a trust-relationship between cooperators. Our empirical data supports studies on the efforts involved in building trust across different professional logics and work realities (e.g. Lezotte et al., 2022) and underlines the importance of face-to-face meetings even in highly digitised work environments as part of resource-costly relationship-building (Gruber et al., 2022). The paper addresses how trust-based structures that RPP representatives discuss as conducive to cooperation-building, like personal networks, can limit recruitment to a few willing people. This burdens individuals disproportionately and reduces innovation potential.

This paper empirically supports calls for institutionalised, widely accessible support structures that incentivise participation in RPP for partners from various contexts.

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Vertrauen in Wissenschaft-Praxis-Kooperationen. Voraussetzung, Ergebnis und Limitation?

Zusammenfassung
Research-practice-partnerships (RPP) zielen darauf ab, Forschungsrelevanz zu steigern und Wissenschaftstransfer zu fördern (Schuster et al., 2024), indem sie ein gegenseitiges Lernen zwischen verschiedenen Akteursgruppen ermöglichen (Holzer et al., 2025). Basierend auf neun Fokusgruppen und einem Gruppeninterview mit RPP-Vertretenden untersucht dieser Beitrag empirisch, wie Forschung und Praxis in digitalisierungsbezogenen Projekten zusammenarbeiteten und welche Faktoren diese Zusammenarbeit ermöglichten. Ausgehend von den Erfahrungen der Teilnehmenden konzentriert sich dieser Beitrag auf die Rolle von Vertrauen (Lezotte et al., 2022; Karlsen et al., 2008).
Ehrliche, transparente Kommunikation über das Projekt erwies sich als entscheidend für eine gute Zusammenarbeit und setzt eine Vertrauensbeziehung zwischen Kooperierenden voraus. Unsere empirischen Daten stützen Studien zu den Mühen, die mit dem Aufbau von Vertrauen über unterschiedliche berufliche Logiken und Arbeitsrealitäten hinweg verbunden sind (z. B. Lezotte et al., 2022) und unterstreichen die Wichtigkeit von Präsenztreffen als Teil ressourcenintensiven Beziehungsaufbaus zwischen Beteiligten (Gruber et al., 2022). Der Beitrag reflektiert, wie von RPP-Mitgliedern als förderlich benannte vertrauensbasierte Strukturen, z. B. persönliche Netzwerke, die Rekrutierung auf wenige willige Personen beschränken können. Dies belastet Einzelpersonen unverhältnismässig und schränkt Innovationspotenzial ein.
Diese Studie untermauert empirisch die Forderung nach institutionalisierten, breit zugänglichen Unterstützungsstrukturen, um die Teilnahme an RPP für Partner:innen unterschiedlicher Kontexte zu ermöglichen.

1. Introduction

There are several evidence-based approaches to bridge the long-debated gap between science and practice when it comes to knowledge use and innovation implementations in education (Farley-Ripple et al. 2018). One comprises cooperations between education practice and education science, research-practice-partnerships (RPP) (Lezotte et al. 2022), to resolve existing problems and facilitate the creation of practically usable research outcomes (Beywl and Künzli David 2020; Bremm et al. 2018; Holzer et al. 2025). From 2023 to 2026, the Germany-wide project alliance lernen:digital was funded by NextGenerationEU and Germany's research ministry[1] to advance innovation-implementation and knowledge transfer in digitisation-related teacher training and school

1 formerly BMBF, now BMBFSFJ (*Federal Ministry for Education, Family, Senior citizens, Women and Youth* in Germany)

development. Its more than 200 projects strongly relied on research-practice cooperations. A lernen:digital transfer hub supported knowledge transfer, networking among projects, and conducted research on transfer (Scheiter and Richter 2024). One working group focused on how cooperations between education science and practice work in digitisation-related projects. *Trust* inductively emerged as central to RPP[2]. Since trust in RPP has previously received little attention (Duveneck 2024; Lezotte et al. 2022), this paper contributes empirical data on its importance, specifically in a context in which cooperations rely heavily on digital mediation.

Literature on trust in cooperations includes diverse conceptualisations (e.g. Balliet and van Lange 2013; Zou et al. 2023). Consensus seems to be that trust takes long to build (e.g. Nielsen 2004) and requires maintenance efforts, including repeated engagements between cooperation partners, to prove their respective integrity (Lander et al. 2004; Karlsen et al. 2008). Trust is considered critical for cooperations (Bauer et al. 2019; Lander et al. 2004). Moreover, "[t]rust matters most in situations that contain greater amounts of conflicting interests" (Balliet and van Lange 2013, 1102). This indicates that trust is especially pertinent when reflecting across-stakeholder cooperations with potentially divergent interests. Karlsen et al. (2008) discuss trust in a Norwegian short-term multi-stakeholder construction project. The authors highlight the particular challenges of trust-building between partners who have not previously cooperated and are on a tight schedule. Discussing a US-based RPP, Lezotte et al. (2022) identify mutualism, politicised trust and research use as key factors in successful cooperations.

Communication and trust are also frequently conceptually linked: Communication is considered vital in relationships (Nielsen 2004, 246), which therefore applies to cooperations (Gruber et al. 2022). The changing nature in communication which accompanies society-wide digitisation likely affects the relationships in which communication happens and therefore merits investigation (Zou et al. 2023, 1389).

2. Study aims

This study empirically discusses trust in across-stakeholder cooperations on the topic of digitisation in school development and teacher professionalisation. It enquires how (former) RPP-members interpret the roles trust played in their respective projects. The above-mentioned conceptual findings are therefore recontextualised in German education-projects. This paper also highlights the costly realities of trust-building and maintenance in RPP and acknowledges previously underdiscussed relationship-work (Duveneck 2024; Lezotte et al. 2022).

2 This paper subsequently uses the abbreviation for research-practice-partnerships (RPP) to refer to the sampled cooperations that provide the case study for the following accounts. This is a heuristic shorthand to improve legibility, which obscures the fact that the sampled projects do not necessarily (fully) fit the criteria for RPP as conceptualised e.g. by Farrell et al. (2021) (c. f. Lezotte 2022) of being long-term and largely co-constructive.

The authors' research team examined enabling conditions of self-defined good or successful cooperations. Trust emerged as a central theme in the below-described investigations. On this basis, this paper empirically considers: How do representatives of (former) RPP in digitisation-related school development[3] reflect the roles of trust in their projects?

To understand trust-building and what trust-relationships meant in the sampled projects, we herein highlight cooperation and communication forms in RPP as represented in our sample. This is particularly salient, because the sampled RPP revolved around digitisation and relied strongly on digital interactions.

The following explores illustrative empirical accounts of across-stakeholder interactions in time-limited RPP (Karlsen et al. 2008). This adds to the body of research on trust in RPP, as we argue that the interactions below serve the purpose of trust-building. Moreover, the select examples underline participants' strong emphasis on offline engagements, despite the dominance of digitally mediated interactions in their across-stakeholder relationships. This paper therefore also advances discussions of the value of face-to-face-interactions (Gruber et al. 2022) linked with trust-building in increasingly digitised and hybridised work contexts (Zou et al. 2023).

3. Methods

3.1 Data Generation

The authors researched experiences of knowledge transfer between education practice and education science. They therefore organised focus groups (FG) with representatives from at least two (former) RPP per FG (see table one). The FG invited discussions on conditions for cross-professional cooperations in digitisation-related teacher training and school development. These included descriptions of how partners cooperated and communicated. All questions about cooperation conditions and transfer concepts comprised deductive codes for a subsequent thematic analysis of the participants' statements (see table two).

Projects were selected from public sources documenting digitisation-related school development research projects that had concluded from 2019 onwards. All projects were required to include practice partners whose collaboration extended beyond mere questionnaire completion or interview participation. The initial dataset comprised an opportunistic sample of seven focus groups (FG) and one group discussion (GD)[4] representing

3 Digitisation-related school development projects involved digitisation as their content. The cooperation form did not necessarily have to be digital.

4 Timing constraints and rescheduling issues made it impossible to match two different projects for a full focus group. Hence, one project's representatives were invited and discussed with each other rather than representatives from another cooperation.

completed projects. Two additional FG were conducted with ongoing collaborations at the time, recruited through contacts with the lernen:digital initiative. In each case, initial contact was established via an email to the project spokesperson, which outlined the study's objectives and focus. Participants were asked to either recruit former project partners or forward the invitation to appropriate contacts. This sampling strategy enabled comparative insights into cooperation and knowledge transfer from both retrospective and current perspectives.

	Focus Groups 1 (finished projects)	Focus Groups 2 (on-going projects)
data generated	seven audio-recorded online FG (180 minutes)	two audio-recorded online FG (120–180 minutes)
	one audio-recorded group interview (GD) (90 minutes)	
timing	November 2024 – February 2025	April 2025
participants[5]	16 individual projects, twelve practitioners, 19 scientists	five individual projects, seven scientists

Tab. 1: Sample description.

Representatives of the sampled cooperations self-identified as either practice or science. They introduced their RPP by disclosing which members of the research/practice communities had collaborated with whom and how (formats, meeting frequency, topics of collaboration). The overall sample included projects in which teaching staff, foundations, junior/senior scientists, educational administration employees[6], employees of out-of-school learning institutions[7], school advisors, school inspectors, support staff and education-ministry associates partook to various degrees.

3.2 Analyses

All discussions were audio-recorded, AI-transcribed and manually proofread. The transcripts were analysed via inductive-deductive coding (oriented at Kuckartz 2018) whereby deductive codes derived from the FG hosts' questions and impulses. Table two presents a selection of the deductive coding scheme applied to the transcripts[8].

5 The authors aimed at an FG size of between six and twelve participants. However, for reasons of time and because none of the participants obtained any reimbursement for their participation, the team also conducted the FG with fewer people. Of all participants who agreed to partake, two excused themselves short-term (FG2,5) because they were ill; one ill person joined a later FG (FG5), and two to three people who had informed an attending participant that they would come did not show up (FG9).

6 Landesinstitute/Qualitätsagenturen.

7 Ausserschulische Lernorte.

8 As shown via tables two and three, no existing code system was adopted or adapted to code the empirically generated primary FG data.

main code	code definition	sub-codes	sub-code definition
good[9] cooperation	participants explain why and how their cooperation was good; participants name elements of successful research-practice cooperations	.	-
cooperation type	emic specification about the ways in which science and practice cooperated	A) cooperation partners B) cooperation format C) cooperation topic	A) participants specify who they collaborated with B) participants explain how they collaborated, e.g. online meetings, workshops etc. C) participants state on which issues they collaborated
conditions for good/successful cooperation	experience-based participant definition of good/successful RPP; participants explain how their RPP came to be	A) subjective, individual conditions B) structural conditions	A) participants explain how they contributed to making the RPP work; participants speak about person-bound factors that helped RPP along B) participants identify structural conditions which afforded their RPP
sustainability/ what remained after the project	participants report on sustainable changes to their own work, after/deriving from the RPP, incl. attitudes, follow-up projects		

Tab. 2: Select deductive codes.

Explanations of how participants cooperated in their respective RPP (cooperation format) showed a strong prevalence of digitally mediated communication forms, especially e-mail and online meetings. None of the represented projects relied solely on digital interactions.

Inductive codes were added individually by each of the lead researchers. Having two researchers individually code the entire data-set follows the principle of researcher triangulation (Arias Valencia 2022) to reduce the bias of just one coder. Recurrent themes which inductively emerged for both coders were subsequently analysed more closely. Trust and other prevalent themes are presented in the results section.

9 The FG discussions interchangeably revolved around good or successful cooperations. For an ease of reading, *good cooperations* is the code that is referred to from hereon.

4. Results

Trust emerged as a recurring theme in the FG discussions, highlighting its role as a fundamental prerequisite for successful cooperation. To illustrate the participants' nuanced understanding of trust, table three shows the code trust, its inductively generated definition and exemplary use in FG. Trust is shown alongside related, relevant codes which emerged from thematically structuring the transcripts (Kuckartz 2018).

code	code definition	example
trust	participants speak of trust in their project; the word trust is used; participants define trust in RPP with reference to their specific project	s, FG9[10]: "I would say the cooperation was a success, because we managed to establish trust between the stakeholders"
eye-level (communication/cooperation)	participants use the term "[cooperation/communication at] eye-level"	s, FG7: "we try to establish an eye-level, of course, but one doesn't really achieve it, I think (…) I think one should learn more from each other (…)"
incentives	participants use the word incentive ("Anreiz")	s, FG2: "they did not get money from us, but there were other incentives"
network/existing contacts	participants speak about networks/contacts (to project partners) which preceded the cooperation	s, FG2: "[recruitment happened] a lot via personal contacts. Because I studied to become a teacher, too"
new contacts/networks *(sub-code of "sustainability")*	participants identify networks/new contacts as an outcome/lasting change deriving from their RPP	s, FG6: "what definitely remained [from the project] is the cooperation-structure. That doesn't just end (…) especially the network we have formed…from which we continuously developed new cooperations."
win-win-situation *(subcode of "benefit")*	participants use the term "win-win-situation"	s, FG9: "According to the motto: What can we do for you, what can you do for us? (…) [s]o that no side feels cheated or ignored in the cooperation-process. "
communication	participants discuss communication (mode, frequency etc.) in their RPP	s, FG1: "we really used the sessions to find a common language"

Tab. 3: Selection of key inductive codes.

The data shows a complex relationship between trust and communication: Trust was considered a premise for communication in good cooperations as well as an outcome thereof.

10 Direct quotes from FG participants are translated from German by this paper's native German authors. Unless FG participants' statements are general, aggregated statement across stakeholders, speakers are identified as associated with science (s) or practice (p). Referenced FG are chronologically numbered. Hence, FG1 and FG2 are not separately identified.

Trust-*building* was conceived of as a long process associated with eye-level communication[11] (Beywl and Künzli David 2020) and relationships between partners as human persons, rather than representatives of institutions or professions (FG1). On a more output-oriented level, people who reliably fulfilled their project tasks earned trust (Lander et al., 2004).

FG participants' emic conceptualisation of trust included:

- trust in others' expertise and motivation to do assigned jobs,
- long-term relationships,
- getting to know each other,
- daring to make mistakes without fear of sanction,
- an ability to give clear, open feedback about the cooperation/issues.

As *conditions for* trust, participants named:

- being listened to; feeling seen, heard, taken seriously,
- a readiness to include others' expertise, learn from others, irrespective of professional affiliation,
- a shared interest/problem which parties want to work on together

and

- a beyond-professional sense of connection between project members (linked with less formal "short communication ways"[12]).

Participants' definitions of good or successful cooperations match Vakil and de Royston's 2019 definition of politicised trust. It includes: "(a) understanding each other; (b) respect for one another; and (c) solidarity with one another." (Vakil and de Royston 2019, 550). This conceptualisation is complemented by FG participants' emic trust concepts, reflecting trust's complexity: Trust needed to be present *before a cooperation* could start: "One makes a leap of faith[13] (…) you assume that everyone is motivated – that's why you get together; nobody is forced [to cooperate]" (s, FG4). Alternative, usually complementary, participant assertions hold that trust *results from* successful cooperations. A scientist (FG9) reflects back on the outcome-nature of trust: "One needs to be able to see how someone else truly is… they have to show themselves. (…) [T]hat's how trust develops. It takes a common activity (…)."

This last statement invokes long-term trust-building in RPP through repeated interactions (Lander et al. 2004, 512). FG participants repeatedly emphasised that it was important to meet project partners offline and get into personal exchanges with them,

11 Participants' emic concept of *eye-level communication/cooperations* implied e.g. that others' inputs were actively listened to, taken seriously and appreciated. Factors associated with the inductive code *good communication* also related to communicating/cooperating at eye-level, e.g. transparent exchanges, developing a shared language or reliably fulfilling project tasks.

12 kurze Kommunikationswege.

13 Vertrauensvorschuss.

even though the projects had a specific digitisation-focus and communication happened mostly online.

5. Discussion

Trust is variously operationalised in the literature: as a mental state, a relationship descriptor etc. (Balliet and van Lange 2013). In cooperative settings, its roles prove equally multifaceted. The following discussion uses Nielsen's (2004) differentiation between trust as a precondition for, a feature and a result of (across-stakeholder) cooperations. This conceptual framework helps to organise the complex ways in which participants considered the relationship between trust and their concept of a good cooperation. Through our empirical lens on RPP, we add to this distinction to argue that trust-building and maintenance are critical and resource-intense features of good across-stakeholder cooperations (Duveneck 2024). The subsequent analysis of non-digital cooperation practices underscores the necessity of accounting for relationship work in RPP planning, even amid increasingly digitally mediated environments.

5.1 5. 1 Trust as precondition for cooperations

Even before RPP started, trust arguably played a role in the sampled projects. Recruitment of practice partners heavily relied on scientists' "Vitamin B"[14] (FG5s; Lander et al. 2004), i.e. personal contacts predating the RPP. Science and practice representatives stated knowing their cooperation partners before, e.g. from studying together or prior cooperations (FG4). The latter also referred to cooperations between a superior and members from the other profession (FG2,3,9). When a principal had made good experiences in cooperations with science, they likely supported their staff's participation in RPP (FG2,9).

These examples support the conceptualisation of trust as precondition for successful cooperations[15] (Bauer et al. 2019) which emerges through repeated interactions that prove dependability and credibility (Nielsen 2004; Karlsen et al. 2008). In these cases, a project partner assumes their partners' good intentions in a potential cooperation and ability to do their job well, based on prior experience (Balliet and van Lange 2013). After such positive experience, FG showed, a scientist may stand in with their name to facilitate cooperations with the practice-side. Subsequent RPP therefore depend on an individual's reputation (Nielsen 2004, 241). Even when a superior's reputation serves to vouch for a colleague, a trust-relationship formed on such premises arguably still

14 Vitamin B stands for vitamin "Beziehung" (relationship). The term refers to deriving advantages from one's relationships.

15 The success, in this case, meant that the cooperation even came about.

adheres to individual people, not institutions (Lezotte et al. 2022; Zou et al. 2023): Superiors *personally* vouch for colleagues who collaborate in the RPP.

If scientists and practice partners did *not* know each other previously, their cooperation was often structurally provided, e.g., if project funding depended on across-stakeholder collaboration (e.g. FG2). As Lezotte et al. (2022) discuss, being structurally enabled and arguably forced to cooperate does not immediately translate into cooperative behaviour or willingness to partake. Our data shows efforts to earn the right to information and cooperation that Lezotte et al. (2022, 167) mention:

A school advisor reports "it took almost a year to build trust" with school employees in a school development project. He adds that during this year, the project did not progress along project-milestones. Instead, the external partners helped solve school staff's pressing everyday problems and thus built rapport which eventually led to meaningful science-practice-relationships. The project-funders, however, did not see this relationship-work as valuable or progress at all.

In this example (FG2), a school advisor underlines that without informally supporting school staff outside of explicit project goals, the school staff would have probably not trusted the external partners enough to cooperate at all. Like in Lezotte et al.'s (2022) example, several sampled projects suffered from practice partners' suspicion about the scientists' motivations and goals, and practitioners' uncertainty about any potential benefits for themselves. Negative past engagement with 'the Other' led to an unwillingness to engage further – arguably an expression of distrust. By helping school staff with their actual problems, the external school developers proved their integrity and showed that they cared for practitioners' concerns. Importantly, the school advisors spent their time sharing the same physical space with the teaching staff whom they wished to collaborate with. They could therefore observe and help resolve pressing problems in the others' community. In Karlsen et al.'s (2008, 10) words, *talk* about benefits for all was backed up with the *walk* of generating benefits for practice partners. These arguable trust-building efforts preceded any engagement with the project itself, which proposes that trust serves as premise for successful cooperation (Nielsen 2004, 245). Another trust-building necessity for RPP that participants mentioned concerned overcoming practice partners' potentially existing prejudice against cooperating with science (FG2). Informal, personal communication was central in such efforts (FG2). These happened in face-to-face interactions: On-site meetings, at least at the project start, served to get to know each other and for informal chats (FG8, Nielsen 2004). Those made it possible to perceive project partners as humans and connect on a level beyond the purely professional. Informal communication helps establish honesty and transparency in time-limited project contexts (Karlsen et al. 2018, 13).

5.2 Trust as a relationship feature

Examples in which scientists showed care for their practice partners went beyond the early RPP phases. In FG, scientists speak of repeatedly thanking practice partners for their cooperation (FG8); emphasising that the practice partners' inputs were highly valued as essential expertise for the RPP (FG7s; Karlsen et al. 2008). This constant reassurance of the scientists' gratitude was complemented by attempts at generating non-monetary benefits for practice partners. The latter were not financially reimbursed for their participation, following the standard protocol for funding-allocation to science (Gonser and Zimmer 2024, 20). The following illustrates how scientists tried to generate non-monetary benefits for practice partners:

The organising, coordinating scientist brings snacks and drinks to workshops in an RPP. This catering is funded by their boss outside of the project-funding. Hereby, the boss supports the lead researcher's efforts to make the cooperation "nice for the [practice partners]", by creating good "ambiance". In-person meetings advance this goal to show appreciation for the practice partners' otherwise not reimbursed investment of time and effort. Even though on-site meetings cost more than online alternatives, meeting face-to-face helps project partners bond more informally. This eventually results in project partners being "on friendly terms" and practice partners later reporting that the project didn't feel like it was "only work" but "fun".

A scientist presented this case (FG9) to highlight the importance of face-to-face meetings between project partners. It emphasises how a validating, appreciative and fun atmosphere could count as benefit for practice partners. Offline face-to-face meetings, especially combined with informal gathering opportunities after work phases, were crucial to get to know project partners as individual humans instead of associating them exclusively with their institution. Informal "getting to know each other" facilitated trust-building and being "authentic" (FG9). Gruber et al. (2022, 418) emphasise the importance of physical contact and face-to-face-interactions for a quick, effortless delivery of a lot of information, including social cues. This facilitates mutual understanding and can thus help find a shared language among project partners (Beywl and Künzli David 2020). Concurrently, FG participants reinforced the helpfulness of being able to reach project partners quickly, if they were available for quick in-person visits. Visits sped up problem-solutions and thus advanced the project (Lezotte et al. 2022). If physical proximity did not permit face-to-face visits, participants repeatedly mentioned telephone-calls as faster, less formal mode of communication. They preferred calling over e-mailing (FG4, 8). E-mail communication is associated with more distanced relationships (Gruber et al. 2022, 428), suggesting that quick communication pathways could signal decreased distance between project partners.

A switch away from formalised communication ways might indicate "swift trust" (Lander et al. 2004, 522), which is deemed crucial for temporary groups like project teams. This trust relies on and enables quick, transparent communication (Lander et al.

2004, 523). Lander et al. (ibid.) highlight the importance of listening sessions at early cooperation stages to clarify roles, goals and priorities in the team, and to establish how everybody's expertise could be integrated into the project (c. f. Karlsen et al. 2008). FG participants similarly described initial on-site workshops to set goals and establish transparency about the project (FG9). They also emphasised casual, informal mingling opportunities in on-site meetings. Those provided a relationship basis for project members whose later interactions were predominantly digital. As in the example above, friendly relationships between project partners contributed to a work atmosphere in which transparent, open communication about goals, expectations and needs from a project was possible. This affords negotiating project benefits for all RPP stakeholders to compensate everyone for the extra effort implied by cooperating – a key step in trust-building (FG6, Duveneck 2024, 122; Lezotte et al. 2022, 164).

To generate benefits for all (FG8, Duveneck 2024), scientists actively listened to practice partners' concerns (FG2; Karlsen et al. 2008, 10), and often met practitioners at their work place, i.e. where innovations were supposed to be implemented (c. f. Lezotte et al. 2022; FG7). The latter helped to learn about the realistic demands for implementing the innovations deriving from projects, participants stated. Moreover, co-locating showed that the scientists were literally willing to meet the practitioners where they were, and that it was important for them to integrate practice perspectives in research projects (FG4, FG7). Valuing others' inputs, and an openness to learn from and about them are considered essential for trust-building (Karlsen et al. 2008). Such positive attitude towards RPP also inspired inventive adjustments to make the cooperation work. In a project that lacked time, money or dedicated space for project members to meet (Duveneck 2024; Gonser and Zimmer 2024), for instance, meetings occurred on weekends, in public places (FG4). The eventual productive collaboration therefore relied heavily on individual motivation and effort.

Our data shows that the motivation to make a cooperation work was a key condition for RPP success. Nielsen (2004, 241–242) cautions, however, motivated individuals alone cannot boundary-span across institutions: Good experiences with representatives from another institution may enable only cognitive trust at an *individual* level. Our data suggests that it remains the role of individuals to do the trusting and accept the vulnerability of interdependency in a work relation.

5.3 Trust as a relationship outcome

The above reflected on trust as basis for cooperations, and a relationship element to continue cooperating. Trust let project partners speak openly with one another, disclose problems early, transparently and without fear of retribution (FG3, 7[16]). By negotiating mutual benefits (Kerres et al. 2022), project partners proved their integrity and genuine wish to behave in ways which help others. Assuming that others have one's own best interest in mind in a cooperation is largely agreed to be characteristic of trustful relationships (Balliet and van Lange 2013, 1090; Zou et al. 2023, 1380). In our sample, good cooperation experiences then shaped future expectations (Balliet and van Lange 2013, 1091) and contributed to a willingness to cooperate again. This was explained with the benefits former cooperators derived from RPP: Practitioners spoke of having acquired hands-on skills and material for their practice (Sander et al. 2025; FG1). Researchers emphasised benefitting from first-hand insights into practice partners' work realities, which helped adjust project designs, research questions and methods (FG1, 9). Those insights often derived from physically co-locating in an RPP, e.g. through school visits (FG5, 7). This again underscores the importance of meeting practice communities where they are, face-to-face, to exchange critical, contextual information (Lander et al. 2004). With these, research-designs or the project (outcomes) could be adjusted to better fit the needs and practical realities of a project's 'target audience'.

Bilateral communication efforts made such iterative project designs possible, and facilitated the production of practically useful outputs and subsequent outcomes from across-stakeholder cooperations (Gonser and Zimmer 2024, 19; Sander et al. 2025, 188). As such, chances for knowledge transfer improve. Sander et al. (2025, 189) emphasise that bilateral communication requires time and effort to establish a shared language and define shared goals. Both are conceptualised as elements of trust-based interactions (Beywl and Künzli David 2020; Holzer et al. 2025, 157). Participants consistently named such trust-building mechanisms as challenges as well as success-conditions for RPP (e.g. FG4, 9). Importantly, those interactions largely depended on individuals' extra efforts. Scientists in particular took on extra tasks. They legitimised their additional investment by arguing that scientists tend to be more flexible with their time than practitioners, and that practice partners usually received no recompense, while scientists were paid for their involvement in RPP (e.g. FG8).

Beywl and Künzli David (2020) explicate how scientists tend to take on extra burdens in RPP, including tasks outside their job descriptions. In our sample, this involved primarily coordination, communication and project management tasks (FG5, 9). Participants stated that good cooperation was facilitated by designated coordinators to take on tasks like scheduling and networking. However, in our sample only one RPP featured

16 The participant spoke of "Fehlerfröhlichkeit", which translates roughly into being happy to make mistakes. Alternatively, participants spoke of an "open mistake culture" (offene Fehlerkultur) to relay the ability to disclose mistakes freely.

such a position (FG8). Consequently, scientists had to do their research while developing and employing relationship and communication skills on top. They had to do so without formal training, and in an academic context that may not appreciate such skill sets explicitly (Duveneck 2024; Lezotte et al. 2022, 170). Such a lack of appraisal is indicated by how few resources go into researcher training in communication and coordination (Beywl and Künzli David 2020). Likewise, too few resources, e.g. time and personnel, are allocated to RPP to fulfil such vital tasks (FG4, Duveneck 2024).

Previous examples underline how RPP members used communication to maintain a good cooperation: They engaged in transparent, appropriate communication at eye-level (FG1, 9). To sustainably continue communicative relationships, moreover, was considered a cooperation *success*. This was especially true, if relationships between former partners created further projects (GD, FG3, 4, 6, 9). This could be empirical evidence of trust-relationships: Literature asserts that good experiences and repeated interactions with others build trust, which furthers continued interaction (Lander et al. 2004). A caveat here is, that relationships between practice and science partners were rather exclusive, i.e. bound to individuals who made an effort to establish and maintain relationships (FG3, 9). Such person-bound, cross-professional relationships are tenuous, due to the prevalence of temporary contracts especially in academia and associated staff fluctuation (Lezotte et al. 2022).

Scientists with good RPP experience might promote institutional change and improve structural provisions for RPP, as was the case in one project (FG7). From a practice-perspective, options to institutionalise RPP were not mentioned, even though practice partners expressed motivations to work with scientists again. They also wished to share their positive experience, newly-gained skills and knowledge with their community. Practitioners emphasised that such knowledge transfer would be easier, if more practitioners had been involved in the RPP (GD) so that the workload would not rest on a single individual. Similarly, Lezotte et al. (2022) raise the issue of cooperating with a gatekeeper in their RPP: An individual community-member cannot speak on behalf of an entire community. Instead, Lezotte et al.'s and our findings underline the value of including more practice partners in RPP. Thus, they have a chance to build rapport with members of the science community and possibly develop trust, whilst also enriching the project with their own perspective. Additionally, involvement in an innovation-implementation project can also make it likelier that one changes one's practice based on higher acceptance of project outcomes (Bremm et al. 2018). If only a few, motivated practice community members, who already trust that RPP are beneficial, continue cooperative relationships, it will remain a challenge to motivate others who are not convinced that cooperations with science can benefit their practice (GD; Lezotte et al. 2022). This challenge, moreover, falls onto practice partners who, as our data empirically supports, already take on extra work through their cooperation with science (e.g. GD; FG5).

The problem of only trusting people one had already worked with had already presented itself during the recruitment phase of the RPP. Recruitment relied primarily on personal contacts or prior work relationships. Thus, the same individuals repeatedly cooperated across professional boundaries (e.g. FG4). This limits the potential of one of the advantages of across-stakeholder cooperation, namely novel insights and perspectives in RPP (Farrell et al. 2022; Sander et al. 2025), to a few motivated individuals, whose dedication makes the RPP work.

5.4 limitations

This self-selection bias in the RPP also biases our data corpus: The sampling inclusion criteria led to a sample which only featured projects that managed to make cooperation work via the above-described efforts. Accordingly, participants' statements represent a specific attitudinal bias. That notwithstanding, this account features a deeper dive into German RPP, specifically with a digitisation focus in school development. This specificity invites further case studies to examine findings. The herein presented focus on trust in RPP reduced the discussion of other topics that may warrant closer investigation. Moreover, the trust-digitality-relationship in RPP is only insufficiently analysed for this contribution: Due to the emergent nature of trust(-building) as a core condition for successful across-stakeholder cooperation, we had not explicitly focused on its relationship with digitality. It would be interesting for further research to investigate the roles of digitally-mediated communication in trust and trust-building across stakeholder relations. We found indicators that e-mailing and video-conferences alone did not suffice to build the less formal relationships between project members, which participants deemed essential for open and transparent exchanges in their RPP. This finding might differ in cooperations which are divided by even greater distances, or in which for other reasons no possibilities to meet offline exist.

Finally, this study is not aimed at representativeness, which would have required, e.g. a representative sample of (former) RPP members and potentially also evaluating intercoder reliability[17]. Instead, the study aims at theoretical validation (Karlsen et al. 2008, 11) and provides an in-depth, anecdotal account of conditions under which research and practice communities can cooperate in project-contexts.

17 Instead of calculating intercoder reliability of individual coding, the authors consulted about the coding throughout, including reflexively engaging with the data and the process. Suggestions on how to obtain reliability and quality-insurance about a qualitative research process were derived from O'Connor and Joffe (2020).

6. Conclusion and Outlook

This empirical paper makes the case that trust in RPP is built through eye-level communication, negotiating benefits for all involved and personal relationship-building. For this, our data emphasises the value of offline meetings to reduce distance between stakeholders with previously separate goals or attitudes that might obstruct trusting relationships. By reducing distance between RPP members, also in a physical way, more communication between partners in the sampled projects occurred which enabled open discussions and mutual problem-solving. This suggests that trust was built in RPP. Trust also existed as precondition for the sampled RPP: Pre-existing professional or private relationships promised that cooperators' expertise was appreciated and every stakeholder should benefit from an RPP. Finally, trust as outcome of previous engagements was discussed as limiting factor to the possible input diversity in RPP, because trust usually remained person-bound. This resulted from RPP recruitment avoiding long-term trust-building with strangers in favour of resorting to extant contacts and networks. The onus of transferring innovations from RPP is therefore, problematically, on the few people convinced of the usefulness and value of cross-professional cooperation.

Against this empirical backdrop, this paper supports calls for more resources dedicated to project partners from science *and* practice, and appreciating the effort and time it takes to establish trustful, mutually beneficial relationships between the communities (e.g. Duveneck 2024). Since even in digitisation-related RPP, face-to-face meetings appeared essential, resources should be allocated to bringing science and practice partners together in the same physical location to enable more informal ways of getting to know one another. Locally established relationships can persist across geographical and digitally mediated contexts, as evidenced in our sample. These ties may subsequently enable broader-scale innovation implementation (Gonser and Zimmer 2024) and foster institutional trust (Nielsen 2004).

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