Seeking Questions from the Field: Connecticut Partnership for Early Education Research

Michael J. Strambler, Joanna L. Meyer, Clare Waterman Irwin, and George A. Coleman

Summary

One of the first steps in developing a research-practice partnership is forming a joint research agenda. In this article, Michael Strambler, Joanna L. Meyer, Clare Waterman Irwin, and George A. Coleman describe the collaborative process that Connecticut's Partnership for Early Education Research (PEER) used to develop an agenda driven by practitioners' interests and concerns.

The authors describe three challenges that often arise during the agenda-setting process: responding to partners' priorities, partners' research readiness, and the researchers' content expertise. Policy makers' priorities often shift rapidly in response to changing contextual factors, especially the leadership changes endemic to education. The authors show that to strengthen the partnership and its ability to withstand such personnel changes, researchers must take a flexible approach to agenda-setting and build relationships with multiple agency personnel. Another challenge is the policy makers' readiness to engage in the research process, with respect both to their understanding and buy-in for research, and to their capacity to support the research in key ways (such as data sharing). The authors describe how researchers can build this capacity over time by showing partners the concrete ways research can be useful, both in general and in a specific context. A third challenge is that researchers may lack expertise in the areas their partners view as priorities. The authors show how research partners can link their partners to resources and expertise they may not otherwise be able to access.

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A main goal of research-practice partnerships is to conduct research, driven by researchers, educators, and policymakers, to seek out new information to improve students' learning. As this issue of the *Future of Children* illustrates, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) take various approaches to define their mission and establish an agenda to accomplish their goal. This article describes the decision points, processes, benefits, and challenges for establishing a collaborative research agenda, with an emphasis on agendas that are driven by practitioners' interests and concerns. Three main challenges are inherent in this collaborative approach: responding to partners' priorities, partners' readiness for research, and the researchers' content expertise. We explore these topics in the context of a Connecticut-based early childhood partnership, the Partnership for Early Education Research (PEER). Using examples from PEER's work, we discuss strategies for addressing the above issues, and we examine the benefits of using a collaborative approach to establish an RPP's research agenda.

Background

The Connecticut partnership PEER conducts research to inform early childhood education policy and practice. Specifically, PEER strives to produce research evidence that can be used to improve access to high-quality early childhood education and to reduce educational disparities among young children, both locally and statewide. A core aspect of PEER's approach is to pursue questions developed in collaboration with its members, thus ensuring that the research is relevant to early childhood teachers, administrators, policy makers, and advocates.

To foreground both researchers' and practitioners' voices, PEER is led by the Yale School of Medicine, Education Development Center (EDC), and Cooperative Educational Services (CES). Both the Yale School of Medicine and EDC (a nonprofit research firm focused on education and health) contribute research expertise in education, psychology, statistical methodology, and interdisciplinary fields. CES, one of Connecticut's six legislatively authorized Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), contributes its longstanding connections to the region's public schools and early childhood education programs as a trusted provider of professional development, as well as direct experience from its own early childhood and elementary programs.

PEER was formed in 2014 in response to the lead organizations' shared interest in collaborative research to help improve early childhood education for Connecticut. PEER's founders were also interested in increasing coordination between early childhood education programs and public school systems. Many Connecticut school districts operate a preschool program, but many preschoolers and the vast majority of infants and toddlers are served by a diverse array of community-based providers, including early childhood education centers and family childcare providers. School districts and community-based providers generally operate independently, with no structures for coordinating learning goals, instructional practices, professional development, information sharing, or children's transition to the public school system. PEER's founders believed that an RPP focused on the largest urban centers in the CES region (Bridgeport, Norwalk, and Stamford) would offer a promising approach for using research and evidence to enhance regional and state-level early childhood education.

The Institute of Education Sciences' (IES) Researcher-Practitioner Partnership grant program provided the initial funding to launch PEER. The IES grant supported three specific research projects: on early childhood assessment, kindergarten readiness, and the association between teacher and classroom factors and kindergarten performance. The grant also helped build the partnership and establish a long-term research agenda. PEER has since relied on funding from the Spencer Foundation and a variety of contracts with its partners to pursue that long-term agenda.

Partnership Structure and Theory

Like many RPPs, PEER was designed as a long-term, place-based partnership focusing on problems of policy and practice, and committed to mutualism. According to a common classification of RPPs, it best fits the description of a research alliance.[1] Rather than aiming to solve specific problems by a repeated cycle of evaluation and design, or to focus on a single problem of practice, PEER seeks to support its partner organizations by studying a range of policy- and practice-related questions.

Figure 1. PEER's Theory of Change

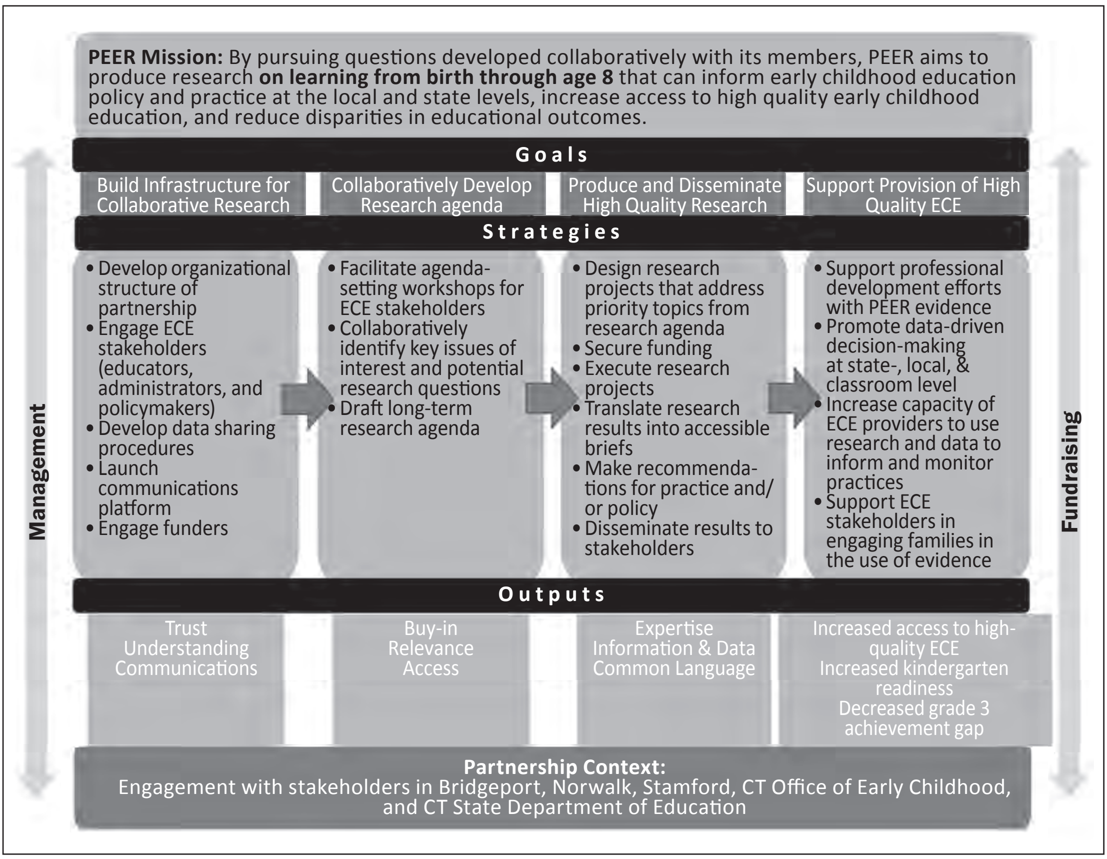
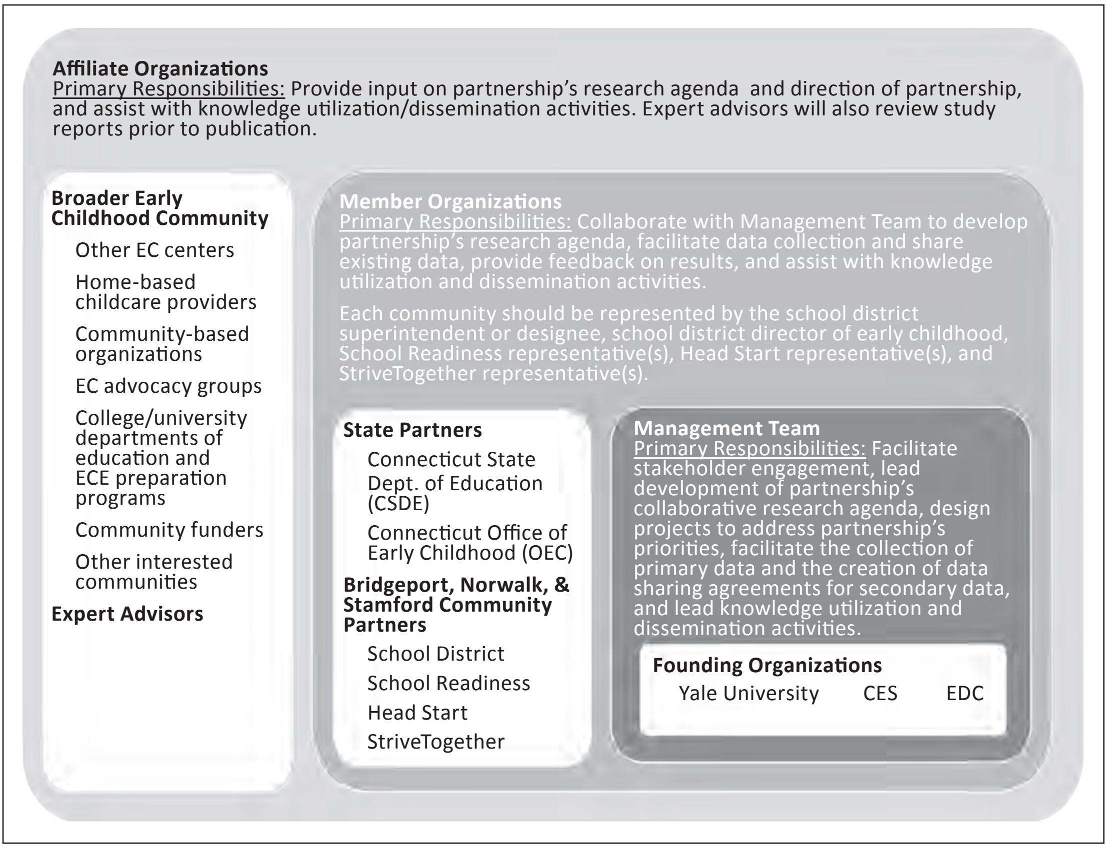


Figure 2. Structure of PEER



Although the member organizations are deeply involved in establishing PEER's research priorities and questions, as well as in using and disseminating the study results, PEER researchers work independently to conduct research before they share findings with member organizations. This structure promotes both research integrity and objectivity.

As PEER's theory of change (figure 1) shows, building processes for engaging a diverse set of partners allows the partnership to collaborate on developing a research agenda. The partnership can then produce and disseminate rigorous, actionable research, and support the application of research to policy and practice in its partner communities. Rather than establishing a linear process, PEER envisions a cycle of collaboration, research, dissemination, and application. Sustaining the cycle requires strategic and logistical management, along with grant-writing and other forms of fundraising.

Figure 2 illustrates PEER's structure. The management team (Yale, EDC, and CES) oversees all aspects of partnership-building, research, and dissemination. Member organizations include two state agencies and each community's school district, Head Start program, and StriveTogether initiative (described below), as well as other community-based providers of early childhood education. These organizations collaborate with the management team to define and refine the partnership's research agenda, guide the development of research projects, collect data and share existing data, give feedback on reports, and design activities to use and disseminate knowledge.

Affiliate organizations also play a role. These are smaller community-based providers of early childhood education, home-based childcare providers, community-based organizations that serve children and families, early childhood advocates, college and university departments of education and early childhood education teacher preparation programs, and representatives of other Connecticut communities that want to learn more about the partnership. Affiliate members provide input on the general direction of the partnership; they also use and help disseminate findings. PEER consults expert advisers on specific projects as well. Including such a range of voices has many benefits, which we describe later in this article.

State and Local Context

Before they reach kindergarten, Connecticut children experience a variety of early care and education settings. These are supported by various federal, state, municipal, and private funding sources, which sometimes overlap. Early childhood education programs funded by multiple sources are subject to the requirements of each funder; these may set parameters for staffing, the physical condition of the site, learning experiences, children's eligibility, and other program elements. Such diversity presents a significant management challenge for early childhood education, and can also make it difficult for K–12 systems to coordinate with these programs. Because of the challenges faced by Connecticut cities and CES's central role in launching the partnership, PEER covers the three largest urban communities in southwestern Connecticut, the region served by CES, which includes three of the state's six largest cities: Bridgeport (pop. 145,000), Norwalk (89,000), and Stamford (130,000). Children of color make up a substantially higher percentage of these cities' school district populations than of the state's public school population as a whole (between 71 percent and 87 percent, compared with the state average of 43 percent). All three districts enroll a much higher proportion of English language learner students than the state average (between 13 percent and 16 percent, compared to the state average of 7 percent).[2]

Leadership transitions have affected each community's level of participation in PEER: each school district has welcomed at least one new superintendent since PEER was launched, and Norwalk has seen three Head Start providers. Finally, each PEER community hosts a collective impact initiative that's affiliated with the StriveTogether network. These initiatives aim to organize communities to work collaboratively on complex social problems that limit opportunities for youth and adults alike. The StriveTogether model seeks to do this by helping communities bring local partners together to assess needs, define goals and action plans, secure resources, and evaluate impacts.[3]

Establishing a Research Agenda

Typically, an RPP's research agenda outlines goals for the next three to five years or more. Research agendas center the work on a specific set of topics or focus areas, and describe a cohesive set of key questions regarding practice or policy for which practitioner partners need answers. The research questions should originate with and have significance for the practitioner partners, with input from researchers.

Without a representative set of partners, RPPs risk focusing on topics and questions that aren't important to practice or policy, thereby undermining their core mission.

RPPs have found a variety of ways to establish a successful research agenda. Because RPPs often develop out of unique circumstances, the partnership will be most effective when partners consider the context while developing their agenda. For example, the researchers who initiated the ParentCorps partnership (see the article in this issue by Laurie Brotman and colleagues) wanted to study a researcher-designed intervention, and they set their research agenda around that specific need. By comparison, the Boston Public Schools' early childhood research partnership (see the article in this issue by Christine Weiland and colleagues) began with broad research questions identified by the school district; the researchers recommended study designs that could be used to answer those questions. Alternatively, as with PEER, researchers and practitioners may connect before doing any research and decide on the RPP's parameters. After agreeing to work together around a broad topic (for example, closing achievement gaps via early childhood education), the partners then collaborate to define their research agenda.

Creating a research agenda together at the outset works well for partnerships that take the form of a research alliance, because it allows many voices to participate. In this process, partners think deeply about their challenges and needs, contribute ideas about what to focus on, prioritize those ideas, and, finally, create a set of researchable questions, targeting the ideas that were generated. Though this process is led by researchers, it ensures that the topics and questions are relevant for policy makers and, especially, practitioners.

For its agenda-setting process, PEER adapted workshop materials from the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands that were created to help RPPs develop their research agendas by drawing out diverse perspectives.[3] These materials guide partnerships through a series of steps: ensuring that all partners understand the possible approaches to the research; generating research topics; prioritizing, categorizing, and voting on the most relevant topics; and generating and refining researchable questions.

Who Should Be Involved?

An essential part of establishing a research agenda is to ensure that the appropriate people are involved. Without a representative set of partners, RPPs risk focusing on topics and questions that aren't important to practice or policy, thereby undermining their core mission. Perhaps worse, failing to involve people who can represent their organization's needs and priorities may produce an agenda that's not important to those with the authority to commit to the research.

The first step in determining who should be involved is to define the structure of the RPP. Will it contain one practitioner entity, such as a single school district, or will there be multiple practitioner partners? There can be tradeoffs either way. For example, PEER decided to partner with a variety of member organizations in part because of the nature of early childhood education—a fragmented system of school- and community-based providers. Also, we aimed to conduct research that would be valuable not only to the partners but also to the state and the field of education as a whole. It would have been hard to accomplish our goals by working with one relatively small community. However, while we benefited from the increased representation and the greater generalizability of our findings, we faced challenges in managing the partnership, which we'll discuss below.

When the partners in an RPP represent a variety of organizations and, in particular, when those organizations approach the work from different perspectives (for example, district- and community-based early childhood education providers with different philosophies of early learning), it's important to build relationships and identify common interests between the researchers and each of the partner organizations, even before convening the entire group to set the agenda. It's essential to keep in mind the adage "Progress moves at the speed of trust." Though working across many organizations can be hard, there are benefits as well; for example, partners get the opportunity to think critically with other professionals who are engaged in similar work. In this way, participating in an RPP has some of the same benefits for practitioners as a professional learning community.

Defining Shared Objectives

The process of setting a research agenda is a critical time to ensure that practitioner partners understand different kinds of research (for example, reviews of research studies, meta-analyses, primary data collection, secondary data analysis) and research goals (to add to existing knowledge, to determine whether an intervention is effective, or to guide practice or policy?). If the partnership intends to create a cohesive agenda with questions to study over the course of several years, it also helps to discuss what constitutes a "researchable" question. However, it's generally up to the researchers to refine the questions generated by practitioner partners to ensure they're specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (condensed into the acronym SMART). For example, here's one SMART question that was generated by PEER's research agenda–setting process: "What are the characteristics of successful coordinated systems among public schools, families, and community-based programs that have served young children over the past 10 years?" This question is *specific* because it targets a specific population. Though the question doesn't define "successful," the concept of success is *measurable* and the data for doing so are *attainable*, either by collecting them or by acquiring them from existing sources. Finally, the question is *relevant* to a large portion of the partner communities and *time-bound* because it describes a specific timeframe. The research agenda–setting process is also a good time to establish partnership norms, including how often to revisit and revise the agenda.

Pursuing the Collaborative Research Agenda

The research agenda defines the partnership's direction, and knowing the key questions of practice and topic areas that the partners want to address allows the partnership to seek funding that supports their shared interests and needs. By gathering input on immediate challenges and by including partners in the proposal process, the RPP can ensure that the proposed work meets important needs. After developing PEER's research agenda, the management team met with a number of practitioner partners to get feedback about which topics to work on first. The partners named supporting dual language learners as a top priority, because Connecticut's growing diversity had created high need. But resources were inadequate, so the management team worked with the partners to craft a proposal that would provide actionable information about this topic.

Beyond developing the research topics and questions, practitioner partners must be included in the process of designing and conducting research. This helps to avoid losing momentum, and also keeps partners feeling they're part of the work. It also keeps the research agenda grounded in the practitioner partners' interests. Such concerns are often addressed by placing partnership members in advisory committees for the purpose of advising the entire RPP, specific projects, or both. PEER opted to create project-specific committees that advise on such activities as data collection (primary and secondary), identifying interest groups that should be apprised of the work, troubleshooting, and recommending resources to make the project a success. During the course of a project, the advisory committee also meets with the researchers to help them interpret findings from the analyses and identify the implications of those findings.

Including practitioner partners in decision-making at each step of the research process maximizes a project's relevance to the partners and increases the likelihood that they'll use the findings to guide their practice and policy decisions. That's particularly important in early childhood education, which encompasses many different systems that provide services for children. These systems often function independently, making it hard to conduct research that's relevant to all of them. PEER includes a range of early childhood partners across different systems and engages them at each step of the research process to make sure the research is relevant to them—and is used to improve the services provided to children and, in turn, to improve children's educational outcomes.

Challenges and Responses

It's almost certain that RPPs driven by practitioner input will encounter challenges that threaten their effectiveness. Some of these challenges are unique to practitioner-driven partnerships, while others are common across most RPPs but manifest differently in practitioner-driven partnerships. In this section we highlight some of these challenges, show how they've emerged in the context of PEER, and describe possible responses. We focus on three broad types of challenges: responding to partners' priorities, partners' research readiness, and content expertise.

Responding to Partners' Priorities

Even when RPPs invest substantial time to identify the priorities of their partner organizations, it can be difficult to translate those priorities into research questions that are of equal interest to all the partners. Partners' priorities may differ and can also shift quite quickly, particularly when there's a leadership change in an organization. These differences can make it hard to keep partners interested in work that they may have previously identified as being valuable to them—and can also make it hard to design future studies. Here we describe the challenges in terms of identifying *shared priorities* and responding to *shifting priorities*.

Shared priorities. When a partnership works with organizations across multiple communities, demographic differences can affect each community's priorities and the types of questions they want to ask. Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity can be especially influential. In the case of PEER, these differences are substantial, especially between Bridgeport and the other two communities. Though Bridgeport, Norwalk, and Stamford are all in one of the richest counties in the United Sates, their populations are quite different, and they face very different challenges. In Bridgeport, for example, 32.9 percent of children under 18 live in poverty, compared with 11 percent in Norwalk and 10 percent in Stamford (and 14 percent in Connecticut overall). Although children of color make up 70 percent or more of the school-age populations in all three cities, more than half the overall populations of Norwalk and Stamford identify as white and not Hispanic or Latino, compared with only 23 percent in Bridgeport and 78 percent in Connecticut overall.[4] These differences shape the questions partners ask. Consider achievement gaps: in a city with less socioeconomic and racial diversity, like Bridgeport, partners tend to frame achievement gaps in terms of differences relative to other communities, to the region, or to the state as a whole. But communities with greater diversity, like Norwalk and Stamford, tend to frame achievement gaps as group differences within their communities. It's important to be aware that when such topics arise, practitioner partners may think about them in different ways.

Another factor that affects the agenda-setting process is the differences in education landscapes among communities. This is especially important for RPPs that focus on early childhood, because early childhood education is highly varied and complex. States vary, for example, in the type and availability of funding for preschool, often having multiple and overlapping forms of funding. And with so many distinct early childhood education providers in each community, it's hard to get them all together to define shared priorities. For this reason, PEER typically focuses on the largest providers in each community.

As time passes, RPPs will inevitably see priorities change—and change quickly, in some cases.

The level of participation in early childhood education is another difference that can arise. For example, in the past few years Bridgeport has struggled to fill all available preschool spots because a large number of families have chosen not to participate. So for Bridgeport, a key priority might be encouraging parents to enroll their children in preschool, whereas Norwalk and Stamford might be more concerned with improving their existing programs.

As the partners gained an understanding of the types of research PEER might conduct to address their needs, differences in research priorities emerged. In 2017, partners began asking whether PEER could conduct research on practices or policies being implemented in their own organizations or communities. Though these inquiries were aligned with the topic areas described in PEER's research agenda, the specific policies and practices weren't shared across the three PEER communities. This challenged our management team to think beyond research questions common to all partners and to better respond to partner-specific concerns.

Shifting Priorities. Collaborating to address the shared priorities of partner organizations is the first step toward establishing a practitioner-driven research agenda. But as time passes, RPPs will inevitably see those priorities change—and change quite quickly, in some cases. Although practitioners' interests are influenced by their own views on problems of practice, they can't ignore the demands placed on them by parents, municipalities, states, the federal government, a natural disaster, or a public health crisis. New state policies may be implemented, new school or district leaders may arrive with their own strategic goals, and parent and community needs may evolve. These changes can ultimately alter what practitioners want or need to know. Such shifts in research priorities can be challenging for RPPs that have invested time and resources in developing long-term research agendas.

RPPs should anticipate leadership changes, which are common in urban districts.[5] PEER's communities have been no exception. As noted above, the three school districts in PEER communities all saw at least one leadership transition during the RPP's first three years. The timing of these transitions was particularly difficult for PEER, because the superintendents who were in place when the research agenda was developed had left their positions by the time PEER launched the first project based on that agenda. In two of the districts, the superintendent changed between the submission of a major grant proposal and its acceptance by the funder. The PEER management team worked to build relationships with the new superintendents, meeting with them to share PEER's mission, history, and research agenda; to tell them about the newly funded project; and to ask them to identify which areas might benefit from research support. Some new superintendents were more receptive than others to research projects that had been launched before their tenure began.

Addressing challenges related to priorities. As the differences in partners' priorities became apparent, and as partners' priorities shifted, the management team explored ways to adjust their approach. The version of the research agenda released by PEER in 2016 included specific research questions developed during the second agenda-setting workshop. But it became apparent that the depth of detail made the research agenda less responsive to the partners' evolving needs and priorities, especially given the differences among the communities. And many of the research questions were directed toward reviews of past studies, which was limiting when it came to seeking funding for PEER's research.

For these reasons, in 2018 the management team decided to reframe the agenda so it focused more generally on the four topic areas and less on specific questions. In this sense, the research agenda became more of a frame than a set of specific research questions, while staying true to the input provided by the partners. Other RPPs that aim to respond to practitioners' interests may find it best to develop a research agenda that's specific enough to focus the partnership, but also flexible enough to adapt to changes in priorities and interests.

The research agenda may also need flexibility to evolve alongside the practitioner partners' knowledge of collaborative research. As we've said, PEER received multiple partner-specific requests once our partners began to understand how PEER might support their organizations with research and evaluation. So the management team started exploring how PEER could respond to such requests, both immediately and in the long term. This led to two changes in our approach. First, rather than assuming that all of PEER's projects would engage early childhood partners in all three communities, we accepted that some research topics might be more relevant to one partner than another. Thus, we agreed to consider research projects that focused on the needs of specific partners. Second, the management team expanded its focus to include evaluation and technical assistance, which allowed PEER to address partners' immediate and unique needs more effectively. The support included helping partners develop a theory of change, developing formative tools to guide decision-making, and evaluating programs' effectiveness. By necessity, these services are currently limited to partners with the funding to support such work. But we hope to acquire core funding so we can provide this support at no cost or reduced cost in the future.

One example of the projects taken on by PEER since this shift occurred is our work with a recently launched Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) preschool to develop its theory of change; to decide on appropriate teacher, student, and implementation measures; and to create an evaluation plan. Another project involved helping a community understand the usefulness of a new communication tool intended to share student information across the preschool-to-kindergarten transition. For this project, PEER worked with a group of community partners to collect data on how effectively the information gathered with this tool by preschool teachers was communicated to kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators, and how useful these partners found the information for guiding practice. More recently, when most Connecticut early care and education programs closed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of our partners asked for support concerning the new challenges faced by families and teachers. We worked with this partner to develop a needs assessment survey and to collect data that could guide the organization as it pivoted to new ways of supporting its families and teachers while its facility was closed to children.

When it comes to shifting priorities, leadership transitions have convinced us that we must engage district leaders beyond the superintendent—for example, mid-level leaders such as directors of research and directors of early childhood. We've found that new superintendents are more enthusiastic about remaining engaged with PEER when the remaining district leaders havebeen involved with the process of setting our research agenda. These leaders could tell the new superintendent what the district had already done, explain the benefits of collaborative research, and advocate for participation to continue. In districts where mid-level leaders were less involved, or where there were leadership transitions across many levels, it was harder to engage the new superintendents.

Research Readiness

Some partner organizations may be more ready than others to participate in research, in terms of both mindset and resources. *Mindset readiness* refers to attitudes and beliefs that are conducive to engaging in research. Here, we highlight attitudes regarding the rigor and timeliness of research. *Resource readiness* means the partners' capacity to get involved in the process of research. The most important resource is personnel, but technological systems for managing, reporting, and sharing data are also relevant.

Mindset Readiness. Although researchers tend to believe deeply in the value of research, practitioners may be less confident about its applicability and relevance. In the early stages of an RPP, it's common to encounter a range of mindsets about the utility of research and evidence for educational practice. These views directly affect partners' preparedness to work with the research partnership. Practitioners on one end of the spectrum believe that personal or professional observation or experience provides the best evidence for the presence of an effect or the effectiveness of a practice. From their point of view, personally witnessing or directly experiencing a phenomenon carries more weight than data produced by research tools like assessments and surveys. (Researchers, on the other hand, tend to view personal observation as useful for generating hypotheses but weak for causal inference.) For an individual with this mindset, producing evidence via rigorous or systematic methods is valuable only insofar as it can "prove" what the practitioner already believes. Such practitioners consider that the real value of evidence lies in convincing funders, administrators, and others to whom they're accountable that a specific approach has a beneficial effect.

The belief that practice—the instruction of children—is the real work of educators is perhaps one of the most challenging views encountered when working with practitioners to develop and execute a collaborative research agenda. This belief implies that while research may be useful, it should take a back seat to instruction; in other words, research is a separate and expendable aspect of serving students. This perspective is especially challenging because it's partly true. In the under-resourced field of early childhood education, when leaders perceive a need to choose between educating children or conducting research, it makes sense to choose educating children. But this either/or framing is mostly driven by the belief that research is resource- and time-intensive for practitioners. Though that may be true in some cases, research often uses existing data to produce actionable findings, which minimizes the burden on practitioners. PEER partners have often told us they have plenty of data but simply lack the research capacity to use the information. In these instances, research can occur without disrupting classroom practices, though coordination at the leadership level is likely required. For projects that do require collecting new data, RPPs can work with practitioners to design feasible studies that use available resources and minimize disruption to teachers and students.

Another challenge occurs when practitioners lack incentives to use research to guide their work. They may adopt a "good enough" mindset, assuming that quasi-experimental and experimental research is unnecessary. This perspective also implies that scientific rigor has its place in such contexts as academia or medicine but is superfluous for early childhood education.

Researchers sometimes see the mindsets we've just described as being opposed to rigorous research. In our view, practitioners who think this way aren't rejecting such research altogether; rather, they're not aware or convinced of its importance and value. And researchers themselves often undervalue descriptive analyses in their work. In many cases, the research most useful to educators includes in-depth descriptive analyses that can help them understand who they're serving, who's working in their programs, or the characteristics of those programs.

Where rigorous research is not the norm, education researchers can easily underestimate the effort required to get practitioners to buy in. This challenge can be magnified when working with early childhood providers, for at least two reasons. First, early childhood settings, especially private programs, often function independently of one another—more so than schools, which are part of a large and organized system. Accordingly, researchers working across multiple early childhood settings will rarely find a common set of leaders with a shared mindset regarding research. Instead, RPPs that focus on early education are likely to include multiple entities with varying understanding of, appreciation for, and capacity to engage in research. This diversity of viewpoints makes it hard to resolve decisions about research directions.

Second, whereas public school systems often have common practices that specify which assessments are administered and when, many states and communities lack such a system for early childhood. For example, Connecticut has a history of common measures for formative assessment in preschools, but no statewide summative assessment. Without common assessments for measuring preschool children's academic and social-emotional outcomes, it's hard to conduct collaborative research across multiple communities without collecting primary data. If, say, a partnership wants to know how classroom quality and instructional supports are associated with the development of preschool children's skills, researchers would need to either administer an assessment across the participating sites or figure out how to compare results from the various summative assessments implemented by the preschools. The former requires a great deal of resources and may burden preschool staff and children. The latter makes it harder to statistically answer research questions or to reach conclusions that apply to all settings.

Resource Readiness. Even when practitioners want to participate in research, they may lack the organizational resources to do so effectively. Although most RPPs aim to increase research capacity, collaborative research requires significant support from schools or districts. For example, if researchers and practitioners are to share data with each other, the researchers need collaborators at the school, district, or organization level so they can develop data-sharing agreements, understand the nature and availability of data elements, and determine the means and schedule for transferring data. The availability of such collaborators can vary widely. Some school districts and state agencies have well-staffed research departments; in others, the research or data teams lack adequate resources. And community-based organizations may have no research teams at all. Moreover, some organizations are better prepared to partner because they've developed structures that can facilitate collaboration. For example, one PEER school district has an administrator responsible for facilitating and managing the district's partnerships. Some school districts establish similar structures by creating professor-in-residence positions that explicitly link universities and school districts. No matter how motivated a practitioner organization may be, participating in research is challenging without the necessary organizational supports. The variation in resources is a barrier for researchers who are trying to collaborate with diverse partners to perform timely, rigorous, and useful research.

Fostering a culture that values data and research is especially important while developing a research agenda, because it encourages buy-in and creates momentum for the work ahead.

Responses to readiness challenges. Because practitioner partners hold different views about research, PEER has worked to show partners how research can help them serve children better. Being committed to fostering a culture that values data and research is especially important while developing a research agenda, because it encourages buy-in and creates momentum for the work ahead. PEER has built such a culture through an "informing and doing" approach. For the "informing" part, we communicate what it means to conduct research and explain its fundamental value. This includes the instructional elements of the agenda-setting workshops previously described, as well as the production and dissemination of bite-size, practitioner-friendly articles related to collaborative research.

For example, PEER's newsletter and website have been important media for informing early childhood partners. Every month we publish a brief article on a topic relevant to our partners. Some articles feature PEER's research or other research related to early childhood; others cover more general topics in education research, such as why evidence matters in helping children succeed in school, the value of logic models in education, and using assessments wisely in early education settings. We can then refer practitioners to these articles as research primers.

We also hold various partnership meetings throughout the year to foster common views around the value of research and its role in practice. The most frequent meetings gather the partners with whom we're actively working; we may meet as often as four times per year to seek feedback and share progress and results. We also hold annual meetings with a wider cross-section of partners, where we discuss broader issues such as the direction of the partnership and hear from a keynote speaker with expertise in RPPs. In 2016, PEER hosted a conference for the Connecticut early childhood community, with workshops where community and state partners shared their research and its implications for practice and policy.

PEER has also tackled the issue of research readiness by "doing." As we began to create research products, it became easier for the partners to appreciate the value of our shared work. In a few instances, we've offered free research and evaluation advice to partners when we saw that doing so would help build capacity relative to the time commitment. For several years PEER has advised StriveTogether groups that are leading community efforts focused on early childhood. Since the collective impact model emphasizes data, evidence, and assessing change and improvement, partnering with each PEER community's StriveTogether group fits with our mission of using research to inform practice. By advising cross-sector groups that work with children from birth to age eight, PEER helps strengthen data collection, data sharing, and evaluation in a way that helps organizations with limited capacity to conduct their own research. Though not every community served by an RPP will have such robust community-wide efforts, many communities have organizations with similar goals, if not a similar scope of work. Allocating advisory time for RPP team members does have a real cost, but the investment can be worthwhile.

Content Expertise

In practitioner-driven partnerships, the partners' research priorities can lead researchers into content domains outside their main area of expertise. When a partner has already developed a theory of change and done some of the deep thinking around conceptualizing constructs of interest, a research team may be able to use that partner's methodological, data analytic, and evaluation skills to perform research in a new area. But in the early stages of research, it's more common for practitioners to request help in performing such tasks as identifying what works best in a specific content area or for a specific population. In these cases, the research team is more effective when it has in-house expertise in the relevant content. Yet it's unlikely that the research team will always have expertise that's relevant to every research question identified by the partnership.

Responses to the content expertise challenge. RPPs that aim to base their research agendas on the needs and interests of practitioner partners must consider any potential gaps in expertise when designing the structure of the partnership, and then start developing resources to address the issue. For example, PEER's management and organizational structure allows us to tap into expertise within our organizations and across various levels of the partnership—practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Having CES as a member of PEER's management team connects us to Connecticut's network of regional educational service providers; these support the school districts and offer content expertise on a variety of topics relevant to professional development. Because CES's role involves supporting educational agencies in various ways, its input is valuable for a range of topics relevant to practitioners, including curriculum development, professional development, assessment, and the formative use of data. Not every RPP can tap into such a state-sponsored entity, but most have access to some type of local technical assistance or a professional development provider. For any RPP facing an expertise gap, it's worth identifying what resources exist and giving the organizations that provide those services a prominent role in the partnership.

RPPs may also use network-based and adviser approaches to address gaps in content knowledge. Another strength of the PEER management structure is its connection with the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands, which is directed by one of PEER's founding organizations, the Education Development Center. Since a key mission of RELs is to support, conduct, and enact applied research with educational agencies, they can be valuable resources for expert research consultation. PEER has consulted experts associated with REL Northeast and Islands and EDC both for their own knowledge and to find others with the expertise we seek. Our connection with REL Northeast and Islands also helped us stay informed about other research being conducted in the region that may complement our own. The IES supports 10 RELs around the United States; other RPPs may find them valuable as well.

It's also worthwhile to engage community and state leaders who oversee early childhood education policies. For example, PEER has developed relationships with directors of school districts' early childhood programs, directors of center-based early learning programs, and directors of community-based organizations that serve children. At the state level, we've built connections with representatives of the Office of Early Childhood, the Department of Education, and early childhood advocacy groups. One-on-one communication with such leaders is helpful, but it's often more valuable to convene them in advisory groups and partnership meetings because of the interactions and feedback made possible in these settings. Furthermore, to ensure that advisors' feedback is specific enough to the topics being studied, RPPs might consider developing advisory panels attached to specific partnership projects, rather than (or in addition to) a panel to advise the partnership as a whole.

Conclusions

Developing an RPP centered on a collaborative research agenda can produce research that's relevant, useful, and actionable for those most likely to put the research into practice. Such an approach can also improve education research in general by developing knowledge about contextual factors that enhance or diminish the outcomes of children, their families, and educators. When a collaborative research agenda is established by integrating input from on-the-ground partners who are close to the practices and systems being studied, it's likely that the RPP will identify and define research questions that can shed light on such contextual factors. As a function of their roles, practitioners will bring insights that prompt new and interesting hypotheses, offer more nuanced interpretations of research findings, and help identify effective ways to put evidence into practice.

As with most efforts intended to bridge gaps in related but distinct areas of work, the partnership approach also faces challenges. We discussed three of these in this article: responding to partner priorities, research readiness, and gaps in content expertise. As we've shown, there are many strategies that can mitigate these issues. One of the most important lessons we've learned is that it's critical to find the appropriate partners for an RPP at an early stage. Partners must have an authentic interest in bridging practice and research and using evidence to guide practice. They must also have deep knowledge of their organizations and communities so they can accurately represent the challenges, interests, and priorities of those organizations and communities during the process of setting the research agenda. Finally, the partners involved in developing the research agenda must have adequate authority to represent their organizations, and must be prepared to advocate for projects that come out of the research agenda. In short, unless the right people participate in defining an RPP's direction, the partnership may find it tough to pursue its research agenda and to produce research that has meaningful benefits for the intended constituents.

Another important but often underappreciated point is that the process of developing and pursuing a collaborative research agenda is rarely neat and linear. It's often messy, with many twists and turns. We've described how conditions like partners' changing priorities and diverging needs have led PEER to reevaluate and adjust some of our approaches. When collaborating with partners to create a research agenda, we recommend that RPP leaders be prepared to encounter challenges, remain open to the opportunities presented by these challenges and use them to improve the partnership, and avoid becoming too attached to their initial agenda. Just as applied researchers advocate using evidence for continuous improvement, RPPs can continuously seek input from partners and use it to make the partnership more effective.

Endnotes

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