Key lessons for successful Research-Practice Partnerships in education

The Jacobs Foundation worked with a small team of Research and Social Entrepreneurship Fellows to better understand the current state of practice in education Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) and to document and share the lessons learned.

As part of this work, the Foundation worked with a small team of Fellows to learn more about the main barriers and success factors to implementing evidence-informed practices through RPPs.

The aim was to glean valuable insights that can guide the Foundation's future investments and serve as inspiration for others working to generate and translate evidence to inform policy and practice to bring practitioners and researchers closer together in a structured partnership.
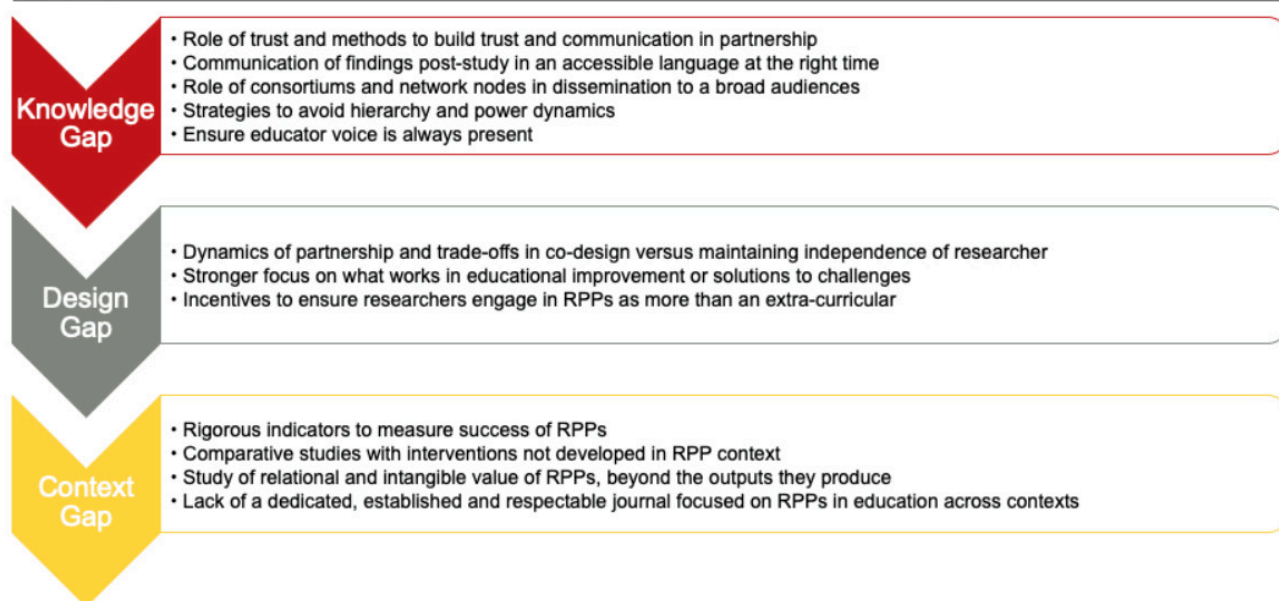
How can we ensure RPPs are effective?

Many education RPPs are already in place, using different mechanisms to connect research and practice, but partnership quality and impact are uneven. Partnerships vary in composition, including research alliances, research partnerships, and networked improvement communities. These different RPP types further vary in goals, approach, and funding.

The LEAP Fellows team undertook research to better understand what is and is not working to better inform decision-making. The team examined a shortlist of 15 recent global partnerships drawn across the three identified RPP typologies. Four examples were chosen, based on a set of criteria, for deep dives resulting from interviews with members of the RPP. From the short-listed examples, several key lessons were identified.

A RPP can be a useful mechanism to overcome structural limitations from both the research and practitioner side, to identify, codify and scale evidence-informed education practices. Bringing researchers and practitioners together can yield powerful results to positively impact learning at speed.

The LEAP team recognized that truly effective and collaborative work is a unique and complex chemistry between experts, landscapes, and pupils. Success requires a number of key elements to be aligned so they can overcome gaps in three key areas: knowledge, design and context.

Key gaps that RPPs need to overcome

Knowledge Gap
- Role of trust and methods to build trust and communication in partnership
- Communication of findings post-study in an accessible language at the right time
- Role of consortiums and network nodes in dissemination to a broad audiences
- Strategies to avoid hierarchy and power dynamics
- Ensure educator voice is always present

Design Gap
- Dynamics of partnership and trade-offs in co-design versus maintaining independence of researcher
- Stronger focus on what works in educational improvement or solutions to challenges
- Incentives to ensure researchers engage in RPPs as more than an extra-curricular

Context Gap
- Rigorous indicators to measure success of RPPs
- Comparative studies with interventions not developed in RPP context
- Study of relational and intangible value of RPPs, beyond the outputs they produce
- Lack of a dedicated, established and respectable journal focused on RPPs in education across contexts

Partners need to undertake to work together to establish trust and trustful communication, install clear roles and incentives, and hold their work up to rigorous standards. The researchers further identified numerous recommendations for each of the individual RPP partners to maximize collaborative success.

1. Educators

Educators should be clear about what they want from partnerships and the specific expertise they bring. It is also important to ensure there are enough human resources available to make the RPP work. The LEAP fellows also urged educators to be a strong advocating voice in the research process and implementation.

2. Researchers

Researchers bring research method expertise and should play a guiding role in ensuring research methods fit practitioner needs. They should further recognize and incorporate practitioner expertise by creating a clear space and role, so educators can contribute meaningful impact. Finally, researchers should support practitioners to find ways to both own and use the data generated by the research without adding to their workloads.
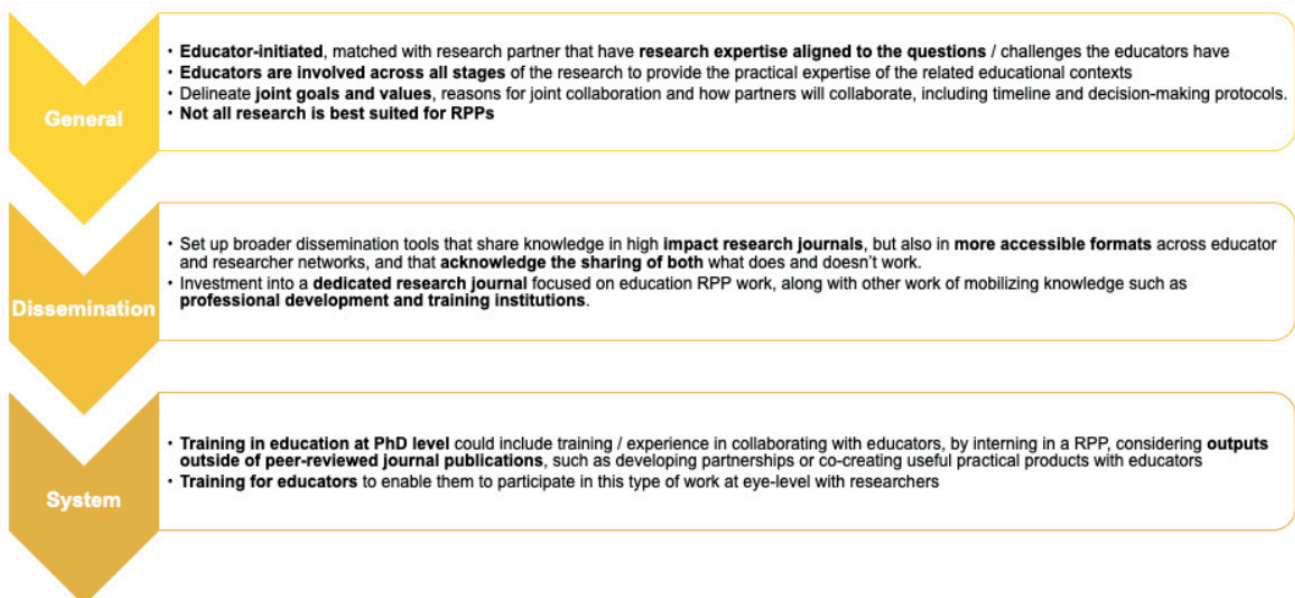
3. Brokers

A third partner, called here a 'broker', plays an important support role in disseminating and providing access to research evidence as a separate institution. Brokers are niche agents, such as funders like the Jacobs Foundation, who have an important role in connecting, mobilizing, and monitoring. Brokers lend a concerted effort to maintain ongoing support for RPPs, build capacity, provide informal training, and create a dedicated space to share findings.

Brokers should aim to facilitate good matches between researchers and practitioners. They should play a facilitation role to broker joint buy-in, mutual understanding, and developing a common language. Strong brokers check in and evaluate the health of the RPP and address arising challenges. Adapted funding principles should help RPPs to strengthen educators' role in the research process.

Key lessons: Successful RPPs in practice

A number of broad recommendations were made in relation to RPP success. Broad recommendations were made in relation to how RPPs are established, how results should be disseminated, and system changes.

Broad recommendations to successful RPPs

General
- **Educator-initiated**, matched with research partner that have **research expertise aligned to the questions** / challenges the educators have
- **Educators are involved across all stages** of the research to provide the practical expertise of the related educational contexts
- Delineate **joint goals and values**, reasons for joint collaboration and how partners will collaborate, including timeline and decision-making protocols.
- **Not all research is best suited for RPPs**

Dissemination
- Set up broader dissemination tools that share knowledge in high **impact research journals**, but also in **more accessible formats** across educator and researcher networks, and that **acknowledge the sharing of both** what does and doesn't work.
- Investment into a **dedicated research journal** focused on education RPP work, along with other work of mobilizing knowledge such as **professional development and training institutions**.

System
- **Training in education at PhD level** could include training / experience in collaborating with educators, by interning in a RPP, considering **outputs outside of peer-reviewed journal publications**, such as developing partnerships or co-creating useful practical products with educators
- **Training for educators** to enable them to participate in this type of work at eye-level with researchers

Successful RPP outcomes are those applicable in the classroom, so educator-initiated questions and challenges should be matched with relevant research expertise. Research and methods should be aligned to the questions or challenges educators have, being aware that not all research is suited for RPPs. Finally, educators should be involved across all stages of the research to provide the practical expertise of the related education contexts.

This blog article draws on the findings from the LEAP Report "Learning from Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs): criteria for and examples of effective RPPs, and the lessons they hold for Funders, Facilitators and Brokers" authored by Lia Commissar, Jamie Jirout, Sehr Tejpar, and Nick Valenzia (LEAP Core Team Lead).