

Strategies for Developing a Mutually Beneficial Researcher-Practitioner Partnership

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Introduction

Researcher-practitioner partnerships can be mutually beneficial. Practitioners who deliver programs to children and youth can benefit from research that helps them understand how their programs operate, how to improve outcomes for different types of youth in different contexts, and the extent to which their programs are achieving desired outcomes. Researchers interested in developing and evaluating programs to serve youth can improve their theories and interventions by gathering data in a real-life setting and integrating the practitioner's perspectives and needs.

When researchers and practitioners build collaborations—researcher-practitioner partnerships (RPPs)—they can ensure that research questions and methods meet the needs of the program, yield results that can be used to improve programming, and generate practical scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, practitioners and researchers often fail to obtain mutually beneficial outcomes due to obstacles such as miscommunication, logistical challenges, practitioners with limited resources that serve populations with urgent needs, and competing or misunderstood goals for working together.

Child Trends staff and partners at the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA), the national resource office of the YMCA, recently developed a successful RPP collaboration to evaluate the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI). Y-USA designed the CDLI to identify, test, and disseminate practices related to youth character development that staff and volunteers could learn and use in their programs to positively influence youth character development across different settings.

Over the course of three years, from the initial conceptualization of the program to its scaling at over 200 sites, Child Trends and Y-USA staff worked closely and intentionally together to clearly communicate about evaluation goals, methodological challenges, interim findings, and suggested tweaks to the CDLI. Child Trends and Y-USA staff also worked together to reduce the burden on program staff when collecting data during site visits, interviews, and focus groups. The iterative, step-by-step nature of the intervention development process that Y-USA uses has clear points when feedback can be shared and changes can be built into newer initiatives, which aligns well with an RPP.

In looking back on the partnership, Child Trends and Y-USA identified six key recommendations that may be beneficial for other researchers interested in building RPPs:

1. **Hold a meeting between researchers and practitioner staff at the outset of the project to help both sets of stakeholders get to know one another.** Mutual trust and respect can begin to develop in this initial meeting and are essential for the partnership to succeed. The effort and expense that it takes to hold an in-person meeting can be worthwhile for the RPP because it helps both sets of stakeholders establish a comfortable rapport with one another. Given the limitations on travel that

the COVID-19 pandemic has created and resource trade-offs that exist in all program settings, a video meeting that intentionally focuses on relationship building could also potentially fulfill this need.

2. **Commit to having regularly scheduled checks-ins between the research team and practitioner staff.** Child Trends and Y-USA held collaborative meetings once a week or every other week. While frequent meetings were time-consuming, they allowed Child Trends and Y-USA to create agendas together to address urgent issues. These meetings also allowed both teams' staff to discuss challenges in real-time and reduced miscommunication.
3. **Provide ongoing, actionable feedback from research.** Throughout the evaluation process, Y-USA staff wanted to use data to respond to practitioner feedback in order to make changes to enhance the CDLI. Child Trends staff provided Y-USA with interim data and noted any limitations of the data, which helped Y-USA prioritize what changes to make. Child Trends and Y-USA's partnership was focused on both an implementation and an outcome evaluation, but this kind of data use could potentially increase buy-in for theoretical research as well.
4. **Minimize the burden on sites around data collection and make the data available as soon as possible.** Practitioners understandably prioritize direct work with youth over collecting data. Adding demands to their day-to-day work can compromise data quality, particularly when data collection feels removed from their day-to-day needs. Identifying ways to streamline data collection and support site staff is essential. Child Trends minimized practitioners' burden by making the site visit scheduling process as simple as possible and also by recommending a retrospective self-assessment survey instead of two surveys, which had benefits both in terms of time burden and methodology. Finally, Child Trends made sure to share observation data with sites as quickly as possible so that they could use it to plan.
5. **Value the skills and knowledge of the organization's staff.** Validate the experience, knowledge, and instincts of practitioner staff and show gratitude when they are helpful. Child Trends staff observed programs during sites visits and scored the practitioners' interactions with children. Although observers scored the program, they also recorded anecdotes to explain the score. Child Trends staff worked hard to share anecdotes from a strengths-based perspective so that staff would feel supported.
6. **Share research findings with program staff.** Researchers can validate the work and expertise of program staff by showing them how the effort they put in to the evaluation resulted in findings they can use to improve outcomes for the children they work with. When local YMCA staff saw how products and processes changed based on their feedback, their buy-in and acceptance of the research plan increased. Child Trends staff also noticed that when staff from local Ys presented at the national CDLI meetings, it helped other Ys better understand how this initiative might work in their programs.

Using these six strategies to guide the partnership, YMCAs participating in this project were able to benefit from continuous improvement in products and messaging. Ultimately, through this partnership, Y-USA was able to improve their character development work for the future. Simultaneously, Child Trends was able systematically share insights about how to implement a multi-site, program-agnostic social and emotional learning (SEL) initiative. Lessons learned on how to support staff to embrace and implement the CDLI can be useful to other programs newly implementing SEL initiatives with their staff.