Chapter 6

Assessing the Quality of Education Research Through Its Relevance to Practice: An Integrative Review of Research-Practice Partnerships

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The contemporary social, economic, and cultural conditions within and outside the academy prompt important questions about the role of research in education policy and practice. Scholars have framed research-practice partnerships (RPPs) as a strategy to promote evidence-based decision-making in education. In this chapter, I interrogate the notion that RPPs offer an insightful framework to consider how the quality of research can be measured through its use. The findings suggest that using RPPs to assess the quality of education research enhances the relevance to policy and practice as well as attention to the quality of reporting, and pivots from the preeminence of methodological quality. RPPs increase local education leaders' access to research and bolster the use of research. RPPs may also strengthen the alignment between education research and the public good. Notwithstanding, employing RPPs as a vehicle to assess research quality has its challenges. Valuing the work of RPPs in academia is a work in progress. Building and sustaining an RPP is challenging, and there is still much to learn about the ways in which RPPs work and overcome obstacles. Assessing the impact of RPPs is also difficult. Future considerations are discussed.

It is a pivotal moment for the enterprise of education research in the United States amid larger questions about the role of academia in addressing educational, economic, and social inequality. The conditions that education researchers in the U.S. study and live in are mired in worsening economic and social inequality (Chetty et al., 2018; Noel et al., 2019). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has renewed urgency in understanding and crafting solutions to myriad, cross-cutting inequalities in health, education, social, and economic success. There is growing skepticism about the fairness guaranteed by social and

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economic structures as well as the public schooling system. As schools across the nation grapple with racial and income disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes such as suspensions and test scores (Welsh & Little, 2018), academia is experiencing a reckoning of its own as racial equity issues within the ivory tower are being more openly discussed (Melaku & Beeman, 2020). Public schools are increasingly populated with Black and Latinx students, yet the scholars who research the conditions and experiences of these students are largely White. In essence, the contemporary social, economic, and cultural conditions within and outside the academy prompt important questions about the role of research in education policy and practice.

Federal education policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) promote the use of evidence in education policymaking (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018; Penuel et al., 2017; Wentworth et al., 2017). The federal government has also played an important role in funding knowledge utilization centers in the past decade with an emphasis on measuring research use (Tseng, 2017; Tseng, Fleischman, & Quintero, 2017). Notwithstanding, evidence-based decision-making in education remains an aspiration rather than a norm, and there are serious questions about the extent to which education is an evidence-based field (Malouf & Taymans, 2016). The gulf between research and practice in education or the limited use of research in education policy and practice has been well-documented (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; Joyce & Cartwright, 2019; Neal et al., 2019; Tseng, Fleischman, & Quintero, 2017; Tseng & Nutley, 2014). The prevailing emphasis on evidence-based policy and practice has intensified discussions on what constitutes quality in education research, how the enterprise of education research generates high-quality research, and the extent to which research evidence is incorporated into local decision-making (Boaz & Ashby, 2003).

DEFINING QUALITY IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

What constitutes "quality" in education research? Consensus on assessing the quality of education research has been elusive. There are various different criteria for assessing research related to a host of methodological and research approaches employed in education research, and the effective adoption and use of quality standards is unclear (Boaz & Ashby, 2003; Moss et al., 2009; Tijssen, 2020). The debate on the criteria for quality and rigor in education research has been reenergized with the passage of the Education Sciences Reform Act and the formation of the Institute for Education Science (IES) in 2002 (Berliner, 2002; Feuer et al., 2002; Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). Boaz and Ashby (2003) posited four main dimensions of research quality: (1) methodological quality, (2) quality in reporting, (3) appropriateness of methods to the aims of the study, and (4) relevance to policy and practice. There is a hierarchy of "evidence-based" research to access funding under ESSA, including (a) strong or randomized experiments, (b) moderate or quasi experiments, (c) promising or correlation studies, and (d) strong rationale-based research with potential for empirical support or theories likely to improve student outcomes (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; ESSA, 2015).

Methodological quality has garnered the most attention in defining research quality (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018). The What Works Clearinghouse developed evidence standards, and more recently, the Standards for Excellence in Education Research was introduced by the IES as a rating system that categorizes research in the What Works Clearinghouse in different "certification" levels (Schneider, 2020). The "what works" movement in education policy propelled by the passage of the NCLB has, "privileged causal research—work that uses social experiments or advanced quantitative methods to carefully identify the causal effects of programs and policies—rather than descriptive, correlational, and qualitative research" (Polikoff & Conaway, 2018). Furthermore, Boaz and Ashby (2003) highlighted that extant procedures to foster high-quality research such as (a) standards and checklists, (b) peer review in proposals and publications, and (c) peer feedback have not resulted in high-quality research due to the inconsistent and uneven application of existing quality standards and procedures.

Scholars have highlighted that there is a misalignment between the hyperfocus on causal research in education and the questions of interest to local decision makers (Polikoff & Conaway, 2018). There is "an even greater need for the field to take up broader questions about what works to include questions about the study's relevance to transforming practice" (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014, p. 19). Boaz and Ashby (2003) argued that the conceptualization of research quality should "address the 'fitness of purpose' of research" and not simply satisfy methodological quality benchmarks. Yarris et al. (2013) contended that "the definition of quality for a given product is usually informed by the consumers of the product" (p. 180). This raises important questions about the use of research in education policy and practice (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; Tseng & Nutley, 2014).

THE USE OF EDUCATION RESEARCH

There are multiple users of education research ranging from federal and state-level policymakers to teachers in the classroom. These users access and use research in different ways (DeBray et al., 2014; Jabbar et al., 2014; Leary & Severance, 2018; Lubienski et al., 2014; Penuel et al., 2018; Tseng & Nutley, 2014). The population of interest in this chapter are school and district leaders or local education leaders. In the United States, even though multiple actors are often responsible for decisions regarding education policy and implementation (Conaway, 2020; DeBray et al., 2014), contemporary educational policymaking remains a largely local affair as principals and district central office leaders play a central role as the primary decision makers on the programs and reforms that schools implement (Penuel et al., 2017). Research use may also vary among local education leaders by their professional roles within districts (Penuel et al., 2017).

Prior studies found that research was hard to access and hardly used with the exception of program adoption considerations (Coburn et al., 2009); however, recent studies have indicated that local education leaders frequently use research (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018; Penuel et al., 2017). Research is typically used in

four main ways: (a) instrumental use or research that shapes policy or practice decisions; (b) conceptual use or research that shapes the worldview of problems and solutions; (c) symbolic use or research that validates prior held positions, preferences, or decisions; and (d) process use or incorporating research processes in practitioners' work (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018; Penuel et al., 2017; Tseng, 2017; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017; Tseng, Fleischman, & Quintero, 2017; Weiss, 1980). Research use varies within and across districts (Honig et al., 2014; Hubbard, 2010; Penuel et al., 2018); however, instrumental use of research is "the type most emphasized in policies that encourage use of research evidence" (Penuel et al., 2017, p. 2).

Research use in policy decision-making is better characterized as a labyrinth process rather than a linear moment (Tseng & Nutley, 2014). Decision-making is an interactive process involving multiple people based on formal and informal interactions rather than single events, and research findings must be interpreted by practitioners to foster understanding that drives decisions (Conaway, 2020; Weiss, 1980, 1982). The use of research is not simply to be an access to information problem. Scholars have highlighted the salience of ideology and preexisting beliefs in interpreting information and posited that lack of collaboration with educators has contributed to distrust of research evidence (Tseng, Fleischman, & Quintero, 2017; Weiss, 1980). Farley-Ripple et al. (2018) argued that bolstering the use of research in educational decision-making is more complex than issues of dissemination and access to research and can be characterized as a bidirectional problem afflicting research and practice communities.

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH THROUGH ITS USE VIA RPPS

In this chapter, I interrogate the notion that research-practice partnerships (RPPs) offer an insightful framework to consider how the quality of research can be measured through its use. I start with the premise that the quality of education research may be partly judged by its use by local education leaders. In recent decades, partnerships between researchers and practitioners have been endorsed as a way to address educational problems (Donovan et al., 2003; Donovan et al., 2013; Wentworth et al., 2017). Gutiérrez & Penuel (2014) posited that "relevance to practice," as a conceptualization of rigor, "can ensure the longevity and efficacy of educational research" (p. 19). Prior scholars have framed RPPs as a strategy to promote evidence-based decision-making in education (Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017; Wentworth et al., 2017). Interest in RPPs has increased in recent decades and reflects the need for a closer link between researchers and practitioners as well as greater attention to the use of research in decision-making (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Farrell et al., 2019; Tseng, 2012).

RPPs provide independent analyses of education policies and practices, and assist policymakers and practitioners in the interpretation and dissemination of findings (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). The National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), a national network of RPPs in the United States, define RPPs as "a promising strategy for producing more relevant research, improving the

use of research evidence in decision-making, and engaging both researchers and practitioners to tackle problems of practice" (NNERPP, n.d.). RPPs represent an intriguing response to the need for a reimagined infrastructure for the production and use of research evidence as well as the relationship between researchers and education stakeholders (Tseng, Fleischman, & Quintero, 2017; Tseng & Nutley, 2014).

This chapter provides an integrative review of the extant literature on RPPs. I juxtapose the synthesis of studies on RPPs with personal experiences as the researcher in an RPP (research alliance) with district leadership in Georgia. The combination offers an opportunity to further extend the limited empirical research literature on RPPs and provide granular pertinent considerations to participants in current and future RPPs. Overall, this chapter situates RPPs as an instructive case to learn more about how the quality of research can be assessed via use.

The resulting insights add to the discussion on how to assess the quality of education research through its use. The chapter offers considerations for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to develop theories of action for different innovative types of RPPs and to train the next generation of scholars who interface with practitioners. The findings provide insights for researchers interested in working with districts as they navigate multiple tensions associated with creating and sustaining RPPs. I first describe the method and theoretical framework used in this chapter before detailing the findings. I conclude with a discussion of implications for academia, education policy, and education practice.

METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Method

This chapter focuses on studies published in the past 10 years (2010–2020) that have provided conceptual or empirical insights on the evolution, dynamics, and effectiveness of RPPs in the United States. The time span includes the seminal white paper by Penuel et al. (2013) in which the official definition of RPPs was introduced. Admittedly, prioritizing recent studies that emerged after the introduction of the official definition of RPP may exclude older studies that have made important contributions. Thus, seminal studies published before 2010 are also considered and included in this review (e.g., Roderick et al., 2009). This chapter places emphasis on peer-reviewed studies; however, given the nascent nature of the literature on RPPs, I also include book chapters and reports. The use of evidence and brainstorming ways to redefine the engagement between policy, practice, and research is a global challenge (Tseng, Fleischman, & Quintero, 2017). Initiatives promoting greater research utilization such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence in the United Kingdom and the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research in Canada provide evidence that the quest to better incorporate research in policy and practice is not confined to the United States. Notwithstanding, this chapter focuses on studies examining RPPs in the United States given that the U.S. context and the "what works" approach to evidence-based policy and practice differ from other countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom (Tseng & Nutley, 2014).

A multiphase process was utilized to identify studies for inclusion. Numerous databases spanning multiple academic fields (e.g., ERIC, Web of Science, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses) were used to systematically search for empirical studies. Effective full-text search strings were developed to identify empirical studies examining RPPs. Each search string included plural forms of search words. When built-in filters were available, the following filters were applied: (a) peer reviewed, (b) written in English, (c) published between 2010 and 2020, and (d) located in the United States. I searched for the following search words: "research-practice partnerships" and "district central office research use." Studies were identified as potentially meeting the inclusion criteria, and during the initial screening, the titles and abstracts were screened to ensure that articles were empirical studies focused primarily on research use and/or RPPs. Ancestral searches from the references list of the included articles were conducted to identify and select additional studies. Overall, just under 50 studies were included in the literature synthesis.

Applying an ethnographic case study approach (Fusch et al., 2017), I use experiences as a researcher in a place-based RPP focusing on school discipline in a midsized urban district to triangulate the theoretical and empirical findings from the literature review. Ethnographic case studies are case studies "employing ethnographic methods and focused on building arguments about cultural, group, or community formation or examining other sociocultural phenomena" (Schwandt & Gates, 2018, p. 344). The design is appropriate as the researcher was embedded within the context and the overarching objective is a richer understanding of the evolution and work of RPPs (Fusch et al., 2017).

Data included observations, informal interviews, and reflective journaling. The researcher conducted multiple observations between 2018 and 2020, including (a) school discipline forums, townhalls, and community meetings; (b) restorative justice and equity workshops as well as restorative practice community of practice meetings (attended by a mix of counselors, teachers, and social workers); (c) alternative education task force consisting of school and district leaders; and (d) code of conduct revisions task force. The researcher also attended multiple professional learning opportunities for principals and assistant principals over the course of the 2018–2019 school year and 2019–2020 school year. The researcher also conducted multiple site visits at schools in the district. Informal interviews and reflective journaling took place regularly as researcher and district partners met to discuss the management, progress, and future of the RPP.

Bartell and Johnson (2013) noted, "We cannot separate ourselves from whom we are, and we recognize that our worldviews influence the privileges that we see as well as those that we do not see" (p. 36). My positionality has been molded by my identity as a Black, heterosexual male as well as my personal life experiences growing up in Jamaica and living in the United States. I am a tenure track faculty member at a predominantly White institution and have received my academic degrees from predominantly White institutions. I am a product of educational opportunity, and I am a proponent of the transformative power of education. Thus, my research focuses on equity and improvement, specifically how we can improve the experiences,

opportunities, and outcomes for traditionally marginalized and underrepresented students, and change the trajectory of their lives.

Complexity as a Theory of RPPs

The application of theory to the examination of the evolution, activities, and outcomes of RPPs has been relatively limited. Arce-Trigatti et al. (2018) used organizational and institutional theories to describe the evolution of RPPs that situated "the description of an organization's environment as a field" (p. 561). In this chapter, I apply complexity theory as an overall organizing concept for understanding the evolution and work of RPPs, which in turn undergirds the discussion of RPPs as a vehicle to assess the quality of education research through its use. Davis and Sumara (2009) posited that complexity thinking "might be productively understood as the study of learning and learning systems" (p. 36). It is reasonable to conceptualize the evolution and work of RPPs as complex phenomena given attributes such as nested within other systems, evolving, and intertwining (Davis & Sumara, 2009). To be sure, not all the characteristics of complex phenomena perfectly align with RPPs; however, I posit there are sufficient commonalities to warrant exploration.

I use complexity theory to frame RPPs as a form of transphenomena and enable "level-jumping" (Davis & Sumara, 2009) to simultaneously examine the functioning of RPPs as well as the conditions in which RPPs emerge and evolve. The theory is appropriate as it acknowledges the "social side of evidence use" (Yanovitzky & Weber, 2020), prioritizes the importance of conceptual use of research, and problematizes assumptions about how actors on the researcher (R) and practitioner (P) sides negotiate the rigid hierarchy and stated rules of institutional and political landscapes. Through the lens of complexity thinking, the activities and outcomes of RPPs can be characterized as a learning and emergent phenomenon (Davis & Sumara, 2009). The process of how research is used—regardless of the type of research use—involves incorporating knowledge into individual behaviors as well as organizational structure and culture of school districts (Davies & Nutley, 2008). Researchers and practitioners are interacting and influencing each other and as RPPs evolve as these interactions spark new phenomena, behaviors, and norms (Mason, 2008; McElroy, 2000). A range of possibilities, outputs, and outcomes in the process of generating and using research emerge from relationships and interactions among researchers and practitioners in the dynamic and interconnected contexts of universities and district central offices. Furthermore, as RPPs evolve, more actors are being involved on both the R and P sides as well as complementary organizations that support partnership work (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018). Complexity thinking also provides a holistic approach to understanding the evolution and work of RPPs based on the recognition that even though the main institutions comprising the R and P side are typically systems with written rules, oftentimes, the reality is messier and diverges from linear codified statements as actors in an RPP interact at both on individual and the organizational levels within universities and district central offices as well as within the emerging structure of RPPs (Anderson, 1999; Yanovitzky & Weber, 2020).

Complexity theory offers a framework to learn more about how RPPs may enhance the use of research and illustrates some of the difficulties of using RPPs to assess the quality of research. Complexity thinking postulates that the ability of RPPs to support research use among local education leaders is not linear and encompass political, social, and cultural dimensions as actors on the R and P sides interact. At the heart of complexity theory is the notion that outcomes are probabilistic, not deterministic (Grobman, 2005), and many small, improvised changes on the part of individual agents can accumulate and lead to larger, deliberate shifts in an organization (Anderson, 1999). Applying the four interdependent conditions in which the expansive possibilities of complex phenomena such as RPPs may manifest—internal diversity, internal redundancy, neighbor interactions, and decentralized control (Davis & Sumara, 2009)—provides a useful way to think about bridging the gap between the evolution and work of RPPs and using RPPs to assess the quality of research. For instance, internal redundancy can be applied to the roles of and relationships between the actors on the R and P sides and may be affected by turnover in RPPs. Neighbor interactions are thought partnerships and capture how researchers may affect practitioners' activities and thinking and vice versa. Decentralized control when applied to RPPs may encompass the management of RPPs and the process of defining and refining a research agenda. Additionally, complexity theory lends itself well to the methodological approach of this chapter (Mason, 2008).

FINDINGS

The Typology and Evolution of RPPs

Defining RPPs

In their seminal 2013 paper, Coburn et al. (2013) defined RPPs as long-term, focused on problems of practice, and mutually beneficial to researchers and practitioners with intentional use of strategies to foster partnership as well as original analyses. Initially, RPPs were classified into three broad categories of RPPs: (a) research alliances, (b) design research partnerships, and (c) networked improvement communities (Coburn et al., 2013). A research alliance generally focuses on a particular district or region (e.g., the Consortium on Chicago School Research); in design research partnerships, researchers and practitioners work together to study, design, and develop new learning materials and teaching practices (e.g., the MIST project housed at Vanderbilt University; and networked improvement communities are a collective of districts, researchers, and designers facing common issues who partner with researchers as a way of identifying solutions (Henrick et al., 2017; Leary & Severance, 2018; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017).

The Growth of RPPs

The formation of and participation in RPPs in education have grown rapidly in the past two decades (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018). Arce-Trigatti et al. (2018) highlighted,

"The RPP model is gaining traction as a potentially useful way to connect research, policy, and practice in education" (p. 576). The formation of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research in the mid-1990s spawned a wave in place-based RPPs in education research such as the Research Alliance for New York City Schools (López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017; Roderick et al., 2009; Wentworth et al., 2017). The growth of RPPs has exploded in the past decade (Tseng, 2012). As of July 2020, there were 44 members in NNERPP spanning collaborators in most states between researchers and practitioners. RPPs can be at multiple educational governance levels, whether state or local districts (Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017).

The RPP landscape has evolved over time as the numbers and types have expanded (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017). Henrick et al. (2017) noted that hybrid RPPs with attributes of the three types of RPPs were growing in numbers since the publication of Coburn et al. (2013) typology. Arce-Trigatti et al. (2018) updated the typology of RPPs and provided a useful overview of the evolution of RPPs. RPPs differ across multiple dimensions: (a) length of partnership commitment, (b) researcher side participation, (c) practitioner side participation, (d) policy side participation, (e) research agenda, and (f) intensity of collaboration (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018). There is an evolving ecosystem of the entities involved in partnership work as partners may extend beyond universities and researchers (e.g., nonprofit institutions on the research side). Arce-Trigatti et al., (2018) highlighted the role of complementary organizations that support the work of RPPs.

The Nature of RPPs

Penuel et al. (2015) framed the work of RPPs as "joint work at boundaries" that includes boundary crossing, boundary practices, and boundary objects. Boundary crossing encompasses reaching consensus across different norms and goals, how problems are conceptualized, and the pace of work (Coburn et al., 2013; Hopkins et al., 2019; Penuel et al., 2015). Boundary practices refer to the routines through which researchers and practitioners engage partnership work, and boundary objects are meaningful for both researchers and practitioners and assist in coordinating boundary practices (Hopkins et al., 2019; Penuel et al., 2015).

The focus of IES-funded RPPs has largely been on K–12 teaching and learning, with relatively less RPPs on school improvement, early childhood education, and postsecondary access and success (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). The research conducted by RPPs is typically descriptive and exploratory with relatively few causal investigations (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). Tseng, Easton, and Supplee (2017) highlighted, "RPPs are increasingly discussed in child welfare, child mental health, and criminal justice settings" (p. 3). The nature of RPPs has evolved over time and RPPs such as the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research have changed considerably (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017).

The Emerging Evidence on RPPs

The empirical literature on RPPs is in its infancy and there are challenges and unknowns abound as researchers and practitioners collaborate (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018; Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018; Farrell et al., 2019). Researchers are paying increasing attention to RPPs as evidenced by the recent special issue in *AERA Open* (Penuel & Hill, 2019) and books on RPPs in recent years (Bevan & Penuel, 2018; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). I organize the evidence on RPPs using five of the major topic areas identified by NNERPP. Within each topic area, I supplement the synthesis of the existing literature with personal accounts for nuanced discussion of the successes and challenges across the various dimensions of RPPs. The five major topic areas are (a) partnering up, (b) funding, (c) working together, (d) engaging stakeholders, and (e) effectiveness.

Partnering Up

Partnering up includes finding a partner, building trust, getting buy in, and negotiating the work (NNERPP, n.d.). Establishing mutualism between the researcher(s) and practitioner(s) is a primary consideration and difficult challenge in RPPs (Coburn et al., 2013; Leary & Severance, 2018). When beginning an RPP, both parties need to be mindful of expressing their needs and ensuring that the proposed research will be mutually beneficial (Leary & Severance, 2018). Several scholars have highlighted that mutual organizational interest and trust among RPP members are critical factors in partnering up and launching an RPP (Coburn et al., 2013; Farrell, 2017; Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017; Tseng & Nutley, 2014). Barton et al. (2014) highlighted the centrality of relationships in RPPs and contended that relationships are the key to success in RPPs, analogous to the importance of location in real estate. Vakil et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of acknowledging the underlying tensions of race and power dynamics in partnerships as partners cultivate trust. Race and power are interacting in complex ways in RPPs between the different actors (Denner et al., 2019). Denner et al., (2019) examined the role of culture and power in the construction and evolution of the RPP and found that over time, dynamics of RPP become just as important as the "finding" produced.

My experiences underscore the salience of Farrell et al.'s (2019) findings about the importance of role and identity negotiation in RPPs. Establishing mutualism started with the district's needs and finding ways to add value. Clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each partner was critical to mutualism. It had to be clear how the partnership is managed and truth be told—it is a dynamic exercise where one learns on the job. As a junior faculty, I entered into partnership work based on how I view my scholarship making an impact. I partially recognized the time commitment but also relished the opportunity to work with district leaders and a chance at meaningful change. Nevertheless, at the outset, there was an agreed-upon modus operandi for managing the partnership. The role and responsibilities of the R side include (a) defining research agenda, (b) data collection, (c) data cleaning and analysis, (d)

interpretation of results, and (e) dissemination of results. The role and responsibilities of P side include (a) defining research agenda, (b) interpretation of results, (c) feedback on results before dissemination, (d) policy and practice responses based on findings, and (e) dissemination of results.

Additionally, I developed mutualism for partnership work in my university department by considering the buy in of university officials at the outset, keeping my department and dean in the loop, and securing their support for partnership work even if the university does not fund the RPP. Admittedly, navigating the misalignment of incentives in academia to prioritize connecting with practitioners is a persistent challenge. The pressures to publish journal articles is real, and although there is some overlap, the products that practitioners find useful are different from the products prioritized in annual evaluations of faculty.

Funding

Funding entails the process of securing resources (typically monetary) for the start-up and sustainment of RPPs. RPPs are resource-intensive and favor larger education organizations that have administrative capacity for research (Conaway, 2020). The growth of RPPs has been accompanied by an increase in opportunities for funding and dollars flowing to RPPs from federal as well as local and national foundation sources (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018; Cannata et al., 2019; Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). Seed funding from private foundations is a common element among a number of RPPs such as Tennessee Education Research Alliance and Education Policy Innovation Collaborative. Over the past decade, the funders of RPPs have included the Spencer Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the IES's Researcher-Practitioner Partnership program (as of January 2019, the IES discontinued the RPP funding program; Bevan et al., 2019; Cannata et al., 2019; Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017). The William T. Grant foundation has dedicated an entire section of their website to providing information on starting, maintaining, and funding RPPs and supports RPPs through their "Institutional Challenge Grant." In some cases, such as the Teacher Workforce Collaborative, a combination of foundation and federal funds as well as support from the university also play a significant role in launching and formalizing RPPs. The support from colleges is an encouraging sign for the future viability of RPPs.

In addition to start-up funds, another challenge for RPPs is consistently raising funds to sustain the work after initial start-up (Conaway et al., 2015; Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017). Of the 27 partnerships that received an IES RPP grant between 2013 and 2015, only 6 partnerships successfully applied for and received additional funding (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018).

My experiences in an RPP illustrate the unseen benefits of seeking funding for both researchers and practitioners involved in an RPP. District partners and I have applied for grants to support the partnership work and the districts' equity work as well as fellowships for the professional development of district leaders. Even though funding success was limited, the process of applying was worthwhile. I found that helping district leaders complete applications for fellowships and collaboratively pursuing

grant opportunities for the RPP provided valuable time and space for additional interpretation of findings as well as updating of our research agenda. The process of seeking funding generated new ideas in addition to bolstering the conceptual use of research for district leaders. In addition to deepening collaboration with district leaders, I also became more familiar with the RPP literature and began to further incorporate lessons from the existing knowledge base into design and operations of the RPP. Securing significant funding for start-up and sustainment of the RPP would have been great, but the process of seeking funds was far from meaningless. Indeed, infrastructure for RPPs are typically developing before receiving funding as partners establish formal data sharing agreements, craft research agendas, and establish decision-making boards (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018).

Working Together

Working together includes activities such as navigating the organization structures, developing a research agenda, and completing data sharing agreements (NNERPP, n.d.). Regular meetings, structured activities, and sustained interactions are important conditions for maintaining RPPs and fostering research use (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). A significant capacity-building exercise in RPPs is "to have the evidence and the opportunities for the people working on the problem to really talk about it, internalize it and understand it" (Coburn et al., 2013, p. 4). Thus, creating spaces and mutual learning opportunities for researchers and school and district leaders to discuss educational issues and research is a critical component of building research capacity (Conaway, 2020; Farrell, 2017).

Co-constructing the research agenda is perhaps the most time-consuming foundational element of RPPs. Co-constructing the research agenda and co-constructing the process to develop research capacity within school districts to conduct and understand education research is time-intensive and is more of an art than a science. My experiences taught me to start with the district's needs and take the time to align district needs and research interests at the outset. It is best to view the work as finding solutions for the district rather than answering research questions. Researchers need to be present and patient. District and school leaders are busy and constantly responding to changing and sometimes exigent circumstances. It is in this phase that researchers and practitioners figure out how to sync schedules and timelines for products. Indeed, partnership work can be viewed as navigating a series of tensions regarding the production and use of research. Although reconciling the inherent tensions between research independence and teamwork is a challenge, researchers remain independent when conducting analyses to bolster credibility of the study and the objectivity of the findings (Coburn et al., 2013).

The timing and the products of RPPs are other operative tensions (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). It is well documented that research and policymakers have different tempos with regard to the production and use of research (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018; Henig, 2009). Districts often need quick results even though quality research takes time to complete (Penuel et al., 2015). The timing of products is a

constant tension I navigated with district leaders. There were a few steps I took to help bridge the gap. I realized it was very beneficial to provide frequent updates on research in order to discuss and preview results before a written report. These serve to bolster research use as the local decision makers can start to use research before the formal report is published. The trust built in an RPP framework facilitates the use of research ahead of formal research products such as reports.

Navigating the politics of RPPs is a challenge for which most researchers have little preparation from their graduate programs (Ghiso et al., 2019). Because researchers in RPPs can be important participants in decisions regarding interventions, lines can become blurry (Farrell et al., 2019; Henrick et al., 2016). Perhaps one of the biggest lessons I learned over time was that the politics of RPP work is challenging as the political winds in a local school district can shift swiftly and frequently. I constantly grappled with understanding the political landscape while remaining in the research sphere. Conditions for interpretation and the incorporation of research findings into policy and practice is slow, sudden, and in many ways precarious by nature. RPPs are not independent but not fully dependent in the political landscape. The work can go from standstill to front burner and vice versa almost overnight. Researchers have to bring consistency and stay ready to meet the district's needs.

Turnover was cited as a major challenge by IES-funded RPPs (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). My experiences also underscore the importance of turnover in partnership work. Within the span of a year, as the RPP progressed, there was turnover of the superintendent, director of community and partnerships, and the director of policy and support services—all key actors in the conceptualization and development of the research agenda on school discipline. Engaging a multitude of stakeholders helps to mitigate the deleterious effects of this turnover on the RPP but cannot fully prevent the loss of momentum that succeeds each departure.

Engaging Stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders includes communicating and engaging several stakeholders and issues pertaining to knowledge brokerage (NNERPP, n.d.). Brokerage refers to "a dynamic and complex set of actors, activities, [and] motivations within which research is exchanged, transformed, and otherwise communicated" (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018, p. 13). Communication pathways are an important component of managing the partnership and fostering capacity (Farrell & Coburn, 2017). At the core of every RPP, there needs to be frequent, clear communication (Leary & Severance 2018). Coburn et al. (2013) encouraged dedicating staffing and funding resources toward the maintenance of this communication.

My experiences underline the importance Penuel and Gallagher's (2017) insights on how research supported educators' work by highlighting tensions between the central office and schools on the nature, scope, and efficacy of school improvement reforms. Preliminary results often made some district leaders defensive and led them to claim proposed recommendations were already being implemented. Partnership work is an opportunity to spark robust conversation and to reduce

misunderstanding regarding schools' and districts' efforts. Yet the dissonance of surfacing tensions is a necessary component of a process of harmonizing the approach to educational equity between schools and district's central office. Indeed, patience and persistence are essential ingredients of partnership work (Farrell et al., 2019; Leary & Severance, 2018).

In my experiences as a researcher in an RPP, engaging a host of stakeholders is a key plank of partnership work. School leadership is an important component of local decision-making; thus RPPs should consider them as a crucial audience. District leaders are preoccupied with how school leaders will perceive, respond to, and ultimately implement equity-driven education reforms. I made it my duty to be available at pertinent policymaking sessions, which acted as a forum to discuss school discipline research, policy, and practice. My goal was to learn more about the context of the district, but in the process, I also became familiar with the actors in the educational landscape. I became a fixture at monthly Board of Education meeting and work sessions. I visited schools regularly. I attended district events such as workshops on Restorative Justice or community chats on school discipline. I joined all district meetings and task forces that I was invited to such as task forces for alternative education and code of conduct revisions. These opportunities served as an exchange of research findings and district challenges. These boundary-crossing activities also developed a sense of accessibility and community that bode well for the partnership. Educational stakeholders including district leaders, school leaders, and school board members slowly began to recognize the time invested to build the RPP and wanted to support the partnership work. District leaders also attended local academic conferences, and these events fostered rich interactions around equity work and contributed to the conceptual use of research.

Effectiveness

Defining and measuring the effectiveness of RPPs is another operative consideration in using RPPs as a measure of the quality of education research. Capturing and quantifying the value and impact of RPPs is a complex and ongoing challenge. IES-funded centers such as the Center for Research Use in Education and the National Center for Research on Policy and Practice have advocated for and supported initiatives to better measure the input, output, and outcomes of RPPs (Wentworth et al., 2017). Yet empirical evidence on the effectiveness of RPPs is somewhat elusive, and the literature on the effectiveness of RPPs is largely based on individual case studies of drastically different RPPs (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Farrell et al., 2018).

There is no universal definition of a successful RPP (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018). Success is difficult to define given the considerable variation in the types of RPPs. Another part of this conundrum is the nature of partnership work and the lack of clear, explicit and measurable inputs and outputs (Connolly, 2019). RPPs can affect multiple outcomes—shaping students, researchers, practitioners, and educational stakeholders. Measuring outcomes in RPPs is difficult partly because "the pathway from collaborative policy and program planning to improved student outcomes is a long one" (Penuel & Hill, 2019, p. 3).

Henrick et al. (2017) posited five dimensions of effectiveness to evaluate education RPPs: (a) building trust and cultivating partnership activities, (b) conducting rigorous research to inform action, (c) supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals, (d) producing knowledge that can inform educational improvement efforts more broadly, and (e) building the capacity of participating researcher, practitioners, practice organizations, and research organizations to engage in partnership work. The priority given to each single dimension varies across RPPs (Henrick et al., 2017). Farrell, Davidson, et al. (2018) provided a descriptive study of the first three cohorts of RPPs funded by the IES using five categories of outcomes that RPPs deemed important: (a) support improvements to teaching and learning, (b) conduct and use rigorous research, (c) inform the work of others, (d) cultivate partnership relationships, and (e) increase capacity of researchers and practitioners to conduct partnership work.

Impact on Student Outcomes

Coburn and Penuel (2016) found evidence for positive student outcomes from interventions designed by rigorous RPPs but cautioned that many RPPs have not been subject to systematic inquiry. Other scholars examining the outcomes of RPPs found little impact on student outcomes (Blazar & Kraft, 2019; Cannata et al., 2019). Cannata et al. (2019) found no evidence between student ownership and responsibility innovation model and student outcomes, and that quantitative outcomes were not associated with implementation quality.

Impact on the P Side

The findings of the review indicate that RPPs increase the use of research by local education leaders. Coburn and Penuel (2016) also found that there is some evidence that participation in an RPP may spur organizational change and is associated with greater access to research. Wentworth et al. (2017) categorized the influence of RPPs into long-term outputs such as policy and practice changes, and intermediary outputs such as participants' behaviors and mindsets. The authors argued that "certain conditions in RPPs may be more conducive to the development among educators of behaviors, mindsets, and perceptions associated with evidence-based decision-making" (p. 241). Intermediary outputs in RPPs such as trust and communication can bolster research use and the generation of more relevant research (Wentworth et al., 2017).

RPPs may also shape the culture of research use and the use of research in a district's complex decision-making process (Penuel et al., 2017, Penuel et al., 2018). Although Farrell, Davidson, et al. (2018) found that "RPP district leaders reported their organizational culture was less research-oriented than did the national sample subset of district leaders" (p. 5), RPPs can increase the absorptive capacity of a district or the ability to incorporate new information deemed valuable into organizational routines and practices (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Farrell, Coburn, & Chong, 2018). Farrell, Coburn, and Chong (2018) found that the differences in how two departments in an urban

district central office incorporated an external partner's ideas into policies and routines were attributed to organizational conditions that facilitate absorptive capacity as well as interactions between departments and the external partner. Hopkins et al. (2019) analyzed research use as an outcome of RPP and found that researchers act as brokers in the use of evidence. Farrell, Davidson, et al. (2018) highlighted,

> Compared to the national sample, RPP district leaders reported less frequent symbolic use of research and more frequent process use. Within the RPP sample, practitioners in research roles were significantly more likely to report higher levels of process use of research than their peers in non-research roles. (p. 4)

My experiences underscore the notion of intermediary outputs, the importance of these outputs to the conceptual use of research, and the difficulties in measuring use of research. District leaders often introduced me as a "thought partner" hinting at the benefits of the RPPs for the conceptual use of research. My district partners noted how partnership work shaped their conceptual use of research and allowed for more informed thought about how to incorporate research into their work. Yet it is hard to measure how this shift in researcher and district leader worldview translates into better schooling and student outcomes (Penuel et al., 2017). Another emerging lesson from participating in partnership work is that the culture-building element of RPPs—fundamentally changing the use of research in local decision-making—takes time and is thus a realistic medium- to long-term goal. It is easier to build relationships with individual decision makers than to change organizational practices in school districts. Moreover, policymaking in local school districts is not an apolitical affair.

Impact on the R Side

My experiences are congruent with the findings of the study by National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018) and reinforce the notion that RPPs build the capacity of both researchers and practitioners. Researchers in RPPs become better communicators and interpreters of extant literature and more attuned to the issues and process within districts and schools. There is meaningful, mutually beneficial learning and teaching occurring in partnership work. As a researcher, I have benefited tremendously from involvement in an RPP. Interactions with district and school leaders have shaped my conceptual thinking and informed my research agenda to more accurately reflect the realities and nuances of complex educational settings.

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I interrogate the notion that the quality of education research can be partly judged by its use by local decision makers. The chapter situates RPPs as a promising framework for assessing the quality of research through its use. The use of research in education policy and practice by local education leaders is navigating a series of trade-offs and balancing values, aspirations, and priorities of both

researchers and practitioners. RPPs provide a framework to address the bidirectional challenges in how research is used in local decision-making (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018). RPPs are an agile vehicle capable of traversing the range of tensions that undergird the process of producing and using rigorous and relevant research in schools and districts.

Using RPPs to assess the quality of education research satisfies the four dimensions of research quality (Boaz & Ashby, 2003) and pivots from the preeminence of methodological quality. RPPs enhance attention to the quality of reporting and, to a lesser extent, the appropriateness of methods to the aim of study. RPPs enable smoother navigation of the tension between minimizing technical details while honoring obligations to methodological rigor. Researchers are getting more comfortable and proficient with reformatting results for various audiences, thus making the products of RPPs accessible without a loss of confidence in the robustness of the analysis. Enhanced relevance to policy and practice is the main beneficiary of using RPPs as a measure of quality of education research. RPPs situates evidence-based education closer to problems of practices and addresses one of the contributors to the lack of research use by local decision makers—researchers addressing educational issues that are not germane for local education leaders. Thus, RPPs have benefits to both research production and the use of evidence in policymaking. The inclusive structure of RPPs that facilitates the coalescing of educational stakeholders satisfies the demand for researchers to produce meaningful and impactful research and meets the demand of local and state agencies for research to inform practice (Tseng, 2017).

The Benefits of Using RPPs as a Measure of Quality of Education Research

RPPs offer several benefits to school districts and research universities in the face of shrinking budgets and staff reductions (López Turley & Stevens, 2015). Districts need timely research support to effectively apply for and secure available resources such as funds for professional development from ESSA (Williams & Welsh, 2017). RPPs increase local education leaders' access to research (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn & Stein, 2010; López Turley & Stevens, 2015). However, access to research is not enough to ensure its use in local decision-making. RPPs can also shape the mindset and beliefs necessary to advance use of research in local decision-making (Tseng & Nutley, 2014). The capacity of RPPs to foster educational change is driven by research, relationships, and developing structures for the interpretation and use of findings (Conaway, 2020). RPPs can change the culture surrounding the use of research in districts, which partly determines how practitioners interact with research (Honig & Coburn, 2008). This culture of research use is an organizational factor that has the strongest positive association with research use (Penuel et al., 2017).

Another benefit of RPPs is shifting the discourse away from primarily instrumental use of research and bolstering the conceptual use of research. RPPs facilitate both the conceptual and instrumental use of research in local decision-making (Coburn 2010; Coburn et al., 2013; Farrell & Coburn, 2016; Penuel et al., 2017; Penuel et al., 2018; Weiss, 1980). Given that attitudes regarding the credibility of

research influences the conceptual use of research in decision-making (Penuel et al., 2017), RPPs are well-positioned to fuel greater conceptual use of research. Prior scholars have highlighted the importance of conceptual use of research for policy and practice (Farrell & Coburn, 2016). Penuel et al. (2017) argued that

> conceptual uses in particular merit stronger attention in policies to support leaders in interpreting and using research to get new ideas, challenge preconceptions about problems and their solutions, and guide design efforts for new initiatives in their schools and districts. (p. 14)

A recent study on measuring and influencing conceptual use of research found that "encouraging conceptual use of research evidence processes also requires careful tailoring of research evidence to policymakers' need and preferences" (Yanovitzky & Weber, 2020). The RPP framework can help facilitate a shift in focus from solely fostering the instrumental use of research to expanding conceptual use of research, which is arguably one of the most important uses to dismantle cross-cutting inequalities in society and schools.

RPPs may also strengthen the alignment between education research and the public good. Undergirding concerns about the enterprise of education research is the relationship between research, productivity, and impact. The advent of research accountability has silently invaded education research. In recent decades, productivity and impact have been equated with publications and there has been a historic number of articles published (Curran, 2016; Mosteller et al., 2004). The intense focus on publications has transformed research productivity into a numbers game, degraded work-life balance of researchers, and relegated the relationships among researchers and practitioners. Given the current incentive structure for faculty and the state of higher education, there are growing doubts about whether education research is motivated by public good. Scholars have framed education research as a public good (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018). There is a hope in education policymaking that common interests will take precedence in policymakers' consideration (Lubienski et al., 2014). Henig (2009) posited that "research and knowledge accumulation are important then, but they are conceived as operating within a zone of value consensus and animated by an unambiguous beacon of 'public good'" (p. 140). It is reasonable that RPPs provide a framework for critical self-reflection among education researchers about their positionality and the impact of their scholarship. It is important that scholars grapple with the notion that conducting research in a university setting is a privilege, even for scholars from poor and minoritized backgrounds. Conceptualizing the quality of research through the use of research via RPPs grounds education research in serving the public good.

The Challenges of Using RPPs as a Measure of Quality of Education Research

Employing RPPs as a vehicle to assess research quality has its challenges. These limitations have implications for academia and education policy and practice. First, valuing the work of RPPs in academia is a work in progress. Scholars have noted the challenge of aligning the goals and operations of RPPs with academic norms and

incentives (Coburn et al., 2013). The incentive structure in academia may not be in the best interest of meaningful school improvement, given that it sidelines the feedback loop between practitioners and researchers (Sparks, 2019). Conaway (2020) highlighted that RPPs "tend to privilege more senior researchers (who worry less about getting publications for tenure)" (p. 6). There is little professional incentive to invest extra time in RPP design and development, especially for untenured faculty. While some schools value RPPs more than others, many do not reward their faculty for partnering with local schools and districts (Coburn et al., 2013).

Second, building and sustaining an RPP is challenging and there is still much to learn about the ways in which RPPs work and overcome obstacles (Conaway, 2020; Farrell, Davidson, et al., 2018). Third, assessing the impact of RPPs is difficult. Although RPPs bolsters research use, measuring said research use by local education leaders and its impact on schools and students is complex. The optimism for RPPs as a framework for assessing the quality of education research ought to be tempered by the acknowledgement that RPPs are not immune to the political undercurrents in school districts or the complexities of research use. RPP can bolster the conceptual knowledge of decisionmakers around a particular educational issue; however, the utilization of this knowledge is often not reflected in policy and practice due to political reasons. Research use may also get sidetracked by the constant exigent set of conditions that local education leaders face. When the house always seems on fire, it is hard for district leaders to consider home improvements.

Future Considerations

There is an urgent need to consider how RPPs can be incentivized and supported in the academy. RPPs should not simply be viewed as extracurricular work, and we should be careful that the formal structures to recognize and support RPPs do not adversely affect partnership work. I agree with Conaway's (2020) argument that universities need to reconsider output and how impact is measured in the academy as well as focus more intently on training the next generation of scholars to value, appreciate, and have the necessary skills to conduct RPP work. The William T. Grant Institutional College with University of Colorado Boulder is a notable step toward changing how universities view RPPs (Sparks, 2019). Notwithstanding, the preparation of future scholars to engage in partnership work requires greater attention (Ghiso et al., 2019). There is room for a richer understanding of how graduate students and junior scholars can be prepared and encouraged to engage in partnership work. As universities consider what are the essential elements and purpose of their doctoral training, the approach to mentoring, curriculum, and funds for pilot projects for partnership work should be prioritized. There should also be greater consideration and meaningful adjustments in how faculty engaging in RPPs are supported and evaluated in universities.

The structure of RPPs also provides a platform to develop evidence on and a better understanding of the reliance and use of research (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014; Tseng, 2017). Empirical studies on RPPs are limited yet necessary to refine the

theories of action governing partnership work (Tseng, 2017). There is a need for a granular understanding of the effects and mechanisms of RPPs. Although the understanding of the dynamics of RPPs has increased in recent years (Penuel & Hill, 2019), the political dimensions of partnership work seems to be relatively overlooked (Daly et al., 2014). Future research can unpack the politics of RPPs.

Finally, the role of RPPs in advancing educational equity amid prevailing educational, social, and economic inequality warrants greater attention. Henrick et al. (2019) argued that "equity and effectiveness are, in fact, two concepts that should be considered in tandem, in so far as an "effective" partnership is one that attends to issues of equity." Some scholars contended that numerous RPPs are addressing issues of equity in a variety of ways (Henrick et al., 2019), whereas others argued that RPPs lack an explicit focus on equity and do not center issues of race, culture, class, and power that underlie educational inequities (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Doucet (2019) discussed the lack of attention to critical theories in studies of evidence use and called for more focus on centering marginalized communities. The role of communities in partnership work, particularly the engagement of minoritized families, is also an important yet relatively overlooked component of RPPs. Oftentimes, community resistance to education reforms has articulated notions of reforms that are done to the community versus done with the community (Welsh, 2019). In sum, Berliner (2002) argued that education research is the hardest science of all. RPPs offer a promising way to respond to the challenges of producing rigorous, relevant, and effective education research.

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