

Partnerships between researchers, policymakers and practitioners improve early childhood education

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Research-practice partnerships (RPPs), long-term collaborations between researchers, policy makers and practitioners, represent an

especially promising strategy for making sure that all children benefit from early childhood education, according to [a journal released today](#) by Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.

The journal, *Future of Children*, edited by Daphna Bassok of the University of Virginia and Pamela Morris of New York University's Steinhardt School, argues that RPPs are crucial for solving today's most pressing question in early [childhood](#) education—how to deliver high-quality prekindergarten programs at scale.

"Too often there is a disconnect between the questions researchers tackle and the ones that are more urgent and salient for [policy makers](#) or practitioners," said Bassok. "The findings from rigorous, well-designed research studies may not be particularly useful for addressing the real-life complexity that educators and policymakers face."

"The idea of research practice partnerships is that through close collaborations, researchers can do work that really helps policy makers address the big problems they are tackling and do the work fast enough to actually inform change," continued Morris. "Our hope is that this journal makes that clear."

RPPs are Designed to Improve Educational Outcomes

RPPs are defined by longevity, mutual decision-making and compromise, and the commitment of both parties to large-scale, systems-level problem solving, rather than a single project or research question.

In study after study, [early childhood education programs](#) developed by researchers have shown large benefits, holding out the promise of substantially narrowing the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers. But when cities and states establish large-scale prekindergarten programs, Bassok and Morris noted, the

results are often far more modest. The important questions today aren't about whether early childhood education "works," but about how to invest limited resources to improve the quality of large-scale prekindergarten programs, support the early childhood workforce, and reach the children who need the most help.

"Delivering effective early childhood education at scale remains elusive," said Bassok. "Findings from promising research studies rarely make their way into early childhood practice; at the same time, policy and practice decisions are often made without research evidence to guide them."

That's partly because policy makers and practitioners have different priorities and work on different timelines than researchers do. Through collaboration, compromise, and long-term commitment, RPPs can help bridge the gap and produce research that's relevant and useful to policy makers and practitioners, while at the same time offering scholars opportunities for broad and innovative research wouldn't be possible in one-off studies of a single program or topic.

The Journal is a User Manual for Partnerships

Each article in the journal describes how a successful early childhood RPP confronted a major challenge or exploited an unexpected opportunity in the process of working together to create a research or funding agenda, develop measurement tools, take innovation to scale, navigate conflicting timelines, find a balance between academic rigor and feasibility, or build research capacity. In this sense, the journal offers both a user manual and a road map for future partnerships to follow.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the benefits of RPPs," Morris said. "Where RPPs were in place, researchers used their familiarity with

the local context to help ease the sudden transition to remote learning."

For example, as COVID-19 spread in New York City, researchers in an established RPP there quickly assembled materials about remote learning, including a tool kit for teachers citywide, and offered resources to answer policy makers' most urgent questions.

"The pandemic has created large gaps in the services provided to our youngest learners, and opened the door for new collaborations as [policy](#) systems race to meet children's needs," continued Morris. "In this context, RPPs can support efforts to rebuild and reimagine [early childhood education](#) systems that can help all of our nation's children acquire strong foundations for kindergarten and beyond."

Provided by New York University

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