American Youth Policy Forum

Building Successful Research-Practice-Policy Partnerships in Child Welfare
Summary of AYPF Discussion Group
March 15, 2016
Washington, DC

On March 15, 2016, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) held a day-long discussion group in Washington, DC entitled "Building Successful Research-Practice-Policy Partnerships in Child Welfare." The event was made possible with support from the William T. Grant Foundation. Attendees included a small, engaged group of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers working in child welfare. Discussion focused on the research of **Dr. Lawrence A. Palinkas**, Albert G. and Frances Lomas Feldman Professor of Social Policy and Health and Director, Behavior, Health, and Society Research Cluster, University of Southern California School of Social Work. Palinkas presented his recent white paper on research-practice-policy partnerships (RPPPs) and how these partnerships can be an important strategy for narrowing the gaps between research, practice, and policy to ultimately better serve children in care. RPPPs come in many different forms and structures as there is no "cookie cutter" type, though there are common elements among successful partnerships. Research-practice partnerships are not a new concept, but RPPPs go deeper and add the policy dimension to cross-sector coordination and collaboration. To use a car analogy given by **Kim Dumont**, Senior Program Officer, W.T. Grant Foundation, the purpose of the event was to lift up the hood of RPPPs, get oil on our hands, and tinker around with the nitty-gritty details of how to do the work of partnerships and where there is room for improvement.

Palinkas started his presentation by reminding the group about why this work matters: "We are doing this for the kids… to make a difference, to make an impact." Partnerships in child welfare make a difference, an impact, by better meeting the needs of children in care. Born out of the fields of implementation science and community-based participatory research, RPPPs show promise in bridging gaps between often siloed sectors of research, practice, and policy in child welfare. For examples of these gaps, Palinkas cited research that found 90 percent of publicly-funded child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice systems do not use evidence-based practices; only around half of all children in child welfare receive care consistent with any one national standard; and less than 10 percent receive care consistent with all 10 national standards. Palinkas' presentation focused on three different models of RPPPs that were explored in subsequent presentations:

- *Model 1: Researcher-driven partnerships*
    - Primary function to conduct research and generate knowledge
    - Example: Child and Adolescent Services Research Center (CASRC), and San Diego County Behavioral Health Services and Child Welfare Services
    - Presented by **Dr. John Landsverk**, Funding Director, CASRC, University of California, San Diego School of Medicine

- *Model 2: Practitioner-driven partnerships*
    - Primary function to provide technical assistance and disseminate knowledge
    - Example: [New York City Administration for Children's Services](#) and [Oregon Social Learning Center](#)
    - Presented by **Leslie Abbey**, Chief Program Officer, Lantern Community Services and **Dr. Patricia Chamberlain**, Science Director, Oregon Social Learning Center
- *Model 3: Partnerships equally driven by research, practice, and policy*
    - Multiple functions including research, technical assistance, knowledge generation, and knowledge dissemination
    - Example: New York University and [New York State Office of Mental Health](#)
    - Presented by **Donna Bradbury**, Associate Commissioner, New York State Office of Mental Health and **Dr. Mary McKay**, Director, McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research, New York University Silver School of Social Work

While each of these models vary in structure, primary function, and partners involved, all relied on close communication and interaction. Palinkas stressed that in RPPPs, partners will share some common aims, like improved outcomes for youth, but prioritize other goals differently (e.g., more publications for the researchers, reduced costs for policymakers, more satisfied clients for practitioners, etc.). Successful partnerships recognize these similarities and differences among partners and are able to build on their strengths and evolve over time. Successful partnerships also place emphasis on trust, commitment, and understanding each partner's goals, values, and the importance of their role and input into the partnership. The key elements that emerged from discussion as important for creating and sustaining successful RPPPs are discussed below.

Key Elements of Successful RPPPs

Trust – Trust was an important, recurring theme throughout the discussion. Trust involves understanding, respecting, and valuing each partner's role in the partnership. Building trust between all partners is crucial for a successful partnership, especially given the history of deep mistrust between some researchers and practitioners. Landsverk recalled a story of African American caseworkers that were not pleased with a proposed research study and planned to boycott it because they feared the study would paint a deficit picture of parenting in their community. Landsverk invited the caseworkers to help him understand their concerns, promised to work with them, and began building a trusting relationship. The study proceeded and revealed no racial/ethnic differences between children. Instead, the study found that African American children were significantly less likely to receive care (i.e., no disparity in status, but in receiving services). As a result, trust was built, studying this community was not an issue again, and Landsverk helped the caseworkers write a proposal for a grant to address both service gaps and their pressing questions.

Co-location can help build trust. Landsverk discussed the importance of being co-located at a hospital, a place viewed as "neutral ground" for researchers and practitioners. Conducting research on site where services are being delivered helps build trust by facilitating mutual learning and frequent communication. Transparency and clarity is also crucial for trust building. When communicating it is especially important for partners to listen, ask questions, and discuss issues openly and honestly with one another. In addition, equitable funding across partners is important for building trust. Palinkas shared that, in talking with a community partner, the partner disclosed "I'm still waiting to see the money we were promised." Funding can thus help build trust within a successful partnership, but if it is not forthcoming can likely jeopardize the partnership.

Flexibility – There will always be a certain amount of messiness in building and sustaining partnerships (e.g., personality conflicts, unanticipated challenges, etc.), but partners must be adaptable and willing to work through these challenges. Bradbury and McKay noted that some partners might have more flexibility than others (e.g., policymakers might be less nimble given the limitations of their work and role). As a policymaker, Bradbury discussed how she relied on McKay and her flexibility as a researcher. Bradbury sometimes had to bring bad news, such as shifts in state priorities and reductions in funding, but McKay helped translate and support the news with evidence for what the policy changes were and why they were happening.

Flexibility involves humility, tolerance, and a willingness to compromise when necessary for the betterment of the partnership. This can be difficult, especially given the tension between rigor and relevance (i.e., researchers want rigorous research, practitioners can't wait an average of [17 years](#) for research evidence to be integrated into practice). Landsverk described a compromise made regarding a randomized trial, in which randomization was initially contested and eventually agreed upon to receive funding for the study. The additional resources and value of the work led to randomization never being a contentious issue again.

Flexibility also applies to time. Partners need to be willing and able to invest time in the partnership and build relationships with the other partners. Bradbury and McKay described long car rides in which they would brainstorm what was and was not working. This informal time together helped strengthen their relationship and partnership, and they were able to learn together. McKay noted that this learning led to turning a lot of Bradbury's "headaches into researchable questions."

Diversity – Diversity is more than ethnic and racial diversity; it also includes diversity of experience and ideas. Progress and innovation does not occur in a homogenous group of similarly-minded people; a variety of viewpoints and diverse perspectives are necessary for change. Diversity can be especially helpful when working with diverse groups, as it helps all partners better understand the perspectives, experiences, and needs of the population they are studying (researcher), serving (practitioner), or affecting (policymaker). Diversity of perspective and experience is important when formulating research questions, delivering services, and creating policies to ensure a variety of

voices are heard and joint decision making takes place to promote culturally mindful studies, services, and policies. Abbey and Chamberlain shared an anecdote of the importance of their Spanish speaking staff, who brought unique perspectives and resulted in training taking place in Spanish. Acknowledging these different perspectives, seeing their value, and learning how to work further reinforces trust and strengthens the partnership.

Role of "Culture Brokers" – The ability to understand and interact well with different groups is an important quality and it is also helpful if relationships with partners exist prior to the partnership forming. "Culture brokers" (i.e., partners with expertise in more than one area of the partnership) play an important role in strengthening a partnership. Culture brokers are skilled at navigating and translating differences in organizational culture and field-specific norms. For example, a researcher culture broker with clinical experience is able to translate findings and interventions into information that is understandable to practitioners. Landsverk shared the example of building trust between San Diego County Welfare Services and CASRC and then serving as a culture broker when he wanted to include Chamberlain in their work of training foster parents on how to deal with discipline problems. Chamberlain was prepared for resistance by parents but because she was brought in by Landsverk, someone they trusted, she faced no resistance.

"Win-Win" Mentality – For the purposes of creating and sustaining a partnership, each partner must see value in engaging in the activity. This might require a shift in organizational mindset from viewing the partnership as merely more work to an endeavor of real value. Each partner must benefit from the partnership in order to buy in to the relationship and for the partnership to succeed. Since each partner is seeking something unique out of the partnership (e.g., more publications for the researcher, reduced costs for policymaker, more satisfied clients for practitioner, etc.), each must see the partnership is a worthy pursuit to achieving their goal. This is why understanding each other's role and goal is important. Several presenters gave examples of how they made an effort to clearly define the roles and contributions of each partner to ensure everyone understood each other's purpose and the value of their contribution to the partnership at the beginning of the process. Equitable distributions of funding also help create a "win-win" environment in which each partner and their contributions are valued equally.

Lingering Questions

Throughout the day, discussion among participants generated many reflections and examples of promising partnerships, and also surfaced the following lingering questions:

Organic vs. Planned – Do partnerships develop organically, with an element of luck and the right combination of personalities, or are there common steps or strategies that can be employed to ensure their success? Is this something we can train people to achieve just as we train social workers and clinicians to develop trusting relationships? What kind of workforce/skills development

would be required to train people for successful partnerships? What kinds of social/emotional skills are important for this work of building relationships and how can we train those? Research is typically a solitary activity; how can we entice researchers to participate more in partnerships?

Individual vs. Organizational Relationships – What is the balance between individual relationships and organizational collaboration? Are successful partnerships about personal connections between individual partners or the structure formed by the partnership or both? If partnerships are more about the development of personal relationships, what are some strategies to sustain partnerships in the event of leadership or partner turnover? While some partnerships are quite dependent on the individuals involved, others are able to maintain the organizational arrangement when key individuals move on. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

Role of Advocacy and Intermediary Organizations – In what ways can advocacy and intermediary organizations participate in partnerships? Is there a place for these organizations to step in if researchers, practitioners, and policymakers do not want to work together? Is there a place for these organizations if there is a personal risk (real or perceived) associated with advocating for partnerships? Could intermediary or advocacy organizations take on the role of culture broker in a partnership?

In sum, RPPPs show promise in helping to better serve children in the child welfare system by capitalizing on a shared interest in improving outcomes for youth and narrowing the gaps between research, practice, and policy. This discussion group examined three different models of partnerships and several key elements (i.e., trust, flexibility, diversity, the role of culture brokers, and having a win-win mentality) that emerged as important for creating and sustaining successful partnerships. The discussion generated numerous questions related to the nature of partnerships and strategies to bring successful partnerships to scale that should be explored further in the future.

For more information about this discussion group, please visit AYPF's resource page.

For more information on research-practice partnerships, please visit the W.T. Grant microsite.