



The Future of Children

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Research-Practice Partnership Brief

Seeking Questions from the Field: Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Early Childhood Education Research-Practice Partnerships' Approaches to Identifying Research Questions

Joanna L. Meyer, Clare Waterman, George A. Coleman, Michael Strambler

As described in a recent special issue of *The Future of Children*, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) in early childhood education (ECE) face a variety of challenges when identifying research questions, including the partners' shifting priorities and readiness for collaborative research. This brief explores these challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and describes how several RPPs responded.

School closures reorganized practitioner partners' priorities and dramatically reduced their capacity to engage in research. Although in many cases research partners remained poised to meet shifting priorities, the capacity of practitioner partners to engage in research was an even greater barrier than before. Education organizations faced challenges in transitioning to virtual learning and in supporting the physical and emotional well-being of children and families. For many organizations, responding to the pandemic gave practitioner partners little time to engage in conversations about just-in-time research, and virtually no capacity to consider longer-term research.

The shifting priorities and reduced capacity of education organizations impacted the types of research questions that RPPs were motivated and able to address. Research projects that had been relevant before the pandemic no longer addressed practitioner partners' needs, and new questions were surfacing that research partners could address to support practitioners. For example, schools and ECE programs around the nation struggled to implement effective virtual learning experiences. In Atlanta, the Urban Child Study Center partnered with Educare Atlanta to survey parents about the transition of Educare's ECE and family engagement model to a remote format. The Madison Education Partnership studied and supported virtual math-focused professional learning communities for teachers in the city's four-year-old kindergarten (4K) program, and examined how participating teachers adapted math instruction for remote and in-person learning.

In many communities, schools and ECE programs were asking which services and supports were needed most by children and families, and how to make these resources accessible during the pandemic. When the Partnership for Early Education Research (PEER) partnered with a Connecticut ECE program to survey families and teachers about their needs and stressors, the results revealed that children and staff needed support for their basic needs more than virtual learning experiences. The Baltimore Education Research Consortium worked with publicly funded programs serving the city's young children (Early Head Start/Head Start, public pre-K, home visiting programs, and the Health Department) to examine how continued enrollment in ECE programs through the pandemic was associated with children's school readiness.

Funding for new pandemic-related projects was sometimes a challenge. When RPPs paused or discontinued projects funded before the pandemic began, funding requirements often prevented them from shifting the funds to emerging projects. As was the case before the pandemic, having research funding tied to specific projects made it hard for RPPs to adapt quickly when practitioners' needs changed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the resolve of RPPs to conduct actionable research. Despite the challenges related to shifting priorities, reduced capacity for collaboration, and funding with limited flexibility, many ECE RPPs have continued to identify and examine questions from the field that can produce results to inform education systems during and beyond the pandemic.
