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Moving from Research to Practice in Research-Practice Partnerships: Lessons Learned on Engaging Diverse Voices

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Applying research findings to practice and policy is a well-recognized challenge (Tseng, 2012). Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) represent one promising approach to bridging the gap between research and practice (Wentworth, Mazzeo, & Connolly, 2017), but questions and obstacles remain. For instance, who is best positioned to turn research findings into recommendations for action? Researchers, policymakers, and even program administrators sometimes lack key knowledge and insights that can be critical for translating research findings into effective policy or practice solutions (Oliver & Boaz, 2019). One way to address this limitation is to engage diverse voices in the process of interpreting research findings, something research-practice partnerships are particularly well-suited to do (Farrell, Penuel, Coburn, Daniel, & Steup, 2021). Understanding study findings from the perspective of those most impacted is a critical but frequently overlooked step in the process of using research to inform the design of effective solutions or reforms (Mulvey et al., 2020).

This lessons-learned resource is based on the process we have used at REL Northeast & Islands to engage stakeholders with diverse roles, backgrounds, and experiences in *meaning-making conversations* focused on the interpretation of research findings to inform recommendations for policy or practice. These lessons may be useful for other research-practice partnerships interested in engaging diverse voices as part of similar meaning-making conversations. The first sections focus on four key lessons corresponding to important steps in the process of engaging diverse voices in the interpretation of research findings: identifying participants, planning facilitation, synthesizing feedback, and sharing feedback with decisionmakers. Following these four lessons is a brief case study illustrating how researchers at REL Northeast & Islands and partners in a large urban school district conducted and used feedback from meaning-making conversations following a recently completed study.

Lesson 1: Identify Important Voices to Include in Meaning-Making Conversations

Once research findings are finalized and published or ready to share, research-practice partnerships aiming to engage diverse voices in the interpretation of research findings should first consider who should be included in meaning-making conversations. Research-practice partnership members at REL Northeast & Islands found the following questions and considerations helpful for informing these decisions.

Whose perspectives are important for making meaning of the research findings?

- Consider including participants from groups most impacted by the program or policy under study, or who would be most impacted by changes to the program or policy.
- Consider including those involved in implementing the program, such as teachers, coaches, school leaders, or curriculum directors.
- Consider how you will ensure that different perspectives and opinions will be represented by identifying participant characteristics that you suspect may lead to different experiences with the program or policy of interest. Such characteristics might include, for example, student grade level, teacher experience, or participant demographic characteristics.

Lesson 2: Design Meaning-making Conversations to Ensure Equitable Participation and Useful Feedback

Once participant groups are identified and invited to participate, research-practice partnership members should next prepare to convene meaning-making conversations. One part of preparation is developing resources that will help participants interpret the research findings easily. Preparing for meaning-making conversations also involves generating questions that prompt participants to make sense of the findings through the lens of their own experiences with the program or policy that was studied. Finally, research-practice partnership members should carefully prepare for key aspects of facilitating the meaning-making conversations, including supporting respectful dialogue and equitable participation. Research-practice partnership members at REL Northeast & Islands relied on the following questions and considerations in each of these three areas as they prepared to convene meaning-making conversations.

Developing Resources

How will you clearly and succinctly share key findings from the research with participants during meaning-making conversations?

- Whether you share findings with participants during the meaning-making conversation or beforehand, ensure that findings are presented in a way that is accessible to a diverse audience in both content and length. Prioritize study findings that are most relevant to participants and most likely to result in actionable recommendations for next steps when selecting which findings to include. For example, you could provide participants with a one-page brief that summarizes findings and is free of technical jargon.
- When using slides to present findings, consider strategically using slide titles and headers to highlight key findings and supporting details.
- When sharing figures or tables to communicate key findings, consider best practices in creating meaningful data visualizations. One such resource is the *Forum Guide to Data Visualization: A Resource for Education Agencies* (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2016).

Preparing Questions

What do you hope to learn from participants in meaning-making conversations, and which questions will you ask to surface those insights?

- Consider questions that ask participants how they interpret, draw meaning from, or connect to key research findings based on their own experiences; such questions will often yield valuable insights for those charged with making decisions based on the findings. This could include questions such as the following:

- o Do any of your experiences with the program (practice, policy) help you make sense of the pattern we see here? Do any of your experiences contradict the pattern we see here?
        - o From your perspective, is this finding surprising? Why?
    - ▪ Also include questions that will solicit ideas about useful actions that might be taken based on their interpretation of the findings. For example:
        - o Given your understanding of the findings, do you have any suggestions for concrete ways the program might be changed or improved?
        - o Have you observed any factors that seem to hinder the success of the program being studied? What modifications to the policy would be helpful?

Planning Facilitation

Who will facilitate meaning-making conversations?

- ▪ Consider the implications of different approaches to facilitation. In some cases, researcher-facilitated conversations may elicit more honest feedback if participants are likely to perceive the researcher as a neutral third party. In other cases, participants may be most likely to share openly when the facilitator is someone they know, such as a program staff member. The nature of the questions may suggest one approach over the other. For example, if one or more research findings lead you to anticipate that participants may share concerns or criticism about the program or policy, participants may be less comfortable responding openly if the facilitator is closely affiliated with the program or policy.

How will you group participants?

- ▪ When convening meaning-making conversation groups, the mix of participants can influence the dynamics and the outcomes of the conversation. Consider the potential advantages and limitations of including in the same conversation participants who may have very different experiences related to the research findings; while doing so can surface important tensions and insights, it may also compromise participants' comfort level and willingness to share.
- ▪ Consider how the focus of the meaning-making conversations might influence participants' engagement, and take this into account when grouping participants in meaning-making conversations. For instance, conversations exploring racial and ethnic variation in experiences may feel more comfortable for racially and ethnically homogenous groups to discuss, while conversations about program recommendations may be more generative among a heterogeneous group (Greenwood, Ellmers, & Holley, 2014; Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004).
- ▪ While including multiple viewpoints can make a conversation richer and more generative, the number of participants in each group should also be small enough so that all group members have sufficient opportunities to contribute to the conversation.

How will you maximize accessibility?

- ▪ In-person meaning-making conversations may not always be feasible, and opportunities to participate in virtual meetings can improve access and convenience. However, access to broadband internet, computer equipment, and concerns about privacy in the home environment can sometimes make virtual meetings challenging for participants. When possible, consider asking participants which modality they prefer and offer options for both online (or telephone) and in-person discussion.

- Consider other steps you can take, when relevant, to encourage participation of individuals with other specific access considerations, such as childcare needs, primarily speaking a language other than English, irregular work hours, or visual, hearing, or other impairments. Keep in mind that in some instances one-on-one conversations may be more appropriate or feasible than a group conversation.

How will you support participants' comfort level and ensure respectful dialogue?

- When the meaning-making conversation is held with a group of participants rather than with individuals, consider establishing norms and ground rules for participation. For example, invite participants to monitor their talk time relative to others', to be respectful of others' experiences and contributions even when different from their own, and to consider strategies for interrupting bias if and when it occurs.[1]
- Participants are likely to bring a range of data-literacy skills to the interpretation of research findings. Consider emphasizing that there are not "right" and "wrong" answers when it comes how participants connect their own experiences to the findings.

How will you reassure participants about their privacy and confidentiality?

- Given that it is not possible to ensure complete confidentiality in a group conversation, it is important to be transparent about that with participants. To allay concerns about privacy and confidentiality, consider clearly explaining to participants how their feedback will be shared with others. For example, participants may be less concerned about others identifying them as the source of a particular contribution if you clarify that you will provide program or policy administrators with themes that summarize similar input shared by multiple participants and that you will not name any participants or attribute any themes or quotes to specific participants.
- Consider asking that all participants' comments stay within the group; although this may not be enforceable, it communicates an expectation of confidentiality.
- If you intend to audio record the conversations to support the next step of synthesizing the feedback, obtain participant permission to do so. Otherwise, ensure that you identify someone to take accurate notes during the conversations. To protect privacy and confidentiality, do not record participant names in notes or other written documentation.

Lesson 3: Synthesize Feedback Shared During Meaning-making Conversations

After holding meaning-making conversations, facilitators should synthesize key themes, while noting instances where experiences and interpretations diverge according to salient participant characteristics, such as participant roles (e.g., student, teacher, parent), participants' familiarity with the program or policy, or participant demographic

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[1] When facilitating meaning-making conversations, it is important to keep in mind that sensitive topics can sometimes arise, whether due to the nature of the research findings or the characteristics and experiences of the participants. There may be instances where a participant makes a comment that reflects an implicit bias or which is hurtful or offensive to members of a particular group. It can be useful for facilitators to anticipate strategies they might use to interrupt bias if comments of this nature arise in the meaning-making conversation. One resource that facilitators might find helpful in preparing to address hurtful or offensive comments should they arise is "Interrupting Bias: Calling Out vs: Calling In" (Haslam, 2019).

characteristics that may be relevant to their experiences with the policy or program. This synthesis is intended to inform follow-up discussions with program or policy administrators and staff who will decide on next steps based on the research findings. Research-practice partnership members at REL Northeast & Islands used the questions and considerations below to inform the synthesis process.

How will you represent diverse stakeholder voices while protecting confidentiality?

- Some participants' perspectives may diverge from more common themes. Surfacing perspectives and experiences that would otherwise be overlooked is a key benefit of engaging diverse voices in the interpretation of research findings. However, particular care should be taken when representing less commonly shared perspectives, as the individuals sharing these perspectives may be more easily identified. For example, an alternative to stating that "one participant had a different experience" would be to instead state that "other feedback suggested that some program participants may experience this practice differently."

How will you organize the synthesis to make it most useful and actionable for program or policy administrators and staff?

- There are multiple options for organizing the synthesis of feedback from meaning-making conversations. For example, themes could be summarized according to participant roles or groups, research findings, or the questions posed to participants.
- Consider including specific quotes from the meaning-making conversations to illustrate themes and represent different perspectives.

Lesson 4: Share Feedback with Decisionmakers and Discuss Recommendations for Action

Including diverse voices in the process of interpreting research findings can help decisionmakers consider perspectives other than their own when connecting research findings to action. When sharing synthesized feedback with decisionmakers, such as program and policy administrators and staff or policymakers, the questions and considerations below can help decisionmakers identify action steps that are informed by the research.

How will you sequence discussion questions to move from the interpretation of research findings toward recommended actions?

- Consider sequential questions that start from participants' and decisionmakers' interpretations and move toward recommended actions. An example of such a sequence is as follows:
    - What possible recommendations for action come to mind when you consider common themes from the meaning-making conversations? What recommendations come to mind when you consider less-common themes?
    - What possible recommendations for action come to mind when you consider your own interpretation of the research findings?
    - Considering this set of possible recommendations for action, which will you focus on first? Which will you focus on later?
- Some recommended actions may not be feasible. However, before making this determination, consider the implications of excluding a particular action generated through the sequence of questions above, including which groups might be most affected by the exclusion.

Once you have identified short- and longer-term actions, how will you ensure their completion?

- Consider creating tools that will help you document and track progress. For instance, for each possible recommendation for action:
  - Document the relevant research finding and rationale for the action based on input from both the meaning-making conversations and decisionmakers. For example, you could use a simple graphic organizer such as the one provided in appendix table 1.
  - Document the resources, including additional information, that would be needed to implement the action. In addition, document anticipated challenges, immediate next steps, the person(s) responsible for carrying out immediate next steps, and a target date at which the group would reconvene to assess progress and plan subsequent steps. For example, you could use a simple graphic organizer such as the one provided in appendix table 2.
- Consider scheduling regular meetings to monitor progress and hold each other accountable for completing the actions that the partnership has prioritized.

Finally, as the focus of the research-practice partnership moves from research to action, keep in mind that these partnerships are most effective when researcher and practitioner partners have clearly defined roles (Farrell, Harrison, & Coburn, 2019). Although researchers may play a smaller role in planning or carrying out actions based on research findings, partnership members might consider ways that the researcher partners can continue to be involved, for example by providing technical support for ongoing data collection to monitor progress as research-informed actions are implemented. Meaning-making conversations may also reveal new research questions that the research-practice partnership may pursue. In this way, meaning-making conversations can be integral to the sustainability of these partnerships.

Case Study

The brief case study below illustrates how researchers at REL Northeast & Islands and partners in a large urban school district conducted and used feedback from meaning-making conversations following recently completed research.

A Case Study

A recent study published by the Institute of Education Sciences (Caven, Durodoye, Zhang, & Bock, 2021), which focused on a large urban school district's New Teacher Mentoring program, emerged from a research-practice partnership between the district and researchers at REL Northeast & Islands. Partnership members began this research by documenting the program's theory of action, creating an inventory of available and needed data, designing new survey instruments, and collecting novel data. The research questions addressed the amount of time new teachers and mentors spent together on mentoring and other aspects of the mentoring relationships, as well as how mentoring dosage was associated with new teacher retention.

Key findings from this study revealed substantial variation in the dosage of mentoring new teachers received, as well as an association between mentoring dosage and likelihood of retention. There were also interesting patterns in the topics that new teachers and mentors discussed according to new teachers' race and ethnicity. White new teachers were much more likely than Black new teachers to spend substantial time on classroom management, while Black new teachers more frequently reported discussing the teacher evaluation and professional development compared to their white counterparts.

The district was interested in hearing more about the factors that drove these relationships and patterns, and in new teachers' and mentors' ideas for program changes. Specifically, they wanted to know how the mentoring program could better support novice teachers of color in the district, and what barriers both new teachers and mentor teachers encountered in their efforts to engage in mentoring activities.

Following the publication of the report, the REL Northeast & Islands study team convened four meaning-making conversations. Acknowledging the power differential between new teachers and mentors, the researchers convened separate conversations with new teachers and two conversations with mentors. While the partnership members were interested in racial variation in new teachers' experiences, they decided not to hold separate conversations according to new teachers' racial or ethnic identity because that would have multiplied the number of conversations beyond feasibility.

District administrators of the New Teacher Mentoring program created a table linking each suggested action to a summary of necessary resources. The primary action that emerged from the meaning-making conversations was the district's commitment to developing a centralized "full-time" program model. In this model, a corps of full-time mentors hired and managed by the New Teacher Mentoring program would receive in-depth training and professional development and their responsibilities would be focused entirely on the task of supporting new teachers. Under this model, mentor selection and matching would be conducted by program administrators rather than building principals. After identifying the launch of a full-time program model as a priority action, the partnership members discussed where the necessary resources would come from, who controlled their allocation, and what could be done to advocate for a reallocation of funds to a more resource-intensive model.

Additionally, the partnership members discussed the possibility of conducting additional research on how the program could better support new teachers of color and also discussed what implementation of culturally responsive teacher mentoring would look like. The research team provided a range of resources to program administrators to use in meetings with district leaders including the full report, the report snapshot, and slides and the synthesis memo from meaning-making conversations. In addition, partnership members are exploring opportunities to disseminate findings about the features of high-quality mentoring for new teachers and advocate for resources for a "full-time" program model, both within the district and in other venues.

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Appendix

This appendix includes examples of graphic organizers that research-practice partnership members might find useful as they plan and carry out recommended actions arising from the research findings and the interpretation of the research findings.

Table 1: An example of a graphic organizer for documenting the research finding(s) and rationale associated with each recommended action.

	Research finding	Rationale based on input from meaning-making conversations and decisionmakers
Recommended action 1		
Recommended action 2		
Recommended action 3		
…		

Table 2: An example of a graphic organizer for planning each recommended action and monitoring progress.

	Resources needed	Anticipated challenges	Immediate next steps	Person(s) responsible	Target date for completing next steps
Recommended action 1					
Recommended action 2					
Recommended action 3					
…					