

Building Evidence Based Practice Through Program Research Partnerships in Early Head Start

Chair: Jean Ann Summers

Discussants: Vivian Herman, Martha Staker

Presenters: Carol L. McAllister, Beth L. Green, Judith J. Carta, Jean Ann Summers, Jane B. Atwater

This symposium presents the experiences of two Early Head Start programs in a research partnership, as well as guidelines for effective research partnerships that meet standards of excellence for both science and practical relevance. The discussants present their points of view as program directors and research partners.

- **“Do We Really Want To Do This?” Parents, Practitioners, and Researchers as Partners in Research and Evaluation With Early Head Start: The Pittsburgh Experience**

Carol L. McAllister, Beth L. Green

This presentation discusses the application of the community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, as well as the challenges and benefits, with an Early Head Start (EHS) program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The EHS program partners participated in decisions about study design, helped solve problems that arose during data collection, and participated in the interpretation of findings. The collaboration involved researchers, program managers, direct-service staff, and enrolled families and required consistent attention to implementation of participatory research practices. The continued engagement of families and program staff in the study, as well as authentic responses to investigator inquiries, significantly enhanced the trust developed through the respective partnerships. Finally, the collaborative research process provided a considerable benefit to program partners and participating families who were able to effectively use this knowledge for program improvement and decision-making.

- **Stages of Partnership Development With an Early Head Start Partner: The Kansas City, Kansas Experience**

Judith J. Carta, Martha Staker, Jane B. Atwater, Jean Ann Summers

This presentation describes the stages of development for the program-research partnership in Kansas City, Kansas, with Project EAGLE/Early Head Start, and the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project, an Early Head Start research site of the University of Kansas. This paper describes the events, challenges, and lessons learned at each phase of this partnership. The EHS Research and Evaluation Project was founded on partnerships that occurred on multiple layers, but central to the design of the evaluation was collaboration between 17 EHS programs and researchers at nearby universities (Raikes et al., 2002). The collaboration describes the four stages: (a) forging the partnership, (b) the

evaluation study years, (c) the relationship matured, and (d) collaborative community action.

Reference

Raikes, H., Love, J. M., Kisker, E. E., Chazan-Cohen, R., Tarullo, L. B., Jerald, J., Staker, M., & Carta, J. (2002). Early Head Start Research-Program Partnerships. *The Evaluation Exchange Newsletter*, Spring Issue.

• Standards of Quality for Partnership Models

Jean Ann Summers

The Pittsburgh and Kansas City program-research partnerships reflect a mid-stage or program-research alliance model of partnership. In this model, researchers and program staff engage in joint decision-making about all phases of the research. The community (both families and practitioners) “owns” the data in the sense that it is reflective of issues that interest them, and they have participated in advising researchers about appropriate measures, and ways to collect data. Perhaps most importantly, the practitioners have a hand in the interpretation of data and explanation of results from the perspective of the unique characteristics of the community and their knowledge of the families participating in the research. Many of these advantages can be enhanced by the use of qualitative or ethnographic approaches, which add to the interpretive power of the quantitative findings in mixed designs.

A third level of integration between researchers and practitioners is represented by a model in which the practitioners are the researchers--determining the problem to study, collecting and analyzing data, and applying results to practice. The university research partners serve primarily in the role of facilitators to guide the practitioners through the process. The advantage of this approach to research partnership is that it incorporates a data-driven approach to service delivery into the daily routine of practitioners. The creation of a “research mind-set” in a community of practitioners will ensure high levels of relevance in the investigations. The role of the university researcher is to facilitate a community of learning model of research partnership, and outline steps to develop new standards of rigor to ensure the results developed through these processes are truly “evidence-based.”

Herman: Participatory research as experienced in the University of Pittsburgh program has had an impact on the view that program participants (staff and families) have toward research studies. The ability of the staff and program managers to participate in designing the research and revising the questions as well as the continuous feedback gave a sense of ownership. In the beginning stages of relationship building with the research team, it was obvious that there were concerns about “putting families through a research project.” The years of participation by program staff and research staff not only built trust, but also a positive reliance on each other to produce a quality program and quality research results. As the results of the research studies became public, the use of the outcome data

for program improvement became a natural outgrowth of the relationship between program and research. The initial work and time-consuming efforts are well worth the end result.

Staker: When practitioners move into more administrative roles, they are forced to look at program outcomes and begin the journey into what research can offer. This journey requires more than a casual relationship with research. Experiences with impact, formative, and ethnographic research designs can influence practice and administration. Research partnerships can also create an understanding that practice is only as good as the outcomes achieved. Research helps practitioners and administrators understand the need to evaluate interventions and explore new interventions. Research and evaluation can help replicate successful programs and understand program impacts on a child, with a family, on a staff's performance, or on community systems. The role of the family within the research-program partnership model must also be explored.