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Embedding research-based practices:

Learnings from the TUTOR Project

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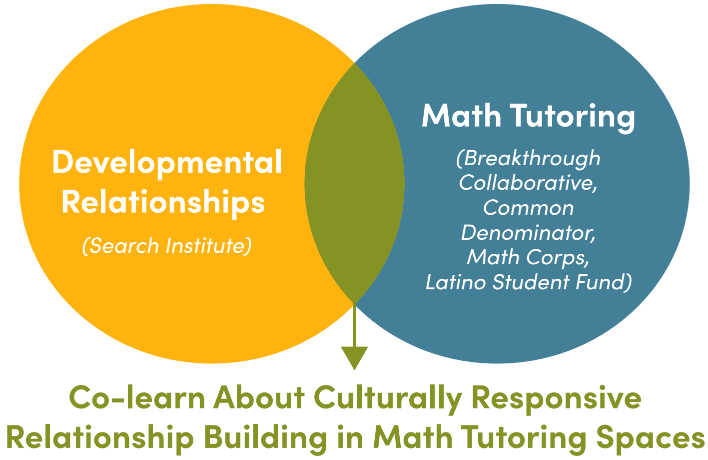
Using the Developmental Relationships (DR) Framework, Search Institute has worked with youth workers, educators, coaches and mentors to better understand and apply the power of relationships.

As applied researchers, we avoid the one-size-fits-all approach by offering actionable tools that are responsive to specific contexts where the framework has been used, and adapt it as new evidence emerges. Most recently, we adapted the DR Framework for use in math tutoring spaces by partnering with four youth-serving organizations (see figure 1). This brief offers six key learnings from that partnership.

FIGURE 1. The design of the TUTOR project partnership



Background

The TUTOR (Toward Understanding Tutors' Optimal Relationships) Learning Network was a co-learning space shared by tutors and leaders from four math tutoring programs that serve predominantly Black and Latina/o/x students from low-income backgrounds: Breakthrough Collaborative, Math Corps, Latino Student Fund, and Common Denominator. The goal was to examine culturally responsive relationship-building practices in math tutoring spaces, as well as to foster cross-learning between the math tutoring programs. Over the course of nine sessions, Search Institute introduced our DR Framework to the tutors and leaders from the four math tutoring programs. We adapted the DR Framework to fit their math tutoring contexts by inviting and integrating their expertise. Search Institute captured the learnings into a DR+Math Toolkit, which includes the adapted DR Framework (i.e., the DR+Math Framework) as well as activities and resources accompanying each of the elements of the framework.

Practitioner Feedback and Data Collection

Regular feedback collected via short, online surveys after each session was used by Search Institute to revise the activities and resources, as well as to inform the monthly practitioner meetings.

Outside of the Learning Network monthly meetings, Search Institute also worked with each tutoring program to conduct tutor and student focus groups and individual interviews. These qualitative data collection efforts yielded rich and impactful narratives about what makes up strong and positive tutor-student relationships. Additionally, a short tutor survey was piloted with items on culturally responsive relationship building, culturally responsive math tutoring, and culturally responsive tutoring program climate.

Search Institute conducted anonymous interviews at mid- and end-of-project milestones to gather general feedback about the Learning Network design and the project in general. **Below we offer some major lessons learned and recommendations for convening researchers and practitioners who aim to embed research-based practices.**

Key Learnings for Researchers

Below are six general recommendations for researchers on working effectively with practitioners to embed research-based practices. Each recommendation includes 2-3 methods ("recommended actions") for operationalization.

I. Clearly articulate and center the purpose.

When done in partnership, research plus practice can yield synergies that are more than the sum of the two. When the collaboration is forced, however, it can result in misunderstandings (e.g., perceived hierarchies) and feelings of disappointment or resentment (e.g., wasted time). One way to facilitate mutual partnership (instead of forcing collaboration) is to first *ground everyone in the purpose of convening*. Then, by co-constructing a shared vision for the partnership, it can uplift each participant/organization's strengths and emphasize what they uniquely offer to the partnership.

- "Quality PD is hard to come by and it feels like this is very well organized. It seems peer-led in a way because I'm not being talked at, and we're doing/building together."
- Recommended actions:
  - If participation seems sporadic, lean into the purpose of the project to draw people back. Sometimes people get confused about who the intended audience is, or simply "why are we even doing this?" In those moments, it's important to pause to understand and validate the concerns, address the confusion, and then re-center everyone to the core purpose before introducing more content.
  - Some might come with a vision that is out of the scope of what you can offer. Or perhaps, the originally proposed vision needs to shift due to budget or other constraints. Whatever the case, be transparent and vulnerable in communicating the scope and budget of the project while remaining open to re-articulating a new shared vision that is understood by and comfortable for all.

II. Prioritize cross-learning between practitioners.

A major strength of a learning network design is the opportunity for cross-learning between practitioners. As researchers, we are listeners and facilitators before we are storytellers. So we spent around 15 minutes in each meeting for 'coffee talk' where we invited practitioners to share what is working well, what has been challenging, what advice would you like to receive from or give to fellow practitioners from other programs (e.g., "COVID is hitting our attendance really hard, but we just spent more time calling parents and hearing how they are doing, that seems to help us"). Participants appreciated the ability to connect with other tutors/programs and to learn new activities that they can implement right away.

- "Basically Search Institute is providing a platform where we can come together and learn from each other. That's the best thing, we get to learn from you and also from other programs."
- "Because we're working with different people from different places, we get a lot of feedback that can help us improve. It's helped me a lot to hear other tutors telling me they struggled with the same things and what they've tried to help fix it."
- Recommended actions:
  - Allocate *and protect* time for cross-learning. At first, we put cross-learning as the closing agenda item for our Learning Network meetings, which meant it could be compromised if other portions ran long. In order to protect the time for cross-learning, we course corrected by merging it with general check-in questions as the opening for each meeting.
  - Prepare broad discussion questions that can facilitate cross-learning, but emphasize that those questions are just conversation starters. If participants have any topic that they want to share with their fellow practitioners, prioritize those.

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III. Use a (theoretical/practical) framework as the guide.

Practitioners brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to the Learning Network meetings. How do we organize such an abundance of expertise, and where do we start? By introducing the DR Framework up front, we noticed a shared vocabulary begin to emerge. We then encouraged practitioners to challenge the framework by introducing nuances that are specific to their context and the youth they are serving. Together we engaged in this interactive process to balance the scientific rigor and actionable utility of our guiding framework.

- "It [the Developmental Relationships Framework] affirms the way we've been doing things, and now we have a more legitimate language for how we approach working with our students and why relationships are so important in math tutoring."
- Recommended actions:
    - Use your (theoretical/practical) framework as a tool, not an answer or solution. Try to remain open rather than defensive. Leave plenty of room for adaptation and actively invite practitioners to challenge the framework— what resonates with you? What does not resonate with you? What is not as applicable to your program?
    - To enhance uptake, introduce your framework using multiple modalities— e.g., slides with clear visual representations, written explanations for the different aspects of your framework, videos, verbal discussions to interactively walk through the framework.

IV. Engage in constant feedback and course corrections.

In a collaborative partnership, being responsive and humble when receiving feedback is critical. As such, we strive to seek feedback constantly and consistently. At the end of every TUTOR Learning Network meeting, we asked all participants to fill out a short online survey regarding how useful and usable the introduced activities/resources were. Included in the survey, we also included space for participants to anonymously share any feedback (e.g., how the meetings are going, what we can do better). Additionally, in the thank you/follow-up email after each meeting, we reiterated our invitation for honest feedback and suggestions. Some practitioners mentioned how much they appreciated the fact that not only was their feedback solicited, but it was acknowledged and frequently incorporated into the work.

- "The thing I value the most is the response to feedback and either being able to say yes we're going to implement this feedback or no we're not and here's why, but trying to find compromise. This has been true of feedback on the survey measures - I've seen those implemented."

- "I feel like the staff [researchers] were informed, open-minded, open to feedback. I felt the only area for improvement is clarity of what to expect as we participate in the project. We didn't always know what we were going to do until we showed up. But we brought up that feedback, and the staff [researchers] were open to adjusting and improving."
- Recommended actions:
    - At the midpoint and end of the project, we invited all participants to an anonymous interview where they spoke with a Search Institute researcher who was not affiliated with the project (hence no conflict of interest). This provided participants a safe space to process how they were feeling and offer actionable course correction ideas.
    - Approach feedback with a growth mindset–take in feedback as opportunities for improvement instead of personal critiques. This is, however, easier said than done. When you find some feedback hard to receive, it might help to ground yourself in the purpose of the project (see point I above).

V. Collect and report data quickly.

Search Institute worked with each tutoring program to conduct tutor and student focus groups and interviews. From these, we gained valuable insight into bridges between research and practice. For each program, Search Institute wrote a short (4-page) summary from the tutor and student focus group/interviews. Those summaries aimed to show the practitioners that we hear them and have a vehicle to let their great stories shine.

- "Getting data back from focus groups and surveys was helpful because it was outside eyes listening, compiling feedback, and sending it back to us. It was nice to have someone who heard us, could synthesize the information, and show us what we do, which was validating for us."
- Recommended actions:
    - Disseminate findings back to the programs in a timely and succinct manner. Present the findings as a 'draft' to invite feedback, instead of a polished final product.
    - When you enter practitioners' spaces to collect data, be thoughtful, generous, adaptive, and accommodating during data collection in order not to disrupt their programming.

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VI. Be intentional about accessibility and sustainability.

Time is a seemingly obvious, yet real barrier to a collaborative partnership. Practitioners' priority is to serve the youth in their program and ensure their program runs smoothly. Many practitioners in the TUTOR Learning Network mentioned that time with students is crucial, and sometimes attending the monthly meetings was taking time away from their students. The same goes for data collection; one hour allocated for a focus group might mean one hour less of instructional time. Time poses a real challenge to the accessibility (who gets to engage) and sustainability (who gets to stay engaged) of partnership between practitioners and researchers.

- "Sometimes the meetings take an hour, and that's keeping us away from the kids for an hour. If the meeting was first thing in the morning, that would be easier... A morning meeting would provide more flexibility for working with students rather than having them miss their session."
- "None of our tutors were able to attend the learning network—it didn't fit with their schedules, as they had classes at those times ... I had to turn these meetings into asynchronous reflections for the tutors. They don't always complete them on their own, and I didn't always get the depth of feedback I would have liked."
- Recommended actions:
  - To the greatest extent possible, accommodate schedules and busy seasons to find times and modes of communication most convenient for practitioners. Consider alternatives like evenings or weekends when there are a wide variety of stakeholders.
  - Identify and maintain a consistent schedule, but add flexibility (optional meetings) to that structure. If possible, make meeting materials and resources easily accessible online (e.g., recorded meeting, follow-up emails to summarize main takeaways, share slides).

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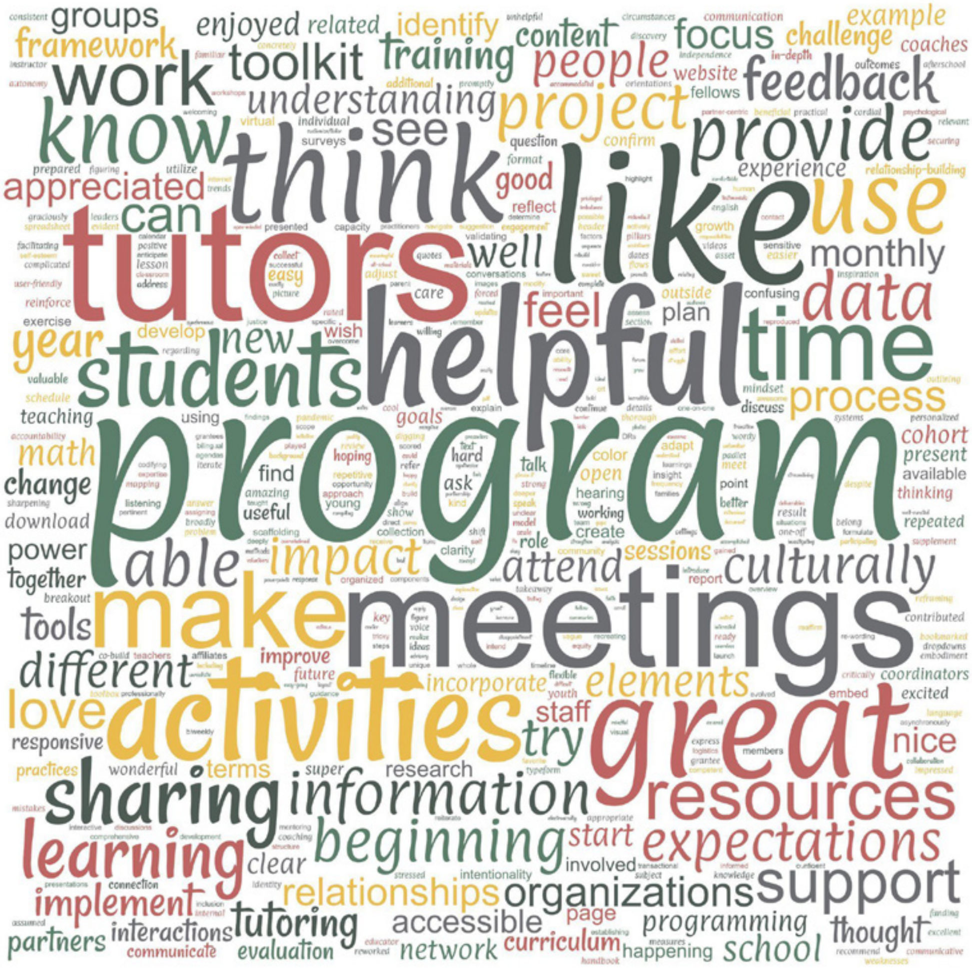

FIGURE 2. Word cloud from the end-of-project interviews

Conclusion

As applied researchers, we are committed to collaborating with practitioners to produce practice-based research and to embed research into practice. Because we believe bridging research and practice is a process not a destination, we offer the above as learnings and recommendations, rather than solutions. We are grateful for, and dedicate this post to, all the practitioners that walked this journey alongside us.

Acknowledgment

This brief is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.