



Building the evidence base for professional learning: Q&A with Stacey Alicea

BY LEARNING FORWARD

The Research Partnership for Professional Learning (RPPL) is a collective of professional learning practitioners, researchers, educators, and funders focused on studying educator learning to inform improvements in practice and outcomes for students. *The Learning Professional* asked RPPL Executive Director Stacey Alicea to describe the organization's goals and strategies for increasing rigorous research evidence about professional learning.

Q: Why and how is RPPL aiming to refocus the questions that researchers study about professional learning?

Our goal is to transform teacher learning and practice to ensure that all students — especially those from historically marginalized groups — learn rigorous content and thrive in equitable schools. Much of the existing professional learning research has focused on testing whether specific professional learning interventions work to change teacher and student outcomes.

At RPPL, we are interested in building knowledge about the specific design features of professional learning that best support shifts in teacher instructional practices that, in turn, improve student learning and development. We believe that we can advance educational equity for all students at a faster pace if we intentionally focus on the core features that maximize educators' ability to improve student outcomes.

Q: What are the key research questions your organization is tackling, and why?

RPPL outlined a learning agenda (Hill et al., 2021) when we launched our work together in summer 2021. Its areas of focus include increasing teacher engagement in professional learning, accelerating skill development, sustaining long-term enactment of new practices, and improving the conditions for adult learning.

We have further grounded our learning plan in three areas: equitable teaching practices, the use of high-quality instructional materials, and supportive classroom environments. Our learning agenda also describes how

we will introduce planned variation in design features, advance our data collection methods and tools for analyzing data, and build a collaborative research infrastructure.

This is a huge learning agenda. It requires complex coordination and intensive collaboration among researchers, professional learning organizations, school districts, funders, and policy and advocacy organizations. Part of our work is to learn how to do this better together, as a collective, to benefit the whole field.

As we've worked to launch cross-organizational, multidistrict studies, and a number of smaller studies driven by member organizations, we have also sought to synthesize existing research knowledge. This led us to publish our *Busting Myths* and *Building Better PL* briefs (Hill et al., 2022; Hill & Papay, 2022). It will also guide our efforts to prioritize how we pursue our next research steps.

Q: Why did you choose the 14 studies you are currently funding, and what do you hope professional learning leaders will learn from them?

We are building a portfolio of studies grounded in the focus areas of the learning agenda (RPPL, 2023). We hope that, together, these studies will provide insights into how to scale effective professional learning in key areas of practice. To date, the majority of our studies have incorporated high-quality instructional materials and curriculum-based professional learning.

Some of these studies were intentionally co-designed with RPPL's member and affiliate organizations and researchers to reflect the goals of the collective. For example, some of our

current cross-organization research focuses on teacher mindsets and student expectations, teacher agency in how professional learning is organized and facilitated, and social accountability as a design feature — that is, teachers holding each other accountable for learning and implementing new practices.

Other studies were designed by specific professional learning organizations, based on questions they were grappling with in their work and opportunities to test different design features with their district partners. If successful, we believe these studies will help us and the field understand what works in professional learning and lead providers to align their practices and models to our evidence-based findings.

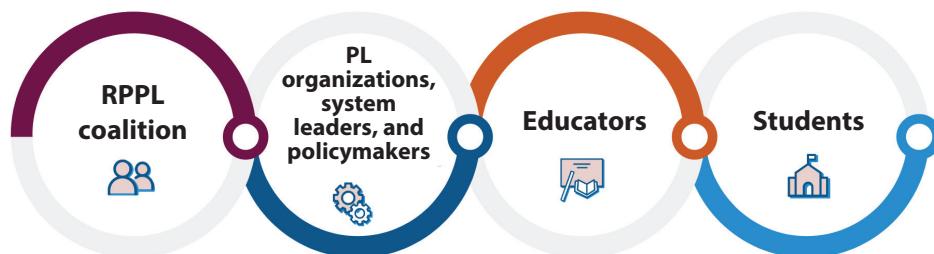
Q: RPPL aims to promote research that supports causal inference — that is, that can show if professional learning leads to meaningful changes. How can educators and programs incorporate more rigorous methods into their evaluations?

Part of the reason RPPL was founded is because, as a field, we weren't doing professional learning research as well as is needed to move the needle on addressing disproportionate outcomes among our students. Professional learning organizations and districts alike were asking: How do we know if what we are doing is working? What do we currently know, and what do we still need to study to have confidence that certain kinds of professional learning make a difference?

One of the things we need to do is better leverage experimental research about which professional learning features lead to impact. We also need

RPPL'S THEORY OF ACTION

RPPL's theory of action describes how the coalition's work is intended to improve professional learning research which should, in turn, lead to changes in educators' practices and students' outcomes.



The RPPL coalition's efforts influence the broader education sector to drive equitable student outcomes.

If the RPPL coalition:

- Creates the research vision for high-quality professional learning;
- Sets a consensus-driven learning agenda around professional learning that includes diverse voices at different levels of the education system;
- Facilitates partnerships to promote advancement of the learning agenda;
- Strengthens enabling conditions that support causal research at scale;
- Generates actionable evidence about the design features of effective teacher professional learning to support equitable instructional practices; and
- Convenes our robust network to share evidence, plan, and guide practical application of learning.

Then professional learning organizations, system leaders, and policymakers will:

- Conduct rigorous and practical research;
- Invest in more impactful professional learning; and
- Apply evidence-based learnings and solutions to implement better professional learning.

Then educators will:

- Engage in more evidence-based professional learning that transfers into stronger instructional practices and more equitable, rigorous, and joyful learning environments that close disproportionate student academic and developmental gaps.

And all students, especially those from historically marginalized groups, will:

- Learn more;
- Experience increased engagement and well-being in safer, more rigorous learning environments; and
- Flourish and thrive, ensuring more success in school and life.

to interrogate for whom and under what conditions promising professional learning features work to reduce disproportionality in student learning and development because we recognize that not all features will work in every context or with every group of teachers and students.

We don't have all of the answers on how we do this well, but we do believe that rigorous research should allow

us to make causal inferences and also understand the processes through which specific design features work to create the change we are seeking.

Trying different ways of doing research together will help us learn what works best. Over the past year, we have learned so much by trying things, seeing what works, and adjusting accordingly. From researchers collaborating with member organizations, to member

organizations collaborating with their district partners, we are working out systems, structures, communications, and designs that work best for all.

We are learning that in addition to taking on "big R research" (A/B tests, quasi-experimental designs, etc.), we also need to invest in targeted "little r research" (such as implementation studies and mix-methods that allow us to contextualize our findings).

The latter can test the feasibility of professional learning approaches and build capacity among member organizations and the larger collective, which can in turn inform efforts to conduct “big R research” that aligns with RPPL’s learning agenda.

Q: RPPL’s most recent report, *Measuring Teacher Professional Learning*, acknowledges some of the challenges to conducting rigorous evaluations. What are the next steps for getting beyond these barriers?

Our paper was driven by the experiences and expertise of professional learning organizations doing this work on the ground every day in districts across the country. The themes it highlighted showed that it will take a collaborative effort among many stakeholders to improve how we measure professional learning at scale.

While getting professional learning measurement right is complex, there are tangible, practical ways the field can begin improving data collection and increasing the effectiveness of measurement. If we can do that, we will be better positioned to engage in research and learning that can drive real change for teachers and students.

Right now, we are focusing on generating strong alignment among our collective about what

we should measure and how. We are engaging with our member and affiliate organizations, our funders, and increasingly our district partners to build consensus around shared measurement and the development of robust measurement strategies that can and should meet their needs.

By the end of this year, our goal is to begin testing a relatively narrow, agreed-upon set of measures and data collection tools across roughly 10 RPPL organizations. This work will be iterative and dynamic in nature. We hope to generate proof of concept — that we can collectively measure the things we care about in service of generating research and learning that builds the field, while simultaneously attending to the unique contexts and needs of our multiple partners.

Q: What role should professional learning leaders (such as district leaders, coaches, and program designers) play in strengthening the evidence base for professional learning?

We need to engage all professional learning leaders, as well as the educators who participate in the learning, in co-designing research on how specific features of professional learning can drive more equitable, rigorous, and joyful instruction in classrooms.

It will take all of us, bringing together our diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and expertise, to ensure every student has what they need to thrive and be successful in school and life. We encourage everyone who is interested in engaging in research with us or learning from our work to join the RPPL network.

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