



Ensuring quality in education: Is research-practice partnership the way?

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Abstract

This article is a theoretical contribution that highlights the need for a more holistic and coherent understanding of and systematic approach to knowledge development within the Norwegian education system. In doing so, the authors explore whether and how research-practice partnerships (RPPs) can contribute to this. Although RPPs as a framework for systematic collaborations between researchers and practitioners in kindergartens and schools are increasingly emphasized internationally as an important contribution to knowledge development within the education system, more research on how RPPs can be carried out has been called for. The concept of coherence is applied as a theoretical framework for examining how shared meaning, direction, and connections may be developed within organizations. Based on this theoretical approach and by looking at national guidelines and local contextual factors, this article underscores how RPPs can provide a systematic framework for and approach to collective sense-making and coherent knowledge development by bridging different forms of knowledge and thus reduce potential power imbalance between stakeholders. Finally, the paper argues for a closer integration of diverse forms of knowledge to strengthen the interplay between education, research, and professional practice.

Keywords: Education system; coherence; capacity-building; research-practice partnerships

Coherence and capacity-building within organizations

Organizational learning is the intentional use of learning processes at the individual, group, and system levels to continuously transform the organization in a direction that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders (Dixon, 1999, p. 6). Organizations that lack intentional processes can lead to inefficient learners and the loss of important information (Dixon, 1999). A useful perspective is to see learning as a dynamic process of constructing and reconstructing meaning; thus, creating and maintaining processes within an organization to gain new understanding and/or to correct current understandings is key (Dixon, 1999). As such, organizational learning is crucial for ensuring relevant knowledge and understanding on the individual, group, and system levels within an organization. Such learning processes constitute the core pieces for stimulating coherence and building capacity among staff.

Quinn and Fullan (2017) describe *coherence* as the development of mental models related to meaning-making, unity, and interconnection. Coherence is thus understood as something perceived and experienced by staff in an organization in relation to the relevance of their tasks and can thus be related to engagement. Coherence is not merely a matter of structures or strategies, but of how individuals and collectives develop a shared understanding of their work in relation to organizational purpose (Quinn & Fullan, 2017). Leadership is identified as a critical factor in fostering engagement and a shared sense of direction – coherence – within an organization. Leaders can either nurture engagement and coherence by clearly communicating purpose and enabling alignment between initiatives and goals or undermine it through ambiguity and weak communication. Following this perspective, effective leadership cultivates a culture in which strategies and ambitions reflect a coherent mindset (Mulford et al., 2004; Quinn & Fullan, 2017). As such, leaders are important in ensuring coherence among their staff as well as in building organizational capacity within their organization. Organizational capacity is a key prerequisite for achieving coherence through shared direction, meaning, and connection (Quinn & Fullan, 2017).

Capacity-building is not about isolated initiatives but continuous practice, where collaboration and collective responsibility are embedded in daily operations. It encompasses both individual and collective dimensions, including skills, motivation, knowledge, and attitudes (Flaspohler et al., 2008). Stoll (2009) argues that capacity is less a response to specific initiatives than an organizational habit of mind and as such an ongoing readiness for learning and adaptation. Research indicates that an organization's ability to manage change and development depends on the interaction between individual, organizational, and societal levels (Oterkiil, 2015). General capacity relates to leadership, shared vision, and collective action, while individual capacity concerns engagement in and understanding of development processes. In this perspective, capacity-building is closely tied to coherence, as organizational learning promotes shared understanding and direction within an organization.

One way of stimulating coherence is by developing professional communities through learning networks within organizations. A recent study among academic staff at a Norwegian university indicates that coherence between research, education, and the practice field cannot always be planned in advance (Bugge & Folkvord, in progress). Rather, coherence is often discovered and developed through practice and collaboration among staff in learning networks. Such networks have been described as engines that connect experiences from practice with teaching on campus and the initiation of research projects: They are arenas where the staff discover something new, both academically and relationally, forming the basis for stronger coherence (Bugge & Folkvord, in progress). It is in such interplays that coherence can emerge. Thus, stimulating coherence should, as part of organizational

learning, be an intentional process that begins with ambitions and is based on strategic choices.

Partnerships to ensure quality in education

Through the funding scheme for local professional development (Lovdata, 2020), partnerships were established between academic staff at universities and university colleges and teachers in schools and kindergartens that were aimed at developing quality in practice, ensuring high quality in education to the benefit of all children and pupils in Norway. One main goal was to ensure that local needs were met and that partnership collaborations could stimulate systematic knowledge development to reach the overall goal of the scheme. This funding scheme was established through White Paper 21 called *Desire to Learn – Early Intervention and Quality in Schools* (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, own translation). The foundation and prerequisites for the partnerships were based on the criteria that (1) the work must be rooted in local needs in schools and kindergartens, (2) collaborations must be based on equitable cooperation with academic staff who contribute to organizational learning through professional learning communities in schools and kindergartens, and (3) experiences and knowledge generated must also be brought back into teacher education. These criteria were central in the funding application process and subsequent project reporting and defined the university partners as learning partners, with the expectation that the experiences derived from the collaboration would contribute to strengthening and further developing teacher education programs. This expectation is referred to as the scheme's dual purpose.

A main concern that was identified as the work progressed was how universities and university colleges understood their role as learning partners, and what consequences this could have for establishing internal structures within the organization that would enable experiences from the partnerships to contribute both to the development of practice and to fulfill the dual purpose of such collaborations. Recent evaluations of this dual purpose through the funding scheme indicate that there remains underutilized potential regarding how experiences from such collaborations are used and managed internally at the universities and university colleges and in partnerships to build even stronger collaborations that can reach the goals of the work (Fossetøl et al., 2021; Lyng et al., 2021; Wiborg et al., 2022). Reasons mentioned in the evaluations are that formal structures and institutional practices appear weak, with consequences for the systematization of partnerships and for the ability to convert experiences into new knowledge. Thus, there is a need to ensure that partnerships are stable through long-term perspectives. Furthermore, opportunities inherent in such partnerships are highlighted in the evaluations, particularly in terms of enhancing research by providing insights that enrich the research opportunities of higher education staff (Wiborg et al., 2022).

However, despite such concerns the scheme has had positive influence on building partnerships that stimulate quality in practice and strengthen the collaboration between academic staff and teachers in the educational system. So much so that in 2025 the funding scheme was incorporated into a comprehensive system for professional development in schools and kindergartens called System for Competence and Career Development for Employees in Early Childhood Education and Schools (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2025). To ensure that the dual purpose is a continuous goal, the new comprehensive system emphasizes both the need for such partnerships as well as the need for such partnerships to be long-term. Furthermore, and as an additional indicator of the importance of partnership collaborations, partnerships are regulated both in the law regarding primary and secondary education (Lovdata, 2026) and in the current draft of the new joint framework plan for teacher education in Norway (coming into force spring 2027). In short, partnerships as a means for high quality in the education system have come to stay.

Aim and term clarification

In this article, we call out the need for a more holistic understanding of and systematic approach to coherent knowledge development through partnership collaborations. We argue that *coherence* as shared understanding and collective *capacity-building* through continued collaborative practice within and between organizations in the education system is crucial to reach this goal, and that collaboration through *Research-practice partnerships (RPPs)*, i.e. collaborations aimed at developing knowledge and solutions to educational challenges, may be an important means for doing so.

Such collaborations can build community within and across organizations or sectors that work within the same system, specifically the education system. The term *education system* as used in this article encompasses kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, university colleges and universities, all institutions that are involved in education and thus are working towards the same goal, that of quality in education. When using the term *sector*, specific levels within the education system are referred to. This is in line with the understanding of the term sector as used in the Frascati-manual, where for instance *higher education sector* refers to all universities, university colleges, and post-secondary education institutions (OECD, 2015).

Ambitions for coherence and learning between organizations

Organizations are frequently exposed to multiple demands and their capacity to manage requirements for development and change, and thus learning is often tested. A central challenge in organizational learning is to establish meaningful coherence, ensuring shared organizational direction and clarity in the collectively implemented measures to pursue

organizational goals that also take contextual factors into account. This is the case for universities and university colleges as well as schools and kindergartens. Evaluations of the Local Professional Development initiative point to this very challenge (OECD, 2020; Reinertsen et al., 2020), emphasizing that knowledge development must be viewed in relation to other development measures and as part of continuous learning processes, rather than as isolated initiatives. In this context, this means that the respective organizations and stakeholders within the education system should learn not only from internal learning processes, such as through internal learning networks, but also from each other.

The question of the relationship between the practice field and research has been debated for a long time. The gap between the professional knowledge promoted in education and the competencies necessary in the practice field has caused worries among professional educators (Schön, 1987). In addition, researchers have been perceived to have less to communicate that practitioners find useful and beneficial and of practical utility (Schön, 1987). Traditionally, research has been viewed as something separate from professional practice as well as too caught up in its own agenda and thus distinct from professional practitioners' needs and interests (Rein & White, 1980). Such views are fortunately, and finally, about to change.

For Norwegian universities and university colleges, coherent knowledge development and the importance of collaboration between partners from education, research, and the practice field are emphasized in national steering documents and internal strategic guidelines. For example, the allocation letter to the University of Stavanger regarding the continuing education for teachers in kindergartens and schools underlines the need to establish meaningful coherence by recognizing that education, research, and collaboration with the practice field must be seen in relation to each other, by stating that:

The government expects universities and university colleges to facilitate coherence between initial education, continuing education, and local competence development. (Allocation letter 2026, University of Stavanger, Chapter 3.4; 8, own translation).

At the University of Stavanger, the Faculty of Arts and Education's 2026–2030 strategy emphasizes the connection between education, research, and partnerships by stating that there should be a close collaboration between education, research, innovation, development work, and contact with society. The same strategy further specifies that the faculty shall work continuously to improve the areas of education, research and innovation, and contact with society and further develop as a learning organization that builds a culture for sharing, collaboration and critical reflection across units and professional environments. (Faculty of Arts and Education's 2026–2030 strategy, p. 3).

In the new system for collective professional development and career pathways in schools and kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2025), it is further stressed that the various funding schemes and regulations must be viewed in relation to one another and work together. Ambitions for coherence through partnership collaborations thus emerge as both an expectation and a goal for the education system as a whole. However, there is a need for a concrete, holistic and systematic approach to ensure that coherent knowledge is developed in line with the goals as specified in the different levels of the education system.

Research-practice partnerships

The concept of Research–Practice Partnerships (RPPs) refers to collaborations in educational contexts between university researchers and practitioners in schools and kindergartens, aimed at developing knowledge and solutions to educational challenges (Farrell et al., 2021). Despite the complementarity RPPs have with Norwegian governmental guidelines and regulations, RPPs are still in an early phase as a framework for systematic and coherent knowledge development and capacity-building within the Norwegian education system. However, we argue that RPPs are a useful means to reach this goal.

RPPs are long-term, mutually beneficial, and built on a shared agenda in which research and practice inform each other. Their aim is to create usable knowledge that improves educational policy and practice through equitable collaboration, systematic use of research methods, and joint commitment to testing and evaluating solutions in real educational contexts. As such, RPPs have been defined as:

(...) a long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research. These partnerships are intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work. (Farrell et al., 2021: IV)

The purpose of RPPs is therefore to develop new knowledge through long-term, equitable collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Such partnerships establish learning communities between organizations and stakeholders in the education system and, over time, can cultivate a culture that values and builds on diverse professional expertise, ensuring that all participants contribute from their strengths. The challenge of asymmetry often seen between power and knowledge as represented by a division between theory and practice through a dichotomic understanding between the domains of research and the practice field as represented by researchers and teachers (Christianakis, 2010) is a destructive perception that RPPs challenge through their emphasis on equality in partnership collaborations. RPPs also foster collective meaning-making, as the purpose is explicit: to improve learning and

well-being in schools and kindergartens by integrating knowledge development and knowledge application. Anchoring these collaborations in meaningful activities and local needs is crucial, as the themes must be relevant to all stakeholders to sustain long-term engagement. However, more research is needed to understand how RPPs can be carried out to reach the overall goal of knowledge development (Jarl et al., 2024).

Through systematic collaborations between representatives of research, education, and the practice field, integrated knowledge emerges that is essential for realizing the aims of local professional development schemes. Furthermore, as RPPs ensure systematic collaborations between partners that represent each knowledge source, coherent knowledge is developed as a result and the dual purpose of the scheme (i.e. experiences from such collaborations strengthen and further develop teacher education programs) is reached. Thus, we strongly argue for making RPPs a central point of departure in developing relevant and coherent knowledge within the Norwegian education system. The relationship and dynamic between the three domains that ensures coherent knowledge development, and the dual purpose may be illustrated as a three-legged stool with cross braces, symbolizing distinct sources of knowledge that interconnect through collaboration, as seen in Illustration 1 below.



Illustration 1: The three-legged stool: developing coherent knowledge in the education system.

Illustration 1 shows the relationship between the different domains that develop knowledge in the education system. However, through the cross braces the three-legged stool emphasizes the need for persistent collaboration between research, the practice field, and teacher education to ensure coherent knowledge development relevant for the education system. The three legs of the stool symbolize distinct knowledge bases, highlighting that each is essential for establishing a stable and coherent foundation. All three legs are equally important to ensure a stable foundation of knowledge together to the benefit of children, adolescents, and adults in the education system.

Furthermore, it is important to have cross braces on stools in order to make them as stable as possible. When representatives from these knowledge domains engage in systematic and long-term partnership-based collaborations, coherent knowledge is co-constructed. This type of integrated knowledge is central to realizing the ambitions of the Scheme for Local Competence Development, which aims to strengthen the connection between the practice field and university environments in Norway through long-term partnerships designed to improve practice and outcomes in schools and kindergartens. Christianakis (2010) has argued that by engaging teachers in research related to their teaching they can reposition themselves in relation to power as stakeholders. But knowledge about and experiences with RPPs in Norway are scarce.

However, in the fall of 2020, an RPP was established between academic staff at a university and staff at an upper secondary school in the Southwest of Norway (Tharaldsen, 2022; Vestad et al., 2024). Some key learning points from RPPs in Norway are briefly presented below.

Designing a research-practice partnership

Partnerships ensure adequate collaborations; however, it is crucial that the partners define a partnership based on equality (Schlicht-Schmälzle et al., 2024). Financially, partnerships have been funded by the funding scheme for local professional development as it was in its early phase, mentioned above. Thematically, it is important to anchor the collaboration between the two partners, for example through initial meetings that were held between the sector's management and the college/ university staff. Such meetings may aid in clarifying roles and responsibilities for the partners as well as identifying local needs for development, thus ensuring the educational needs in the sector. Following this, it is important to make a detailed time schedule for the partnership and its content. Such plans can include which staff to include, setting a meeting schedule, and deciding what learning arenas should be used in the partnership collaboration, i.e. seminars, group work, etc. The topics that are of interest may vary between the different partners in the sector; thus it is important to ensure that the partners from the college/ university have the competence to be an adequate partner.

RPPs can be developed through designing the work process as an exploratory qualitative case study design situated within an action research framework (Tharaldsen, 2022), thus emphasizing the research dimension within a professional practice context. This ensures that the partners have specific and unique but equally valuable roles and are involved throughout the work as partners.

Certain challenges have been identified in partnership collaborations (Vestad et al., 2024), including difficulties of including the knowledge from the partnership collaboration in their respective learning environments. Furthermore, many partners that represent the education sector are already involved in other ongoing developmental work, which can make it difficult to find arenas for those involved to focus on working towards the objectives for the partnership.

However, some highlights of partnerships have been identified (Vestad et al., 2024). Firstly, partnership collaborations can lead to a common understanding and confirmation of the already ongoing work in sector, e.g. they are on the right track regarding knowledge development. For example, in one RPP where the objective of the partnership was to stimulate academic motivation and student involvement, the teachers found that the strategies already being used in the learning environment were adequate (Vestad et al., 2024). Secondly, partnership collaborations can have a positive influence on the respective learning environments in terms of a more conscious approach by the educators as a result of the collaboration. For instance, in one RPP where the partnership collaboration aimed at developing adequate strategies for class management, teachers perceived that the students' perceptions of the teaching sessions were more positive, meaning that the students understood the teachers' choices regarding the sessions to a greater extent (Vestad et al., 2024). Thirdly, partnership collaborations can contribute to more systematic, collective learning for the staff. For example, the teachers met on a regular basis in internal learning communities and shared experiences and ideas they all could benefit from (Vestad et al., 2024).

Such highlights from partnership collaborations, here demonstrated through examples of learning points from an RPP, indicate that partnerships that are designed and carried out as RPPs can ensure coherence and serve the dual purpose, as well as build capacity within the education system (i.e., among the school staff and the university staff) through a systematic partnership collaboration (i.e., long-term, based on local needs, with relations based on equality). Thus, we argue that RPPs can stimulate and build capacity in organizations, which can have a positive influence on the education system in terms of coherent knowledge development through collaboration between the partners, RPPs, like the previously mentioned three-legged stool, can contribute to persistent collaboration between research,

the practice field, and teacher education to ensure coherent knowledge development relevant for the education system.

Discussion

The aim of this article is to provide a theoretical contribution that sheds light on the need for a more coherent knowledge development within the education system and, in doing so, explore if research-practice partnerships (RPPs) can be viewed as a contribution to meet this need. Coherence can be understood as an experience of meaning, direction, and alignment within organizations, wherein diverse elements are integrated in ways that strengthen professional development and collective capacity. This article has highlighted three central domains, i.e. research, education, and the practice field, and argued that these should be viewed in relation to one another to promote professional learning and capacity building in the education system. In doing so, the dichotomic understanding of and the power imbalance between the sectors can be challenged.

It has been argued that it is best to not only take advantage of research-based knowledge, but that education be acquired through practitioners' professional knowledge as well (Schön, 1987). Teachers are experts on teaching; researchers are experts on research. However, working towards the same goal in ways that appreciate both forms of expertise and stimulate collaborative measures may lead to the coherent knowledge development necessary to reach the same educational goal. We and others argue that long-term perspective-taking is needed (Jarl et al., 2024; Schlicht-Schmälzle et al., 2024). Thus, coherence here refers not only to a sense of unity but also to the establishment of structures and practices that enable capacity development over time. This can be interpreted as a form of organizational learning, designed to enhance both professional development and innovation. A key aspect is how connections are built both within and across these domains in the education system.

In partnerships, learning networks provide opportunities for experience-sharing and the development of new practices. In education, interdisciplinary arenas can highlight diverse perspectives and stimulate reflection. For research environments, systematic knowledge-sharing and access to both current and past studies are vital foundations for development. Lack of anchoring in existing research may weaken coherence, underscoring the responsibility of researchers to ensure continuous updating via databases and professional networks. Thus, all domains are equally important to reach the common goal of ensuring quality in practice to the benefit for all children and students.

However, there is a need to involve leaders in the education system to reach this goal. Organizations that, through intentional leadership, succeed in integrating operations, governance, and learning processes create conditions in which employees experience precisely this sense of meaning and coherence. This aligns with Quinn & Fullan's (2017)

argument that coherence cannot be realized through ambition alone but requires established practices that promote collective learning. Strategies, policy documents, and professional communities thus function as key linking mechanisms.

When coherence is presented as an overarching ambition in the new comprehensive system for Competence and Career Development for Employees in Early Childhood Education and Schools (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2025), it must therefore be understood in relation to organizations' capacity for continuous learning. Capacity building encompasses both individual and organizational measures that strengthen competence, motivation, and values (Flaspohler et al., 2008) and may be viewed as the outcome of processes in which new connections are discovered, and existing practices are challenged and further developed. As such, it is at the core of organizational learning and thus knowledge development.

Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) may contribute with a fruitful systematic approach to coherent knowledge development in the education system. The central question that remains is the extent to which and in what ways such partnerships can serve as arenas for capacity building, meaning-making, and coherent knowledge development, thereby strengthening relationships between universities and the professional field in line with the societal mission of higher education. More research on RPPs is needed to fully understand how this approach can support partnership collaborations in the education system.

Nonetheless, ensuring coherence across research, education, and partnership work requires a systematic approach. Both national policy documents and local strategies express clear ambitions that organizations should interpret initiatives and structures within a broader, more integrated framework. We argue that coherence emerges when contextual conditions allow for robust professional communities that support the development of new knowledge, both for individuals and for the organization as a whole. Coherence may thus be understood as a phenomenon that is continuously shaped through participants' responses to how connections among education, research, and collaborative practice are rendered meaningful and relevant.

Such connections are established through internal professional communities within universities, where experiences from practice and partnership work form the basis for collective reflection and knowledge development in a systematic manner. At the same time, professional communities may be expanded through external collaborations. These professional communities can also be productive in all sectors within the education system. When different knowledge bases converge, knowledge production and knowledge application become integrated, providing a strengthened foundation for developing profession-relevant knowledge. Additionally, the equality perspective emphasized in RPPs redirects the work from the more traditional perception of researchers as experts and teachers as receivers of research-based knowledge.

Concluding remarks

Both coherence and knowledge development are dynamic processes that follow a circular rather than a linear logic. Experiences from practice provide a basis for collective reflection, which in turn generates new knowledge that can be reintegrated into practice through internal professional communities and external partnerships. When leadership, organizational purpose, and structural conditions are aligned, such learning cycles are strengthened. This enhances an organization's ability to create, apply, and further develop relevant coherent knowledge over time.

Coherence, therefore, cannot be predetermined or fully planned in advance. It is most effectively realized when leadership, purpose, and structural conditions point in the same direction and support professional learning communities, both within the different sectors that constitute the education system as well as in external research–practice partnerships between the sectors in the education system. Policy makers and leaders within the various education sectors are all stakeholders that can influence the education system through strategic choices, guidelines, and management that guides practice. The main aim is to ensure an education system of high quality for all parties involved, leading to reaching the overall goal of best practice within kindergartens and schools as well as universities and colleges.

A common understanding of terms and goals of the education system is of essence, and RPPs are measures that can ensure an adequate approach with an additional intentional use of learning processes. RPPs are not merely partnerships, but long-term collaborations that equally value the respective partners and thus ensure balance in power between the stakeholders. Although RPPs are not necessarily the only answer to ensuring coherent knowledge development through collaboration between research, education, and the practice field within the education system, we argue that it is an important way to further develop a fruitful mindset among stakeholders within the education system. Policy makers and leaders in the education system have an overall responsibility to facilitate high quality in the education system. As such, we finally call for political measures such as funding schemes for more systematic use of RPPs in the education system as well as more research that investigates how RPPs can contribute to coherent knowledge development that enriches the education system by collaborations that ensure high quality in education and that the dual purpose is met.

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