

# Whose Agenda is It? Navigating the Politics of Setting the Research Agenda in Education Research-Practice Partnerships

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## Abstract

In this article, we provide insight into sharing power and balancing practitioner and researcher priorities during the process of establishing a research agenda for a research-practice partnership (RPP). We draw on the literature about effective collaboration within RPPs to identify concepts and factors that can help or hinder the research agenda-setting process. Concepts include boundary spanning, spheres of interest and action, and strategic knowledge leadership. Factors include early and ongoing engagement of partners, adequate representation of diverse perspectives, funder priorities, and the presence of trusting relationships. The authors then use examples from our own experiences in RPPs to illustrate how these concepts and factors play out in the agenda-setting process.

## Keywords

politics, research agenda, research-practice partnerships

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## Introduction

### *The Context of Research-Practice Partnerships*

In his book, *Healing: Our Path from Mental Illness to Mental Health*, Insel (2022), the former head of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), laments the research agenda he helped shape over the 13 years of his leadership. He describes “betting big” on funding neuroscience and genomics research, but a decade later regretting that a core piece of NIMH’s research agenda has yet to help any people. This decision, and the \$20 billion in federal funds behind it, resulted in important advancements in scientific knowledge, but ultimately had little impact on the everyday person in need of mental health care.

Insel’s story speaks to the importance and implications of setting research agendas. At their best, research agendas can be powerful engines of innovation and solutions to problems that improve people’s lives, and at their worst, they can not only be ineffective, but can contribute to a loss of trust in the organizations that create the agenda. While the process of establishing research agendas within education research-practice partnerships (RPPs) occurs on a much smaller scale than in federal institutions such as NIMH, RPPs face similar challenges in ensuring that the agenda pays off. Farrell et al. (2021) define an RPP as, “A long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research.” But who should set the research agenda? How do partners negotiate what topics and questions to prioritize? How do partners know whether addressing the research questions will produce actionable evidence? In this article we explore these issues in the context of RPPs, while providing examples of how these processes played out in and lessons learned from two specific partnerships in which the authors played a founding role.

### *What are Research Agendas and Why Do They Matter?*

Although the term *research agenda* is used widely across the medical sciences, natural sciences, and social sciences, it is rarely defined in the literature. In this article, the authors use a definition developed by the IES-funded Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands, which defines a research agenda as a description of the topics and research questions that a researcher, research team, or partnership plans to explore, typically over the course of 3 to 5 years (Kochanek et al., 2014). The purpose of a research agenda is to serve as a road map that details the nature and scope of the research that the researcher or team plans to pursue, which supports planning

around the design of research studies and securing resources to conduct them. At the same time, research agendas should be flexible enough to accommodate policy changes and emerging issues.

As we discuss further below, one of the posited advantages of RPPs is that they can help avoid the problem described by Insel by focusing on producing research that is beneficial for organizations and individuals *and* contributes to scientific knowledge. For practitioners and policymakers, the value of research lies in its potential to address real-world problems that need to be solved. While researchers tend toward research questions that align with their academic and professional interests, an RPP's research questions must also reflect the needs and interests of practitioner partners. In our experience, practitioner partners are more likely play an active role in designing and facilitating studies when the research agenda is aligned with the needs and interests of the communities they serve. A research agenda that reflects their priorities also increases the chances that practitioners will pay attention to the research findings and ultimately use them in their decision-making process (Coburn et al., 2013; DuMont & Smeeding, 2016; Liberman & Young, 2020).

## **Understanding the Politics of Research Agenda Development**

Despite the clear benefits of developing a collaborative research agenda, the process has its share of challenges. As noted in the introduction, Wirt and Kirst (2005) explain that in the field of education “politics is a form of social conflict rooted in group differences over values about using public resources for private needs.” Because time and financial resources for research are limited and the research agenda defines the direction of an RPP's work, the process of developing the agenda is inherently political and can create tensions between RPP partners. The goals and priorities of partners may vary because of their roles or their organizations' perspectives. For example, researchers are often incentivized to focus on research that will appeal to academic publications: questions that are narrow and novel, methods that are considered rigorous, and timelines that allow for intensive study. On the other hand, practitioners are more inclined to be interested in the application of knowledge to their setting, approaches that will maximize benefit to students while minimizing disruption, and timelines that will produce results quickly.

At the center of the research agenda-setting process is the question of how partners negotiate what topics and questions to prioritize. Many RPPs struggle with power-sharing during the development of their shared research agenda. Variations in the professional backgrounds and credentials of partners may contribute to power dynamics in which some partners are

considered experts while others are not. For example, researchers might use their professional standing to maintain control over defining what constitutes a rigorous research question, such that the agenda may prioritize rigor over relevance. Researchers may lean on their academic training to control decisions about what research methods are appropriate for a given question, without adequate consideration of the knowledge of practitioners about what types of study designs or data collection are feasible. Farrell et al. (2021) note that some researchers believe that the involvement of practitioners in the collection or analysis of data compromises the objectivity of research findings. Additionally, practitioners may feel unwelcome or unheard in discussions about research because they lack research credentials or expertise. However, practitioners can provide contextual knowledge that is essential to study design and the interpretation of study findings; the engagement of practitioners can ensure researchers conduct studies that are relevant and actionable and can prevent researchers from coming to erroneous conclusions based on incomplete understandings of the on-the-ground reality. It is important to note that power dynamics sometimes favor practitioner partners, who can serve as gatekeepers by deciding what data to share or whether findings can be made public.

### *Principles of Collaboration and Power-Sharing Within RPPs*

In this section, we describe some of the basic principles of effective collaboration and power-sharing within RPPs.

*Boundary spanning.* Farrell et al. (2022) describe different ways that RPPs can span boundaries between sectors to promote collaboration among researcher and practitioner partners who belong to different organizations with different goals, priorities, and organizational cultures. *Boundary practices* are processes or routines that connect partners from different organizations, roles, and perspectives to facilitate communication and collaboration. For example, using systematic processes to develop a partnership's research agenda and to revisit the research agenda at regular intervals would be boundary practices that bring stakeholders together in their shared work and ensure that the changing needs and views of the partner organizations are reflected in the RPP's work. *Boundary objects* are concrete anchors for collaborative work across different partners, such as a document outlining the research agenda or a framework for defining new research projects.

*Spheres of interest and action.* Thompson et al. (2017) describe the importance of balancing the needs of researchers and practitioners when selecting

research questions and encourage RPPs to consider partners' spheres of interest and spheres of action. Considering *spheres of interest* involves weighing the relevance of a research question to stakeholders based on their professional roles and responsibilities. For example, although district leaders may agree that social-emotional learning is important, they may believe that research would simply demonstrate what they already know. Examining *spheres of action* involves considering stakeholders' ability to act on the research findings. For example, state agency leaders may be more invested in research on a state policy that they can affect directly than on a federal policy that they may find more challenging to influence.

*Strategic knowledge leadership.* Farrell et al. (2022) also describe a crucial aspect of RPP leadership: *strategic knowledge leadership*. Effective RPPs rely on the ability of leaders from different organizations to identify needs and opportunities, tap into existing human capital or engage additional expertise when needed, facilitate communication and coordination within and among organizations, and consider how new knowledge connects to established practices. Because of the unique perspective afforded by membership in their practice-oriented organization, practitioners provide strategic knowledge leadership that complements the strategic knowledge leadership researchers provide based on their position within the research endeavor. Harnessing the strategic knowledge leadership of stakeholders who are diverse in terms of home institution, role, and professional training and experience, as well as social-cultural identity, is crucial to establishing a research agenda that is feasible and meets the needs of all stakeholders.

### *Factors That Help or Hinder the Research Agenda-Setting Process*

As described above, promoting boundary spanning, considering spheres of interest and action, and valuing different types of strategic knowledge leadership can facilitate power-sharing and effective collaboration during the agenda-setting process. This section describes several factors that can facilitate or hamper an RPP's efforts to include all partners' priorities in the shared research agenda and the studies that follow.

*Early and ongoing engagement.* Researchers can engage practitioner partners at a variety of stages. Some researchers engage stakeholders in specific studies at the recruitment phase, after study design is complete. Others wait to engage stakeholders until the study reaches the dissemination phase. In general, RPPs

aim to span the boundaries between researchers and practitioners throughout the research cycle to promote joint work (Penuel et al., 2015). For example, RPPs typically engage stakeholders at the point of developing a research agenda that describes the partnership's goals and questions—well before the design of specific research projects. Engaging practitioner partners early ensures that the partnership's work reflects the interests, needs, perspectives, and expertise of partners from both research organizations and practice organizations. Continuing to engage practitioner partners throughout the research cycle can ensure that the research design is feasible and likely to produce actionable findings, data collection is efficient, and the interpretation of findings accounts for contextual factors. It can also allow exploration to happen in closer proximity to the phenomenon of interest and increase practitioners' understanding of, trust in, and valuing of the research (Tseng, 2012).

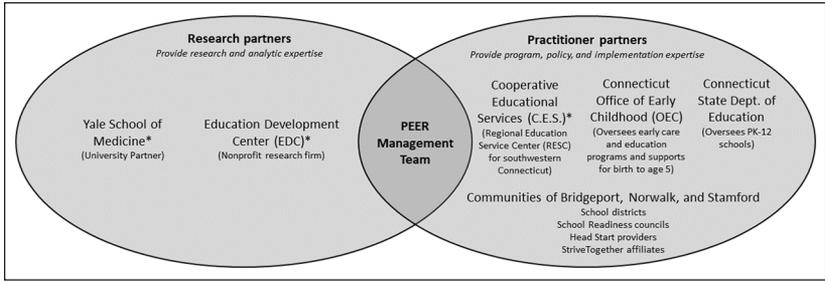
*Adequate representation.* When establishing a research agenda, it is essential to invite all relevant stakeholders to the table (Kochanek et al., 2014; Strambler et al., 2021). Failure to include key organizations or individuals can make it difficult to accurately assess spheres of interest and action or to engage needed strategic knowledge leadership, potentially leading to a research agenda that does not reflect the realities or priorities of the practitioners the research is intended to serve. For example, the research agenda might focus on a topic that is of interest only to a minority of stakeholders or a topic that is already being studied by another research partner. However, ensuring adequate representation from diverse stakeholders when establishing a research agenda isn't easy. Those organizing the research agenda process may not be aware of all the relevant partner organizations or they may be biased by past impressions of which organizations are productive partners. Even if all the relevant organizations are invited to participate, practitioners may have limited time, energy, or flexibility to represent their organizations in the process. Alternately, they may be unclear about the purpose of the process, the benefit to their organization or community, or the importance of their perspective. Finally, organizers must find ways to manage potential power asymmetry that can result from differences in representatives' professional backgrounds and credentials, lived experiences, or social-cultural identities (Coburn et al., 2008; Denner et al., 2019)—for example, related to race/ethnicity identity, gender identity, age, parental status, ideological viewpoint, etc.

*Funder priorities.* While funders are rarely brought to the table for agenda-setting and often lack direct influence on the development of an RPP's research agenda, funder priorities and funding structures meaningfully impact

the work of RPPs (Bednarek & Tseng, 2022; Coburn et al., 2013). For example, research grants may require a level of academic rigor that is challenging for RPPs that value timely results. The goals of private funders and philanthropies may differ from federal agencies. Grant-funded RPP work may be more flexible, while contracted work may need to adhere to more stringent rules. These factors may impact the flexibility the RPP has in designing and carrying out a research agenda that suits the partnership's needs. Furthermore, it has been the authors' experience that some state or local agencies are unable to accept grant funding to support key staff nor are they able to accept small grant amounts, which can mean their staff are being asked to participate in RPP work that is effectively unfunded from the agency's perspective. Finally, many funders require principal investigators (PIs) and/or co-PIs to hold doctoral degrees, effectively ensuring that research institutions hold the primary responsibility for the work of the RPPs, while other funders require that practitioners serve in a co-PI role in order to ensure co-creation and execution of the work.

*Foundational relationships.* Managing power dynamics, ensuring adequate representation, and allocating resources equitably may be challenging without first establishing trusting relationships among stakeholders. Until the conveners of the research agenda process have developed some level of rapport with potential partners, stakeholders may be less likely to make time to participate in research agenda conversations. This phase of collaborative research can be undefined in a way that may feel uncomfortable or off-putting without a sense of connection to the conveners. Partners may be uncomfortable expressing their priorities, perspectives, strengths, and needs. Foundational relationships among partners are also important. Many partners need to experience a sense of trust and a shared commitment to learning in order to feel comfortable enough during research agenda conversations to express differences of opinion about the current landscape, challenges, and opportunities for learning. While partnerships often can't establish trusting relationships prior to working together, they can move ahead slowly while actively building relationships (López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Tseng et al., 2017).

To summarize, RPPs must navigate the sharing of power among partner organizations and their representatives in order to establish a collaborative research agenda that reflects the needs and the priorities of researcher and practitioner partners. The concepts of boundary spanning, spheres of interest and action, and strategic knowledge leadership help explain what balanced power-sharing looks like. Several factors can facilitate or hinder an RPPs efforts to develop an effective research agenda: early and ongoing



**Figure 1.** Organizational chart for the Partnership for Early Education Research (PEER).

engagement, adequate representation, foundational relationships, and funder priorities. The next two sections illustrate these themes by sharing lessons learned from two partnerships in which the authors played a founding role.

### Example 1: Partnership for Early Education Research (PEER)

#### Introducing PEER

The first example is PEER, a place-based research alliance focused on early care and education for children from birth through age 8. PEER’s mission is to conduct rigorous, collaborative, actionable research that can inform early childhood education policy and practice at the local and state levels, increase access to high-quality early childhood education, and reduce disparities in educational outcomes. Figure 1 describes the partner organizations that make up PEER, including the management team that leads its work.

PEER was launched in 2014 with initial support from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES, award R305H140142) and has received additional support from a variety of sources including the Spencer Foundation and the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC). In its first 3 years, PEER had three main goals:

1. To develop community, regional, and state capacity to partner in and benefit from collaborative research;
2. To use primary and secondary local and state data to conduct policy-relevant research on early childhood education (ECE) in the state; and
3. To partner with state and local ECE stakeholders to create a multi-year research agenda to guide future work.

PEER conducted three initial research projects that were proposed in its application to IES: a study of kindergarten readiness (in partnership with the State Department of Education), a study of literacy in early elementary grades (in partnership with the local education agency for a mid-sized urban community), and a study of teachers' use of assessments in ECE programs serving children from birth to age 5 (in partnership with local ECE programs). While these three studies were designed largely by the partnership's management team, conducting these studies provided ample opportunities to actively engage other partners as the partnership determined what data were available, what studies had been conducted previously, and what partners wanted to learn.

### *Process for Developing an Initial Research Agenda*

In its first 2 years, concurrent to conducting the research projects defined in its original grant proposal, the management team brought all partners together to develop a shared research agenda. The goal was to work collaboratively to create a long-term research agenda that would inform the partnership's work beyond these initial projects—a process that required partners to accommodate multiple perspectives and navigate variations in objectives.

As described in Strambler et al. (2021), the management team based its research agenda-setting process on materials developed by the IES-funded Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands (Kochanek et al., 2014). To engage partners early in the research process, the management team held a two-part in-person research agenda-setting workshop in 2015. In an effort to include all relevant stakeholders, the management team invited representatives from state agencies, local education agencies, and a variety of community-based organizations to participate in the workshop. The first session was framed as a full-day professional retreat (approximately 6 hours) with two objectives: (1) To promote robust discussions among early childhood education stakeholders around education research and RPPs; and (2) To generate research topics of interest to inform the development of PEER's research goals and ongoing research agenda.

The retreat took place during the traditional workday and began by introducing participants to one another, to the management team, and to the purpose of PEER, which set the stage for relationship-building throughout the day. To develop common understanding and language, the management team presented information about the history and goals of education research (e.g., knowledge building, evaluation, and continuous improvement), possible approaches to education research (e.g., primary research, secondary research, qualitative research, quantitative research, etc.), and the basics of

RPPs. Next, workshop participants worked independently and then in small groups to generate research topics that were of interest to their organizations; the groups then categorized these topics into broader themes. After each small group shared the themes and topics they had discussed, each workshop participant rated which five topics were highest priorities for their organization.

After this retreat, the management team collated and processed the output from the meeting and shared a summary with all workshop participants. The management team then reconvened the group to continue the process during a half-day professional workshop approximately 5 months after the first session, also during the traditional workday. This second meeting was about 4 hours long, and began with another round of introductions, which was especially important given that not all participants had attended the first session. After providing an update on the initial studies and reviewing information from the first session about the possible goals of education research and possible research approaches, the management team described possible sources of research questions (e.g., educators, policymakers, researchers, etc.), what makes questions researchable (e.g., reasonable, answerable, etc.), and the purpose and types of research agendas (e.g., linear, topical, etc.) After reviewing the process used at the first session to generate research topics, the team facilitated a discussion of the themes and topics that session had produced. Once the group affirmed the four priority research areas identified through the first phase (program quality; kindergarten transition; dual language learners; and, family and community services), workshop participants worked in small groups to generate research questions to explore the priority research topics, with each small group working on 1 to 2 topics.

After the workshop concluded, the management team refined the research questions to ensure that each was specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (summarized with the acronym SMART). Notably, the management team did not rule out questions based on academic norms around novelty; the draft research agenda included many questions of interest to practitioners that would involve the synthesis of existing research rather than original research studies—projects that were unlikely to produce publications in peer-reviewed journals. For each research question, the management team proposed a specific approach (e.g., literature review, secondary data analysis, collection of qualitative and/or quantitative data). Finally, the management team shared the draft research agenda document with all partner organizations for another round of feedback before releasing the research agenda document (<https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/3fec3b54-266f-4afe-b7c4-f5bd1c59dbc7>) publicly.

## *Learning From PEER's Experience With the Politics of Agenda-Setting*

PEER's experience with developing and executing a collaborative research agenda provides many lessons about sharing power in RPPs, specifically in the areas of partner engagement, adequate representation, funder priorities, and relationship-building.

*Lessons learned about engaging partners in the agenda-setting process.* In preparation for the research agenda-setting workshop, the management team did substantial outreach to partner organizations to ensure adequate representation of diverse partner organizations—both outreach to education agencies and community organizations. When the management team called partner organizations to explain the goal for this convening and secure commitments that leaders would participate, leaders of large community-based organizations in ECE generally were quick to commit to attending and bringing their senior leaders, whereas the leaders of smaller organizations were less likely to engage or send delegates. The reasons for this are not entirely known, but one possible explanation is that larger organizations had more capacity to participate—members of larger leadership teams may have more time for strategic planning within their normal responsibilities, whereas leaders of small organizations may find it necessary to devote more of their time to daily operations. Regardless of the reason, it seems likely that the interests of large ECE programs were better represented in the research agenda than those of smaller ECE programs.

Through outreach to state and local education agencies, it became clear that state commissioners and school district superintendents did not have time for substantive participation in the research agenda-setting process. Instead, the management team asked these partners to delegate appropriate representatives who had the insight and authority to represent their agencies' interests, needs, and capacity. While all of the state and local agencies sent representatives, some were more able than others to speak for their agency, either as a result of their experience or their position within the organization. Some agencies sent representatives who didn't have the strategic leadership knowledge or the authority to speak for their organization; these agencies were more likely to say later that the research agenda did not reflect their interests or needs—not surprising, given ineffective, and thus inadequate, representation. Agencies that sent representatives with the knowledge and authority to represent their organization were generally more engaged with the research agenda produced by the process. In addition, the engagement of upper-level leaders from state and local education agencies provided

essential stability during commissioner and superintendent transitions. While the buy-in of the commissioner or superintendent was important, the engagement of other senior leaders proved crucial to maintaining the agency's commitment under new commissioners or superintendents. Upper-level leaders were more likely to remain at their agency than the top administrator, and they were well-positioned to transfer knowledge to a new leader regarding the value of continued engagement in the RPP.

*Lessons learned about the intersection of funder and partner priorities.* After completing the collaborative research agenda-setting process, the RPP's management team began to seek funding opportunities to support implementation of the research agenda. While the priority research topics defined by the research agenda resonated with many funders, the management team soon realized that many of the specific research questions were less compelling to funders. As noted above, many of the research agenda questions would be best addressed through the synthesis of existing literature, an approach that was not motivating to research funders or funders focused on improving practice.

In the case of research questions that were more appropriate for original research studies, conversations with practitioner partners revealed that differences among school districts' priorities made it hard to design studies that were of equal interest to all three of the communities, especially as transitions in district leadership occurred. For example, the management team worked with local partners to design a study focused on policies, practices, and supports for multilingual learners and their families, but one of the three districts had a new superintendent and did not participate in this process. When PEER secured funding to conduct this study, that district declined to participate; another district that had provided a letter of support for the grant application now had a new superintendent who also declined to participate. The major ECE providers from all three communities were excited to participate in the study; they identified representatives to a research advisory committee and signed data-sharing agreements that outlined their engagement and the data they would contribute. However, the fact that only one of three school districts engaged had a substantial impact on the study design.

*Lessons learned about foundational relationships and ongoing engagement.* Around the same time, the management team began to hear from individual partner organizations that wanted to collaborate with PEER on topics specific to their organization. These partners had appreciated their interactions with PEER and found the idea of collaborative research compelling. The management team decided that given partners' varying needs, PEER should be more

flexible with regard to its research agenda. The team proposed that while PEER would continue to focus on the four priority research areas identified through the collaborative research agenda-setting process, it would expand its focus beyond the specific research questions defined through that process. The management team created a *research areas and activities* ([https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/peer/publications/peer%20research%20areas%20and%20services\\_334112\\_284\\_31376\\_v4.pdf](https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/peer/publications/peer%20research%20areas%20and%20services_334112_284_31376_v4.pdf)) document that succinctly described its mission, its priority research areas (slightly revised to improving education quality, preparing for the kindergarten transition, supporting dual language learners, and engaging and supporting families), and the types of research in which it engaged (research studies, evaluation studies, research synthesis, and technical assistance for research/data use). Unlike the research agenda document, this new document did not list specific research questions to show that PEER was flexible *within* the priority research areas. When the management team shared this document with partners at its 2018 convening, stakeholders responded favorably to this more flexible approach. When a partner approaches the management team about a potential collaboration, PEER's research areas and activities document serves as a *boundary object* (Farrell et al., 2022) that helps partners from different organizations assess whether a potential project is a good fit for PEER. Specifically, the management team assesses partners' requests based on alignment with PEER's priority research topics, likely benefit to all partners, management team capacity, and available funding.

Since 2018, the management team has accepted five invitations to work with partner organizations on multi-year projects of varying scope; in some cases, the partners had already secured funding while in other cases, the management team contributed to the writing of grant proposals. In each of these projects, the management team has worked closely with the partner organization(s) to identify research questions and approaches that are achievable while meeting the partners' needs. Each project has yielded products that practitioner partners said they found informative and useful. In addition, some of these projects have yielded scholarly work, such as academic publications or presentations.

For example, one of PEER's larger projects since 2018 was a collaboration with the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a Preschool Development Grant (PDG) expansion grant to the OEC to expand high-quality preschool for low- and middle-income 4-year-olds in targeted communities (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). The grant permitted a limited amount of funds to be spent on program evaluation, and the OEC had partnered with the state university to examine child outcomes at

the start and end of the intervention. The OEC was also interested in the effects of PDG participation on early elementary outcomes, so the OEC decided to partner with PEER to expand the evaluation of PDG. The management team and OEC representatives met every 6 to 12 weeks throughout the study to discuss data sharing agreements, data requests, analytical approaches, results, and dissemination. These meetings allowed representatives from the OEC and the management team to seek additional information from within their organizations and networks, negotiate and refine the research questions, develop a feasible research plan, share updates, and discuss findings. These meetings deepened foundational relationships and promoted power-sharing between the state agency leadership and PEER management team. For example, state agency leadership wanted a study that could show the program was effective, and it took several conversations for all partners come to consensus about what types of claims the available data would allow the study to examine.

*Other lessons learned about developing and pursuing a collaborative research agenda.* The PDG evaluation also illustrated the importance of strategic knowledge leadership in defining research questions. Unfortunately, transitions in leadership and data systems midway through the project temporarily reduced the agency's strategic knowledge leadership, which slowed the process of finalizing the project's research questions and approach. The PDG evaluation also faced several data-related challenges. The partners had agreed on a quasi-experimental design in which propensity score matching would be used to select a matched comparison group that was similar to the group of children who had participated in the PDG program. The plan was to link each child's ECE enrollment data to his or her early elementary outcome data collected by the State Department of Education (SDE), which would allow the team to compare early elementary outcomes for PDG children and the matched comparison group.

Unfortunately, the OEC collects ECE enrollment data only for children whose participation is supported by public funds, which means it is impossible to determine which of the other elementary school children had preschool experience that was funded through parent fees alone and which had no preschool experience at all. Given that the PDG program aimed to increase access to preschool, the partners wanted to compare PDG children to children who would not have otherwise attended preschool, but the partners ultimately determined that was impossible given data constraints. Instead, the evaluation compared PDG children to children in other publicly-funded programs with similar standards of quality. Not surprisingly, the study determined that PDG children's outcomes were statistically similar to the outcomes of

children who utilized other publicly-funded preschool spaces. Although these null findings were disappointing and potentially damaging to the agency's reputation, the relationship between the PEER management team and the OEC allowed the partners to come to consensus on how to explain the results in a way that could reduce potential misinterpretation and focus attention on the lessons learned and recommendations produced by the study, as described in Strambler et al. (2020).

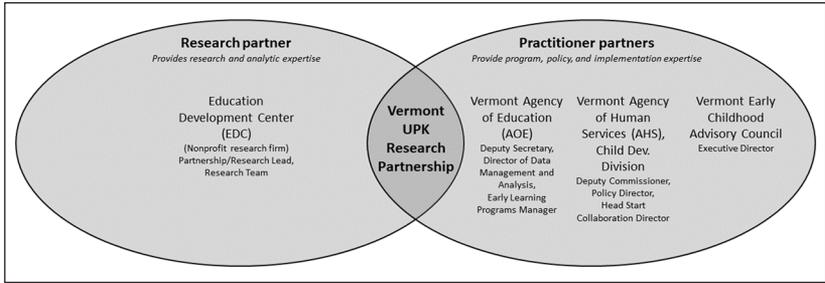
With respect to funding, the management team has found it more challenging to respond to requests to collaborate with partners on relatively small, short-term projects. Even when funding has been available for this type of project, establishing a contract has proved infeasible because of short timelines or small budgets. This reality caused the management team to conduct some small projects on a pro bono basis, which has challenged the RPP's capacity, especially during periods when all funding is tied to a specific project. RPPs that have general operating support may be more able to respond to small-scale or time sensitive requests from partners (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic) than RPPs that rely entirely on project-specific support (Meyer et al., 2022).

## **Example 2: Vermont Universal PreK (UPK) Research Partnership**

### *Introducing the Vermont UPK Research Partnership*

The second example, the Vermont UPK partnership, led by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northeast and Islands at Education Development Center (EDC), is a place-based partnership among a nonprofit education research firm, two state agencies, and a public-private partnership. Figure 2 describes each organization's representatives and their contributions. This partnership was created to study the implementation of Vermont's universal prekindergarten (preK) legislation, which passed in 2014. The legislation provides access to state-funded preK in state-approved preK programs through a mixed-delivery system of public and private providers. Full implementation of the legislation began during the 2016/17 school year, and the state's legislature has been interested in determining how the legislation affects the students and families it is designed to serve.

Because the state's universal preK system is co-administered by Vermont's Agency of Education (AOE) and Agency of Human Services (AHS), studying the implementation of the universal preK legislation has required inter-agency integration of data sets and business processes that were siloed previously. This work forced the partners to break new ground in



**Figure 2.** Organizational chart for the Vermont Universal PreK (UPK) Research Partnership.

data management across the two organizations as well as orchestrating the coordinated application review process for providers seeking approval to provide preK under the law. These areas of operational innovation demanded sizable staff, skill, and time commitments from AOE and AHS, leaving little capacity for value-added analysis of the data sets beyond required legislative reporting products. State personnel had little time to conduct in-depth studies that could inform decision-makers at agency and legislative levels.

When the 2017 to 2022 IES-funded REL Northeast and Islands contract began, EDC researchers and AOE leadership met regularly to discuss the most pressing needs related to ECE in the state. This initial scoping work highlighted that the state needed help evaluating implementation of their state-funded universal preK system as it came online. The UPK partnership was formed to support AOE and AHS by conducting two research studies as well as providing research technical support to address questions related to the implementation of universal preK in the state. In other words, the partnership provides the state with the needed analytic capacity to leverage both extant administrative data as well as develop, deploy, and analyze primary data collection to inform refinement to regulations of the state’s universal preK legislation.

### *Process for Developing the Research Agenda*

The research agenda setting process used by the UPK partnership was very similar to that of PEER. During the first 6 months of the partnership, research partners facilitated a research agenda-setting process in which AOE and AHS partners: (1) brainstormed topics and problems of practice related to implementation of the state’s universal preK legislation; (2) prioritized the brainstormed topics by voting for the top five topics of interest to them; (3) drafted

researchable questions that addressed those topics and were further refined by the research partners; and (4) drafted a long-term research agenda to guide the work of the partnership over the 5-year REL contract (Kochanek et al., 2014). The research partners used the research agenda to design the activities of the partnership, including two complementary studies that were approved by the practitioner partners and the partnership's funder, IES. Practitioner partners participated in the agenda-setting process and study design process as part of their typical job duties during normal business hours and sanctioned by their agency leadership. While substantial capacity for advanced data management and analysis already existed at AOE, the research partners' ability to focus attention and address some of the research questions defined by the research agenda was a value-add for the state agencies.

### *Learning From the UPK Partnership's Experience With the Politics of Agenda-Setting*

The UPK partnership also provides many lessons about navigating the politics of developing and executing a collaborative research agenda. Specifically, the UPK partnership's experiences illustrate how engaging partners early in the process, including diverse stakeholder organizations, building foundational relationships, and funder priorities can help or hinder efforts to share power equitably in an RPP.

*Lessons learned about engaging partners early in the research process.* Although the research partners led the development and design of the research studies, these studies addressed the practitioner partners' need to better understand universal preK implementation and inform related policy discussions in the state. The research partners incorporated feedback from practitioner partners throughout each step of the design and operationalization process by eliciting feedback at bimonthly meetings and through regular email communication. At the outset of the partnership, the researchers helped agency partners prioritize research questions that were most important to investigating the implementation process and answerable with the data immediately available. This was a critical discussion as universal preK implementation was a considerable task in and of itself, with myriad coordination, data integration, and business process design choices that were the primary focus for agency partners.

*Lessons learned about balancing partners' perspectives.* A key aspect of conducting the research agenda-setting process was ensuring that leadership

from each of the state agencies were part of the process. As mentioned above, the state's universal preK program is co-administered by AOE and AHS, with each agency governed by a distinct set of rules and regulations. At times, the needs of one agency did not match the needs of the other. And the state's universal preK legislation marked the first time that both agencies needed to coordinate oversight and implementation efforts. As a result, the establishment of the UPK partnership coincided with a new level of collaboration between AOE and AHS, allowing the research team to act as a relationship broker between the agencies both during the research agenda-setting process and as the interagency collaboration began. This context meant it was especially important to ensure that each problem of practice identified by partners be given equal consideration. The researchers promoted this balance by ensuring the same number of participants from each agency were present during the agenda-setting process and, particularly, during the prioritization of research questions for the agenda.

The resulting research agenda addressed several questions related to implementation of the state's universal preK program that were important to all partners as well as the state legislature, including:

1. To what extent are children with different characteristics enrolled in public school preK programs, private preK programs, and preK programs at each quality rating?<sup>1</sup>
2. To what extent are preK children enrolled in a program within the boundaries of their local education agency?
3. After other characteristics are controlled for, which characteristics of preK children are associated with the likelihood of being enrolled in a public school preK program rather than a private preK program, a five-star program rather than a three- or four-star program, and a program within rather than outside the boundaries of a child's local education agency?
4. How do characteristics related to program availability, program quality, and family choice differ between public school and private programs?
5. How do characteristics related to program availability, program quality, and family choice differ by local education agency population size and by poverty level?

The partnership designed and conducted two research studies to address these questions. The design of the studies was led by the research partners, but practitioner partners provided essential strategic knowledge leadership, particularly regarding the data available to address the research questions and

interpretation of findings. By engaging partners early and making space for all partners to contribute to setting the research agenda, the UPK partnership facilitated the development of trusting, foundational relationships among partners, which ultimately ensured the commitment and engagement of all partners consistently and over time (López Turley & Stevens, 2015).

*Lessons learned about representation and managing power dynamics across the research cycle.* Throughout the process of setting and executing the research agenda, the partners maintained regular communication (e.g., monthly to bimonthly) via email, phone calls, and video meetings facilitated by the research staff. This boundary practice was an important factor in the partnership's success as the research staff were a very effective third-party intermediary between the two state agencies. In fact, the research partner played a key role in helping to smooth relationships across state agencies because they were able to act as brokers and boundary spanners (Farrell et al., 2022). This reduced tension and enabled work to move forward when it might otherwise have become mired in political or interagency turmoil. The boundary practice of holding regularly scheduled meetings for partners to engage in the work and provide input increased communication and strengthened relationships, ultimately improving the work. Similarly, the research agenda served as a boundary object for the partnership, in that partners could return to this document to keep the work focused over the long term.

The UPK partnership was intentionally structured to engage mid- and senior-level leaders from all partner organizations in the work. For example, both the AOE Deputy Secretary of Education and Director of the Data and Analysis Division were engaged in the partnership, representing senior- and mid-level leadership. This structure ensured strategic knowledge leadership across all organizations (Farrell et al., 2022) that allowed the partnership to continue seamlessly when there was turn over in senior leadership. Both agencies experienced turnover in senior leadership multiple times, and the work of the partnership did not stagnate. If anything, the strength of the partnership grew over time and through these transitions. As needs arose, the partners prioritized their relationship and the work, holding additional meetings to discuss data, as well as convening sessions to review reports and products before publication. At every step, the partners planned together, often discussing work that could take place over a much longer term (e.g., five or more years into the future), beyond the efforts immediately at hand.

As noted above, adequate representation was ensured by including the same number of representatives from each state agency to the partnership. Furthermore, the researcher partners created a hybrid research agenda-setting process to ensure that the busy practitioner partners could contribute to

agenda-setting in multiple ways. The majority of practitioner partners were able to attend the agenda-setting sessions in person, however at least one partner, who was a senior leader at AHS, needed to call into the sessions. To facilitate her engagement in the brainstorming and voting process, the research partners created a Google spreadsheet and encouraged all participants, both in person and online, to bring their laptops to the meeting. The group brainstormed topics in the Google spreadsheet, which each partner then used to vote for the most important topics. Not only did this approach allow for adequate representation of the partners, it allowed partners to review the brainstormed topics with others on their team and with new partners when turnover occurred.

Although members of the partnership worked as a team to recognize, plan around, and actively mitigate challenges, power dynamics across the state agencies posed a challenge at times. While AOE has a long-standing history of data collection, use, and engaging in research, AHS has only recently begun to invest substantial resources in these endeavors. In addition, the research experience and credentials of AOE partners exceeded that of the AHS partners, with several AOE partners holding a Ph.D. in education or related fields. The differences in expertise and experience of the two state agencies meant that the research partners had to level-set with all partners at the outset of the research agenda-setting process to make sure all partners felt comfortable and were able to fully engage in the process. This level-setting was done by providing pre-reading materials that described different types of research and defined a research agenda. The research team avoided jargon and focused the agenda-setting meetings on eliciting input based on practitioner experience and needs, rather than expertise in research.

*Lessons learned about funder constraints.* Another challenge in developing and executing the research agenda related to the source of funding for the partnership. While RELs are tasked with supporting state and local education agencies in engaging in and using data and research to inform their policy and practice, federal guidelines affect the types of research activities that can be funded through this work. For example, it is difficult to engage in primary data collection through REL contracts because of Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval requirements, limiting the questions that can be included on the research agenda to those that can be addressed using existing data sources. There is little that can be done to mitigate this challenge, but the UPK partnership dealt with it by including research questions that were of interest to the partners but that were beyond the immediate scope of the partnership. These additional questions were used to seek grant funding from other sources that were able to support different types of research activities.

## **Bringing It All Together**

As described above and throughout the related literature, education RPPs offer a promising approach for bridging the divide between researchers and practitioners and promoting collaborative research that addresses real-life problems and needs while building generalizable knowledge. However, the process of establishing a joint research agenda is inherently political because it challenges partners to negotiate the priorities for their work together. Resources for research are limited, and RPPs must balance the needs and interests of different partners for collaborative work to be meaningful and effective. Research agendas are documents that generally describe a partnership's priorities and research questions for the next 3 to 5 years. They serve as boundary objects that guide the shared work of RPPs by keeping attention focused, over time and through leadership transitions, on the questions that the partnership agreed to address.

### *Why Engage Partners in Research Agenda Development and Refinement*

Engaging partners in developing a shared research agenda ensures that it reflects the needs and interests of each organization. Developing a collaborative research agenda can serve as a boundary practice that allows partners from different organizations to come together, hear one another's perspectives, and negotiate shared priorities. Considering spheres of interest and action and acknowledging the strategic knowledge leadership that each partner provides can promote power-sharing during this process. This article provides examples from two partnerships in which the authors played a founding role to highlight ways in which a research agenda can be developed collaboratively to inform the work conducted by an RPP, both during the first 3 to 5 years of the partnership, as well as in seeking additional funding sources. The example of PEER also shows how treating the research agenda as a living document can help a partnership continue to meet the evolving needs of all partners.

### *Why the "Who" at the Table During Development is Important*

A research agenda can be a valuable tool for an RPP when the agenda reflects the needs of all partners. This is best accomplished by thoughtfully recruiting stakeholders at various levels of leadership within the partner organizations and ensuring that leaders are present who have the authority to speak to each organization's priorities are present. As we saw with PEER, if the leadership of a partnership organization cannot engage substantively in the process,

whether because of limits on their time, knowledge, or opportunity, partners are less likely to see the priorities of their organization reflected in the research agenda. The UPK partnership found several ways to mitigate issues related to partners' time constraints by structuring agenda-setting workshops that were accessible to in-person and attendees, which maximized participation and ensured all partners had a voice in the research agenda.

### *Why Foundational Relationships are Crucial*

Education RPPs bring together partner organizations with different priorities, values, and ways of operating. As a result, RPPs generally engage organizational representatives who are diverse in terms of their professional backgrounds and credentials, lived experiences, and social-cultural identities. Without boundary practices that facilitate power-sharing by explicitly making space for the knowledge and expertise of diverse stakeholders, researchers may dominate discussions about potential research questions and studies while practitioners may feel uncomfortable, undervalued, or unheard. Without building trust and foundational relationships among stakeholders, it is difficult for RPPs to do the hard work of negotiating shared priorities, defining the questions in a research agenda, and designing studies to address these questions. This reality means that RPPs must invest early in building relationships among stakeholders and creating structures that actively engage all stakeholders.

### *How Funder Priorities Affect Research Agendas*

Even when an RPP is successful in developing a collaborative research agenda that balances the needs and interests of all partners, pursuing that agenda requires funding. Funders' priorities, standards, and structures affect what types of research questions are "fundable." For example, funders may expect a level of statistical power that a partnership's study population (i.e., sample size) cannot support. Application review timelines may be so long that partners' priorities shift between submission and decision. And project-based funding may not allow RPPs to be responsive to emergent needs or to do the work required to maintain relationships among partners.

### *Strong Research Agendas Support Effective Partnerships*

This article focused on considerations for navigating the politics of setting an RPP's research agenda. Much of what was discussed above is relevant for working within an RPP framework writ large, not only during the research agenda-setting process. Early and ongoing engagement of partners, adequate

representation across partner organizations, the presence (or absence) of foundational relationships, and funder priorities affect an RPP's ability to share power effectively during the research agenda-setting process, which often represents a partnership's first collaborative work and sets the course for the partnership's future work. However, these considerations are also important as partners begin to engage in research activities such as developing data sharing agreements, conducting analyses, interpreting results, and deciding on dissemination approaches and venues. And, while the research agenda-setting process may take place over a relatively short period of time, boundary spanning practices, weighing partners' spheres of interest and action, and harnessing strategic knowledge leadership throughout the research cycle can support the partnership in weathering challenging power dynamics, turnover in senior leadership, and changes in the education landscape. As illustrated by the examples drawn from the authors' experience, RPPs that attend to the politics of developing a research agenda that reflects all partners' needs and voices position themselves to conduct research that can inform education policy and practice.

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### **Note**

1. The state has an early childhood quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that provides a rating of one to five stars, with higher ratings indicating higher quality across a variety of indicators. Programs must have a rating of at least three stars to become a state-approved program.

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