

Most educators do not regularly engage directly with researchers or with primary research.

This is not a new observation. As Teresa Preston (2021) reminds us in *Kappan's* April 2021 issue, concerns about the weak link between education research and practice have been aired dozens of times, over many decades, in this magazine alone. It has even become a *global* preoccupation, with international entities such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Burns & Schuller, 2007) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Hewitt & Goupil, 2020) investing in efforts to figure out how education research can more usefully inform teachers' practices.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to strengthen the connection between education research and practice (Farley-Ripple & Grajeda, 2020). One is to link researchers and practitioners to one another *directly*, such as by creating partnerships in which researchers collaborate with teachers, principals, and district administrators to identify and solve the most pressing problems facing their schools. This approach has received a lot of attention in recent years — for instance, it was the main focus of the April *Kappan*.

The second is to connect research and practice *indirectly*, such as when people share research findings via websites, blogs, magazines, and professional networks. In fact, all sorts of individuals and organizations play this role in K-12 education, serving as intermediaries *between* the worlds of research and practice. These “knowledge brokers,” as they're often called, have received much less attention, but as I argue in this article, they have great potential to support school improvement, and they deserve a closer look.

Moreover, I see this kind of indirect knowledge-sharing as particularly valuable today (Fandos & Wines, 2021), at a time when growing numbers of Americans are clamoring for racial, economic, and climate justice and for new ideas and solutions to the immense societal challenges we face. In education, especially, calls now abound for efforts to “reimagine” familiar ways of doing school. As the editors of the *Harvard Educational Review* recently put it, “The crises of the past months have underscored the urgent need for education that is equitable, that centers social justice, and that equips young people to be informed, ethical, and effective citizens of diverse nations in an interconnected

world” (Editors, 2021). That suggests a growing demand for credible knowledge brokers who are adept at curating, translating, and disseminating important research findings — and, potentially, other sources of evidence — so that practitioners can make use of them.

Two paths: One well-lit, another neglected

I don't mean to disparage efforts to forge direct links between research and practice, whether through research-practice partnerships (RPPs) or efforts to support practitioner-led research (Bush, 2017; Malin, 2020). Such work can and often does result in accessible, timely, and relevant findings that can be used to inform school improvement (Farley-Ripple & Grajeda, 2020; Welsh, 2021).

However, indirect forms of knowledge-sharing that fly under the radar often play an equally vital role in K-12 education, and they have some advantages over the direct approach. As Stephanie Brown and Annie Allen (2021) note, researchers and practitioners largely “live in different professional worlds, each with its own institutional language and norms, hierarchies, incentive systems, and approaches to solving problems” (p. 21). Most educators do not regularly engage directly with researchers or with primary research (Cordingley, 2008; Farley-Ripple et al., 2018), and while RPPs can provide opportunities for them to do so, it's difficult to scale up these relationships quickly. RPPs require proximity between well-matched researchers and educators, as well as ample time and resources to support the participants in developing research projects and learning how to work together effectively (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Farrell et al., 2018).

By contrast, intermediary organizations (IOs) and other knowledge brokers who occupy the space between research and practice can share important research-based information quickly and with many thousands of educators at once (Cooper, 2014; Malin & Brown, 2020; Neal et al., 2015). They have the “ability to draw from a broad range of research or researchers and reach a broader set of practitioners, overcoming the challenges of scale that direct relationships might pose” (Farley-Ripple & Grajeda, 2020, p. 66). If our aim is to spread useful knowledge in and across schools and systems, then we should build, leverage, and strengthen these alternative “avenues of influence” (Farley-Ripple & Grajeda, 2020, p. 81).

Ben Levin (2013) points out that education knowledge is developed and applied in three

partially overlapping domains. The first is focused on research production, which often, though not always, occurs in universities. The second, which focuses on research use, principally occurs in schools or related spaces. The third, mediation, is made up of those individuals and entities (e.g., think tanks, the media, foundations, professional organizations) that attempt to connect research with policy or practice. My focus here is on the third category: those people and organizations that try to *mediate between* researchers and practitioners. In general, this indirect way of connecting research and practice is underexplored and poorly understood (Farley-Ripple, 2021), and little is known about the ways in which these sorts of knowledge brokers influence educators. As a result, those who engage in this crucial work have often had to make it up as they go, without much information about how to play this role effectively. Still, there is some historical and contemporary information that can help us to map out the field.

The larger landscape

In the U.S., efforts to strengthen the connection between education research and practice have frequently centered on intermediary organizations (IOs); prominent examples include the federally funded Regional Educational Laboratories, created in the 1960s, and the What Works Clearinghouse, launched in 2002 (Farley-Ripple, Tilley, & Tice, 2017). Moreover, even as governmental support for IOs has fluctuated over the years, educators' demand for useful research-based information has been strong enough to drive various knowledge brokers to try to meet the need. For example, the online publication EducationNC, founded in the 2000s, resulted from the collective efforts of a number of superintendents in North Carolina (Farley-Ripple, Tilley, & Tice, 2017). Similarly, the widely read subscription-based Marshall Memo (a weekly summary of research and ideas in K-12 education; Malin & Paralkar, 2017) was created to meet a strong demand for credible information about effective practices. Meanwhile, professional organizations such as PDK International and ASCD have long included research-based information in their publications and events. And some IOs have sprung from philanthropic work aimed at fostering educational improvements by leveraging research. Edutopia, for instance, is devoted to "shining a spotlight on what works in education" (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2020), and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has also become a prominent knowledge broker,

sharing research findings and information about school improvement.

Universities and individual faculty members (i.e., traditional *knowledge producers*) have increasingly entered the fold, as well, sharing research-based knowledge through websites, newsletters, and podcasts — examples include the Harvard Graduate School of Education's (HGSE's) Usable Knowledge and the Center for Policy Research in Education's Knowledge Hub. And recent decades have also seen the proliferation of numerous education think tanks and advocacy organizations. These latter entities have shown more interest in influencing policy than practice, though, and they've often been accused of misrepresenting others' research findings and publishing less-than-credible research of their own (Lubienski & Malin, 2020; Malin & Lubienski, in press).

In short, intermediaries that seek to connect education research to practitioners are diverse and plentiful; indeed, this has become an increasingly crowded and competitive space. Moreover, although educators' demand for research evidence has varied over time, federal accountability pressures and requirements that educators use evidence-based practices have lately pushed the demand for such evidence to historical highs (Farley-Ripple, Tilley, & Tice, 2017). It is therefore essential to better understand such entities' activities, processes, and impacts.



"Wow. The pandemic really upped everyone's pastry game."

Educators' demand for useful research-based information has been strong enough to drive various knowledge brokers to try to meet the need.

A closer look at three intermediaries

My colleagues and I recently studied three well-known practice-focused knowledge brokers: Edutopia, the Marshall Memo, and Usable Knowledge (Malin, Brown, & Trubçecac, 2018). These three intermediaries vary substantially in regard to such basic elements as *what*, *why*, *whose*, and *how* knowledge was shared. And yet, despite such differences, each has successfully identified an operational niche, showing that various possibilities exist for knowledge brokers. The choices brokers make carry key implications by, for instance, attracting or repelling particular audiences or community members.

We found Edutopia, for instance, to focus more on highlighting the thoughts and activities of educators, rather than those of researchers. Accordingly, they tend to position educators as valuable *knowledge producers* (versus solely as *research consumers*), sharing information about ways to improve teaching and learning. This positioning is especially conducive to the flow of ideas and strategies from educator to educator, but the Edutopia community includes multiple stakeholder groups, including researchers. This ultimately paves the way for knowledge exchanges in which researchers share evidence-based knowledge about the efficacy of approaches like project-based learning, and teachers, school leaders, and students share specific how-to knowledge about implementing these ideas. It's worth noting that some scholarship suggests such two-way knowledge exchanges are more likely to foster real-world changes in practice than one-way efforts to disseminate knowledge *from* researchers to practitioners (Contandriopoulos et al., 2010). Finally, Edutopia stands out for its embrace of multiple media (e.g., videos exploring the science of learning or highlighting educators' successes) and platforms (e.g., an active and broad



presence on social media). This practice, too, aligns with research that underscores the importance of framing evidence compellingly and through various channels in order to persuade (Wells et al., 2019).

The Marshall Memo is a weekly, subscription-based email newsletter produced by Kim Marshall (a longtime teacher and school and district administrator), who aims to get the best new “*research and other ideas* into educators’ hands, assuming educators crave it but have insufficient time and access to otherwise attain it” (Malin, Brown, & Trubçeac, 2018, p. 10). Marshall writes primarily for an audience of principals and other formal leaders (although his subscribers perform varied roles, and he aims to meet their needs, too). The fact that leaders have distinct interests and generally possess an elevated ability to enact larger-scale educational change has implications for the memo’s content and framing. (Plus, some research suggests that administrators are particularly well positioned to act as knowledge brokers themselves; Farley-Ripple & Grajeda, 2020.) Key to the Memo’s success is the belief among subscribers — many of them busy practitioners — that Marshall has identified useful materials on their behalf (Malin & Paralkar, 2017). Thus, Marshall’s reputation as a longtime educator who “gets it” and can gamely serve as a “designated reader” for busy frontline professionals is all-important. For many, he is a trusted curator who draws educators’ limited time and attention to “top shelf” items. Marshall’s activities focus mostly on one-way dissemination, as opposed to the sort of knowledge exchange featured by Edutopia. Recently, though, he and a colleague — Jennifer Lang — have developed a Best of Marshall Memo website (supported by the Gates Foundation) that is freely available and encourages readers to interact with and add to the content, and this may foster more two-way exchanges of knowledge.

Finally, the Usable Knowledge website appears to be focused principally on getting the work of HGSE’s researchers into the hands of educators and other stakeholders, including policy makers. Its guiding logic appears to be that good, traditionally-produced research exists but too often fails to reach frontline educators, and so the site amplifies academics’ voices (especially HGSE-affiliated ones) by translating their work into brief, actionable “stories.” Usable Knowledge has largely pursued one-way dissemination via news stories, video interviews, and the like, but it has engaged in some two-way knowledge creation through its connection to an HGSE project about school community-building and anti-bullying.

Assessing the impact and moving forward

When it comes to the *effect* of these indirect efforts to connect research and practice, we still know very little, although there are some indications that these intermediaries can achieve their hoped-for effects. For example, Edutopia’s community survey data has revealed that practitioners routinely use material from Edutopia in a variety of ways; indeed, Edutopia appears to be achieving its chief aim of influencing educators’ professional thoughts, decisions, and actions (Malin, 2020). Likewise, analysis of Marshall Memo survey data suggests that educators are largely using it as Marshall hoped — to stay on top of key trends in research and practice and to provide information that subscribers can use or share and discuss with others (Malin & Paralkar, 2017). Still, more research is needed regarding the roles and impacts of knowledge brokers in education.

A more robust body of research could guide brokers as they decide what to emphasize (i.e., pure research, practice, or some combination) and how to do it (e.g., multimedia, social media, briefs, newsletters, podcasts, in-person convenings). There are innumerable possibilities in both of these areas, and it would be helpful to know which options are most likely to achieve the knowledge brokers’ main goals. In the meantime, however, we can usefully draw upon some existing work to understand, for instance, why and how to *frame* evidence compellingly and through multiple channels (Wells et al., 2019) and why and how to identify and exploit “windows of opportunity” to get one’s ideas out into the world — or to preferred pockets within it (Kingdon, 1995).

At the same time, those of us who rely on knowledge brokers must be aware of the sad but true reality that distorted information currently spreads more rapidly than factual information (Van Bavel et al., 2021). Such “information pollution” is a major problem in education as well (Malin & Lubienski, in press), where we often see troubling activities such as the selective use of evidence to justify hidden agendas. For this reason, we must all learn how to navigate a challenging informational context — for instance, by habitually adopting a skeptical stance toward new claims and examining the backgrounds of those making them (Sinatra & Jacobsen, 2020). To diminish the influences and effects of bad-faith actors who are polluting the decision space, we need to work concertedly to elevate honest brokers (including those previously described) who possess relevant forms of expertise. And these honest brokers have a responsibility to

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Those of us who rely on knowledge brokers must be aware of the sad but true reality that distorted information currently spreads more rapidly than factual information.

identify, (co-)develop, translate, and share evidence-based information that can be widely dispersed, discussed, adjusted to context, and (re)applied using new technologies and media as they emerge. Ultimately, what we need are more and better opportunities for interested stakeholders to access and exchange professionally relevant information that will enable them to work together to improve teaching and learning, schools, and even society. ■

References

- Brown, S. & Allen, A. (2021). The interpersonal side of research-practice partnerships. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 102 (7), 20-25.
- Burns, T. & Schuller, T. (2007). *Evidence in education: Linking research and policy*. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Bush, J. (2017, April 27). Am I an evidence broker? Reflections on a trip to North America. *Evidence for Learning*.
- Coburn, C.E., Penuel, W.R., & Geil, K.E. (2013). *Research-practice partnerships: A strategy for leveraging research for educational improvement in school districts*. William T. Grant Foundation.
- Contandriopoulos, D., Lemire, M., Denis, J.-L., & Tremblay, E. (2010). Knowledge exchange processes in organizations and policy arenas: A narrative systematic review of the literature. *Milbank Quarterly*, 88, 444-483.
- Cooper, A. (2014). Knowledge mobilisation in education across Canada: A cross-case analysis of 44 research brokering organisations. *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate & Practice*, 10 (1), 29-59.
- Cordingley, P. (2008). Research and evidence-informed practice: Focusing on practice and practitioners. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38 (1), 37-52.
- Editors (2021, Spring). A letter from the editors. *Harvard Educational Review*.
- Fandos, N. & Wines, M. (2021, March 15). For voting rights advocates, a 'once in a generation moment' looms. *The New York Times*.
- Farley-Ripple, E.N. (2021). A new day for education research and practice. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 102 (7), 8-13.
- Farley-Ripple, E. & Grajeda, S. (2020). Avenues of influence: An exploration of school-based practitioners as knowledge brokers and mobilizers. In J.R. Malin & C. Brown (Eds.), *The role of knowledge brokers in education* (pp. 65-89). Routledge.
- Farley-Ripple, E., May, H., Karpyn, A., Tilley, K., & McDonough, K. (2018). Rethinking connections between research and practice in education: A conceptual framework. *Educational Researcher*, 47 (4), 235-245.
- Farley-Ripple, E., Tilley, K., & Tise, J. (2017, April). *Brokerage and the research-practice gap: A theoretical and empirical examination*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Antonio, TX.
- Farrell, C.C., Davidson, K.L., Repko-Erwin, M., Penuel, W.R., Quantz, M., Wong, H., . . . & Brink, Z. (2018). *A descriptive study of the IES researcher-practitioner partnerships in education research program: Final report* (Technical Report No. 3). National Center for Research in Policy and Practice.
- George Lucas Educational Foundation. (2020). About. *Edutopia*. www.edutopia.org/about
- Hewitt, T. & Goupil, S. (2020). *Imagining the future of knowledge mobilization: Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs*. Canadian Commission for UNESCO.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Allen Lane.
- Kingdon (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Levin, B. (2013). To know is not enough: Research knowledge and its use. *Review of Education*, 1 (1), 2-31.
- Lubienski, C. & Malin, J.R. (2020). Moving the goalposts: the evolution of voucher advocacy in framing research findings. *Journal of Education Policy*, 1-21.
- Malin, J.R. (2020). Mediated, evidence-informed practice as impact. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 16 (8), 1-17.

Malin, J. & Brown, C. (Eds.). (2020). *The role of knowledge brokers in education: Connecting the dots between research and practice*. Routledge.

Malin, J.R., Brown, C., & Trubçeaç, A. (2018). Going for broke: A multiple case study of brokerage in education. *AERA Open*, 4 (2), 1-14.

Malin, J.R. & Lubienski, C. (in press). Information pollution in an age of populist politics. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*.

Malin, J.R. & Paralkar, V. (2017). Educational knowledge brokerage and mobilization: The Marshall Memo case. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 12 (7), 1-20.

Neal, Z.P., Neal, J.W., Lawlor, J.A., & Mills, K.J. (2015). Small worlds or worlds apart? Using network theory to understand the research-practice gap. *Psychosocial Intervention*, 24 (3), 177-184.

Preston, T. (2021). A look back: Research meets practice, again and again, in *Kappan*. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 102 (7), 5-7.

Sinatra, G.M. & Jacobson, N.G. (2020). Zombie concepts in education: Why they won't die and why you can't kill them. In P. Kendeou, D. Robinson, and M.T. McCrudden (Eds.), *Misinformation and fake news in education* (pp. 7-28). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Van Bavel, J.J., Harris, E.A., Pärnamets, P., Rathje, S., Doell, K.C., & Tucker, J.A. (2021). Political psychology in the digital (mis)information age: A model of news belief and sharing. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 15 (1), 84-113.

Wells, A.S., Parks, S., Cabral, L., Cordova-Cobo, D., & Keener, A. (2019, November 26). Children left behind: Turning education research into film. *Phi Delta Kappan*.

Welsh, R.O. (2021). Assessing the quality of education research through its relevance to practice: An integrative review of research-practice partnerships. *Review of Research in Education*, 45 (1), 170-194.

GET ON THE SAME PAGE.



Get access to the latest thought-provoking books on education. Add the **PDK Book Club** to your current membership, and three times per year (July, November, and March) you will receive a contemporary, education-related book selected specifically for PDK members by PDK CEO Dr. Joshua P. Starr.

Add the PDK Book Club to your membership today for only \$39* by logging into your Member Portal at members.pdkintl.org or calling 800-766-1156.

* The \$39 rate applies to PDK members who live within the U.S. or have an APO/FPO address. The rate is \$59 for PDK members in Canada or Mexico and \$89 for PDK members in any other country.

The most recent PDK Book Club selections

- *Collective Leader Efficacy: Strengthening Instructional Teams* by Peter DeWitt (November 2021)
- *Learners Without Borders: New Learning Pathways for All Students* by Yong Zhao (July 2021)



A Division of
PDK
INTERNATIONAL