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Editorial: Networks and knowledge brokering: advancing foundations, inviting complexity

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Networks and knowledge brokering: advancing foundations, inviting complexity

Framing the Research Topic

As educational ecosystems become increasingly complex and diverse, understanding how knowledge brokerage and relational networks interact can offer pathways for strengthening connections among research, policy, and practice. Knowledge brokers have garnered attention for their capacity to navigate evidence and adapt it for various audiences, while relational networks—spanning professional communities, partnerships, and organizational structures—provide channels through which knowledge flows and evolves. Yet, much of the current literature examines these phenomena independently, and we lack integrated perspectives that clarify how they co-influence policy decision-making, on-the-ground educational change, and system-wide learning.

This Research Topic aims to bridge this gap by examining how knowledge brokers operate within relational networks to cultivate evidence-informed policy and practice in education. Its dual objectives are to advance theoretical and empirical understandings of these intertwined processes and to translate these insights into concrete, actionable guidance for policymakers, educational leaders and practitioners, and researchers.

Synthesis of contributions

Across this Research Topic, the contributing articles illuminate how knowledge brokerage and relational networks can be harnessed—and sometimes challenged—to strengthen evidence-informed policy and practice in education. Their findings offer new insights into the interplay of theoretical concepts, methodological approaches, and ethical imperatives that shape this complex terrain. Several contributions highlight the distinctive roles and practices of knowledge brokers. For instance, [Malin and Shewchuk](#) emphasize that knowledge brokers are not merely neutral intermediaries; rather, they are “actors whose activities and decisions must be understood contextually—e.g., in relation to the communities that are being connected and to brokers’ placement within systems” (p. 3). Similarly, [Caduff et al.](#) explore how brokers’ relational ecosystems both broaden and constrain their ability to mobilize resources and facilitate innovation through the strong and weak social ties they cultivate.

In pushing beyond conventional frameworks, some articles spotlight relational networks as sites of strategic innovation. Bohannon et al. demonstrate how boundary infrastructures, such as co-designed professional learning opportunities and flexible organizational routines, help rural districts adapt and learn in dynamic contexts. Turner et al. extend this line of thought by mapping social networks related to mental health supports in schools. Their analysis reveals how patterns of interaction and trust-building open or close pathways for critical knowledge flows.

Equity and ethics also figure prominently. Malin and Shewchuk advocate for an equity-centered lens, urging brokers to foreground issues of representation, power, and justice in their work. This stance resonates with Friesen and Brown's exploration of teacher-leaders' professional learning, where the growth of confidence and capabilities is tied closely to the careful, context-sensitive design of relational activities that honor diverse perspectives.

Methodologically, these studies introduce varied research designs—ranging from social network analysis to in-depth qualitative case studies—that yield a rich understanding of how knowledge moves through and transforms educational ecosystems. Collectively, the articles underscore a need for more approaches that capture complexity rather than oversimplify.

In terms of implications, the authors suggest that policymakers, leaders, and practitioners who aim to strengthen ties between research, policy, and practice must attend to the subtleties of relationships, resources, and values. Rather than a technical fix, advancing equitable and impactful knowledge brokerage requires sustained reflection, dialogue, and openness to context-specific adaptations.

Broader context, implications, and future directions

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have recognized that addressing complex issues—ranging from mental health supports in schools to rural capacity-building—cannot be achieved by simplistic, top-down evidence dissemination alone. There is a renewed emphasis on building relational infrastructures that acknowledge the multi-level interplay of policies, practices, and diverse forms of expertise (MacKillop et al., 2020). The articles presented in this Research Topic both reinforce and deepen this perspective. By examining relational ecosystems, boundary infrastructures, and equity-centered approaches, they suggest that knowledge brokerage and relational networks are integral elements of educational change, not just beneficial add-ons. Their collective insights resonate with an emerging scholarship that views relational networks as essential to leveraging complexity and mobilizing

knowledge in service of local and global educational aims (Penuel et al., 2020; Rodway et al., 2021).

For policymakers and practitioners, these findings imply that designing more flexible, equity-aware systems is crucial. Rather than imposing standardized reforms, leaders might consider strategies such as co-designing professional learning that respects multiple knowledge systems and power differentials. Such approaches can help ensure that local expertise is not overshadowed by distant authorities—a point highlighted when Bohannon et al. found that “even the best-intentioned external partners must negotiate shared ownership with rural educators”.

For researchers, there is a fertile landscape for future inquiries. Comparative, cross-disciplinary work could elucidate how relational networks evolve in varying socio-political contexts. Longitudinal research might track the lasting impacts of network-based interventions, while other methods—such as critical ethnographies or participatory action research—could surface subtle power imbalances that shape learning processes over time. These studies prompt a renewed attentiveness to the human, relational dimension of educational change. The educational challenges faced worldwide call for approaches to change that value complexity and contextual nuance. By continuing to explore this terrain and by refining methodologies to capture the contours and dimensions of knowledge brokerage in relational networks, educational communities can move closer to realizing meaningful, sustained improvements that are both evidence-informed and locally resonant.

Author contributions

SM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JR: Writing – review & editing. EF-R: Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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