

Hawai‘i Education Research Network (HERN): Facilitating Capacity Building and Systems Change through Research-Practice Partnerships

Research Overview

This qualitative study examines how the Hawai‘i Education Research Network functions as an institutional infrastructure for systems change within USA’s only centralized education agency. By integrating graduate assistants, HERN mitigates power asymmetries and elevates all partners as co-inquirers, offering a globally relevant vision for educational systems change.

Purpose of Study

While research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are increasingly recognized as drivers of educational change that challenge traditional ways of doing research, the majority of existing models operate within localized, district-level contexts. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring how the Hawai‘i Education Research Network (HERN) brokers RPPs between the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and the Hawai‘i Department of Education (HIDOE). Functioning as the only single-district state education agency in the U.S., HIDOE represents a unique governance that closely mirrors the centralized structure of national Ministries of Education worldwide. Consequently, HERN provides a global vision for how systems change can be sustained when decision-making authority rests far from the classroom.

Furthermore, this study investigates HERN’s “tripartite model,” which structurally integrates Graduate Assistants (GAs) alongside university faculty and practitioner partners. The purpose of this study is to examine how HERN functions as an institutional broker to bridge the distinct professional cultures of academia and state bureaucracy, how participants navigate boundary-crossing within this tripartite structure, and how their co-creation of knowledge builds capacity and sustains systems change.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of stakeholders engaged in HERN projects. Purposive sampling was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with 13 participants across five distinct RPP projects to ensure a rich cross-section of perspectives. The sample included five university faculty members,

three state-level and complex-area practitioners, and five graduate assistants. Online interviews, lasting 45 to 75 minutes, focused on collaboration, boundary navigation, professional learning, and systemic impact.

Data analysis utilized an iterative, thematic coding approach. Initial coding incorporated both deductive codes grounded in boundary-crossing and RPP infrastructure literature, and inductive codes capturing participants' specific language. Through collaborative verification, memoing, and pattern coding among members of the research team, four central categories were finalized: Collaboration, Learning, Impact and Sustainability, and Challenges. To operationalize "systems change," the study measured four interrelated indicators: the institutionalization of research-informed routines, sustained relational capacity, the diffusion of knowledge beyond original contexts, and the emergence of a human capital pipeline.

Results and Discussion

The findings illustrate that HERN's impact stems directly from its function as a centralized institutional broker capable of bridging diverse institutional cultures. The tripartite model proved to be a critical mechanism for boundary crossing and democratizing research. Positioned as learners rather than external evaluators, GAs occupied a non-threatening professional space. This unique positionality allowed GAs to serve as vital boundary spanners who mitigated the historical power asymmetries often present between academic researchers and practitioners. As the full-time personnel managing specific RPP projects, GAs coordinate meetings, monitor progress, and ensure researcher and practitioner priorities align. Consequently, state practitioners were elevated from mere implementers to equal co-inquirers, engaged in all research phases from forming questions to co-authoring publications. This fostered an environment where co-creating knowledge replaced the traditional, unidirectional translation of research.

Participants identified capacity-building benefits stemming from this co-creation. Faculty expanded their collaborative networks and gained deeper contextual understandings of systemic realities, while practitioners reported increased confidence in leveraging data for programmatic decisions. For example, one HERN RPP was instrumental in assisting HIDOE in writing the reports required by the Hawai'i State legislature regarding the progress and challenges in implementing new legislation requiring all public schools to offer Computer Science courses. As

a direct testament to this sustained relational capacity, HODOE leadership, particularly the deputy superintendent, now considers HERN as a primary institutional partner for exploring future research collaborations. Moreover, the integration of GAs established a robust “human capital pipeline.” About a quarter of former GAs transitioned into state leadership or consulting roles in the field of education, embedding research capacity permanently within Hawai‘i’s educational system and beyond.

Despite these successes, participants navigated persistent systemic barriers inherent in centralized bureaucracies, including data access hurdles, shifting departmental priorities, and staff turnover. Internal friction also emerged, particularly regarding role ambiguity for GAs bridging communication gaps without formal authority, and academic misalignment for faculty whose RPP efforts go unrewarded until published in academic journals.

Ultimately, this study argues that sustaining educational systemic change through RPPs in centralized, bureaucratically complex systems requires formal institutional infrastructure like HERN. By bridging distinct professional cultures through relational trust and strategically deploying a tripartite model to co-create knowledge, RPPs offer a distinct platform that can disrupt traditional hierarchies in conducting research and sustain long-term educational reform globally.

Keywords: Research-Practice Partnerships, Systems Change, Boundary Crossing, Capacity Building, Educational Reform