Are Research-Practice Partnerships Responsive to Partners’ Needs? Exploring Research Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Despite everyone’s best intentions, RPP-produced research may still fall short of being responsive to the needs of practice partners. The COVID-19 pandemic arguably magnified the demand for research to help education leaders make informed decisions in unprecedented ways. Were RPPs able to be responsive to practice-side partners in their time of need? We draw upon data collected as part of the 2019, 2020, and 2021 National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships’ (NNERPP) annual reports to explore this question. Our findings suggest an increase in design-based projects, in addition to increases in quick-turnaround research syntheses in order to accommodate partner needs.

Keywords
research-practice partnerships, politics, responsiveness

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Introduction

Of the many premises that undergird the value proposition of research-practice partnerships (RPPs), bringing people together from typically siloed research and practice organizations to collaborate on salient, practitioner-identified issues is often named as one of the most compelling. Inherent in this potential is the assumption that partnership-produced research will, by definition, be responsive to the needs of practice-side partners. Given the numerous touchpoints created between research and practice once a partnership approach is utilized, responsive research partners seems like a sensible assumption. Evidence also exists suggesting research partners might be responsive in RPPs (e.g., see Coburn et al., 2013; Tseng et al., 2017, which highlight the common practice of co-constructing a research agenda for the RPP, i.e., reflective of practice-side partner needs).

There are several reasons, however, why despite everyone’s best intentions, RPP-produced research may still fall short of being responsive to the needs of practice and policy partners. For example, research timelines tend to be much slower than the pace dictating practice and policy decisions (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; López Turley & Stevens, 2015). Second, there could be challenges to the collaboration itself, given the differences in language and culture shaping research and practice settings, which may interfere with the co-development and co-production of research (Penuel et al., 2015). Additionally, from the perspective of policy and practice (and relevant to this special issue), there could be political pressures that prohibit some questions from being taken up in the partnership, no matter the level of trust built between RPP partners (Scott et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2001).

To be sure, these are examples of challenges that appear to be innate features of the research-practice partnership endeavor and all RPPs are likely to encounter some version of these at one point or another. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new layer of complexity for RPPs, however, in that existing ways of working together across research and practice likely experienced a unique set of pressure tests never encountered before. Daily routines for practice-side partners in all types of practice-facing agencies, from schools and districts to state education agencies, were completely upended in ways no one could have predicted, not to mention the incredibly disruptive effects experienced by students, families, and teachers as well (Agostinelli et al., 2020; Reilly, 2020; Terada, 2020). And yet, despite these disruptions, RPPs might have been “just the thing” to respond to the massive influx of unanticipated, novel questions needing evidence (e.g., see the “EdResearch for Recovery” Project from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University that emerged in 2020).
In this new context, RPPs should (in theory) be well-positioned to effectively address the changes to practice- or policy-based inquiries by leveraging existing relationships and infrastructure between research and practice agencies. At the same time, RPPs were faced with a deluge of competing questions, which heightened the political nature of this position since many of the new needs faced by school districts were so pressing. In this paper we explore exactly this: given the volume of emergent (and changing) opportunities to provide evidence or collaborate to produce evidence, were RPPs actually able to meet these demands? Were they able to be responsive to practice-side partners in their time of need, despite the potential for challenges identified earlier? How did this response vary among RPPs, particularly those that initiated projects directly in response to COVID-related questions?

Toward these aims, we draw upon data collected as part of the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships’ (NNERPP) Year in Review, a yearly report that summarizes and highlights up to two projects NNERPP members have worked on in the past year. In particular, we focus on entries included in the 2019, 2020, and 2021 editions, thereby allowing for insight into year-over-year changes to research projects that cover both pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. We use a typology first introduced to the literature by Thompson et al. (2017) developed to identify the types of research questions asked by RPPs to categorize and document NNERPP member RPP projects over this time period. We additionally allow for new types of research questions to emerge given that our sample differs substantially from the one used to develop the Thompson typology, in terms of size, RPPs represented, and content.

This study offers three key contributions to deepen current understanding on whether and how RPPs respond to changing practice-side needs, particularly in a time marked by unpredictability, instability, and crisis (e.g., Grissom & Condon, 2021). First, we apply an existing framework categorizing the types of research questions taken up by RPPs to demonstrate how the distribution of RPP projects in our sample shifted before and after the pandemic as one approach to gauging responsiveness. Second, we address limitations of the Thompson typology and propose three additional categories of activities that characterize the kind of work RPPs do: capacity enhancing activities, research syntheses, and RPP improvement activities. Lastly, we examine projects that emerged directly in response to the pandemic to illustrate specific instances of responsive behavior among RPPs during this time. While COVID-19 posed a uniquely disruptive challenge, especially in the early days of the pandemic, these examples can also act as opportunities for
learning how RPPs can enhance their work to better serve the needs of their stakeholders in the future.

Our findings suggest that a portion of RPPs in our sample intentionally shifted their work away from projects involving evaluative research questions to those centered around design (i.e., projects meant to generate new materials, activities, or tools). In addition, we also find evidence to support a shift toward quick-turnaround artifacts, such as literature reviews or syntheses of existing research, that are produced on shorter timelines than evaluation or descriptive research. For RPP projects that reference COVID-related efforts specifically, we find examples of partnerships embarking on new lines of work with their partners, including the development, administration, and analysis of surveys answering questions tailored specifically to local conditions and needs and the creation of summaries of existing research to inform partner efforts during the unprecedented period of the pandemic.

**Toward a Theory of RPP “Responsivity”**

One of the defining features of research-practice partnerships that has been established in the literature is that “research priorities are set in response to district [or state] needs” (Coburn et al., 2013, p. 3; emphasis added). This is the very reason why many research-focused organizations and practice-facing organizations come together to work via an RPP in the first place—to improve the probability that research might be useful to those in policy or practice, and to explicitly support practice-side priorities (Henrick et al., 2017). In “ordinary” conditions (i.e., absent a paradigm-changing pandemic), this is typically operationalized by a series of discussions held between representatives from both the research and practice sides in an effort to negotiate a long-term research agenda that identifies key priorities for the collaborative research (Kochanek et al., 2014). In other cases, research and practice teams may also come together to co-write a grant proposal that explains (in great detail) the anticipated collaborative work to be done (e.g., the National Science Foundation’s Computer Science for All RPP funding initiative), which includes highlighting precisely how the research will be responsive to practice-side needs.

However, despite everyone’s best intentions, RPP-led research may still fall short of actualizing “responsivity” in practice. Drawing upon Coburn et al. (2013), we define responsivity within the context of RPPs as the partnership’s ability to align research priorities with practice-side partners’ needs. More specifically, we see the concept of responsivity as being distinct from responsiveness in that it implies a systematic and concerted effort to be responsive rather than a way to characterize discrete or one-off encounters,
interactions, and/or projects. Because practice-side partners are always faced with multiple, competing needs, exercising responsivity is a political process that necessitates RPPs to make determinations as to what will be prioritized.

There are several factors that shape RPP responsivity. In this section, we name barriers to responsivity identified in prior literature on RPPs and use this to theorize how the pandemic may have introduced modifications to existing threats as well as presented new opportunities for RPP responsivity.

**Misaligned Timelines**

As has been noted in the literature, research and practice timelines are generally in constant tension with each other, even in a partnership setting (e.g., Coburn & Penuel, 2016). The pace of policymaking and practice-facing activities is far more accelerated than what traditionally produced research allows (Bassok et al., 2021; López Turley & Stevens, 2015). For this reason, some have suggested that RPP research agendas should consider intentionally sidestepping the immediate evidence needs of practice-side partners and instead, focus on answering long-term questions that are nonetheless likely to be of use to the practice-side (Booker et al., 2019). Tensions around research timeliness were probably not solved by the pandemic; in fact, they were likely worsened given the newly quickened time-pressure demands experienced by practice-side partners. Moreover, the imperative to address the immediate needs of practice-side partners may have been much larger during this time of crisis, widening the gap in expected pacing between research-side and practice-side partners.

**Threat of Irrelevance and Inability to Adapt**

Even if RPP teams meaningfully acknowledge the disparate time horizons in which partners work by co-developing long-term research agendas, the threat of irrelevance remains due to any number of unexpected shifts among personnel, priorities, or both (Booker et al., 2019; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Rosenquist et al., 2015). For example, RPP teams can thoughtfully create a shared research agenda that tightly aligns with key questions raised by the practice-side, which can promptly lose relevancy if conditions suddenly change, such as leadership turnover at the partnering agency (see Klein, this issue), adoption of new laws governing education policy, or inability to obtain adequate project funding (see Rivera and Chun, this issue), among other disruptive events.

This threat was very likely magnified by the pandemic. Based on what we heard within our networks, our own experiences, and what has been shared in
public venues (e.g., DeArmond, 2020; Lake et al., 2020), priorities were changing almost daily for practice-side partners. In some cases, practice-side partners were inundated with crises and did not have the capacity to engage, severely limiting the opportunity to stop, reflect, and decide on what to do next. On the research-side, NNERPP members reported wanting to help, but were unsure how. Some strategies to cope with this uncertainty included taking deliberate pauses in the work and being as supportive as possible through acts as simple as listening (one example is Biag et al., 2021). Because the boundaries of what was “relevant” was constantly in flux, especially in the early days of the pandemic, responsivity of RPPs was likely continuously challenged.

A closely related threat to irrelevance is the potential for limited adaptation to meet ever-changing research demands given existing expertise. In this case, if newly proposed questions fall outside the expertise of existing research-side partners, there is a greater chance responsivity will be negatively affected in that the team may not be able to take up these new questions, however important they may be. One way to solve this, of course, is to expand the team as needed. This would require the development of new relationships, a critical component to partnership work (Henrick et al., 2017). Authentic relationships built on trust take time, however; because of the massively destabilizing effects of the pandemic, this option was likely not available.

**Flexibility of Grant Funding**

Funding constraints may also dictate how much an RPP is able to pivot, negatively impacting responsivity (Spitzley et al., 2021; Rivera and Chun, this issue). For example, research staff time is commonly tied to a specific project supported by a particular grant; deviating from this allocation is often not allowed. Responsivity will thus be severely limited if external research partners are ultimately tied to commitments from months prior. In the case of the pandemic, funding agreements secured prior to COVID likely constrained initial responsivity due to the particular conditions under which those grants were awarded. However, we do note efforts from the philanthropic community to offer new funding streams that invited studies related to the pandemic that RPPs could apply to (e.g., Spencer Foundation and William T. Grant Foundation).

**Developing Trust and Communication**

There are more nuanced elements of the partnership itself that likely influence the degree to which responsivity can be achieved as well. A key
dimension to highlight here is shared trust—that is, how much RPP members are willing to trust each other with new, unsettled, or politically charged research topics that may be particularly salient to consider for practice-side partners (Coburn et al., 2013; Kochanek et al., 2020; Tseng et al., 2017). It is likely that the greater the depth of trust shared between practice- and research-based partners, the more flexibility there is in the types and range of research projects that move forward, resulting in greater responsivity. A closely related dimension to trust is the breadth and strength of the partnership infrastructure to engage various partners when needed (Penuel, 2019). In particular, partnership routines and/or existing channels of communications that enable the partnership to support collaborative work across members as research needs emerge will also influence the degree of responsivity.

With respect to the internal partnership dynamics of trust and infrastructure, there is perhaps less clarity as to the direction of impact on responsivity due to the pandemic. Given the heightened emotions surrounding all aspects of the pandemic, one potential outcome of an RPP’s response could have been greater trust as partnership members worked through various challenges together. These joint responses may have served to develop deeper bonds and relationships as partners forged through the crisis together. This would potentially lead to increased responsivity, as access to a deeper set of questions or research needs may have emerged through stronger trust. The opposite of this case, of course, would be if deeper bonds were in fact not nurtured through the crises, and existing trust became damaged. During a period of immense crisis, weaker relationships could have impacted a partner’s willingness to display vulnerability during the uncertainty of this period, and partners may have withdrawn from relationships where trust was less well established. As a result, the crisis may have divided partners which could have resulted in responsivity falling dramatically.

Likewise, when considering RPP’s communications infrastructure, a similar reasoning applies. These invisible structures are necessary to support the joint work required in an RPP absent a pandemic-induced crisis, but they are perhaps maximally critical once there is “no time,” as was the case during 2020. Being able to confidently activate, extend, and adapt these mechanisms (and rapidly) is likely crucial in moments requiring people to respond to a problem (e.g., shifting the timing and cadence of RPP meetings in accordance to what partners needed, or creating space to have more informal discussions to sense-make together, etc.). We would thus expect a greater degree of responsivity, all other things equal, for the partnerships that were able to lean on their underlying infrastructure in order to effectively meet new challenges. Weak infrastructure and/or the inability to adapt would likely have resulted in less responsivity.
**Political Environment**

Finally, we also note the role of varying political contexts in constraining RPP responsivity. There is very likely a collection of research questions that may be relevant, timely, and especially critical to explore via an RPP that may never, in fact, be on the table for the RPP given the political setting. In some cases, it may be challenging to even pose a particular research question; in others, the answers to some questions may be difficult to navigate. Rather than affecting an RPP’s rate of responsivity, these factors speak more closely to an RPP’s potential responsivity. That is, the political dynamics shaping the environment in which the RPP operates almost certainly reduces the potential responsivity that an RPP could otherwise have in meeting the needs of practice-side partners given that some research topics are never even a possibility (see Klein, this issue, for discussion of practice-side partner politics interacting with RPPs). From a pandemic point of view, it is unlikely that this threat was minimized, for all the reasons mentioned previously.

From the various dimensions of partnership work we identified above as likely influencing the degree to which an RPP was able to respond to the unexpected conditions presented by the pandemic, most are likely to constrain responsivity. Fewer opportunities for partnerships to break through responsivity barriers exist; these include embracing new instances for strengthening trust and leaning into, adapting, or building new communications infrastructure that would lend support for new ways of working together as required by the pandemic. In the next section we provide a description for how we study the impact of the pandemic on RPP responsivity through the actions of a large group of diverse RPPs.

**Empirical Approach**

Currently, there are no measures of responsivity available to help determine the extent to which an RPP project met the needs of its practice partners. In the absence of this, we turn to an existing framework to help us first categorize RPP projects, which then allows us to test whether there were changes to the distribution of categories over time that could be due to responsivity demands introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thompson et al. (2017) categorized abstracts for 41 RPPs funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the Spencer Foundation, resulting in a typology describing four types of research questions reflected in the abstracts: data quality, information gathering, evaluation, and design. A summary of these can be found in Table 1. We use this typology to guide our own categorization of the various activities and research projects included in our
There are several reasons why this approach is useful for exploring our research questions. First, the Thompson et al. (2017) typology is based on a relatively large sample of education RPPs (41) that includes some variation in RPP approach; thus, there is, to a certain extent, a degree of applicability of the typology to RPPs outside of their sample. Second, the typology was created from short abstracts describing proposed partnership work, which is similar to the sample we are working with (e.g., short summaries of existing RPP work). Third, the typology reflects what we might expect from RPPs operating in non-pandemic times and therefore working in a “status quo” state. For these reasons, we anchor our categorizations of the projects and activities contained in our sample to the typology and test whether we see year-over-year differences in the distribution of project type, presumably related closely to drastic changes experienced by members of the practice-side due to the pandemic. Because 2019 represents a “pre-pandemic” year, we first identify how the projects are distributed among the four types included in the Thompson et al. (2017) typology. We then repeat the exercise for the 2020 and 2021 years, allowing for the possibility of new research question types to emerge.

While we think use of the Thompson et al. (2017) typology is appropriate given our analysis plan, we note a handful of differences between the sample the typology was developed from and the one we use in this study. First, the abstracts undergirding the typology appear to be generally more comprehensive

| Table 1. Description of Thompson et al. (2017) Research Question Types (p. 466). |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Data quality** | Data quality questions provide information about the availability, validity, and reliability of data, answering such questions as: What data do we have? Are these data accurate? And/or What additional data may we need that we do not currently have? |
| **Information gathering** | Information gathering provides answers to descriptive and/or predictive questions such as: How many. . .? or What is the relationship between. . .? |
| **Evaluation** | Evaluation questions ask: What is the effect of this program or policy? |
| **Design** | Design questions ask: What new materials, activities, and/or systems would address this problem? Focus is on understanding a particular problem of practice while also collaboratively constructing a solution, perhaps by designing a new tool process that accomplishes particular goals for learning and/or system change. |

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with respect to a partnership’s portfolio vis-à-vis what is included in reports producing our sample. For example, the Thompson et al. (2017) abstracts contain a wider view of the collection of work the partnership intended to take on, while the summaries included in the NNERPP annual reports used for our sample are typically short vignettes of individual projects completed in a particular year. Related, the abstracts (as far as we could tell) from the Thompson et al. (2017) sample are descriptions of proposed work that will take place as a result of receiving the grant. The snapshots contained in the NNERPP annual reports, however, are nearly all describing already completed work. Third, although there is indeed some variety in the types of partnerships represented in the Thompson et al. (2017) sample, it should be noted that RPP grantees from only two funding agencies are represented. In contrast, the NNERPP annual reports contain partnerships whose funding may come from a variety of sources including IES, the Spencer Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and additional national or locally-based funders. While we list these differences here for transparency, none have implications for the interpretation of the analysis itself. Although differences between the Thompson et al. (2017) typology and our initial findings from the 2019, pre-pandemic year may emerge (perhaps due to these underlying sample differences), these are irrelevant for documenting any year-over-year change we observe since those changes are calibrated to the same typology each year.

Data

Overview of the NNERPP Year in Review Data Set

Our main data set comes from a public-facing annual report produced by the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) known as the “NNERPP Year in Review.” The report has been in production since 2017 and includes a snapshot of each member of the network, in addition to a short summary of NNERPP’s efforts in that year. Each year, NNERPP members are invited to summarize up to two projects they have worked on during that calendar year. They are given a template to complete that includes prompts asking them to share the reason the project occurred, the research questions investigated, the findings, and perhaps most importantly, a short description of how the project’s efforts were used in practice. For those partnerships that are new and generally do not have fully developed projects from which to draw upon, they are instead invited to submit a short narrative summary of their activities for the year. Additionally, in some cases, established
partnerships also decided to submit narratives in lieu of two specific project descriptions. Ultimately, it is up to each partnership to decide what accomplishments they wish to highlight in their submission to the annual Year in Review. The data collection for each report occurs in October through November, with publication of the report in December. To date, all current members have accepted the invitation to be featured in the Year in Review. All reports are currently available on the NNERPP website (http://nnerrpp.rice.edu/annual-report/).

For the purposes of this study, we focus exclusively on the reports from 2019, 2020, and 2021. We begin with the 2019 Year in Review to serve as a “control” year as this report was produced shortly before the pandemic began in March of 2020 and can be thought of as “business as usual.” Given this timing, the 2020 Year in Review contains work that occurred mostly during the first year of the pandemic, providing key information on how and to what extent partnerships were able to shift their work in response to a rapidly changing practice-side setting. Because they had no anticipation of what was to come, with many partnerships engaged in ongoing work attached to already-received grants, it serves as a natural experiment that allows us to test responsivity of RPPs. We also include the 2021 Year in Review as well, which is the most recent report available. This edition covers the full, second year of the pandemic. Although unexpected challenges were still arising on the practice-side, there was arguably more clarity with respect to research and evidence needs that resulted from ongoing efforts to support students and families. Simply put, everyone knew more in year 2 of the pandemic relative to year 1. As a result, the data contained in the 2021 report can be thought of as what might happen when partnerships are indeed given more time to adjust their trajectories of work, which may offer additional clues regarding responsivity.

One caveat that should be noted here with respect to the self-reported nature of the data contained in the reports: while the NNERPP Year in Reviews invite members to include up to two projects completed during the year or provide a short narrative of activities, the selection process behind which projects or efforts are chosen for inclusion in the report is entirely up to members. Some partnerships have large portfolios of work and may be actively engaged in several projects at any given time. For these RPPs, the selection of two projects to include might very well be strategic in order to amplify certain projects over others. For smaller RPPs, who tend to have fewer concurrently-run projects, the inclusion of up to two projects may cover all of their work for the year. For newer partnerships who are in the early stages of RPP development and inquiry with their partners, their initial years of work may generally focus on agenda setting or infrastructure-building aspects of their RPP.
Given that the entries are self-selected by RPP members, one way to view their inclusion in the report is that they reflect important signals about the way members want their partnership to be perceived. For example, some members may be using the Year in Review to spotlight projects of particular importance to their local stakeholder community, to the NNERPP community, to their funders, or all of these. In other cases, they may be choosing to highlight a range of projects, or those they would like the research community to be aware of.

More closely related to this study, partnerships may very well have chosen to intentionally omit projects that were in a state of flux due to disruptions from the pandemic. As a result, it is very likely that this data set does not fully capture all of the things that an RPP might have done in response to partner needs. Other highly responsive activities that RPPs may have engaged in during the pandemic, such as informal listening sessions, virtual coffee chats, conversations during standing meetings, troubleshooting practice-based questions in real time, and brokering connections across people that may not have existed previously, will not (generally) be captured in this data set. These are the invisible activities that many partnerships likely take on at any given time but are not necessarily elevated and shared in a standard, formalized report. We also note that we will never know the full range of questions and/or needs that are or were raised by practice-side partners with their external research partners; all we are able to observe are questions that are indeed taken up and shared. This data set, then, likely undercounts the number of projects that were created in response to practice-side needs.

**Constructing the Analytic Sample and Methodological Approach**

We began with all entries included in each of the 2019 to 2021 Year in Review reports. As mentioned earlier, each NNERPP member submitted either up to two projects or a narrative update. For project-based entries, each project was coded separately. Narrative-based entries were much more variable in structure, with some stating the mission and goals of the RPP while others provided brief summaries on a host of projects. For narrative entries that made explicit mention of projects, each of those projects were coded separately. Narrative entries that included too few details with respect to concrete activities or projects shared were excluded from the sample. The final analytic sample consisted of 232 entries of projects and narrative updates. Table 2 shows the total number of RPPs included in these reports along with the number of entries by region and type of entry (e.g., two-project entry, one-project entry, and narrative update).
After determining the analytic sample, each author separately reviewed each project/narrative and made an initial determination about how that entry should be coded according to the Thompson et al. (2017) typology, writing brief memos to document their reasoning for why they assigned the category they did. Authors also flagged projects that explicitly mentioned anything related to the COVID-19 pandemic. After each author independently coded all entries in the analytic sample, the research team reconvened to compare results and make a final designation for how entries should be coded. Projects/narratives that were coded unanimously among all three authors were assigned that respective code, consisting of 82% of cases. Entries for which there was disagreement were re-examined and jointly reviewed by all three authors. This included revisiting the entry within the Annual Review as well as comparing memos to explain the rationale for each author’s decision. Resolving these disagreements entailed applying additional scrutiny to understand the research activities/methods undertaken by the project, referring to the Thompson et al. (2017) typology to identify key terms that aligned with the project description, and at times drawing upon additional knowledge of the project to provide further insight into the project’s aims and approaches. Through this process, we were able to achieve consensus on a final designation, and an additional round of memos were written on how disagreements were resolved.

### Table 2. Overview of Analytic Sample.

|                  | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|------------------|------|------|------|
| Total number of RPPs | 41   | 46   | 53   |
| West             | 13   | 14   | 15   |
| South            | 9    | 11   | 14   |
| Midwest          | 10   | 11   | 12   |
| Northeast        | 9    | 10   | 12   |
| Total two-project entries | 36   | 33   | 34   |
| Total one-project entries | 0    | 5    | 4    |
| Total narratives | 5    | 8    | 15   |
| Total excluded   | 4    | 2    | 4    |
| Total entries    | 73   | 76   | 83   |

*Note.* This table describes the number of RPPs that appeared in each year of the NNERPP Year in Review reports, in totality and by region. In addition, it provides the number and type of summaries included in each year of the report, as well as the total number of project summaries omitted from the analytic sample.
Though the initial orientation to analysis was to take a deductive approach (i.e., applying an a priori framework to new data), each author independently realized that there were projects that could apply to multiple categories under the Thompson et al. (2017) typology or did not fit altogether. This became especially clear when the research team attempted to resolve cases for which there was disagreement in the initial round of coding. For example, a project describing research activities aligned with information gathering could be nested under a larger goal of (re)designing a professional development session or intervention. In other instances, there was agreement among the research team that the project being described was not encapsulated by any of the existing categories within the typology. Entries like these highlighted the limitations in the application of Thompson et al. (2017) framework. As such, we shifted our analytic approach from one of deduction to abduction, which involves guiding analysis “based on the interplay between existing theories and data when anomalies or unexpected findings occur” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 179). This allowed us to defamiliarize existing categories by interrogating the definitional boundaries set by Thompson et al. (2017) in their original framework as well as develop new categories for research projects that diverged from existing categories through alternative casing (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In doing this analysis, the research team revisited the analytic sample to flag entries challenging the Thompson et al. (2017) typology. These entries were re-examined and compared to one another to identify common themes, which were then grouped into new categories. This iterative, abductive process resulted in three rounds of coding and analysis to determine the final designations for each entry.

Results

We present the results over three sections: first, we share the results from our analysis including the entire analytic sample. Second, we share the results from our analysis when we restrict the sample to contain a consistent set of RPPs in order to test the hypothesis that any results we observe in the first set of analyses are due to projects from recently joined NNERPP member RPPs. Finally, we share results corresponding to COVID-19 specific projects as outlined in the reports.

Results Using All Projects Contained in Analytic Sample

Table 3 contains the findings related to the following research questions, “What types of research questions did RPPs take up during the COVID-19 pandemic? Did these differ from those occurring prior to the pandemic? Were
new types of research questions or activities introduced?” The top section of the table (“Thompson et al., 2017 types”) shows the results with respect to the four types of research questions identified in Thompson et al. (2017), while the middle section of the table (“New categories”) shows the results with respect to newly identified categories that emerged from our analysis. Each cell contains the count of projects we identified according to the various types. In addition, for the years 2020 and 2021, we also include the number of projects that additionally contained a COVID-19 focus.

As shown in the column containing the findings for the year 2019, our analysis aligns strongly with the four-group typology from Thompson et al. (2017), with only a very small number of projects falling outside of the four groups (four projects total out of 73). This finding suggests that prior to the pandemic, nearly all of the RPP projects represented in the 2019 NNERPP Year in Review could be described with the Thompson et al. (2017) typology, and by extension, suggests that RPPs may have been pursuing a “business as usual” approach to their work.

The distribution of projects analyzed for 2019 shows that the majority (64%) of entries could be classified as “information gathering” efforts, with a much smaller percentage of projects (18%) falling into the “evaluation” group. The two smallest categories of projects in 2019 were those in “design” (9.5%) and data quality (8%).
One major difference across the two studies for the 2019 year is the distribution of projects across category. Per Thompson et al. (2017), 100% of the projects in their sample included research questions and activities that could be categorized as “data quality” and “information gathering,” while 22% and 63% contained research questions related to “evaluation” and “design,” respectively. We note two observations here that could account for these differences. First, the Thompson et al. (2017) analysis included the examination of comprehensive abstracts describing a portfolio of proposed work. This likely explains why they were able to identify multiple research question types for a single proposal. In contrast, the brief descriptions provided in the NNERPP Year in Reviews generally only allow for a single categorization of any given project. Second, we might also expect less variation in the distribution of abstracts across the four types relative to what we might find in this study, since the abstracts included in the Thompson et al. (2017) sample were written in response to specific calls for funding. In order to meet the requirements of said calls, all abstracts would have likely had to speak about very similar aspects of the proposed research, perhaps leading to less variation in research question type in absolute terms. The NNERPP annual reports had no requirements regarding what could be included; thus, relatively speaking, we might expect a greater deal of variation across the types in our study. Despite these differences, we nonetheless emphasize that the main conclusion to draw from this initial comparison is that our analysis essentially replicated the typology with minimal alterations for the year 2019.

In terms of the minimal alterations, we do find that four projects from the 2019 year did not fall into any of the four research question types from Thompson et al. (2017) In particular, we found these projects to be better described by one of three new categories we introduce as a result of our analysis: capacity enhancing activities, research syntheses, and RPP improvement activities. We define these as follows:

- **Capacity enhancing activities**: Descriptions of activities undertaken by the research-side partner to expand the capacity of the partnership, which may include running or launching a Network Improvement Community (NIC), a professional learning community (PLC), serving as a convener of multiple stakeholder groups, or providing technical assistance or capacity development efforts.
- **Research syntheses**: Descriptions of activities that do not involve the production of new research evidence, but involve summarizing research evidence for a specific time period (e.g., a summary of 10 or 20 years of research) or on a particular topic. In several cases, research syntheses were conducted specifically to help partner’s access research
relevant to responding to COVID-19 pandemic conditions, such as research syntheses about online learning or remote instruction.

- **RPP improvement activities**: Descriptions of activities that are intentional actions to support, sustain or improve the RPP, such as efforts to develop RPP infrastructure, goals and objectives, or align priorities.

Although we view these new categories as complementary to the Thompson et al. (2017) typology, it is also important to clarify that some of these activities may very well have been occurring in the RPPs that produced the Thompson typology. Because of the limitations of the sample mentioned earlier, it could be the case that RPPs were not explicitly including these activities in their proposed scope of work given the audience for the abstracts. Additionally, we also note the tendency of the Thompson typology to refer to the types of “research questions” that are asked by RPPs. However, the activities provided by the authors to describe each type of “research question” vary widely in terms of empirical approaches that systematically study phenomena to those that might be considered more “inquiry-based” or exploratory in nature. In this regard, both the additional categories we propose above and those contained in the original Thompson typology might be better thought of as research and inquiry based activities that support both the production of new knowledge in response to practice-side needs, in addition to efforts that support partnership-improving aims.

Considering the findings in the last two columns of Table 3 (2020 and 2021, which are COVID-19 pandemic years), we note a few shifts that are of interest. As shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the changes over time for the Thompson et al. (2017) four types, we see a notable increase in the number of projects falling under the “design” category from 2019 to 2020 (and somewhat sustained into 2021). According to Thompson et al. (2017), research questions falling under the “design” designation include, for example, “What new materials, activities, and/or systems would address this problem?” (p. 466). Given the significant disruption experienced by all levels of the education sector, it is perhaps unsurprising to see this uptick in design questions, as “new materials, activities, and/or systems” would likely need to be developed in response to such changes.

We also see a small decrease in the number of projects falling under the “evaluation” category from 2019 to 2020, a trend which is also generally sustained into 2021. Thompson et al. (2017) describe “evaluation” questions as those involving experiments, such as randomized control trials, or those utilizing quasi-experimental methods. This downward trend in the number of evaluation projects (albeit small) may very well be due to partnerships intentionally pausing evaluation efforts due to disruptions in data collection.
Finally, we also note a small upward trend in the number of projects falling under the “information gathering” type, which is more pronounced in 2021 relative to 2020, and a small downward trend in the number of projects falling under the “data quality” type.

In terms of the additional categories that emerged from our analysis which are not part of the original Thompson et al. (2017) typology, we also note two shifts over time that are of interest. As shown in Figure 2, we see a large spike in the number of projects falling under the “research synthesis” category. Several of these projects included direct references to responding to COVID-19 related needs expressed by their practice-side partners: of the five “research synthesis” projects that emerged in 2020, four were focused on providing research summaries and resources to inform COVID-19 responses. The second shift that is of interest is the large increase in projects falling under the “RPP improvement” category that appears in 2021. A possible explanation for this shift is that partnerships may have embraced the pause on regularly scheduled research projects due to the disruptions in order to reflect and refine current partnership approaches.

Because these shifts could have been caused by changes in the sample of members included in the reports, we next share the results from analysis after restricting sample inclusion to only those members that appear in the 2019 reports.
In order to test the assumption that the shifts we observe from the analytic sample are due to changes in the types of partnerships that joined NNERPP after 2019, we run the same analysis outlined in the previous section on a restricted sample that only includes partnerships that were part of the 2019 NNERPP Year in Review. This resulted in a loss of 14 RPPs, for a total of 41 partnerships in this restricted sample.

As shown in Table 4, we observe a large increase in the number of projects falling under the “design” type when moving from 2019 to 2020, similar to the results we found when utilizing the entire analytic sample. This increase is not sustained into 2020, which is different from what we observed in the previous set of results, which suggests that the sustained increase in “design” projects is due to recent NNERPP members who prioritized those types of projects for inclusion in the reports. We also confirm a downward trend in the number of projects classified as “evaluation” when moving from 2019 to 2020, as we observed in the previous section. In this case, however, the shift is more pronounced (falling by almost half), lending support for the idea that partnerships were intentionally pausing evaluation efforts that typically rely on stable data sets to pursue design projects that may have better served current needs. Finally, we note a similar small shift downward for the number of “data quality” type projects we found in the previous results section, as well
as a decrease in the number of “information gathering” projects, which is opposite to what we found in the previous section.

On this last point, namely the downward trend in the number of information gathering projects we observe with this sample, we suspect partnerships may have also substituted away from these descriptive efforts (usually involving the collection of new data), in favor of those we classify as “research synthesis” projects. As seen in row six of Table 4 under the “New Categories” section, this restricted sample perfectly replicates the results we found in the previous section, which confirms that partnerships were indeed adding this new category of projects to their existing portfolios. Notably, as mentioned in the previous section, four of the five projects in this category explicitly reference COVID-19.

We next turn to a further exploration of COVID-19 related projects to help us better situate the findings from these previous two analyses.

### Analysis of Projects Related to COVID-19

We next share our findings from a thematic analysis of projects that specifically referenced COVID-19 in their descriptions and narratives to provide a
richer picture of the nature of changes in project type that we observe in the previous two sections. In 2020, 14 out of 46 NNERPP members reported conducting pandemic-related projects. By 2021, eight of these members reported continuing these COVID-focused projects while six other members reported new projects related to the pandemic. Several of these projects included direct references to the efforts as being in response to COVID-19 related needs expressed by their practice-side partners, pivoting existing projects or launching new ones that were explicitly pandemic-focused. For example, the Stanford-San Francisco Unified School District Partnership shifted an existing study examining their Personalized Learning Environments (PLE) Pilot program to “gather information about effective distance instruction practices during the COVID-19 pandemic” (National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships [NNERPP], 2020, p. 35). By doing so, they were able to identify challenges and recommendations posed by remote learning in a timely manner that was actionable for their district partners while also fulfilling the original goal of providing insight into improving the PLE program. This case demonstrates how some RPPs were able to leverage existing infrastructure in service of the pressing needs of practitioners, highlighting the potential for flexibility within RPPs during a time of unprecedented circumstances facing districts and states.

Of the 31 entries that explicitly referenced COVID-related projects, almost half \((n=15)\) documented efforts to understand the experiences of students, families, and educators in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. While these projects most closely align with the “information gathering” category within the Thompson et al. (2017) typology, they also expand the definition of this category through the inclusion of data capturing experiences, which is distinct from descriptive frequencies and relationships. Given that these kinds of data are not readily available in administrative data, these projects entailed collecting new data in the form of surveys, interviews, and needs assessments. In a time when many research institutions and universities halted data collection efforts due to the pandemic, these partnerships designed new surveys/interview protocols, recruited respondents, and analyzed these responses to form an understanding of what was happening on the ground. This, in turn, provided school districts with insight into the experience, challenges, and strategies around best practices reported by their students, families, and educators, which was especially crucial during this period of isolation and disconnect from key stakeholders served by these districts. Some examples of findings include describing logistical and technical problems such as ensuring internet access for students, families, and staff; providing professional learning in remote formats; and designing instructional activities that could be implemented in a remote
learning model. In addition to these rapid response-type projects, by 2021, some entries (n = 7) noted projects that fit into the more conventional definition of “information gathering,” examining post-pandemic trends on academic and non-academic factors alike.

While some RPPs responded by engaging in new data collection efforts, this was not a viable option for all partnerships due to a host of factors such as district-mandated moratoriums on research activities, the lack of capacity to spear the intensive effort of primary data collection, and the universal turmoil the pandemic brought to all of us as individuals and organizations. Even so, multiple RPPs sought to support their district partners during this time despite these constraints through research synthesis, an emergent category not encapsulated in the Thompson et al. (2017) typology. Five of the 30 COVID projects fell into this research synthesis designation, and these projects entailed compiling and curating existing literature to create research summaries and resources to inform COVID-19 responses. These types of projects were indeed more prevalent in 2020, which makes sense given that in the early period of the pandemic there was a significant and pressing need to understand what lessons from existing research evidence, if any, could be applied in the unprecedented conditions districts and states were experiencing. Topics covered by these research syntheses included guidance on navigating remote learning, best practices for engaging students and providing professional development, and considerations for serving specific populations of students such as English Language Learners. The purpose of these resources was to build the capacity of educators, families, and district officials alike. For example, the Multnomah County Partnership for Educational Research compiled a series of research briefs that were literature reviews to inform recommendations and strategies related to students’ academic concerns, pedagogy, professional learning, social emotional learning, and technology use during the pandemic (NNERPP, 2020, p. 26). Though research synthesis projects are not new among RPPs (see Farrington et al., 2012, for example), the unique skill set RPPs possess to comb through existing and emerging work became especially important at a time when school districts had to take decisive actions with limited information due to the unfamiliarity and uncertainty that characterized the early stages of the pandemic.

To be clear, we do not claim that the projects outlined in the NNERPP Annual Review are representative or comprehensive depictions of how RPPs operated during the pandemic. Rather, these accounts highlight the ways in which RPPs can be responsive to the needs of their partners, especially in times of crisis. It is likely that not all RPPs were positioned to support their practice-side partners to the same degree, and as mentioned earlier, not all
COVID-related endeavors are captured within these annual reports. However, documenting these different approaches sheds light on the potential RPPs hold as well as how this potential can be achieved, even in the absence of a global pandemic necessitating these practices.

**Discussion**

At its core, the research-practice partnership model holds that applied research is a process, not simply an outcome. How this process operates hinges on a host of factors including, but not limited to, the specific needs of practice-side partners, the strength of the relationship among partners, and the larger context within which the partnership is embedded. Previous work has enumerated the various barriers to responsivity that RPPs face, like differences in pace of timelines, possibility of irrelevance, adaptation to new and emerging research questions, flexibility of funding agreements, and the development of trust and communication within the partnership (Booker et al., 2019; Coburn et al., 2013; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Henrick et al., 2017; López Turley & Stevens, 2015; Spitzley et al., 2021; Tseng et al., 2017). Additionally, others have offered explanations for the concrete forms through which RPPs engage in their work to align their actions to the interests of the practice-side partners they serve (Thompson et al., 2017). This study contributes to this body of knowledge by not only examining how these principles manifest in times of crisis but also demonstrating the ways in which some RPPs have changed their work in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our analysis suggests that there were shifts in the types of projects and topics that RPPs highlighted in the 2020 and 2021 NNERPP annual reports as compared to the “business as usual” pre-pandemic 2019 report. In addition to the quantitative differences in project types noted earlier, many of the project summaries directly noted that the focus areas of their efforts had adapted in response to the emerging needs of the COVID-19 crisis. One representative example of this is the 2020 annual report entry from the Oakland Unified School District—UC Berkeley Research-Practice Partnerships project on Educator Resilience (Educators’ Risk and Resilience During the Covid-19 Pandemic”). In its entry, the RPP describes the “why” for the project as follows:

“Early on during the shelter in place/distance learning phase in Spring 2020, the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) team at OUSD made an important observation: Educators in the district were confronting novel challenges and had to rise to them. They reached out to the research partners at Berkeley to
help design a survey that would take stock of educator’s well-being. Moreover, teacher recruitment and retention is one of the two key priorities for the Partnership”.

In this example, we see elements that have been frequently praised as the benefits of research conducted in an RPP model. Practice partners and research partners jointly discussed pressing problems of practice which had both short and long term implications for district goals and research efforts. Subsequently, the research partners collaborated with the practice partners to co-develop approaches to address these identified immediate needs and to inform a longer term key priority of the partnership. The existing collaborative and reciprocal relationship within this partnership, which was begun in 2018, may have facilitated the high level of responsivity evidenced in this project.

Another example from the 2021 NNERPP annual report illustrates how some partnerships shifted *existing* work, that likely still held relevance for their practice-side partners, but needed a reframing given the disruptive effects of the pandemic:

“The pandemic has caused school attendance in Detroit to get even worse than in pre-pandemic times, where more than half of Detroit students were already considered chronically absent. Understanding how parents and students experience chronic absenteeism and uncovering misconceptions about why Detroit students don't attend school can help schools and districts address major causes of absenteeism to ensure that Detroit students can attend school regularly, especially amid the added challenges they have experienced and continue to experience due to the pandemic.”

- Detroit Education Research Partnership, “*Why Do Detroit Students Miss School? Implications for Returning to School After COVID-19*” (page 81)

Here we see an example of a partnership that was able to take advantage of existing infrastructure and research agenda, extending their work to strengthen relevance given imminent practice-side needs (which can also be seen in Lenhoff et al., 2020).

In some instances, COVID-19 exacerbated existing threats to responsivity, interrupting or hampering work that predated the pandemic (see, for example, the 2021 Northwestern Evanston Education Research Alliance narrative or 2021 Research Alliance for New York City Schools project entry, *The Maker Partnership Program*). Nevertheless, some RPPs diverged from conventional approaches to research to maintain relevance in practice applications, as noted in the following entry:
“During the pandemic, the need for schools, districts and states to innovate has never been more pressing, nor the need to understand what new strategies are effective. Partners in REL Northeast & Islands have used the FAQ and related resources to design and test new practices - whether in the classroom to assess learning or at the district level to increase internet access for families”

- Education Development Center: REL Northeast & Islands, on their project “Resources for schools and districts responding to the COVID-19 crisis” (page 95)

This finding stands in sharp contrast to the usual cadence of more “traditionally produced” research, which often suffers from lags between conceptualization and funding and lengthy timelines for implementation of research activities and production of final results. Compounding the lengthy timeline of what could be considered “traditionally produced” research is the additional time between the completion of the study and the publication of results. Often in the form of a journal article, publication requires substantial time with intervals between submission, acceptance, and publication—sometimes taking a year or more.

We also note the unexpected but perhaps unsurprising finding of discovering additional types of research activities that were not previously included in the Thompson et al. (2017) typology. These included the categories of “capacity enhancing,” “research synthesis,” and “RPP improvement,” which reflect actions that RPPs commonly undertake but are not typically recognized as “deliverables” of research efforts. We posit that the reason these activities do not appear in the Thompson et al. (2017) typology is that these activities, while important, are not ones commonly funded by grants. Grant funded projects often stipulate restrictions and expectations which privileges certain types of activities over other types of activities. The dynamics of what research activities are “fundable or not fundable” undoubtedly influenced Thompson et al.’s (2017) data and sample. Our data reflects those projects and efforts that the RPPs themselves selected to highlight and promote, not projects which they were attempting to secure funding to conduct. This is a notable difference between the two samples.

Finally, we also note a handful of limitations given our sample and analysis. Although we draw on a wider sample of RPPs than what was available for the Thompson et al. (2017) effort, we nonetheless note that it is not clear to what extent this sample is representative of all RPPs in education. In addition, because the NNERPP Year in Reviews represent a self-reported snapshot of partnership work featured in a public-facing document, it is difficult to know how and why projects are chosen for inclusion. For example, it is
likely that for partnerships with larger RPP project portfolios, they may very well have selected only finished projects to include in the reports. In this sense, we are likely undercounting the number of projects that may have shifted in response to changing partner needs, especially if they were not fully realized by the time the report was to be published.

**Future Research**

This study is an initial attempt to document changes in research products produced by RPPs in response to changing needs from practice-side partners. Future work should expand on the suggestive evidence here that some RPPs are indeed able to rapidly respond to dramatic fluctuations in research priorities, such as what occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we encourage a deeper exploration into the various ways partnerships may in fact support their practice-side partner needs in service of responsivity, perhaps through a collection of stories, narratives, or more detailed examples than what was available here. In addition, future research might also examine the different models and approaches RPPs can take to better understand whether some RPP structures lend themselves well to responsivity. Features such as having a place-based approach to the work, a co-location of research and practice teams, diversity in research expertise on staff, or longevity might all matter for responsivity. Related, further research is also needed to fully develop our notion of “responsivity” itself: for example, how we might capture this aspect of RPP work, measure it, and track responsivity over time. Finally, we also note that RPPs may not be well suited for every instance of the work requiring a shift or pivot. Under what conditions might RPPs be appropriate? When might other endeavors be a better fit? Advancing our knowledge along these lines will be of great benefit to those wishing to develop RPPs that can truly be responsive to practice-side needs.

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**Notes**

1. NNERPP is a professional learning community of education RPPs from communities all across the U.S. that represent a variety of different RPP models, projects, and approaches. NNERPP’s membership has grown each year, and at the time of this writing, included nearly 60 member organizations.

2. Note that this threat of non-responsiveness is always present; one question to consider is the extent to which the pandemic “sped up” the reality of the research process in ways that helped teams overcome this ever-present inertia.

3. It should be noted that many of these activities are not likely to be captured in any currently available data set.

4. At the same time, because most places were experiencing similar challenges due to the disruptions from the pandemic (e.g., immediate shifts to online learning), there may have also been a narrowing of research needs in that most locations were likely seeking answers to the same kinds of new questions. In this case, an RPP might not have been in the best position to respond to such requests. This might explain the emergence of an entirely new effort at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University called the “EdResearch for Recovery Project,” which was perhaps more aptly built to meet these needs.

5. And note that the way to solve this is fairly straightforward: have more funding opportunities available to RPPs that cover operating costs generally, so that staff time is not restricted by pre-specified projects.

6. We also note (anecdotally) that we heard of funders generally being more flexible with existing grants, acknowledging the shifts in the work that were certain to transpire.

7. We additionally note that some of the RPPs included in the Thompson et al. (2017) sample are also included in our sample as they are members of NNERPP.

8. NNERPP membership is open to all research-practice partnerships in education. To become a member, RPPs respond to an application form that asks the partnership to reflect and share how they operationalize different elements of the definition of RPPs that appeared in the Farrell, Penuel, Coburn, et al. (2021) state of the field report. After a review of these responses, the NNERPP Steering Committee makes a recommendation regarding membership and extends an invitation to join for those that qualify.

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