

Systematic Review

Bridging Schools and Universities: Collaborative Models for Research Capacity Building—A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Increasing attention has been given to strengthening educational practice through the use of research evidence. However, the relationship between educational research and school practice remains fragmented, particularly regarding how school–university partnerships (SUPs) support teachers’ engagement with evidence and their role as epistemic agents. The aim of this study is to identify the characteristics of collaboration models between schools and universities that shape different forms of teachers’ engagement with research and the collaborative development of professional knowledge. Following the PRISMA protocol, 20 studies published between 2020 and 2025 were selected from Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC and analysed to address four research questions on the objectives, actors, organisational dynamics, and reported impacts of SUPs. Based on the analysis, the study proposes three distinct configurations for examining the relationship between SUPs, research utilisation, and teachers’ epistemic agency: an approach to teacher training, an approach to fostering informed professionals, and an approach centred on the co-creation of knowledge. These configurations reflect different levels of teachers’ epistemic agency and vary according to the organisational conditions that support evidence use. The study offers an analytical framework for understanding the potential and limitations of SUPs in strengthening research-informed practices and for guiding future collaborative initiatives.

Keywords: evidence-informed practice; school–university partnership; co-creation of knowledge; knowledge mobilisation; third space



Academic Editor: Federico Corni

Received: 28 May 2026

Revised: 11 July 2026

Accepted: 13 July 2026

Published: 17 July 2026

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, interest in improving school learning through a solid pedagogical foundation has grown ([OECD, 2025](#)). However, a key question remains: Is such a foundation supported by educational research? This question is vital for reassessing the conditions under which knowledge produced in academia influences teaching practice. Although education has traditionally been a field where various forms of knowledge converge, the systematic and meaningful integration of scientific evidence into teaching and learning remains limited and inconsistent ([Burns, 2024](#); [Hirschhorn & Geelan, 2008](#)).

In response to this disconnect, various theoretical models have been proposed to bridge the gap between research and practice. On one hand, the Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) model advocates for replicating strategies proven effective in academic research (Knogler et al., 2022; Newman & Gough, 2020). Conversely, the Evidence-Informed Practice (EIP) model views teachers as key actors who evaluate their context and integrate research findings into their pedagogical decisions alongside professional experience and environmental factors (Cain, 2019; Rodríguez & Onrubia, 2021).

This gap between research and practice exists not only due to limited access to scientific findings but also because of a deeper structural disconnection between two professional cultures operating with different logics, timelines, and goals: the academic-research culture and the professional-craft culture of teachers (Hirschhorn & Geelan, 2008; McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2007). The former aims to generate knowledge relevant to the academic community and advance scientific understanding, while the latter prioritises context-specific, timely solutions directly applicable in classrooms.

Despite the growing interest in SUPs as mechanisms for connecting research and practice, existing studies continue to offer a fragmented understanding of how these collaborations are organised and how they shape teachers' engagement with research evidence. In particular, there is limited systematic knowledge about the different configurations through which SUPs position teachers in evidence use and collaborative knowledge production.

The aim of this study is to identify the characteristics of collaboration models between schools and universities that encourage different ways for teachers to engage with research and the collaborative development of professional knowledge. To address this aim, the study conducts a systematic review of SUP models focused on the use of research evidence in educational practice. The study examines the objectives, actors, organisational dynamics, and reported impacts of these partnerships in order to analyse how different forms of collaboration shape teachers' epistemic agency. Based on this analysis, the article proposes three analytical configurations of SUPs to explain the relationship among research utilisation, collaborative practices, and teachers' roles as users or producers of knowledge. Accordingly, the article is structured to introduce the conceptual background, describe the methodological approach, present the findings, and discuss their implications for research and educational practice.

1.1. From Access to Active Engagement in Research Use

Educators incorporate evidence into teaching practice in multiple ways, ranging from consultation and reproduction to more active forms of knowledge production, interpretation, and contextualised application. One of the classic approaches that proposes levels of research use is the typology proposed by Landry et al. (2001), who conceptualise a "ladder of research use" ranging from passive instrumental use to more active conceptual and symbolic use. Passive models follow a linear knowledge-transfer logic, with teachers having minimal to no involvement in adapting or elaborating the content. Although these models may raise awareness of specific findings, they rarely lead teachers to make profound changes in their pedagogical practices or professional understanding (Cain, 2019; Landry et al., 2001). Active models involve teachers in processes of contextualised adaptation, research, reflective enquiry and co-creation of knowledge (Burns, 2024; Esparza et al., 2022; Ion et al., 2021).

This transformation entails a shift in professional role, involving the development of a complex form of agency that requires critical thinking, intellectual autonomy, and a willingness to apply knowledge across diverse, real-world contexts. Recent discussions on teacher professionalism increasingly recognise that professional learning involves agency, collaboration, and inquiry; however, they also point out that these perspectives have

paid comparatively less attention to how teachers' relationship with knowledge itself is transformed through these processes (Boylan et al., 2023). Understanding this epistemic dimension of professional practice therefore requires moving beyond accounts of research use towards perspectives that explain how teachers question, reinterpret, generate, and mobilise knowledge. In this framework, it is necessary to recover the concept of teachers' epistemic agency, understood as the capacity of educators to question, reinterpret, generate and mobilise knowledge for relevant educational purposes (Elgin, 2013; McGeown & Sjölund, 2025).

This approach stands in sharp contrast to technocratic conceptions of evidence use, which portray teachers merely as implementers of expert recommendations. On the contrary, epistemic agency calls for an active role for teachers as subjects who investigate, interpret, and decide in dialogue with multiple sources of knowledge (Resnick & Kolikant, 2025). From this perspective, teachers actively engaging with research express a form of critical and reflective professionalism that strengthens their autonomy, identity, and pedagogical leadership (Hordern, 2019; Oosterhoff et al., 2020).

1.2. School–University Partnerships

School–university partnerships (SUPs) have gained prominence as strategies to strengthen teacher professional development, improve initial training and foster evidence-informed educational practices (Chow et al., 2015; Green, 2024). SUPs can assume diverse configurations, from large-scale institutional arrangements involving institutional means for their maintenance (Burns, 2024; Swanson & Duncan, 2025) to more focused initiatives, such as collaborations between a group of teachers and a university team (Duran et al., 2021), or joint action research projects at the school level (Esparza et al., 2022; Samosa, 2021).

Regardless of their scale or formality, SUPs share specific fundamental purposes that distinguish them from conventional teacher education practices. First, they foster links between theory and practice, facilitating authentic and immersive learning experiences. This integration materialises, for example, in the implementation of university courses within public schools, in inter-institutional mentoring programmes, and in the co-construction of training curricula oriented towards situated practice (Sayago Quintana, 2006; Swanson & Duncan, 2025).

Secondly, the SUPs aim to strengthen teachers' professional development, thereby increasing their critical, analytical, and epistemic capacities by leveraging insights from educational research (Duran et al., 2021; Vaillant, 2016). Thirdly, SUPs contribute to sustainable educational improvement, as when school leaders are involved, they foster distributed pedagogical leadership, shared ownership of educational processes, and a professional culture grounded in dialogue about knowledge (Burns, 2024; Green, 2024; Swanson & Duncan, 2025).

1.3. Third Space for Knowledge Co-Creation

A relevant aspect of the relationship between universities and educational institutions is the asymmetry between the types of knowledge involved. These asymmetries can manifest as a subordination of practical knowledge to academic validation. Overcoming these inequalities requires not only inclusive structures but also epistemic frameworks that value situated knowledge as legitimate, relevant and necessary for educational transformation (Cain, 2019; Farley-Ripple et al., 2023).

In this sense, these asymmetries may be expressed in SUPs, as they connect research and practice. In recognition of this, the concept of the ‘third space’ has been proposed as an organisational model for the co-construction of knowledge between school and university actors. Originally grounded in Soja’s (1998) theorisation of hybrid socio-spatial environments, the concept was later articulated in teacher education as a framework to challenge hierarchical relations between academic and practitioner knowledge (Zeichner, 2010). From this perspective, third spaces are understood as intermediate socio-cultural environments in which the boundaries between research and practice are intentionally blurred, thereby enabling more horizontal forms of collaboration. In recent SUP research, the third space has been further developed as an analytical lens for examining epistemic hybridisation, the negotiation of meaning, and the joint production of pedagogical knowledge (Green et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Onrubia, 2021; Swanson & Duncan, 2025).

In this sense, the third space offers a conceptual and operational architecture for transforming power relations in SUPs. It enables actors to engage in dialectical collaboration, share responsibility for learning, integrate diverse forms of expertise, and develop hybrid professional identities. That is, the actors involved—teachers, researchers, mentors, or school authorities—do not remain anchored to their traditional roles but adopt flexible and reciprocal positions that enable new configurations of educational knowledge (Grudnoff et al., 2017; Jackson & Burch, 2019). This model not only democratises the production of educational knowledge but also strengthens teachers’ epistemic agency, as educational communities increasingly recognise them as legitimate actors in the fields of enquiry, innovation, and continuous improvement (Burns, 2024; Swanson & Duncan, 2025).

For the third space to function as a genuine co-construction environment, it is necessary to have facilitators who act as mediators between institutional cultures, as well as organisational strategies that foster trust, time-sharing, joint reflection, and co-responsibility (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Heimann, 2015). Creating such an environment does not happen spontaneously; it requires institutional commitment, distributed leadership, and material and symbolic conditions for collaborative relationships to be sustainable and productive (Williams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010).

1.4. SUP Models and the Development of Epistemic Agency

While SUPs offer an opportunity to integrate research into educational practice, stakeholders implement them in different ways, particularly regarding the role they assign to teachers in applying research findings and determining who should generate practical knowledge for schools.

School–university partnership configurations that promote higher levels of teacher agency tend to position teachers, both pre-service and in-service, as active agents in the interpretation and production of knowledge (Carter et al., 2024; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak & Ion, 2024). From this perspective, teachers are not merely masters of research techniques or understanding scientific designs; instead, they mobilise a set of skills, dispositions and opportunities that enable them to ask relevant questions about their practice, formulate hypotheses, collect and analyse information systematically, and generate answers that contribute to professional learning and school improvement (Blannin et al., 2020; Maussumbayev et al., 2022; Oancea et al., 2021).

Developing research capacities directly strengthens teachers’ epistemic agency. Teachers build this agency through meaningful formative experiences and by engaging in organisational structures that support professional judgement and foster dialogue among diverse experts (Burns, 2024; Hordern, 2019; Resnick & Kolikant, 2025).

Drawing on prior typologies of research use (Bernay et al., 2020; Landry et al., 2001) and contributions from research on epistemic agency and the third space, we propose an initial analytical framework. This framework aims to explore how SUPs are organised and how they might enhance teachers' epistemic agency. It functions as a guiding lens for analysing patterns in the literature, especially regarding the roles attributed to teachers, collaborative organisation, and methods of knowledge mobilisation. Consistent with recent conceptualisations of teacher professionalism, which view professional learning as involving different ways of relating to and working with knowledge (Boylan et al., 2023), analysing SUPs requires attention not only to their organisational features but also to how they position teachers in relation to research and professional knowledge. Within this framework, three ideal-type configurations are described to represent recurring patterns in the organisation of school–university partnerships, the roles assigned to teachers, and the forms of engagement with research through which teachers' epistemic agency is expressed:

An approach to teacher training. This configuration reflects a predominantly unidirectional approach, in which researchers generate valid knowledge and disseminate it to pre-service and in-service teachers for replication. Although it may include a guided form of reflection aimed at understanding or applying content, it does not encourage teachers' epistemic autonomy or participation in shaping questions or producing research knowledge. Consequently, teachers have limited exercise of their epistemic agency. In this framework, the existence of a third space is not a primary requirement.

An approach focused on fostering informed professionals. This configuration reflects a more dialogical relationship between research and practice. Researchers generate relevant knowledge, and teachers provide feedback and enrich it by assessing its relevance to their context. Teachers need to develop a medium level of epistemic agency to identify relevant sources of knowledge, analyse their applicability, and make informed decisions about their practice. Although teachers and researchers interact constantly, the existence of a third space depends on the degree of their involvement.

An approach to co-creation of knowledge. This configuration is characterised by collaborative arrangements in which teachers, researchers, and organisations such as universities, schools, and communities jointly participate in the production of knowledge within a broad network grounded in the co-construction of knowledge, equal participation, and commitment to pedagogical innovation. In this configuration, research not only informs practice but also emerges from it as actors collaboratively develop research projects that address real-world challenges. The implementation of this model fundamentally relies on creating a third space for the renegotiation of epistemic power. Teachers and researchers jointly conceive educational transformation as a shared enterprise and assume their roles as legitimate producers of knowledge. In this space, teachers exercise epistemic agency critically, creatively, and collaboratively.

From this perspective, these configurations provide an analytical basis for examining how school–university partnerships vary in terms of their aims, organisational structures, and the roles assigned to teachers in relation to research. Based on this analytical orientation, the following research questions guide the review:

RQ1 What are the aims of school–university partnerships?

RQ2 Which actors are involved, and how are SUPs structured?

RQ3 How can the reviewed SUPs be characterised in terms of different configurations of research use and teachers' epistemic agency?

RQ4 What is the implementation effect of SUPs reported by the studies?

2. Materials and Methods

We conducted the systematic review in accordance with the PRISMA protocol to synthesise and compare a diverse body of literature on school–university partnerships focused on evidence use.

To delimit the search field in accordance with the study's aims, the conceptual cores were defined within the theoretical framework of evidence-informed practice, school–university partnerships, and knowledge-building and knowledge-circulation processes.

To ensure a comprehensive and relevant search, in addition to the main terms, their variants were also included: (a) evidence-informed practice (evidence-based practice, research-based practice, informed practice), (b) school–university partnerships (school–university collaboration, university–school partnership, linkage), and (c) knowledge building and circulation (knowledge sharing, collaborative knowledge building, community of practice). These terms guided the formulation of specific and combined search strategies using Boolean operators.

We conducted the research in three databases recognised for their coverage of social sciences and education: Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC. These platforms provided access to peer-reviewed literature, technical reports and book chapters, ensuring a diversity of perspectives and methodological approaches. Filters were applied by document type (articles, chapters, and reports), language (English and Spanish), open access status, and publication period (2020–2025). This period was narrowed to focus the analysis on recent contributions that reflect current and consolidated configurations of school–university partnerships aimed at evidence use, within a context characterised by an increased emphasis on research-informed practice and evolving forms of collaboration between research and practice (Burn et al., 2021).

The search strategy included combinations of the following: ((evidence-based practice OR research-based practice OR informed practice) AND (school–university partnership OR collaboration OR linkage) NOT (Medic*)), limited to studies in education and educational research. For the selection of studies, we defined inclusion criteria focused on (a) formal education (K12) or teacher training contexts, (b) participation of in-/pre-service teachers, and (c) description of collaboration models oriented towards the use of evidence in pedagogical practice. Studies of purely theoretical or normative nature, as well as those conducted in non-school contexts, such as medical education, were excluded.

After identifying records in the databases and defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, the records were imported into Rayyan (<https://www.rayyan.ai/> (accessed on 20 February 2026)) for screening in accordance with the PRISMA protocol. The screening was conducted in two phases with independent double review by the researchers. First, review titles and abstracts with a double evaluation to select studies that could potentially be analysed according to the inclusion criteria; second, review full texts to confirm their eligibility. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus, ensuring analytical control over the selection process. Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a final dataset of 20 studies from 951 formed the corpus. Figure 1 illustrates the process. The diagram is adapted from the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

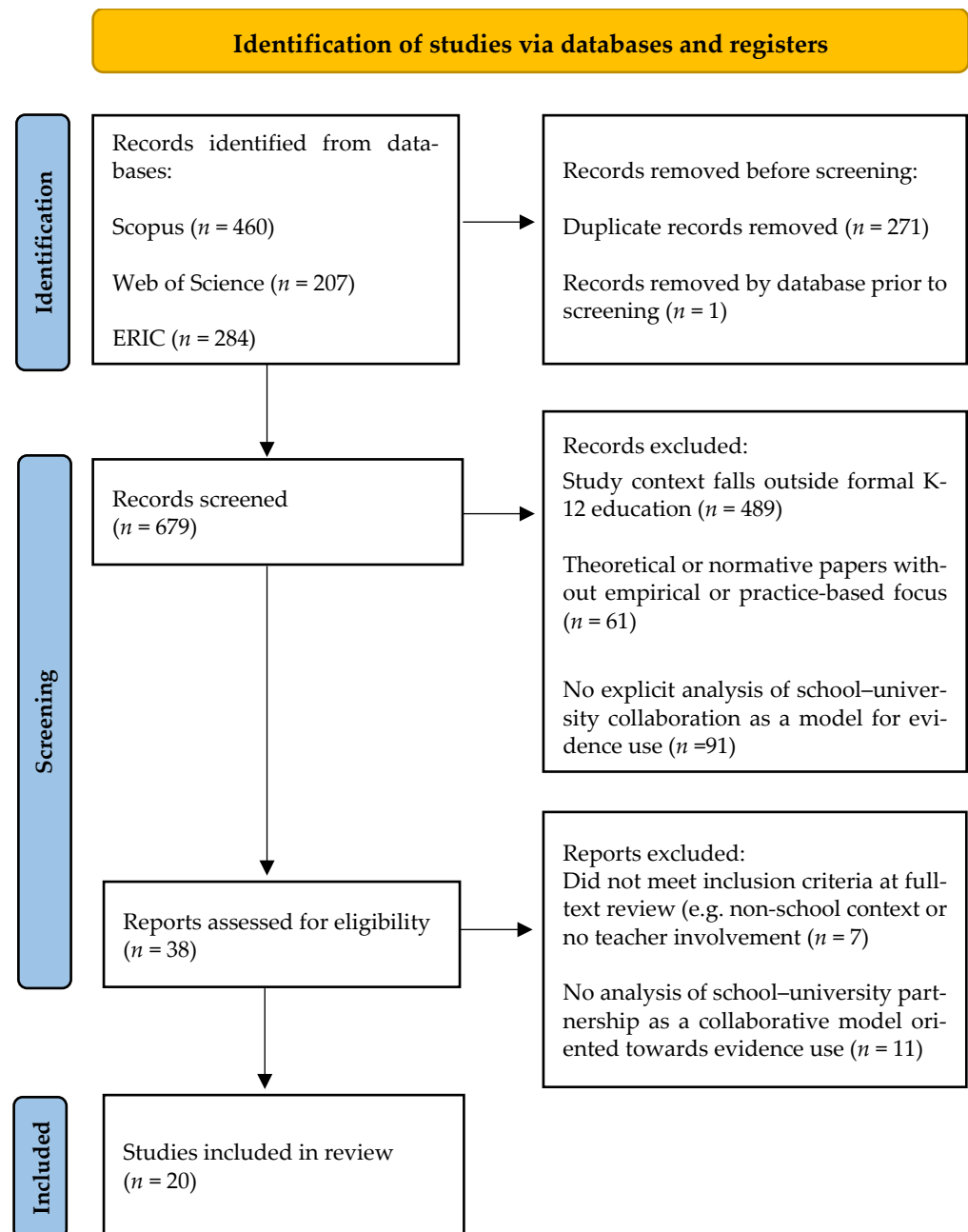


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

3. Results

3.1. General Characteristics of the Selected Studies

When analysing the general characteristics of the studies included in the review (Table 1), we observe a marked predominance of studies from English-speaking countries (United Kingdom, United States, Ireland, Australia, and the Philippines) ($n = 15$), regardless of the inclusion criteria for English- and Spanish-language articles. Regarding the temporal distribution, a peak in publications is observed in 2022 ($n = 9$), followed by decreases in 2023 ($n = 3$) and 2024 ($n = 4$). The pandemic may have disrupted inter-institutional partnerships, and researchers may now be shifting their focus or reducing their interest in this area of study.

Table 1. Descriptive information about the selected studies.

Criterion	Category	N
Country	United Kingdom	5
	United States	5
	Ireland	3
	Sweden	2
	Australia	1
	China	1
	Estonia	1
	Philippines	1
	Norway	1
Year of publication	2020	0
	2021	5
	2022	8
	2023	3
	2024	4
	2025	0
Educational level targeted	Primary Education	6
	Secondary education	7
	Primary and secondary education	7

Note. The table summarises the descriptive characteristics of the 20 selected studies, including country of origin, year of publication, and targeted educational level.

In terms of the educational levels at which collaboration takes place, there is a balance between initiatives oriented towards primary education (6) and those focused on secondary education (7). Relevant is the presence of multi-level approaches, as seven of the partnerships identify actions that simultaneously address both primary and secondary levels.

3.2. What Are the Aims of School–University Partnerships? (RQ1)

The studies reviewed reveal a variety of purposes that motivate the creation of school–university partnerships. Among the most recurrent are the improvement of teaching practice through collaborative processes (Thomas & Drew, 2022; Ward et al., 2023), reflective and situated professional development (King & Holland, 2022; Lang et al., 2022), and the critical appropriation of knowledge (Brennan et al., 2021; Emery et al., 2022). In addition, some studies identify more specific objectives, such as strengthening disciplinary or digital competencies (Dai, 2023; McGill & Reinking, 2022; Vieyra et al., 2024) and co-constructing practical and applicable knowledge in school contexts (Bowers & Krumm, 2021; Johannesson & Olin, 2024).

We analysed the stated objectives of each SUP and identified four primary categories, presented below: (a) To train future teachers, $n = 5$; (b) To train teachers in a specific domain, $n = 10$; (3) To foster research from/with schoolteachers, $n = 6$; (4) To develop a product/service, $n = 5$. The most frequent objective among the SUPs analysed is teacher training in specific domains, highlighting a practical and specialised orientation in many of these collaborations.

3.3. Which Actors Are Involved, and How Are the SUPs Structured? (RQ2)

The analysis of the stakeholders involved in the SUPs (Figure 2) reveals constant participation by university faculty in all cases reviewed ($n = 20$), as well as a majority presence of in-service teachers ($n = 19$).

Regarding the structure and stability of these SUPs (Table 2), we distinguish two main types based on their level of formalisation. On the one hand, there are SUPs of a more individual nature ($n = 10$), where the initiative comes from one or a few actors within each

institution, generally a university researcher who collaborates with a limited number of schools (Babinski et al., 2024; Steel et al., 2022; Waller, 2021). These partnerships are more linked to one-off projects and rely heavily on personal commitment. On the other hand, there are institutional SUPs ($n = 10$), which involve multiple actors across universities, educational institutions, and the system, and have a more stable, sustained structure over time (Burn et al., 2021; King & Holland, 2022; Tanti et al., 2023).

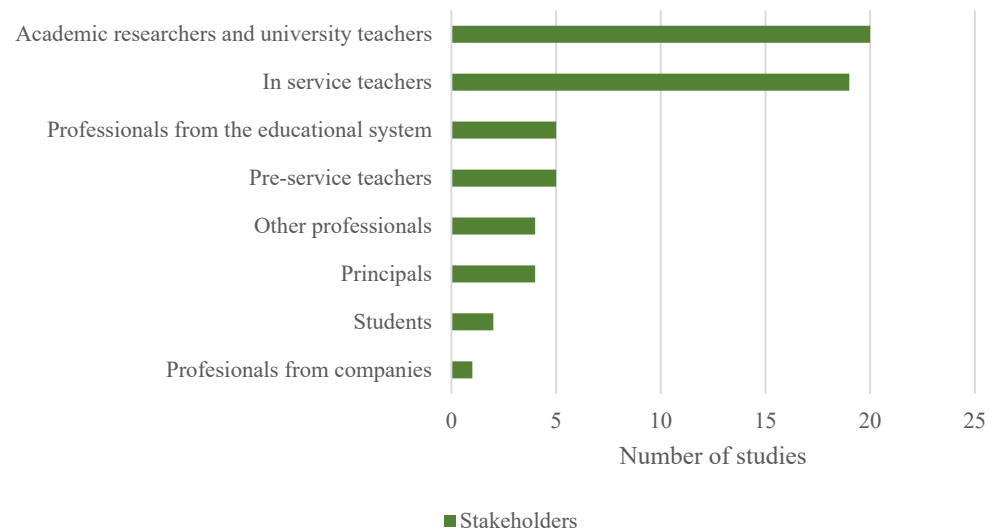


Figure 2. Stakeholders participating in SUP. Note. The bar chart displays the number of studies ($N = 20$) involving each stakeholder type. Stakeholders include academic researchers, in-service teachers, principals, and others.

Table 2. Overview of school–university partnership models: Objectives, actors involved and type of initiative.

Approach	Publication	Objective	Kind of Initiative	Stakeholders Involved	Third Space
Teacher training	(Babinski et al., 2024)	b	Individual initiative	1, 3	No
	(Dai, 2023)	b	Individual initiative	1, 3, 6	No
Fostering an informed professional	(Brennan et al., 2021)	b	Individual initiative	1, 3	Yes
	(Burn et al., 2021)	c	Structured alliance	1, 2, 3, 4	Yes
	(Emery et al., 2022)	b	Structured alliance	1, 3	Yes
	(Lang et al., 2022)	a	Structured alliance	1, 2, 3, 8	No
	(Merket, 2022)	a, c	Structured alliance	1, 2, 3	No
	(Sillaots et al., 2024)	b	Structured alliance	1, 3, 5, 7, 8	No
	(Steel et al., 2022)	b	Individual initiative	1, 3	No
	(Thomas & Drew, 2022)	b	Structured alliance	1, 3	No
	(Waller, 2021)	d	Structured alliance	1, 3, 8	No
Co-creation of knowledge	(Bowers & Krumm, 2021)	b	Individual initiative	1, 4, 6	Yes
	(Forssten Seiser & Portfelt, 2024)	c	Structured alliance	1, 3, 4	Yes
	(Johannesson & Olin, 2024)	b	Individual initiative	1, 3	Yes
	(King & Holland, 2022)	c	Individual initiative	1, 2, 3, 6	Yes
	(McGill & Reinking, 2022)	d	Individual initiative	1, 3	Yes
	(Ronda & Danipog, 2022)	c	Structured alliance	1, 3, 5	Yes
	(Tanti et al., 2023)	a	Structured alliance	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	Yes
	(Vieyra et al., 2024)	d	Individual initiative	1, 3, 6, 8	Yes
	(Ward et al., 2023)	d	Individual initiative	1, 3	Yes

Note: I. Objective: (a) To train pre-service teachers, (b) To train in-service teachers in a specific domain, (c) To foster research from/within in-service teachers, (d) To develop a product or service. II. Stakeholders: (1) Academic researchers and university teachers, (2) Pre-service teachers, (3) In-service teachers, (4) Principals, (5) Students, (6) Professionals from the educational system, (7) Professionals from companies, (8) Other professionals.

3.4. How Can the Reviewed SUPs Be Characterised in Terms of Different Configurations of Research Use and Teachers' Epistemic Agency? (RQ3)

Applying the previously described analytical framework as a guiding lens, the examined studies were analysed to identify patterns in the configuration of school–university partnerships with respect to research utilisation and teachers' epistemic agency. This analysis avoids presuming fixed categories and instead aims to interpret how diverse collaboration types indicate different levels of teacher participation in knowledge creation and application.

A small number of studies ($n = 2$) demonstrate configurations consistent with our description of an approach to teacher training. In these cases, teachers play a limited role in building knowledge. For example, Babinski et al. (2024) describe teachers following university-prescribed pedagogical guidelines without modifying or designing them, while Dai (2023) notes teachers applying research recommendations without critical analysis or adapting them to their context. These arrangements often reinforce hierarchical relationships between research and practice, with knowledge flowing mainly from the university to the school.

A larger group of studies ($n = 9$) reflects configurations consistent with an approach focused on fostering informed professionals. These studies describe collaborative environments where teachers engage with research through dialogue, interpretation, and contextual adaptation. For instance, in Lang et al. (2022) and Sillaots et al. (2024), participants collaborate in curriculum and evaluation design processes informed by research evidence. Nonetheless, the control over research processes generally remains with academic actors. While these setups enhance teachers' ability to interpret and apply research, they do not usually lead to a complete redistribution of epistemic authority. Importantly, only a few of these cases (3 out of 9) exhibit features associated with the development of a third space.

Finally, a significant number of studies ($n = 9$) reflect configurations consistent with an approach to co-creation of knowledge. These cases highlight more horizontally organised collaborations between researchers and teachers (Johannesson & Olin, 2024; Thomas & Drew, 2022), grounded in principles such as co-creation of knowledge, shared leadership, and joint transformation of practices (King & Holland, 2022). Within these settings, diverse collaborative approaches are employed, including lesson studies (Ronda & Danipog, 2022) and design-based research (McGill & Reinking, 2022; Vieyra et al., 2024). Other efforts are managed through more formal structures, including professional networks (Tanti et al., 2023; Ward et al., 2023). In these configurations, the creation of a third space is more evident, enabling the negotiation of meanings, the redistribution of epistemic authority, and the development of teachers' epistemic agency in more sustained and collective ways.

3.5. What Is the Effect of Implementing SUPs? (RQ 4)

We analysed the effects reported in each study. We identified five types of effects (Table 3): enhancing teacher learning of a specific dimension ($n = 10$), contributing to the development of teachers' epistemic agency ($n = 17$), improving school conditions to foster epistemic agency ($n = 10$), fostering the development of collaborative research ($n = 9$) and transforming teachers' pedagogical practices ($n = 11$).

From the perspective of the SUP model type, the analysis reveals that proposals focused on model A primarily enhance teachers' mastery of specific content or competencies (Babinski et al., 2024) but do not foster the development of epistemic agency or knowledge co-construction processes. However, this does not preclude teachers from exercising epistemic agency, as demonstrated by Dai's (2023) study. The proposals in model B tend to develop key competences in teachers, both in specific domains and those related to

epistemic agency (Brennan et al., 2021), and generate changes in pedagogical practices (Emery et al., 2022). Furthermore, SUPs aligned with model C show a stronger effect on strengthening teachers’ epistemic agency and on the generation of collaborative research (Bowers & Krumm, 2021; Johannesson & Olin, 2024).

Table 3. Effects of SUP models.

Approach	Enhancing Teacher Learning of a Specific Dimension	Contributing to the Development of Teachers’ Epistemic Agency	Improving School Conditions to Foster Epistemic Agency	Fostering the Development of Collaborative Research	Transforming Teachers’ Pedagogical Practices
Teacher Training	2/2	0/2	0/2	0/2	1/2
Fostering an informed professional	4/9	8/9	4/9	0/9	5/9
Co-creation of knowledge	4/9	9/9	6/9	9/9	5/9
Total	10/20	17/20	10/20	9/20	11/20

Note. The table summarises the effects identified in the reviewed studies (N = 20) and categorises them by SUP model type. Values indicate the number of studies reporting each effect, divided by the total number of studies using that model. SUP = school–university partnership.

It is essential to note that we have based the systematisation of effects on the findings reported in the studies, most of which employ a qualitative approach focusing on participants’ perceptions, particularly teachers’. Only one of the reviewed studies (Tanti et al., 2023) employs a Randomised Controlled Trial to assess the causal interpretation of the reported results.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the studies shows that SUP models differ not only in their formal objectives but also in how they shape teachers’ roles and the levels of epistemic agency they promote. In this sense, the findings suggest that it is not merely the establishment of a partnership that fosters the use of research in practice, but rather the way the SUP is structured, and the roles of the different actors involved.

This perspective helps explain why some collaboration configurations tend to favour a more transformative use of educational research. In contrast, others reproduce dynamics predominantly focused on knowledge transfer, placing teachers in less active roles in the production and use of knowledge.

In terms of the objectives underpinning collaborations, the analysis shows a persistent structural tension between models focused on knowledge transfer and those that promote teachers’ situated professional judgement. This tension, widely documented in the literature as a contrast between EBP and EIP (Cain, 2019; Kumah et al., 2022), takes on an additional analytical dimension in this review by explicitly linking it to the degree of epistemic agency fostered by each collaboration model.

Regarding the actors involved, the review shows an almost constant presence of in-service teachers, while only 25% of the cases include pre-service teachers. This pattern suggests that SUPs conceptualise research as a more helpful resource for in-service teacher training than for pre-service teacher training. However, from a transformative perspective, engaging pre-service teachers in co-creation processes can strengthen their epistemic agency from an early stage and enrich their professional training through situated research experiences (Kaçaniku, 2020; Štemberger, 2020).

The variety of organisational structures reveals two major configurations: individual initiatives, based on the will and involvement of a few actors, and structured partnerships, which involve a higher level of institutional formalisation. Although both can generate positive effects, the sustainability of the changes promoted tends to be greater in the latter (Burns, 2024). This aspect opens a future line of research on the institutionalisation processes of SUPs and their relationship with the continuity and depth of the transformations they promote.

One of the central findings of this review is that SUPs, by themselves, do not generate epistemic agency; instead, their structure, the way actors distribute roles, and how they recognise knowledge influence the development of specific professional capacities (Burns, 2024). This finding suggests that teacher professionalism is shaped not only by opportunities to access research but also by how teachers are positioned in relation to professional knowledge and participate in its interpretation, mobilisation, and production, consistent with the conceptualisation of teacher professionalism proposed by Boylan et al. (2023). Some collaborations continue to reproduce vertical structures, while others open transformative frameworks that democratise knowledge production (Farley-Ripple et al., 2023).

In terms of effects, we can identify different impacts of SUP related to the use of evidence in practice, ranging from those aimed at acquiring specific knowledge to those aimed at creating conditions that enable evidence-informed practice. Furthermore, in line with the discussion about strategies to reduce the gap between research and practice, it is important to note that more than half of the SUPs analysed report changes in teachers' pedagogical practices ($n = 11$) (Cain, 2019).

5. Conclusions

This systematic review examined SUP models aimed at promoting the use of evidence in teaching practice to understand how different ways of structuring these partnerships can foster evidence-informed practices. Through a comparative analysis of objectives, actors, organisational forms, and reported outcomes, the study offers a relational contribution by linking the roles assigned to teachers, the levels of epistemic agency encouraged, and the conditions that influence evidence use.

At the same time, the scope and applicability of these findings are shaped by several methodological decisions that warrant acknowledgement. First, the corpus analysed is predominantly composed of qualitative studies conducted in the English-speaking context. While this allowed for an in-depth examination of relational dynamics and agency-oriented configurations, it limits the extent to which the identified models can be generalised to other educational systems. Second, the focus on open-access publications and formal K-12 education excluded relevant work, thereby limiting the range of collaborative dynamics captured in this review.

These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted as offering analytical guidance rather than prescriptive solutions. In practical terms, findings can inform the design of school–university partnerships and inter-institutional policies that seek to recognise teachers as active epistemic agents, promote more equitable relationships, and go beyond knowledge-transfer approaches. However, translating these insights into concrete designs requires careful attention to contexts.

Future research could extend this work by incorporating a broader range of educational systems, educational levels, and methodological approaches, and by examining more closely how initial teacher education can be integrated into co-creation processes to strengthen epistemic agency within collaborative models.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; data curation, J.D.E.-R. and D.I.C.-R.; writing—original draft preparation, J.D.E.-R.; writing—review and editing, D.I.C.-R. and G.I.; validation; supervision; project administration; funding acquisition, G.I. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Generalitat of Catalonia, Department of Education and Professional Training, under Grant number REDU-CAT (ref.). EDU145/23/000008.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Acknowledgments: This work was carried out as part of the Doctoral Programme in Education at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and forms part of the Research—Evidence-Informed Schools Network: Design and Validation of a Model in Catalonia (REDUCAT) project.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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