In Pursuit of Evidence:
Lessons from the Study of Researcher Dissemination and Practitioner Search

Objectives
Underlying the use of research evidence in educational policy and practice is the assumption that decision-makers search for, find, and access research that is relevant to the challenges their organizations face. Yet surprisingly little work tests that assumption, in spite of the fact that subsequent aspects of use - such as interpretation or application - depend on the what information is brought into the process. Research on search comes primarily from organizational theory, finding that search is limited by preferences, resources, skills, and beliefs. Few studies have examined search in the context of education, and to date there has been no direct examination of how search relates to researchers' dissemination and outreach activities. Our objective in this session is to present findings about researchers' and school-based practitioners' reported effort, strategies, and networks for disseminating/accessing research evidence in order to surface potential barriers and offer strategies for supporting this dimension of the evidence use process.

This paper is based on the early work of an IES-funded R&D center, the Center for Research Use in Education (CRUE), which focuses on understanding knowledge utilization based on the production and use of research in education. CRUE is conducting a series of studies beginning with two pilot phases to develop and validate survey instruments to measure a) research use in schools, b) the production of research, and c) the "gap" between research and practice communities. This paper presents results from the first pilot of both practitioner and researcher instruments, with specific attention to items associated with search and dissemination.

The following research questions guide this work:
1. How much effort (time, financial) do researchers and practitioners report devoting to dissemination/search activities?
2. How (strategy) and where (source) do they focus their efforts?
3. How do practitioners and researchers differ in their approach to search/dissemination activities?

Theoretical Framework
Our work is informed by the study of knowledge utilization, from which we adopt several principles. First, the use of research evidence is not productively conceptualized as a problem of dissemination, nor of increasing practitioner uptake, but rather about understanding and strengthening mechanisms that link research and practice. Accordingly, we examine the behaviors and perceptions of *both* researchers and practitioners. Relatedly, we draw on the idea of cultural dissonance (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010) as a framework for making sense of the different ways in which researchers and practitioners approach their work. Third, we acknowledge the "third space" between research and practice where intermediaries, including individuals, organizations, and media, may serve important roles in facilitating search and dissemination (Neal, et al, 2015). Lastly, we recognize varied forms of evidence use, including

instrumental, conceptual, symbolic, and political, conceptualized in the literature. We do not limit our focus to a particular form of use, but contend that search and dissemination are assumed under all conceptualizations and therefore an issue of broad concern.

Methods & Data

Instrument. The two surveys were developed through an iterative process consisting of 1) a blueprint on which we received expert feedback, 2) semi-structured interviews with researchers (n=15), intermediaries (n=15) and school staff (n=15); and 3) cognitive interviews for each instrument (n=65). The surveys cover a range of constructs mapped onto the Center's conceptual framework. Of particular focus here are items in which a) practitioners indicate where and how they search for research evidence, b) researchers indicate where and how they disseminate or otherwise communicate their work, and c) both practitioners and researchers indicate the individuals, organizations, and media sources they rely on to connect to research or practice respectively.

Sample. In 2017, the first large-scale pilot of the practitioner survey was conducted with administrators and instructional staff from 32 schools in two states with a response rate of 38% (n=580). A large scale pilot of the researcher instrument is being conducted in Fall 2017 with an anticipated sample size of 200 from a range of institutions across the U.S.. Data for this paper will be updated to include data from the researcher pilot prior to the SREE conference.

Analyses. Analyses for RQ1-3 are descriptive of both research and practice communities. Closed ended items on effort (time, financial), strategy, and source are presented in terms of distribution, central tendency and variability. Open ended items about connections to research and practice were recorded as social network data for ego network analyses. Network size, composition, and heterogeneity are reported as well as qualitative examples of the common network members (i.e. potential brokers). Analyses for RQ4 focus on comparisons between researchers and practitioners using appropriate parametric and non-parametric tests.

Results

Practitioner activities: Effort devoted to search is bimodal in terms of time, with most either spending half a workday or spending five or more days. Most resources used were publicly available and free. In terms of strategy, we find practitioners to engage in primarily local search, primarily seeking information within their own or another school/district, while strategies such as research databases or using bibliographies were much less frequent. Similarly, network analyses reveal the importance of individual connections, which on average accounted for 44% of practitioners' network. Among the most influential resources were coaches and professional associations.

Researcher activities: Analyses of data from the researcher pilot are planned for early winter 2018.

Similarities and differences: Specific comparisons will be made once researcher pilot data are available. We do not anticipate specific differences in effort associated with search or dissemination. However, we hypothesize notable disconnects between researchers and practitioners, including a) practitioners'

reliance on local search compared to researchers' broader, less targeted dissemination strategies and b) limited overlap in the networks and sources relied upon for sharing research-based information.

Significance

This work surfaces important similarities and differences in how researchers and practitioners approach research evidence use. Hypothesized differences in strategy draw attention to the distinct structures, processes, and incentives in each community, but which may be manipulated at the organizational level. Similarities in effort, sources, and networks highlight potential for improving search/dissemination activities, whereas differences signal the need and opportunity to adjust approaches in the future. Overall, findings are instructive to the research community and higher levels of the policy and practice communities, represented in SREE membership, by providing a) "evidence about evidence use" on issues that are understudied to date and b) useful information for future efforts to strengthen ties between research and practice.

References

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