Chapter 2
Introduction to Part: Research Use at the School and District Level

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The chapters in this part all focus on the use of research in districts and schools. Local educational systems are important settings for studying research use because actors in district offices and schools have responsibility for programs and policies intended to improve teaching and learning. As such, they have the potential to directly impact teachers' practice and students' opportunities to learn. If one wants to understand the role research can play in influencing instructional improvement, it is therefore important to understand when and under what conditions decision makers at these levels use research. These chapters help to illuminate some of these conditions.

Taken together, the chapters suggest that research use at the local level is not simply the product of bureaucratic rationality or individual leaders' action, but rather is embedded in a dynamically changing ecology of actors and organizational units and connections among them. When policy makers and others encourage school and district leaders to use research in their ongoing work, they often envision that they should use research directly and centrally to make decisions related to policy or practice (Johnson 1999; Sharkey and Murnane 2006; Weiss 1980). Weiss (1980) describes this image, which she calls instrumental use, in the following way:

> A problem exists; information or understanding is lacking either to generate a solution to the problem or to select among alternative solutions; research [or other forms of evidence] provides the missing knowledge; a solution is reached (pp. 11–12).

In fact, educational decision making at the local level rarely happens in an instant; rather, as Weiss (1980) argues, decisions "accrete" over time, through interactive processes that include contention, negotiation, and sensemaking.

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As the chapters in this part and other studies highlight, research use, too, involves these same interactive processes (Amara et al. 2004; Contandriopoulos et al. 2010; Earl 1995). It entails leaders making sense of conclusions from research, deliberating about their relevance to the current context, and creating policies that reflect agreements about what the research suggests they should do in that context. As the part authors point out, local actors often contest the conclusions of research and their relevance, and the translation of research into practice requires significant learning on the part of local actors.

Furthermore, these chapters highlight the fact that decisions are not made by isolated individuals, but involve actors across, and even outside, districts and schools. Decisions related to teaching and learning are stretched across multiple organizational divisions (i.e., curriculum and instruction, assessment, zone or areas, special education) and levels of the system (county, district, school) (Coburn et al. 2009; Spillane 1998). They also involve and implicate actors outside of the formal system, including a range of consultants, vendors, and advocates seeking to change the system from partway outside it (Burch and Thiem 2004; Burch 2009; Welner et al. 2010).

Despite their commonalties, each chapter makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of research use. They focus on different actors: two chapters focus on district administrators (Chap. 1 by Daly and Finnigan, as well as Chap. 4 by Honig and Venkateswaran), one on members of school boards (Chap. 5 by Asen and Gurke), and the fourth on intermediary organizations who can play a consequential role in policy making (Chap. 6 by Scott, Lubiensky, Debray and Jabbar). They also differ in the purpose of research use they investigate: Asen and Gurke (Chap. 5) focus on use of research for decision making, while Honig and Venkateswaran (Chap. 4) focus on the role of research in changing work practices of educational leaders. Daly and Finnigan (Chap. 1) focus on data use, rather than research use. And, Scott and her colleagues (Chap. 6) focus on the role of research in advocacy for particular policies and programs. Finally, the chapters vary in the conceptual frameworks the authors draw upon, which, in turn, prompt them to focus on different aspects of the research use phenomenon. Daly and Finnigan use social network analysis to investigate the social structure within which research and data use is embedded, while Honig and Venkateswaran foreground the learning demands or cognitive aspects of making use of research. The chapters by Asen and Gurke (Chap. 5) and by Scott and her colleagues (Chap. 6) focus more on the political dimensions of use.

Daly and Finnigan's chapter (Chap. 1) investigates patterns of advice seeking among central office staff and school principals. Rather than focusing on use of research, they attend to data use, a practice that is explicitly promoted within most of today's accountability systems as an important guide to educational decision making. They make use of social network analysis, which illuminates the ways that information flows through specific ties among local actors and how these flows are constrained in part by the structure of the network. It contrasts sharply with a "rational actor" perspective that presumes information and research flow freely within systems and are readily taken up when findings dictate (cf., Dynarski 2008). As Daly and Finnigan's chapter (Chap. 1) implies, the social structure of advice giving shapes how and where information related to specific studies is likely to flow, and it also points to the potential constraints on information flow when ties are sparse.

Honig and Venkateswaran's chapter (Chap. 4) focuses on when and how district leaders use research related to central office transformation to change their own work practice. The chapter offers a cognitive perspective that frames research use as a learning problem for district leaders from the perspective of sociocultural learning theory. Sociocultural learning theory, the authors argue, helps researchers move beyond binary distinctions between "use" and "nonuse" of research that characterize many policy debates. The authors offer instead a more nuanced way to characterize *how* district leaders engage with ideas from research when they do. The cognitive perspective also brings into focus the importance of prior knowledge in shaping leaders' use of assistance strategies suggested by research.

Asen and Gurke's chapter (Chap. 5) focuses on the forms of evidence that school board members use in public deliberations with one another. By focusing on different forms of information rather than on use of research alone, the chapter authors are able to situate research use relative to other forms of information and investigate the conditions under which research findings persuade others in the course of deliberations. Asen and Gurke's analysis also underscores the critical role that trust plays in shaping when school board members see research findings as persuasive and when colleagues take up others' invocations of research findings. This particular finding connects to Daly and Finnigan's observations about the importance of social networks, in that we might expect to see more evidence of trust where there are frequent interactions among members of the network than where there are less frequent interactions.

Finally, Scott, Lubiensky, Debray, and Jabbar (Chap. 6) focus on intermediary organizations and their role in synthesizing and promoting select research findings for the purposes of advocacy. Scott and her colleagues (Chap. 6) argue that intermediary organizations are not neutral "brokers" of research findings. Instead, they often advocate for the use of some findings over others, packaging findings in forms and sharing them in venues outside the peer review system for traditional social science research. In their analysis, intermediary organizations work nimbly and quickly to fill a void for research that is locally relevant and useful to decision makers that researchers themselves do not fill. It is important to note that the intermediary organizations depicted in Scott and colleagues' chapter are portrayed quite differently from the partners depicted in Honig and Venkateswaran's chapter (Chap. 4), whose aims are to assist local actors with internal transformations of work practices. Their chapter reminds us that research use is situated within and framed by larger policy debates about governance and instruction in schools and that brokering access to findings is often an agenda-driven activity, rather than a neutral effort to bring evidence to policy.

In our view, these chapters are complementary emphasizing different aspects of the complex and interactive processes associated with research use. For example, research findings that appear on the surface to have clear implications for practice may be linked to particular political positions and advocacy groups (Chap. 6 by Scott and colleagues). Actors who agree with their relevance to their own practice, moreover, are still likely to face challenges when learning how to make use of recommendations to change their practice (Chap. 4 by Honig and Venkateswaran). Issues of trust among different actors (Chap. 5 by Asen and Gurke) are likely implicated in all deliberations regarding research use for decision making. And, some actors may have differential access to research findings in the first place, and advice

on how to use them, depending upon the nature of their ties to their colleagues and to the range of actors involved in educational policy issues outside the system (Chap. 1 by Daly and Finnigan).

The field is only beginning to understand the nature and dynamics of research use in local educational systems. We need to understand far more about the interactive processes involved in research use or what Tseng (2007) has called "the demand side" of research use before we can improve district and school leaders' research use as many policy makers would like. These chapters help define some of the territory we must traverse to get to that point.

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