

Building a Village Through Data: A Research–Practice Partnership to Improve Youth Outcomes

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Abstract

There is growing recognition that the traditional research paradigm fails to address the needs of school practitioners. As such, more collaborative and participatory approaches are being encouraged. Yet few articles examine the structures, processes, and dynamics of research–practice partnerships. To address this gap, this essay analyzes a research alliance between a university and a full-service community school district focused on family engagement. It identifies strategies that facilitate working relations between university researchers, school practitioners, and community stakeholders; describes the complexities in mobilizing research for action; and demonstrates how linking data can bridge institutional silos and strengthen relations among youth-serving organizations. Through an in-depth, single case examination, this article seeks to demonstrate the potential of research–practice partnerships as a community development strategy whereby individuals who share common aims can generate useful knowledge and bring about positive change in the lives of young people.

Key Words: research–practice partnerships, data linking, community youth development, family engagement, full-service community schools, districts

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind legislation, enacted in 2002, raised demands on school systems to use data to inform decision-making (Lachat & Smith, 2005). The current version of the law, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act,

maintains a strong commitment to using data to examine how well its schools and students are meeting learning standards. Reformers argue that schools can better target resources, identify areas in which teachers need support, and make evidence-based decisions that enhance students' learning through the systematic use of data (Feldman & Tung, 2001; Wayman & Stringfield, 2006).

Against this backdrop of increased data use and accountability, there is a growing call for education researchers to work more closely with districts, schools, and communities to conduct research that addresses local concerns (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). Traditional research models in which academics alone determine the questions, define the methods, and decide the main outcomes of interest have fallen short in addressing the needs of school practitioners (Coburn et al., 2013; Easton, 2013; Schoenfeld, 2009). As such, more collaborative and participatory approaches, including research–practice, are being encouraged, as evidenced by grant initiatives conducted by the federal Institute for Education Sciences as well as by philanthropic organizations such as the William T. Grant Foundation.

Coburn and colleagues (2013) define a research–practice partnership between researchers and school district personnel as an enduring, mutualistic collaboration organized to investigate problems of practice. The long-term nature of these alliances helps create a culture of trust and respect, which is critical as these partnerships can involve multiple stakeholders with distinct organizational norms, priorities, and routines. By joining forces to address issues in the community, research–practice partnerships seek to yield knowledge that directly speaks to the needs and interests of decision-makers (Nelson, London, & Stroebel, 2015; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Tseng, 2012; Walsh & Backe, 2013).

Few “thick descriptions” (i.e., in-depth; Geertz, 1994) of the inner workings of partnerships between researchers and practitioners exist in peer-reviewed, academic publications. Consequently, there remains much to learn about the theoretical underpinnings and dynamics inherent in such partnerships (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). To address this gap, this paper provides an in-depth examination of the Youth Data Archive (YDA) research alliance between the Redwood City School District’s full-service community schools and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education. This case analysis seeks to identify strategies that facilitate working relations between university researchers, school practitioners, and community stakeholders; describe the complexities in mobilizing research for action; and demonstrate how linking data can bridge institutional silos and strengthen relations among youth-serving organizations. This essay aims to enrich the literature with real-life evidence, encourage

inquiry about the processes of research–practice partnerships, and show how collaborative and iterative research designs can facilitate change.

In what follows, I first provide background information about research–practice partnerships and the collaboration between the Gardner Center and Redwood City’s community schools. I explain the different stages of the YDA research approach, which is a design–build–modify method of engaging researchers and practitioners at each stage of the partnership (McLaughlin & London, 2013). I draw upon the work of Coburn and colleagues (2013) who characterize the YDA as a cross-sector research alliance among youth-serving institutions from diverse sectors including education, health, and human services. Next, I describe how years of examining linked, longitudinal student-level data and engaging in collaborative research practices focused efforts on improving families’ engagement with their children’s learning. Following this, I reflect on the iterative nature of the YDA approach and remark how it bridges institutional silos and provides a foundation for the social processes that influence how data are mobilized to reform practice and policy. Finally, I conclude the paper by noting the contributions and shortcomings of this single case examination.

Background

Characteristics of Research–Practice Partnerships

Research–practice partnerships shift conventional notions of the research process in different ways. In these partnerships, researchers work alongside educators to determine the research aims, data collection methods, and how to utilize findings to address relevant issues of interest (Coburn et al., 2013). While there is some give-and-take when it comes to the focus of the research, participants in research–practice partnerships mutually benefit from engaging in the process and are afforded opportunities to address specific priorities and concerns—whether it is school administrators helping teachers improve their instructional practice or researchers validating their theories with data (Coburn et al., 2013; Isenberg, Loomis, Humphreys, & Maton, 2004).

Some research–practice partnerships are interdisciplinary in nature and bring together professionals from diverse sectors with distinct skillsets and orientations (Coburn et al., 2013). These cross-sector relationships allow partners to achieve some degree of fluency in one another’s customs, organizational language, and ways of working (Miller, 2007; Riger et al., 2004). Since there is communal leadership and control in research–practice partnerships, stakeholders are equally accountable for the successes and failures of their alliance and share responsibility for resolving tensions and conflicts that inevitably arise (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Fetterman, Rodríguez-Campos, Wandersman, & O’Sullivan, 2014; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004).

Research–practice partnerships are designed to address local problems of practice and policy (Coburn et al., 2013; Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). By tackling community issues and concerns, findings are more likely to be seen as meaningful and actionable (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Research–practice partnerships pay careful attention to culture, power dynamics, and “ecological resources and constraints” (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014, p. 19), as these dimensions influence the implementation and efficacy of proposed solutions (Boothroyd, Fawcett, & Foster-Fishman, 2004). Conducting culturally anchored research (Keys, McMahan, Sánchez, & Abdul-Adil, 2004), which acknowledges and respects the lived experiences of community partners, is especially critical when partnering with individuals who have experienced marginalization because of their citizenship status, ethnicity, or socioeconomic standing (Wandersman et al., 2004).

Given the intentional design of research–practice partnerships, they involve careful planning of who will be involved in the project and how activities and responsibilities will be distributed and monitored (Coburn et al., 2013). Because alliances are longstanding, it is almost certain that course corrections will be necessary at some point in the partnership; open and frequent communication is essential to maintain focus and progress and to promote lasting commitment despite the obstacles that may arise.

The Gardner Center

Founded in 2000, the Gardner Center works in partnership with a wide array of agencies and institutions—from school districts to nonprofit organizations—to pursue actionable research that bolsters the lives of young people, their families, and the communities in which they live (McLaughlin & London, 2013). The Gardner Center considers all aspects of youth development: cognitive, physical, social, and emotional. Researchers apply a tri-level framework and focus on the interactions among the embedded individual (youth/student), setting (classroom/school/program), and system (district/community) levels, and how changes at one level affect others. The Gardner Center also seeks to build the capacity of partners to develop researchable questions, collect and analyze data, and use findings to improve programs, practices, and policies that serve youth and families.

The Redwood City School District’s Full-Service Community Schools

As a longtime partner of the Gardner Center, the Redwood City School District (RCSD) operates a total of 17 schools and serves about 9,000 students (Grades K–8). Roughly 46% of RCSD’s students are designated as English learners, 73% identify as Hispanic/Latino, and 51% come from economically

disadvantaged households. Currently, there are seven full-service community school sites in Redwood City. With the school as the central hub, community schools provide students and families an integrated and comprehensive system of programs and supports including healthcare, mental health counseling, food aid, and enrichment opportunities. Redwood City's community schools also work closely with families, developing their leadership skills and encouraging them to take greater part in decision-making (Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016). Through strategic partnerships with community-based agencies and providers, community schools help students graduate ready for college, career, and productive citizenship (Dryfoos, 2005; Samberg & Sheeran, 2000; Shah, Brink, London, Masur, & Quihuis, 2009). Focusing on the needs of the whole child, community schools aim to remove barriers to supports, rectify the problem of service fragmentation, and encourage collaboration among educators and community partners (Blank & Berg, 2006; Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012; Dryfoos & Quinn, 2007; Kronick, 2005).

The decision to establish community schools in Redwood City grew out of an extended history of collaboration among school district, city, and county leaders (Gerstein & Christensen, 2013). Through a collective body known as Redwood City 2020, leaders came together in 1995 to promote youth development and education efforts by first creating Family Resource Centers and then scaling them to be full-service community schools.

The Youth Data Archive Research Process

With the wide array of programs and providers operating in community schools, there was an increasing need to collect and analyze students' information, including their academic performance and participation in programs and services. Launched in 2005, the Youth Data Archive (YDA) emerged from the Gardner Center's partnership with Redwood City 2020. The YDA is an integrated data system and a collaborative research process designed to address questions that no single agency can answer on its own (McLaughlin & London, 2013; McLaughlin & O'Brien-Strain, 2008). The YDA is stored on the Stanford campus under strict security protocols. It contains student records from multiple sources including school districts, county offices of education, and county health departments (Nelson et al., 2015). By linking data over time across different sectors, partners including service providers, school practitioners, and other youth-serving professionals can develop common goals, streamline activities, and evaluate the reach and efficacy of their efforts (London & McLaughlin, 2014; McLaughlin & London, 2013).

Using linked student-level data in the YDA, Gardner Center researchers in 2007 began investigating the extent to which community school programming

shaped students’ achievement and attendance (Gerstein & Christensen, 2013). Below, I identify iterative practices used in three stages of the YDA process: start-up activities, analysis and early reporting, and dissemination and action (see Figure 1).

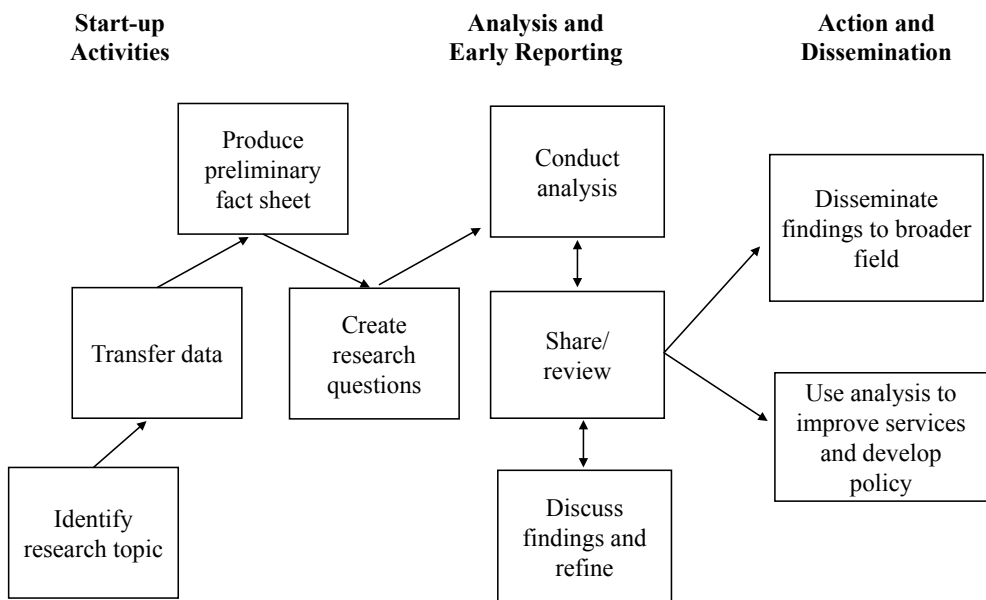


Figure 1. The Youth Data Archive research process (adapted from McLaughlin & London, 2013).

Start-Up Activities

RCSD’s community schools offer nearly 100 programs to students and families in partnership with community-based organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club and Citizen Schools. These programs are categorized into three strategy areas: family engagement, extended learning, and social support services. Using an online database called CitySpan, program participation records for students and families are logged by service providers, district employees, and other professionals. At the close of each school year, Gardner Center researchers extract records from CitySpan and organize them for analysis. During this period, researchers also gather students’ administrative records for that school year including their attendance, grades, disciplinary infractions, and demographic information. Using a unique student-level identifier, youths’ participation and administrative records are linked and uploaded into the YDA. This identifier allows researchers to track individual-level participation over time; however, data are always reported in the aggregate to protect students’ identities and privacy.

Analysis and Early Reporting

After organizing the data and conducting preliminary analyses, an internal *Factsheet* is shared and discussed with district leaders. These briefings are designed to ensure that early results are consistent with practitioners' experiences and understanding of the data. These meetings also give district leaders the chance to process the potential implications of the study's findings, which is critical as researchers and school officials have different accountabilities when it comes to data and research (Evans et al., 2001).

Following the discussion of preliminary data trends, relevant and actionable research questions are co-constructed with partners. Past questions using the YDA have included the following examples: "What are the demographic characteristics of students who participate and do not participate in community school programs?" and "How does taking part in a single or combination of programs influence students' educational outcomes such as their attendance and English language proficiency?"

After a more thorough analysis of the data, Gardner Center researchers compile and distribute internally a comprehensive report known as an *Issue Brief*. Shortly thereafter, researchers convene the district's community school director and superintendent to discuss the results and solicit feedback. After these discussions, researchers revise and prepare the *Issue Brief* for wider release including publication on the Gardner Center's website. Researchers also compose an executive summary known as a *Snapshot*. Unlike academic-facing publications, both the *Issue Brief* and *Snapshot* are meant for a broad audience and are intentionally written in a succinct and accessible manner so that administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders can quickly learn about the findings and relate them back to their work.

Dissemination and Action

Following the release of the *Issue Brief* and *Snapshot*, a series of *Data Talks* are arranged. These *Data Talks*, which are led by Gardner Center researchers, assemble together the community school coordinators and administrators, district officials, service providers, and other partners. During these briefings, researchers present key takeaways of the study, provide relevant handouts (e.g., one-page data analyses for each community school), and pose discussion questions known as *Considerations for Practice* to stimulate dialogue about how findings may be used for action. Past discussion questions have included: "How will you take these research findings back to your school, teachers, parents, and students" and "What do these findings mean for our collective practice?" Creating a forum for partners to deliberate the implications of the research helps build the local knowledge base, which, in turn, can guide efforts at the district and community schools.

With the approval of partners, Gardner Center researchers, during the dissemination and action period, draft formal manuscripts for peer-reviewed publications and paper proposals for professional gatherings such as the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Obtaining the consent of partners for publically facing documents fosters trust and strengthens the sense of mutualism in the collaboration (Coburn et al., 2013).

In all, the collaborative and iterative practices that undergird the YDA approach foster joint ownership and accountability, reflect the importance of acknowledging the know-how and experience of community partners, and ensure that analyses are meaningful and useful (Coburn et al., 2013; Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). In the next section, I describe how the YDA approach brought greater attention to family engagement as an important strategy in helping community school students succeed in Redwood City.

Mobilizing Research for Action

Positive Associations Between Family Engagement and Students' Outcomes

After years of linking and analyzing student-level data in the YDA, researchers had accumulated a significant local knowledge base about the influence of community school programming on students' outcomes. Evidence suggested that, each year, these community schools reached an ever-increasing number of students and families—many of whom came from low-income backgrounds and in need of supports and services such as mental health counseling and food aid. Further, based on a series of predictive statistical models that accounted for the influence of demographic factors, researchers also found that students whose families were involved in family engagement opportunities on a regular basis for three or more years exhibited greater attendance and achievement when compared to youth with less-involved families (Biag & Castrechni, 2016). These findings are similar to those found in prior studies of family engagement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005) and first emerged in the 2009–10 school year; subsequent analyses have produced the same results (Biag & Castrechini, 2014; Castrechini, 2011).

Toward a Deeper Understanding of Family Engagement

The positive results associated with family engagement provoked discussion among researchers, district leaders, and community school personnel. Practitioners and researchers alike wanted to learn more about how family engagement strategies were being implemented and experienced across the

community school sites. Thus, in the 2011–12 school year, the Gardner Center secured funding to support a complementary qualitative study to generate more nuanced understanding about stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of family engagement strategies and practices in the community schools.

For the qualitative study, researchers conducted a series of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with families, students, teachers, administrators, and other relevant school personnel. Findings revealed that a majority of respondents shared the belief that family engagement was critical to students' emotional well-being. Yet family engagement was perceived in distinct ways. While families viewed family engagement as occurring at home, school personnel operationalized family engagement within the school setting and focused on how parents could interact more with the school or with their children in school-based activities (Westrich & Strobel, 2013); this finding is consistent with other studies (e.g., Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014; Vera et al., 2012). Despite these varying viewpoints, parents and school staff agreed that cultural and language barriers, among other factors, impeded some families' participation in their children's schooling.

The use of qualitative methods allowed families to provide important context and meaning to the quantitative data. These methods permitted families to express their experiences, both good and bad, with the educational system in Redwood City. The discussions among school personnel which ensued following the publication of the study's findings suggested that the study raised consciousness about the levels and types of opportunities afforded to historically underserved Hispanic/Latino families (Harper et al., 2004). This is critical, as partnerships with marginalized populations are often vulnerable to power and relationship dynamics. Past research indicates that members of low-income and minority communities have felt exploited by some university researchers who have used research findings to mostly advance themselves through scholarly publications, leaving the community with no direct benefit (Pellegrino & Donovan, 2003; Roderick & Easton, 2007).

Using Data to Inform Change

Results from the qualitative study, along with accumulating evidence from years of quantitative analyses, affirmed that family engagement was important for students' success. The findings motivated community school leadership to further their efforts on engaging families. For instance, the community schools adopted the Parent Teacher Association's national standards to guide their family–school partnership approach. These standards stress the principles of collaboration, equity, shared decision-making, and active communication among parents and educators. Teachers and community school staff also

partnered with other institutions such as the Sobrato Family Foundation's Early Academic Language program to help families support their children's language and literacy development at home. Additionally, staff increased their efforts in *Socios for Success*, a training series designed to build capacity among administrators, educators, and families to increase school–family–community partnerships.

Key Reflections

Partnerships between K–12 systems and educational researchers are highly complex, require great effort, and can entail numerous challenges (Coburn et al., 2013; Walsh & Backe, 2013). Developing mutually beneficial alliances that produce usable knowledge necessitate time, resources, and patience. In this section, I provide key reflections on the YDA strategies used in the research–practice partnership between the Gardner Center and Redwood City's community schools. First, I utilize a community knowledge development framework (Boothroyd et al., 2004) to note the equally valuable contributions that researchers and practitioners bring to research–practice partnerships (see Figure 2). Then I discuss how the YDA approach bridges institutional silos and strengthens relations among youth-serving organizations. Lastly, I remark how the YDA approach provides a structure and foundation for the complex social processes that frequently shape how data and research are mobilized for action.

Integrating Research and Experiential Knowledge

The role of evidence in facilitating change is an integral part of research–practice alliances. Boothroyd et al.'s (2004) model shows that while the “scientific” or research-based knowledge generated from the examination of data is essential, experiential knowledge and the usefulness of the research to community partners is equally important. The professional know-how of district partners and their understanding of students, families, and the environments in which they live can help determine whether particular solutions or interventions would work under particular conditions in the local context. Practitioners' knowledge of school and community conditions (e.g., gentrification), along with their first-hand experience with student issues (e.g., chronic absence), provide invaluable context to findings yielded from scientific methods. This interaction between research and experiential knowledge suggests the need for research–practice partnerships to have an inclusive view of all types of evidence and to balance rigor with relevance (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014); doing so will certify that the knowledge produced is attuned to the needs of the community.

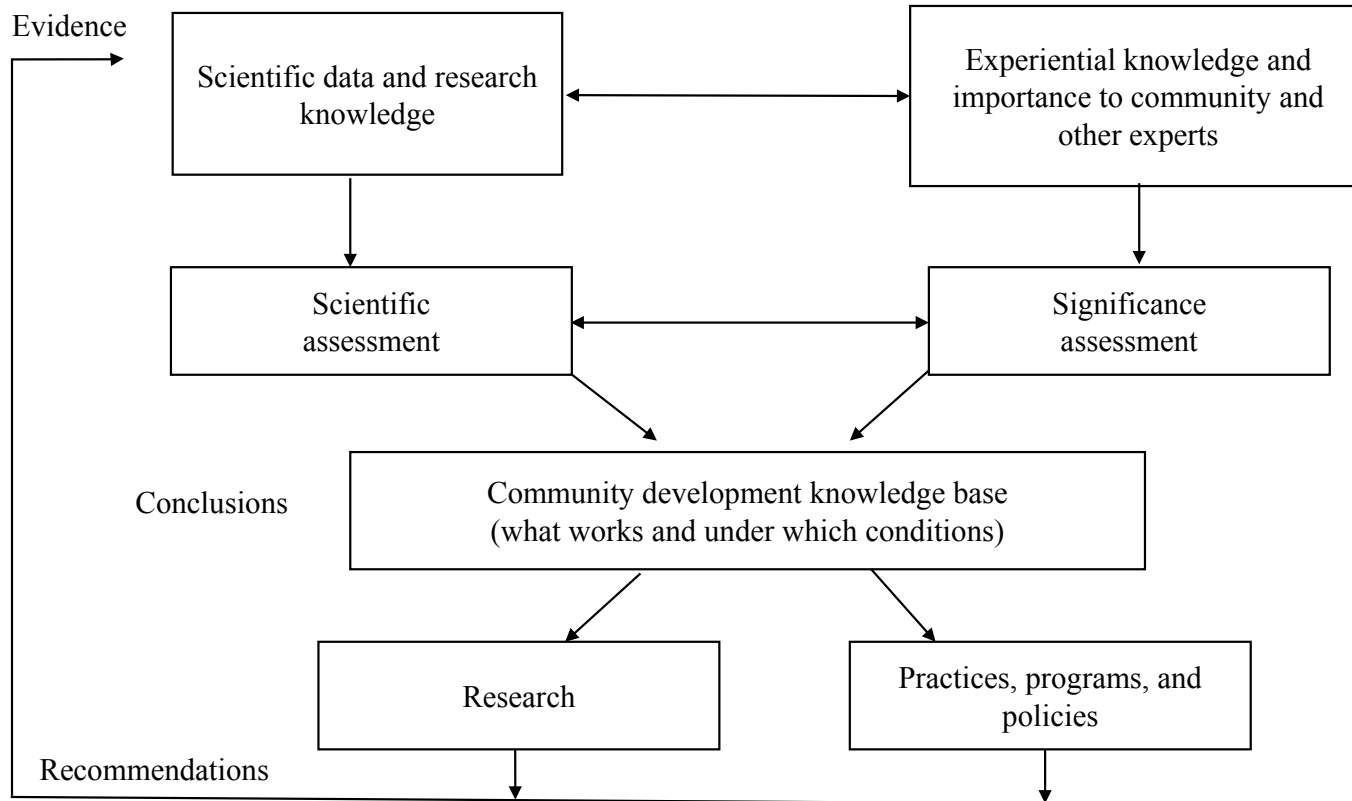


Figure 2. A framework for enhancing the knowledge base in community development (adapted from Boothroyd, Fawcett, & Foster-Fishman, 2004).

The iterative and collaborative practices of the YDA approach promote a sense of trust and respect (Coburn et al., 2013). These practices include reviewing early findings with educators, producing internal *Factsheets* for discussion and feedback, and facilitating structured opportunities for partners to deliberate the research, make sense of the facts, and vet all publications before they are released. These methods affirm that both researcher and practitioner know-how are integral to the productivity and success of the partnership. The iterative practices described in this essay may be replicated in similar cross-sector alliances and even embedded within the organizational systems, practices, and cultures of collaborating agencies. Still, it is important to acknowledge that such methods can be mediated or moderated by contextual factors including personnel shifts, budget cuts, and even federal policy influences such as the adoption of Common Core State Standards. Given the dynamic nature of collaborative practice, the influence of these external factors will wax and wane as partnerships grow and evolve.

Supporting a Youth-Sector Approach Through Data Linking and Iterative Research Practices

Joining up student-level information in the YDA unified stakeholders around a single focus: the community's youth (London & McLaughlin, 2013; Nelson et al., 2015). Linked data provided a more complete view of students in RCSD's community schools, especially as many of them take part in a wide array of programs and supports within and outside of school. Past studies point to the value of longitudinal and integrated data as they allow professionals to better monitor students' progress across settings, distribute resources in targeted ways, and locate areas for reform and innovation (Culhane, Fantuzzo, Rouse, Tam, & Lukens, 2010; Duran, Wilson, & Carroll, 2005; London & McLaughlin, 2013). The YDA, along with its iterative research practices, builds community knowledge, breaks down institutional silos, and promotes joint accountability (London & McLaughlin, 2013; Nelson et al., 2015). The YDA also facilitates the integration of research and practical knowledge and expertise. As partners in this case example move forward in their work, these integrated data may shift their perceptions about the cause or nature of problems and create new understandings that enrich professional discourse and debate (Davies & Nutley, 2008).

Using Data for Change Is a Complex Social Process

Applying research to practice is a multifaceted social process in which a variety of factors are at play (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007; Davies & Nutley, 2008). Because of the Gardner Center's work, the school district's leadership

has sought to enhance staff's capacity to partner with families, including sponsoring professional development training to community school coordinators. Yet it is important to note that the decision to invest more in family engagement did not happen immediately, but rather through years of sustained research attention and accumulating local evidence. Indeed, the influence of research is at times felt through "the gradual sedimentation of insight, theories, concepts, and perspective" (Weiss, 1977, pg. 535).

The iterative nature of the YDA process eschews the notion that research utilization is a rapid and straightforward process. More often than not, change occurs slowly, and this is influenced partly by the long-term nature of cross-sector alliances. Although studies over several years may bolster the knowledge of community leaders, the research may not readily identify specific decision options and actions (Coburn & Talbert, 2006). Further, policy windows may open and close as researchers take the time necessary to conduct rigorous research and as partners intentionally practice joint decision-making (Dukakis & London, 2013).

Practitioners' knowledge and prior experiences, including their beliefs and expectations about the validity of the data, can influence how they use research information to guide reforms (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2006). In this partnership, Gardner Center researchers interacted mostly with the superintendent and RCSD's community school director and had relatively fewer interactions with community school coordinators, principals, teachers, and program providers. In addition, parents and students were generally absent from research deliberations during the *Data Talks*. As such, the data literacy of the superintendent and community school director greatly influenced the "data-to-action" process (Dukakis & London, 2013). In this case, data literacy is not just about being able to read a statistical table, but also having the political savvy and know-how to facilitate a process of inquiry that makes effective use of data to promote implementation of improvement practices.

Earlier work suggests that central office leaders are important gatekeepers who can guide school principals and teachers on how to use data and research to inform their daily practice with students (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). For example, Park and Datnow (2009) demonstrated how district leaders facilitated learning and encouraged innovation by convening educators to discuss data in a professional community network of practice. In this case illustration, the *Data Talks* helped connect stakeholders from the school, district, and community levels; however, these discussions only occurred about once per year, when the analysis of the previous year's data was already completed and vetted by district leaders.

Additional supports are needed to embed strong cultures of data inquiry for school improvement planning (Copland, 2003; Marsh, 2012). A central way of achieving a data culture is to ensure that there are many types of stakeholders “at the table”—different leaders with unique roles and perspectives who are motivated to pursue data-involved approaches to solving problems of practice. As Figure 2 depicts, the development of a contextually appropriate knowledge base requires continued engagement and co-learning among researchers and relevant community partners (Boothroyd et al., 2004). Over-reliance on researchers—however unintended—can bypass opportunities for school practitioners and others in the community to build their capacity to draw on evidence and engage in critical inquiry that advances student outcomes (Streifer, 2004; Stringer, 2004).

Conclusion

Creating and sustaining research–practice partnerships presents a host of opportunities, ambiguities, obstacles, and lessons. Collaboration is hardly linear, especially when individuals from diverse backgrounds and orientations come together to solve complex problems with no easy answers. While this essay provides a nuanced examination of a cross-sector alliance involving a shared integrated data system, it has important limitations. For instance, this article primarily represents the researchers’ perspectives, and data were not collected to understand the diversity of partners’ experiences in the YDA research process; as a result, future studies can build on this case the quality and productivity of their collaboration. Other studies can also shed light on the conditions and supports that build the data literacy of school practitioners and community providers, as well as the facilitating and hindering conditions on establishing a culture of data inquiry at the school, district, and community levels. This essay also points to a need for more knowledge on the benefits of leveraging different kinds of research findings at various phases of the policymaking process.

Despite shortcomings, this case brings to life diverse issues and constraints that arise in real-world collaborations. It also demonstrates the potential of integrated data schemes to promote interagency dialogue and connect the research community with reform advocates, foundations, business leaders, government, and others with interest in data-driven policymaking that improves outcomes for children and youth. As the number of research–practice alliances continues to grow in education, a more detailed understanding of how knowledge gets used and when and by whom will be essential in creating effective approaches that improve prospects for young people.

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