

**Characteristics Influencing the Development of Research Alliances:
An Exploratory Study of Eight Research Alliances**

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Background

Education researchers are increasingly seeking new ways to integrate practitioners into the research process in an effort to bridge the research-practice divide (Bryk & Gomez, 2008; Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Coburn & Stein, 2010; Committee on a Strategic Education Research Partnership, 2003; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002). The recent awarding of ten new Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) contracts by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) signals a federal interest in supporting this type of research. The new contracts, which require the 10 laboratories to form and/or join research alliances as a context for rigorous analytic work, ensure that millions of federal dollars will be channeled into collaborative research nationwide over the coming years. In addition, new lines of IES research funding provide seed money to develop researcher-practitioner partnerships that lead to future work and joint proposal development and involve researchers and practitioners in continuous cycles of improvement as a result of iterative cycles of research and implementation.

The descriptive, exploratory study reported here draws on the experiences and lessons learned about the formation and development of research alliances from the perspective of one REL. It uses administrative data from eight research alliances formed in 2012 to identify characteristics of these alliances and interview data from members of the alliances to explore the whether the challenges and facilitators of research alliance development differ by alliance characteristics.

Related Literature

Despite increasing efforts from education researchers to develop and disseminate effective strategies for improving our nation's schools, evidence suggests that links between research and practice remain weak and have failed to incite large-scale improvements (Bryk &

Gomez, 2008). As a possible explanation for this shortcoming, researchers have identified the social organization surrounding the research process as problematic (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Coburn & Stein, 2010; Committee on a Strategic Education Research Partnership, 2003; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Kelly, 2006). In particular, these researchers are voicing concern over the structural, social, and cultural divisions between researchers and practitioners (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013) and are looking for new ways to collaboratively integrate practitioners into the research process. This paper uses the literature on organizational learning and change, the diffusion of innovation, research partnerships, school improvement and on use of research in education to inform the field's understanding of selected dynamics involved in forming collaborative research alliances.

The historical relationship between researchers and practitioners has been characterized by distinct roles for each, with researchers formulating questions and possible solutions independent of practitioners. In this model, the practitioner's role is to consume research and to implement effective, research-based practices in their local context. This system incorporates a producer-push model (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007) in which the flow of information is unidirectional, with researchers "pushing" information onto practitioners. The major flaw with this arrangement, however, is that it ignores the practitioner's valuable perspective regarding research questions and potential solutions, and an understanding of innovation as a social process (Rogers, 2003). This disconnect between researchers and practitioners results in gaps between research and practice, as researchers may not be addressing the critical policy questions, the findings themselves may not be accessible to practitioners or easily translate to practical solutions (Bryk & Gomez, 2008; Tseng, 2012), and the social interaction required to bring new ideas to action may be inadequate (Kotter, 2007).

Collaborative research models support the engagement of practitioners or policymakers in the research process from beginning to end. Proponents of emerging models of collaborative research argue that involving practitioners in the research process has multiple benefits. First, including practitioners on a research team bridges the gap between research and practice, resulting in a bi-directional reframing of problems and research questions (Nutley et al., 2007) and a greater likelihood that research findings will be applied to practice (Coburn & Stein, 2010; Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009). By contributing to the research process from the beginning, practitioners develop an investment in and ownership of the work and a sense of trust towards the researchers (Dearing & Kreuter, 2010). This trust is especially important given the finding that district administrators often cite a distrust in research findings (Nutley et al., 2007; Weiss, Murphy-Graham, & Birkeland, 2005; Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009). This distrust can arise from the belief that research is often used to support an individual or group's preexisting beliefs (Nutley et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 2005), or that research findings are inconsistent in that similar studies can be found that support very different conclusions (Nelson et al., 2009; Daly & Finnigan, 2011). The increased trust and ownership of research findings engendered by the collaborative research model ultimately may make practitioners more likely to integrate the findings in their work (Dearing & Kreuter, 2010).

Second, practitioner involvement in research has been suggested as a way to build capacity to incorporate systematic inquiry into regular decision-making processes within practitioner communities (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Roderick et al., 2009). Rather than just providing answers to singular problems, collaborative research can foster a more lasting influence on schools and practitioners by building their capacity to identify indicators of improvement, developing practices that might influence these indicators, such as

protocols that allow exploration of alternative ways of framing and alternative responses to an issue, and assessing these indicators for evidence of improvement (Roderick et al., 2009). By participating in a collaborative process, practitioners can develop a better understanding of the research process, enabling them to incorporate ways of framing issues that uncover biases and increase the likelihood of learning from decisions and programs, and integrating measurement and improvement efforts into their daily practice.

Finally, collaborative research may also inform the research process and education research itself by bringing together experts from diverse perspectives to engage in problem-solving work so that research and practice become part of an interactive cycle supporting improvement (Bryk & Gomez, 2008; Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010). In the traditional research model, the researcher does not have access to the valuable experience and knowledge of practitioners and policymakers. By bringing together all stakeholders with relevant knowledge about the underlying issue, possible solutions, and the process necessary to produce useable research evidence, the gap between research and practice can be bridged. Further, rather than serving as a single research endeavor whereby a particular problem and accompanying solution is assessed, collaborative research models such as Networked Improvement Communities supported by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching are characterized by continual plan-do-study-act cycles (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; Langley et al., 1996). This iterative approach uses intentionally formed communities of teams to provide constant feedback to inform practice on the ground, allowing both researchers and practitioners to learn quickly and revise practices that fail. In this manner, practitioners and researchers can contribute to a flow of meaningful and coherent learning and improvement as opposed to the disconnected and insular research findings that often result from the traditional producer-push model of research.

Research alliances, which in this context are ongoing groups established to promote long-term partnerships between groups of policymakers or practitioners and researchers for their mutual benefit, are one approach to collaborative research. In the next section we discuss different characteristics that may influence the formation and development of such research alliances.

Characteristics That May Influence Research Alliance Development

Ongoing collaborative research efforts provide several lessons to guide this developing field and have identified several characteristics that may influence alliance formation and development, including alliances with (1) pre-existing member relationships, (2) the presence of “boundary spanners,” (3) the commitment of members to the alliance, (4) number of organizations participating in the alliance, and (5) research capacity of members who are practitioners. Previous research demonstrates that the manifestation of these characteristics may contribute to developmental outcomes such as individual and organizational learning, collegiality and trust among partners, and teacher effectiveness and student learning (for reviews, see Clifford & Millar, 2007, 2008).

Pre-existing Member Relationships

Research alliances are not static entities, as the relationships among members and functioning of partnerships undergo changes with time and shared experience (e.g., Bamford, Gomes-Casseres, & Robinson, 2003). Just as alliances evolve, so do the benefits and challenges of participating in these partnerships. Adobor (2006), for example, asserts that alliance members benefit from increased social networks early in the lifecycle of an alliance, but are more likely to experience duress from these same ties as alliances mature. By extension, one might hypothesize that alliances that are formed around existing relationships might experience an acceleration of the benefits and challenges associated with the alliance lifecycle. Despite these initial hypotheses

about the effects of alliance maturity, the vast majority of research on K-20 partnerships have examined mature alliances (Clifford & Millar, 2007, 2008), leaving little evidence on the influence of prior relationships on alliance formation. As a result, little is known about the characteristics that influence success in the formation and growth of such partnerships.

Presence of Boundary Spanners

In addition to the existence of prior relationships, the presence of “boundary spanners” also influences the formation and effectiveness of an alliance. Boundary spanners are individuals who are given, or adopt, the role of linking an organization's internal networks with external sources of information (Tushman, 1977). In the alliance model, boundary spanners play important roles in establishing the effectiveness of the alliance such as maintaining communication networks, fostering trust, facilitating new collaborations, and increasing efficiency of decision-making (Hutt, Stafford, Walker, & Reingen, 2000). Perrone and colleagues (2003) add that, in order to maximize the rewards from people who link information networks, the boundary spanners must have the freedom to develop personal connections without overly didactic or restrictive oversight from their organization. Hutt et al. (2000) comment that, “while these personal relationships between ‘boundary spanning members’, who work closely together, serve to shape and modify the evolving partnership, economic theories of exchange virtually ignore the role of people and their importance in the management of interorganizational relations. Surprisingly, human or people factors appear to have remained unconsidered or, at worst, dismissed, in the alliance research tradition” (p. 51).

Membership Commitment

The commitment of the alliance members may also contribute to the ability of the alliance to accomplish the overall objectives and meet the needs of its members. Research

alliances necessarily contain members with differing backgrounds, skills, and needs. For alliances to achieve their maximum effectiveness, Goodlad (1991), in his study of K-20 partnerships, asserts that participating members should strike a balance in terms of overlap, dissimilarity, and commitment, with optimal partnerships possessing “sufficient dissimilarity among institutions to warrant the effort of seeking complementarity in the fulfillment of some functions; Sufficient overlap in some functions to make clearly apparent the potential benefits of collaboration; Sufficient commitment to the effective fulfillment of these overlapping functions to warrant the inevitable loss of some present control and authority on the part of the institution currently claiming dominant interest” (p. 59). In addition to the similarities and differences of members, Catelli, Padovano, and Costello (2000) claim that an authentic partnership requires that participating members or organizations are seen as equal partners, with the perspectives and needs of each considered equally important.

Number of Member Organizations in the Alliance

Related to the composition of alliances, the number of distinct organizations (e.g., number of SEA or LEA representatives on the alliance) represented in the alliance plays a role in the overall functionality of research alliances, as the number of organizations influences the overlap, dissimilarity, and commitment of participating members as described above. As Goodlad (1991) claims, alliances benefit from the inclusion of multiple organizations with diverse contributions to the partnership, though the inclusion of many distinct organizations such as several different SEAs or LEAs, or SEAs and organizations that work with SEAs may make it difficult to balance competing needs. In a meta-analysis of published studies on K-20 partnerships, the most commonly reported characteristics of successful partnerships were shared purposes and goals (Clifford & Millar, 2007, 2008). This finding suggests that alliances

consisting of multiple distinct organizations can be effective if the participating organizations can come together around a singular research agenda.

Research Capacity of Practitioner Members

Finally, the research capacity of practitioner members may contribute to the successful development of the partnership. The motivating factor behind researcher-practitioner partnerships is to bring together complementary knowledge and perspectives, but the differences that make the partnership valuable can also make it difficult for members to communicate using a common language and appreciate the bigger purpose of the alliance. As Bryk, Gomez, and Grunow (2010) explain, the inherent challenge is that members often only fully understand their piece of the puzzle, making it difficult to grasp the big picture. If the alliance includes one or more members who are comfortable communicating about research and conducting activities to support research, such as developing targeted research questions, these members may help bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners.

Purpose of Study

In the current study of research alliances, we explored each of these characteristics of research alliances in the context of a REL and the extent to which these characteristics helped or hindered the development of the alliances. As previous research has tended to focus on more mature researcher-practitioner relationships (see Clifford & Millar, 2007, 2008), this study provides a unique opportunity to explore the challenges of research alliance formation and development. This study examined the following questions:

1. How are alliance characteristics, identified in the literature, manifested in the REL's research alliances?

2. Do the challenges and facilitators experienced in the development of alliances differ by alliance characteristics?

Methods

To address Research Question 1, researchers used (1) administrative records about alliance membership and (2) observational data of REL facilitation and research teams that work directly with each alliance. Administrative records included the names, affiliations and positions of alliance members as well as participation of research alliance members in research alliance meetings and events. Observational data included notes from monthly meetings between the study authors and the REL alliance team for each alliance and direct observations of quarterly research alliance meetings regularly attended by the study authors. Each alliance team consisted of two REL staff, one designated in the role of alliance facilitators who coordinated and facilitated alliance meetings and an alliance researcher who provided support for the development of a research agenda for the alliance. Using the administrative and observational data, the study authors categorized the alliances by the five characteristics described in the previous section, namely, those alliances that are characterized by pre-existing relationships among members; the presence of boundary spanners; commitment to the alliance; number of organizations represented by the alliance; and the research capacity of alliance members who are practitioners. The study team also created subcategories of these characteristics based on the administrative and observational data. For example, the team identified that in five of the eight alliances, there were no pre-existing groups but that three of the alliances were building from pre-existing groups and relationships. See Table 1 for the subcategories for each of the five characteristics by research alliance. We hypothesized that the challenges and facilitators

experienced by the alliance in its development might vary by differences in whether there were pre-existing relationships or not. This led to the formation of Research Question 2.

To examine Research Question 2, researchers used interview data from semi-structured interviews with alliance members. Interview data included transcribed interview notes with between three to five alliance members. These were founding members of the research alliance who held voting power on topics to be pursued under the research agenda developed for each alliance. An *a priori* coding scheme was developed based on the interview protocol, including codes for challenges and facilitators of alliance development. The research team used the categorization of alliances shown in Table to compare interview responses across alliances. For example, researchers compared the transcript segments coded as “challenges” for alliances that had no pre-existing groups with the transcript segments for alliances that were formed from pre-existing group to examine whether the challenges experienced by alliances during a developmental stage varied according to whether the alliance was or was not built from a pre-existing group or relationship.

RQ 1: What are the Characteristics of the REL Research Alliances?

Table 1 provides a list of research alliances sorted by characteristic and subcategory explored in this study.

Table 1: Research Alliances by Different Alliance Characteristics

Characteristics	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Pre-existing Member Relationships								
New group	√	√				√	√	√
Builds on existing group			√	√	√			
Presence of Boundary Spanners								
Many boundary spanning members			√	√	√	√		
Few boundary spanning members	√	√					√	√
Membership Commitment								
Predominantly State Education Agency (SEA)	√		√	√				√
Predominantly Local Education Agency (LEA)					√		√	
Mixed SEA & LEA representation		√				√		
Number of Member Organizations								
Predominantly serves single organizational entity						√		√
Serves multiple organizational entities	√	√	√	√	√		√	
Research Capacity of Practitioner Members								
More research capacity			√		√	√	√	
Less research capacity	√	√		√				√

Limited versus extensive prior member relationships

Every research alliance in this study was a new group specifically configured to meet the purpose of those alliances defined by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). This provided an opportunity to establish alliances based on common expectations, with the single purpose of bringing practitioners and/or policymakers from across the region together to define a five-year research program and identify research that members considered vital to informing their organizations' agenda. There was no alliance in which there had been no prior work-related interaction between at least two of its members, and none in which respondents reported that everyone knew everyone else. However, while three of the alliances constituted completely new

groupings, five were built around existing organizations or groups, or incorporated one or more such existing groups.

Presence of boundary spanners

Four of the eight REL research alliances have a number of members who the study team characterized as boundary spanners because the member's organizations performed this function for other organizations in the region. Other research alliances with a high proportion of boundary spanners have members who regularly work across state or regional boundaries.

Membership Composition and Commitment

Four of the REL research alliances were predominantly composed of members representing their SEAs. Two had no SEA members, and two had mixed membership.

Number of Distinct Organizations

Two of the REL alliances were established to serve a single organizational jurisdiction. The remaining six alliances were represented by multiple organizations and sometimes at different levels of the system. Three of these alliances were composed of members from different organizations but with similar roles.

Building Research Capacity

Four of the REL alliances included members who were trained as researchers and/or who currently conducted research as part of their daily activities. In contrast, the other four alliances were represented by members who did not regularly access, use or conduct research.

RQ 2: Do The Challenges And Facilitators Experienced In The Development Of Alliances Differ By Alliance Characteristics?

Several broad findings surfaced from the analysis of interviews to determine whether the challenges and facilitators experienced by alliances differ by their characteristics. First, among alliances with pre-existing relationships, members engaged in discussion of their expectations about the goals of the alliance and their roles with greater specificity than alliance members in alliances with no existing working relationships. This sometimes served to facilitate alliance development. For example, in the case of two alliances, a majority of members knew each other and had worked together. Said a respondent from one of these alliances, “We have the usual suspects, who know each other and work well together, you won’t need a lot of start-up time, because we’ll know each other and what each of us has to contribute.” And another respondent shared, “We have been working for four and five years on a lot of stuff, and so we’ve been through our storming stages.” However, sometimes the familiarity of pre-existing relationships seemed to be a challenge for alliance development. In several cases respondents who were in alliances where members had worked together, concerns were expressed about other members or the REL. Said one respondent, for example, “. . . well, to be honest, many of the work - the times, the dealings that I’ve worked with [another member], on several different things, has been somewhat contentious, so there’s a little bit of a distrust factor there, but nothing that has occurred during this research alliance work.” There was also concern expressed from some respondents familiar with IES that IES restrictions on content or research designs would limit the research alliance utility.

Among alliances with no pre-existing relationships, perceptions about the alliance were favorable and optimistic about developing trusting relationships but there was also less

understanding about how and what work would be conducted in the alliances or would lead this work. Said one respondent, “I think the clear vision, common purpose, and communication are ... what we’ve been talking about all the way through this.” Another respondent commented, “I think we’ve got to build relationships around the work. And we do have differing opinions, although there’s lots of consensus, so, you know, [it’s] worth doing.” Yes statements also reflected a greater lack of understanding of the process, and even confusion about how the research alliances might function. Examples of statements from those interviewed that communicated this message were, “I feel like I see the trees when they pop up in front of me, but I’m not seeing the forest right now,” and “Okay, if I were going to rate my understanding of the purpose of the research alliances, I’m pretty clear. The way that it’s working, I am absolutely confused about.” We identified no such statements from respondents from groups whose members had worked together in other contexts.

Second, boundary spanners play an important role in alliances both in those with existing and no prior existing relationships. All alliances had some boundary spanners, though some had more than others. Boundary spanners, especially those charged with cross-organizational activities, engaged in discussion about their perceptions about the extent to which the work of the REL alliances aligned with their own work. For some boundary spanners, it appears that there is a sense of strong alignment between the goals of the boundary spanner’s organization. In these cases, the boundary spanner serves to facilitate the development of the alliance. This is illustrated by statements such as, “For me personally, just the ability to network with other educational leaders and various organizations is beneficial . . . You know, I also keep - I’m active online. I have blogs that are utilized and I’m active with, that help me to keep of track what the current trends are in education...and I could certainly bring that kind of understanding

to the research alliance.” A response from a boundary spanner on the potential benefit of the alliance was, “I mean, when we get questions from the legislature, as the example, it [the research alliance] will provide us an avenue of broadening that discussion, looking at it from a regional standpoint that will be helpful in trying to interpret whatever we’re doing.” Said another, “I think there is great alignment between the intentions and the desires of the existing groups in this research alliance and the areas that appear to be surfacing for the research agenda for this alliance. So, I think it’s pretty strong.” However, in at least one instance a response from someone identified as a boundary spanner suggested that the REL activity was seen as a possible duplication of effort, with potential diminished member commitment to the research alliance: “We already are engaged in many of the activities that the REL is designed to do, just limited to our own state. So I’m not sure the REL directly meets our needs.” In this case, the presence of a boundary spanner may not facilitate the development of the research alliance if it is viewed as duplicative to on-going efforts.

Third, the membership commitment and composition may influence the development of research alliances. Researchers analyzed respondent interviews to identify any differences in the nature of statements they made about their commitment to the alliance they had joined in order to gauge whether their level of commitment facilitated or hindered development of the alliance.

Among those alliances that were dominated by SEA members, interviews reflected general commitment to the alliance which suggests that this composition may facilitate commitment to the alliances. Among SEA members interviewed, statements tended to convey an unreserved commitment to the alliance, and the commitment itself was relatively general. “I think it really is aligned to our needs, because we need to have the research behind us. Oftentimes we assume, and in this climate... we can assume anything, and we need to have the

research behind us to demonstrate what's working and what's not working," is an example of this, as is "I don't have any problem with the commitment."

The issues that might limit commitment from SEA members most often mentioned was alignment between IES and SEA and "grass roots" agendas or IES restrictions on research and primary data collection. Said one, "I think the biggest challenge is balancing a real grassroots-driven agenda and a grassroots and main-state-leader-driven agenda, and what the federal requirements are, and to the extent that becomes more clear or more articulate or more like a checklist, I think we'll be able to move along a faster. They too often say, well, we have to do this because of IES, and we have to do this because of the feds, and it distracts the conversation." Said another, "A lot of research that they [the REL] are able to do is not primary data collection. Where we are right now, we are going to have to work together around primary data collection and data fields."

Researchers then examined comments from the two alliances with mixed SEA and LEA membership. There were multiple statements of mixed commitment from respondents. For example, some respondents talked about time constraints and lack of clarity about the mission or direction of the research alliance they have recently joined. Another respondent expressed concern about the effectiveness of the alliance, "because it doesn't feel like anything is going on. We keep meeting and being asked questions, but no results." Another questioned the role she perceived had been asked of her, stating that she "feels that the role of the state and district people is not to conduct research or even to think too much about the research. This should be reserved to researchers who can devote more time to these questions. ." In contrast, another member said, "I think that championing the use of research in education policymaking in our jurisdiction is the most significant contribution that the research alliance can make. The

circumstances which I see in my jurisdiction happening are that most organizations have no time for research. Most organizations don't even have time to look at what the research says, so let alone actually do research. And so most organizations are really just putting out fires on a daily basis. And so I would think that one of the main things that the REL can help us achieve is getting the policymakers to put down their fire hoses for at least a day and take a look at what the research agenda either already says or what problems need to be discussed and need to be analyzed more in-depth for future policymaking..." Alignment with organizational goals was given as a reason for commitment, as was the opportunity for SEA members to learn from other states and from LEA members.

A challenge that mixed SEA-LEA alliances face appears to be that of the power differentials and perspectives of members working at different levels of the education system. Said one alliance respondent, "It is important that practitioners on the ground be part of this alliance." The respondent did not want members representing state departments of education to have a "louder voice" than LEA members. We did not hear the same level of interest in interaction with SEAs from LEA members. On the contrary, in one instance an alliance dominated by LEA members and containing few boundary spanners insisted that it not contain any SEA members as some members considered that this would limit open conversation.

Finally, those alliances which were predominately composed of LEA members were more likely to bring greater specificity and personal perspective to the interviews, discussing alignment of their own work to the alliance, time constraints, desire to learn from one another and questions about the purpose and functions of the alliance. This served as a challenge and an opportunity to support LEAs. Statements such as, "... there might be really good things that any of us could do, but they simply may be sort of too high a demand, given our local

responsibilities, or maybe just not quite appropriate in terms of our local responsibilities, but you're staffing this work, in a way, and we're coming to it episodically, and in that sense it's making sense to me, and it's doable to me," and "this very much parallels the needs that I have in my district to use data, quality research to inform decision making in terms of curriculum, in terms of assessments, in terms of programs and initiatives that we're to undertake as a district and try to use research to help inform that decision-making process. . . So I think it aligns very nicely."

Commitment was stated in more personal terms than by SEA members, anticipated direct connection to member's work, and implied the possibility of interpersonal information sharing. Illustrative statements include, "...on a personal and professional level I would like to gain a better understanding of some of the current issues that we're looking into, especially items around efficiencies and in rural and isolated small schools," and "You know, I'm excited about over time being able to know those people better and having that be a collegueship, where it's not just about the particular research but a collegueship that we can share. I think that's going to take time, and I'm looking forward to that. I really appreciate the different things that people bring, and by getting to know people more."

Related to the more specific responses to commitment, LEA members expressed the want for more clarity in how alliances would function. Statements such as, "I don't know whether there's a way that we'll need to be working as we go forward with one another that are even in bounds, let alone possible. I don't know what that could be, should be, or might be," illustrate this perspective.

There were also many more statements of concern or hesitation to commit from this group than from SEA respondents. One set of concerns related to time, limited resources and gaining

local support. “It’s going to be more time consuming. It’s going to be probably a bit harder for each of us to sell internally, to the extent that a sale is required,” and “There’s a lot being asked of us as educational leaders in very difficult times, with less money and less resources than ever before. So, as far as managing my own commitments, it’s not easy but certainly it’s something I would try to make a priority, again because it helps me on my fronts, not only my own leadership but also personally.” There were also statements of concern about the skills of REL staff and how researchers might relate to alliance members. For instance, one respondent observed, “I have found that when people who are outside of school districts organize these conversations, that they really underestimate the - and I guess I don’t want to say sophistication - they underestimate the quality of the work and the level of the work already being done in school districts.” The statement, “So I’m not sure the REL directly meets our needs,” also illustrates this hesitance to commit to an alliance.

Fourth, the number of distinct organizations in alliances influenced the development of research agendas. Fewer distinct organizations facilitated more cohesion in the development of five-year agendas except in alliances that were composed of members with similar roles. In the one alliance that is composed of several organizations and they do not all share similar roles, the presence of boundary spanners appears to have facilitated the development of a research agenda.

Two of the REL alliances were established to serve a single organizational jurisdiction. In both cases the research topics quickly identified by members were immediate SEA priorities. In one of the research alliances, the department was “going through a big graduation-requirements revamping that has to do with the whole idea of getting students college and career-ready,” consequently college and career readiness was the focus of the alliance. For the other alliance a member stated, “Well, we’ve been tasked with the development of an early-warning system to

detect dropouts. Making that a reality is a very long, very big project, and we are counting on the neurons of research alliance members to, at this very early stage in our project, help us find the correct path to ensured success.” Early warning systems became the immediate focus of the alliance.

Within those serving multiple organizations we observed two patterns. Two alliances were established to support ongoing national initiatives, the scope and expectations of which are relatively well defined. In response to a question about the alignment of an research alliance emerging research agenda a member of one of these alliances stated, for example, “I think it’s great alignment between the intentions and desires of the [X Consortium] and the areas that appear to be surfacing for the research agenda, so I think it’s pretty strong.” However, the other alliances with a greater number of distinct organizations found defining and committing to a common research agenda that would last for five years more challenging at an early stage in their group development. Said a member of one of these alliances, “It’s probably a lot more complicated to come up with a shared research agenda that represents a compromise, . . . we all have to come up with majority value and very much minority disagreements.” This alliance arrived at a research agenda with a “broad enough goal to cover a number of important domains...[that] gives us enough flexibility to be useful, and enough flexibility to potentially allow us to lose focus.”

Three of the REL alliances were composed of members from different organizations but with similar roles which facilitated the development of a common research agenda. Said a member of one of these alliances, “.the ability to connect with researchers in the region and have an agenda where multiple states are looking at the same issue based on the same data fields, you know, really will help us advance the work. Finally, one alliance was composed of members

from different organizations including several boundary spanners. The boundary spanners seemed to support the research agenda setting process by seeking to leverage resources and finding alignment between topics that could be pursued in the alliance and the on-going work of the other organizations. “The thing that’s made this workable for us in terms of workload is the very, very tight alignment with the three key leverage points of the [organization that works with the research alliance]. And so, because of that, if there’s any leadership role that we play — I don’t know if there’s anything formal, but I think one of the roles that we have played and see us as continuing to play, is that in some ways the keepers of the faith around those three focus areas, the leverage point, because I know they matter to five of the states in this research alliance.”

Finally, there is variation in the existing research capacity across the eight alliances. A major function of the REL program is to build capacity to use and conduct research in region. In our interviews, we asked questions about the extent of data and research use to inform decision-making. Interviews revealed that there is variation in how alliance members use data and research in their work and this variation seemed to relate to individual alliance members experience and expectations for using data and research in their work. We characterized research alliances as one of two types: ones that brings already existing capacity to conduct and/or use research and those that were looking to the REL to build that capacity. For example, in one of the alliances with existing capacity, an alliance member shared “we already are engaged in many of the activities that the REL is designed to do, just limited to our own state.” Another interviewee from this type of alliance said “we consistently use data to inform our programmatic decisions.” These alliances also used data and research language in the interviews, including references to formal structures necessary for data and research use like, data sharing agreements, institutional review board (IRB), adherence to FERPA guidelines. In contrast, a respondent from

an alliance looking for the REL leadership in building capacity to use research indicated “we run fast and don’t have time to use research.” Another alliance member indicated that “we are not a higher education institution and therefore research is a luxury we cannot afford.”

Regardless of whether alliance members brought substantial research capacity to the alliance or not, a common concern among members was the lack of time and resources to access, use or conduct research. Some members have no interest in building capacity without funding. For example, one respondent indicated “ I wouldn’t expect the research alliance to support data collection, maintenance, or use without some grants available. Others showed strong interest in building capacity but organizational and fiscal constraints in doing it. For example, one respondent shared “we’re using data to improve schools. To the extent that we can participate in that, and it fits with our available resources.” Similarly, another interviewee stated “to the extent that the Alliance or the group identifies needing additional information in some area, if we can piggy-back it off of our other work that we’re doing with the districts or statewide, then we’re more than happy to do that. If it is new data that is really outside, it’s very difficult to put it inside of one of our current work plans, then we’d do it to the extent that we got resources to try and do that.”

Implications for Practice and Research

There is a substantial effort through federal funding lines to learn more about the development and maintenance of collaborative research models such as the one described in this study.

However, constituting alliances alone will not lead to their growth and sustainability. It will be necessary to attend to the characteristics and contexts of such alliances so that appropriate supports can be provided to sustain their productive growth.

There is not an adequate knowledge base about the development cycle of alliances and what structures and strategies might be useful at different stages. This study provides an early, baseline examination of research alliance development and the characteristics that facilitate or hinder growth.

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