

Unpacking How Education Learning Networks Can Best Support Evidence Use in Global Education

Abigail Conrad (Results for Development) and Rebekka Flam (Results for Development)

Introduction: The School Action Learning Exchange (SALEX), established in 2022, is a global education network that unites organizations supporting schools, school leaders, and teachers worldwide. Launched and funded by the Jacobs Foundation and facilitated by Results for Development (R4D), SALEX supports members with integrating evidence and data into decision-making through themes such as amplifying teacher and school leader voices, promoting foundational skills and wellbeing, and scaling teacher and school-driven innovations. This report delves into strategies that members of SALEX and affiliated networks can use for enhancing evidence use in global education.

Aim of Learning Activity: The learning activity aims to bolster SALEX's capacity to support evidence uptake effectively, surfacing strategies for identifying and collecting evidence across the education system and supporting evidence use by members at various levels. It embraces a broad understanding of evidence, encompassing research evidence, sector-generated evidence, and practice-informed advice.

Approach: The study employed a comprehensive approach, including a literature review on evidence uptake in education, key informant interviews with education network experts, and focus group discussions with SALEX members. These methods provided insights into strategies used by education learning networks to promote evidence uptake effectively.

Findings: Our findings show that education learning networks can influence evidence use among their members and affiliated networks. Education learning networks typically employ strategies in which networks function as evidence producers, evidence resources and brokers, and/or connectors and conveners of education actors. Education learning networks typically use diverse strategies to fulfill multiple functions.

While the evidence base about how education learning networks can influence evidence use is nascent and not robust, there is documentation suggesting that a range of strategies can be appropriate based on respondent perceptions and existing literature. These strategies include fostering and strengthening relationships, collaborative evidence generation, capacity strengthening, curating and synthesizing evidence, peer learning and exchange, and dissemination and advocacy. Evidence is insufficient to determine when each strategy is most effective. A combination of approaches may be most effective and what is effective likely varies by context, evidence user needs, and network goals and characteristics.

There is documentation and practitioner experience suggesting that education learning networks contribute to intermediate outcomes from network strategies or activities, which can contribute to practice and policy change outcomes. These intermediate outcomes from network strategies and engagement include creation of trusting relationships among ecosystem actors, co-production of demand-driven evidence, improved organizational culture and capacity for evidence use, and strengthened professional learning and capacity. These intermediate outcomes can contribute practice and policy changes in the medium-term such as adoption of improved practices or innovations by teachers and schools and evidence-based policy reforms. Ultimately, these outcomes can contribute to impact improvements within education systems in the longer term.

We identified factors within education learning networks and in the education system that influence the success of networks' efforts to support evidence use. SALEX members' experiences often aligned with those of other education networks based on our interviews and desk review. In addition, the factors we identified as pertinent to education learning networks largely aligned with the literature on factors influencing evidence use in the education system more broadly. The factors related to education networks emphasize that a well-functioning network with key characteristics, such as being demand-driven, inclusive, and collaborative, are prerequisites for supporting and facilitating evidence use. Within the education system, characteristics of available evidence mattered, including whether it is context-specific and accessible, in addition to the enabling environment. Drivers of evidence use included strong stakeholder demand and engagement and a culture of evidence use, while constraints included limited capacity, time and resource constraints, and politics and power inequities.

The report, which will be published in June 2024, emphasizes the need for a systems approach to evidence use in education, highlighting the importance of complementary strategies and interventions across the evidence lifecycle. The report also showcases several examples of evidence use by both SALEX members and other education learning networks.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the important role of education learning networks like SALEX in supporting evidence uptake within the education sector. By adopting a range of strategies and taking a systems approach, these networks can enhance their contribution to evidence-informed decision-making and positive outcomes in education globally. Moving forward, there is a need for more research on this topic and to delve deeper into the effectiveness of different strategies and their applicability across diverse educational contexts.

Session Proposal: For this session, we propose collaborating with 1-2 SALEX members to share their real-world examples of evidence uptake, highlighting both successes and challenges. The session format can be interactive, allowing participants to engage directly with the presenters and explore the nuances of effective evidence use. Alternatively, it can take the form of a structured presentation, offering in-depth insights into strategies that have proven successful within the SALEX network. This session aims to inspire dialogue, foster learning exchanges, and stimulate innovative approaches to evidence uptake in education networks.