What policymakers need from implementation evaluations of early childhood development programs

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As early childhood interventions move from small- to large-scale programs, the partnerships among researchers, policymakers, communication experts, practitioners, and local communities become increasingly critical for successful implementation. The results from evaluations of programs need to guide policymakers so that they can make informed administrative and fiscal decisions. This commentary makes five recommendations for researchers to consider when designing early childhood programs for scale.

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Traditionally, researchers and policymakers traveled down separate roads, without the type of interchange that could inform each other’s work. Yet, as public awareness about the early years grows and new interventions emerge, the relationship between researcher and policymaker becomes more important than ever. I have been fortunate to spend more than 40 years moving across the worlds of policy, practice, and research and have come to appreciate the central role of partnerships both with the research community and with program staff and families. While each has a distinct role, they share a common interest in the search for new knowledge about program effectiveness and efforts to assure quality of life for children and families. It is this common goal that motivates and sustains the connections. The articles in the 2018 Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences special issue “Implementation Research and Practice for Early Childhood Development” reinforce the need for new partnerships between the research and policy communities.

1. Design research with key implementation elements in mind from the beginning

Policymaking is full of decisions about how best to design programs and/or policies so they are the most cost-effective for children and families. “Black box studies” of impact alone most often do not provide information that results are higher as investments increase. The question often asked is: How can research help to better inform policy? While every situation may be different, overall policymakers need the following type of information:

- What program elements, policies, and/or family and community circumstances contribute to positive results and under what conditions?
- What factors help to sustain results?
- Do different combinations of services and policies lead to different results?
- How do the findings of one study relate to other studies?
- What does the research really mean and how should it be communicated to other decision makers, practitioners, and the general public?

With these questions in mind, below are five common design elements for researchers to consider:

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can lead to improvements. Instead, policy-related research should include at least three types of implementation data that can help program administrators understand the variation in input under different circumstances:

- **Program elements**: When designing programs, particularly at scale, there are a number of competing elements to consider, most of which have cost implications and should be explored in relation to program effectiveness. These include among other variables: staffing, caseloads, dosage, and cost.

- **Population differences**: Policymakers want to better understand how programs and policies affect different populations of children and families (e.g., what works for children at various ages, for children with special needs, and for families at different income levels).

- **Infrastructure supports**: At scale, infrastructure can help provide essential supports that contribute to program quality and sustainability. These may include coordination mechanisms across sectors, training and technical assistance systems, and financing mechanisms. Yet, the role of these essential elements often receives less attention in the research.

2. **Provide more timely results**
Policymakers need real-time results. Long delays in disseminating evaluation findings often inhibit the usefulness of the results to influence change. While it is important to follow rigorous scientific review methods, it is also critical that the findings are put to use. This calls for an increase in rapid cycle research methods, along with more traditional evaluations, so that programs and policies can benefit along the way. These early and ongoing results can be particularly important in checking assumptions about program elements and adjusting program delivery.

3. **Consider new methodologies to better understand collective impact**
Today, more than ever, we know that a single intervention is not like an inoculation. Nurturing care needs a life course approach and multisectoral strategies. This leads to new challenges for researchers trying to sort out what program elements or policies contribute to change. As we move from “single program to place-based strategies” that bundle services and attempt to assure continuity across the early years, we will need new methodologies that can sort out collective impact at the population level. For example, in a growing number of communities across the world, policymakers, service providers, and families are coming together to develop a common vision for young children and to establish benchmarks to improve child development. These may range from improving low birth-weight to expanding the number of children in preschool. Rather than assessing individual program performance, these communities are looking across the various interventions and moving to collectively improve the developmental trajectory of children.

4. **Put research findings in context with other information**
Program administrators and other policymakers have a growing amount of data to inform national decisions, including information from monitoring, administrative reports, case studies, and parent testimonials, among other data. At the same time, studies on related policies and intervention in other countries are emerging much faster than we have seen in the past, particularly from low- and middle-income countries. New studies need to be put into context for decision makers. For example, if one community is about to use the waiting rooms of a local clinic as a place to encourage responsive parenting and improved family nutrition practices, it is essential to first look at the research that has already been conducted in other countries and consider: *How was the program designed? What worked and what did not? How is this new context the same or different?*

5. **Translate the data so that it can be better communicated to practitioners and the general public**
The ability to communicate the research results has become increasingly important. Early childhood practitioners and families with young children have a right to understand the implications of the emerging data. While this is often a challenge, it remains important...
for the research community to partner with communication experts to help translate their findings not only for policymakers, but also for the general public when possible.

As someone focused on policy implementation, I have found that partnership with a group of researchers can begin simply with someone calling “the meeting” and sharing mutual interests and opportunities. It all starts as any relationship, with development of a sense of trust, and knowing and respecting one another’s unique contributions. Partnerships among researchers, policymakers, communication experts, and practitioners are sustained by ongoing dialogue and a sense of inquiry that leads both to more effective use of important research findings and to real change for young children around the world.5

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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