Children's Bureau Child Welfare Evaluation Virtual Summit Series 2013-2014: Use of Research Evidence: Building Two-Way Streets
Transcript

[01:00:10] [Presentation slide – Children's Bureau, The Child Welfare Virtual Summit Series was made possible by Children's Bureau graphic of logo, two figures arms upraised]

[Music – up tempo]

[01:00:23] [Slide – Graphic of highlighted words: Use of Research Evidence, Child Welfare, Evidence-Based Practice, Rethink the Problem, Building Two way Streets, Evaluation Research, Bridging Research and Practice]

[01:00:42] [Slide – Construction side, bridge with gap, Research on one side, practice on the other, crane]

[01:00:42] **Presenter: Vivian Tseng, PhD, Vice President, Programs, William T. Grant Foundation:** There is growing interest in proving the use of research in practice. We hear it in the repeated calls for evidence-based practice in child welfare and in many other areas. On the research evaluation side, great effort and resources are spent to generate stronger research. And on the practice side, higher stakes and incentives are attached to the use of research.

[01:01:07] And yet the gaps between research and practice remain. Let's talk about some of the steps that we in the research and evaluation community can take to help close the gaps. We need to rethink our way of framing the problem. People often talk about needing to move research to practice, but this framing depicts a one-way street [Slide: picture of bridge under construction with a one way sign, research one way and practice the other way, cars depicting reports, evaluations].

[01:01:28] It has led us to view the problem from researchers and evaluator's vantage points and to focus a lot of effort on three strategies, improving the quality of research, improving its communication, dissemination and marketing and increasing the adoption of evidence based programs.

[01:01:46] First, it would be hubris to think that the problem is simply about getting practitioners to adopt what researchers know. Practitioners are not simply passive adopters of research; they are active agents with their own experiences, judgment and knowledge about serving children and families.

[01:02:04] If research is to inform their work, then they should be at the table searching research agendas from the outset. Instead of one way streets, we should be building two way streets [Slide – picture of bridge with cars representing different evaluation parts moving both ways on bridge representing practice and research] that allow bustling back and forth between researchers and practitioners and that enable us to productively learn from each other.

[01:02:24] That reframing of the problem led my colleagues and I to launch an initiative five years ago to understand when and how policymakers and practitioners use research.

[Music – up tempo]

[01:02:38] We have learned a few lessons through this work. The first is fairly obvious – we can do a much better job pinpointing who the research users are that we hope to engage.

[Slide – graphic – men and women representing researchers, picture – group of researchers around conference table].

[01:02:53] We could be much clearer about which decision makers and which agencies should inform our work and find it useful. Legislators and politicians are one potential group of research users. Another group includes state and county child welfare agencies and still another group are the organizations with whom they contract.

[Slide – picture of researchers casually talking]

[01:03:13] We have been very interested in agency leaders and mid-level managers. Leaders influence the culture and capacity for using research and managers make the day to day decisions about adopting new programs, practices and protocols and how they will be implemented.

[01:03:29] They make key decisions about resource allocation and staff training to foster success. After identifying which of these research users to engage, it is useful to include them in the beginning of the research projects so that they inform the research goals. [Slide – graphic, research users in bubble, project in bubble, with arrows linking the two] So they are not just the targets of dissemination efforts at the end of the study; instead they help shape the research questions at the outset.

[01:03:56] Many researchers and evaluators hope their work will be useful not only to the participating agencies, but also to others. Thus it is also useful to understand how administrators acquire and interpret research. And their information sources are not necessarily obvious. [Slide: series of pictures of researchers at work]

[01:04:14] As researchers, we often focus on disseminating our work through written products – through articles, reports, briefs and conference presentations [Slide –

graphic of written products, website]. And more recently funders are using websites to distribute research.

[01:04:26] But on the flip side agency leaders and managers say they often get their research through networks and relationships [Slide – graphic of researchers interconnected] [Slide – picture of researchers talking to one another] They turn to the people they trust, not only for the research itself, but also to determine whether it's relevant to their local context.

[01:04:43] Larry Polinkas, for example has been setting how county child welfare administrators in California acquire information on evidence based practices. [Slide – picture of researchers around table] He finds that many of them led to people working in parallel positions in similar agencies who were working under similar circumstances.

[01:05:01] These are the people who are grappling with the same issues and who understand the choices that need to be made. And when it comes to evaluating [Slide – picture of researchers] the research evidence, system leaders look for its relevance to their local circumstances. They judge how well the studies population matches the one they are serving and whether the program is having effects in counties similar to theirs.

[01:05:26] Implementation questions are also very important. They look at how much the program costs and how much time is required to train staff. Intermediaries are another important source for practitioners. [Slide – graphic of researchers and research users linking to intermediaries] These are the organizations and individuals who translate research for use by agency staff and non-profit and private service providers.

[01:05:43] They are an important source because agencies often lack the internal capacity to acquire and interpret research or the research they can find is hard to understand. Professional associations, technical assistance providers and consultants can help them make sense of the research and determine its relevance to their needs.

[01:06:03] Knowing who agency leaders and managers turn to for information can strengthen our work on the research and evaluation side. We can learn a lot from intermediaries about agency's information needs and the ways to make research and evaluation better fit their needs.

[01:06:21] Intermediaries and peer networks are also useful for our efforts on the dissemination side. We can identify who the trusted sources and collaborate with them to share research and evaluation with agencies. Finally, it's important to understand the various ways research is used. [Slide – picture of single male researcher] It is tempting to think of research being used as part of a linear and rational problem solving process by a single researcher, but this is rarely what research use looks like.

[01:06:48] [Slide – picture of single female researcher] It is rare that significant decisions are made by lone individuals sitting in his or her office, decisions about adopting policies, programs, practices and staff development are usually made in groups [Slide – picture of multiple researchers around table]. They are made in task forces, working groups and committees.

[01:07:04] In addition, research rarely provides a definitive answer to a problem. Even when research makes it to the decision table, it must be interpreted and weighed alongside data about client needs, alongside prior experiences, available resources and assessment of the political implications of any decisions.

[01:07:28] People who have studied the use of research over the past few decades have identified various functions that research serves. I will discuss three of them. Proponents of evidence-based policy and practice often aspire to instrumental uses of research where it directly affects a particular decision.

[01:07:47] The scholars find that research often has conceptual influence. Carol Weiss described it as research as enlightenment function, it is a slow diffuse process by which research seeps in and shifts how people think about problems and orient themselves to the issues.

[01:08:05] Like all of us, practitioners integrate new information into their existing store of knowledge. Next is the tactical or political uses of research, when it is used to justify a position that has already been staked out. This way of using research causes researchers a lot of consternation, but it shouldn't be surprising.

[01:08:24] Understanding the politics behind practice issues can help researchers and evaluators anticipate the ways that research will be used and the concerns that will arise. Moreover, researchers who want their work to have greater impact can learn from advocacy groups and think tanks about the ways to leverage research to support policy aims.

[01:08:46] The gaps between research and practice have been pernicious. Going forward we should concentrate on developing shared goals and greater trust [Slide – graphic, cars on bridge] so that we can jointly tackle the difficult and complex challenges facing children and families.

[01:09:01] One promising way to do this is to form long-term research practice partnerships. These collaborations depart from the more transient ways researchers and agencies typically work together. Instead, research and agency partners strive for sustained commitments that enable them to take on larger questions and to explore issues in greater depth [Slide – graphic, puzzle pieces depicting researchers/partnership/administrators].

[01:09:25] Researchers can better understand core problems of practice and the constraints and opportunities agencies face for making change. Administrators in turn can trust that researchers will share their findings in a useful and timely fashion and help administrators apply their research to their particular circumstances.

[01:09:45] [Slide – graphic of bridge with multiple cars, with two hands shaking] We need to pave two way streets for learning so that researchers can learn from practitioners, as much as practitioners are learning from researchers. We can close these gaps; we just need to forge common ground.

[01:10:04] [Closing slide – references, special thanks]

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