

# LEARNING ABOUT THE USE OF RESEARCH TO INFORM EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND PRACTICE:

## *Early Lessons And Future Directions*

The calls for evidence-based policy, practice, programs, management, and decision-making can be heard across many areas. On the research side, billions of dollars are spent trying to generate stronger research; while on the policy and practice sides, higher stakes and incentives are attached to using research. And yet, there is little strong theory or empirical evidence to guide researchers in producing useful work, practitioners in acquiring and using that work effectively, and policymakers in creating the conditions that enable both to occur. Unless this changes, it seems likely that the hope for evidence-based services will unravel—another fad tried and failed.

While there is widespread agreement that research should inform policy and practice, there is no clear roadmap for how to bring research to bear on solving important problems. Michael Marmot (director of the International Centre for Health and Society, University College London) has written:

*“a simple prescription would be to review the scientific evidence of what would make a difference, formulate policies, and implement them—evidence-based policymaking. Unfortunately, this simple prescription, applied to real life, is simplistic. The relation between science and policy is more complicated. Scientific findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result. Science engages with busy minds that have strong views about how things are and ought to be.”*

The William T. Grant Foundation shares Marmot’s realistic viewpoint. Calls for producing and using high-quality research are well and good, but researchers, policymakers, and practitioners need clearer guidance—*informed by strong empirical work*—on how to do so. What types of research are (and are not) used, how they are used, how they are acquired, and what conditions support and obstruct their use are important questions that can and should be studied. Researchers and policymakers have often weighed in on the types of research practitioners should use and how they should use them, but generally that guidance has not been based on empirical evidence on how research is acquired, interpreted, and used.

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Two years ago, the Foundation launched a research initiative to increase understanding of the use of research in policy and practice affecting youth. In our 2007 *Annual Report* essay, we discussed two questions: Why study the use of research? And, what are promising directions for future studies of research use? Our thinking on these questions has sharpened since then. We funded several studies, developed a Request for Proposals (RFP) on this topic, reviewed over 170 applications for the RFP, and learned a lot from colleagues in research, policy, and practice. In this essay, we return to our initial questions and discuss our refined thinking about the answers. We also add discussion on a third question—what supports do scholars need to pursue this work?

### Why study the use of research?

Understanding when and how research is used is essential because this knowledge can improve the relevance of research, its use in policy and practice, and interactions between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. As a research funder, we think it is particularly important to understand research consumers because we want to support research that is useful. The Foundation is interested in policymakers' and practitioners' perspectives on research, their research needs, and the ways research can be more useful to their work. Gaining a stronger understanding of the types of research that are used and how they are used should shape research questions and study designs, so that researchers can more fully meet the needs of practitioners and policymakers. Research should not necessarily conform to dominant policy or practice thinking about social problems or solutions—it can usefully challenge dominant paradigms—but it will have greater impact if it is based on a strong comprehension of policy or practice work.

This research initiative should lead to improvements for research users. More than ever, public and nonprofit agencies find themselves operating in high-stakes environments that demand the use of research evidence. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) included over 100 references to “scientifically based research” and placed an unprecedented demand on districts and schools to use that research in their decisions about curricula, instructional programs, and professional development. More recently, President Obama’s competitive Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation programs emphasize the use of research. The Obama administration has also made program evaluation a priority more broadly and seeks to use evaluation research to “help policymakers and agency managers strengthen the design and operation of programs [and]...help the Administration determine how to spend taxpayer dollars effectively and efficiently—investing more in what works and less in what does not” (Orzag, 2009). In the child welfare and mental health arenas, state legislative and judicial actions have induced public agencies to use research to redesign systems, select evidence-based programs and practices, and implement them. These increasing stakes necessitate stronger knowledge about the effects of policies and funding incentives on agencies and practitioners. Are these policies having the intended consequences? Do agencies have access to useful research? Do they have the capacity to make productive use of research? Do lists of “what works” programs help agencies make better decisions that benefit youth?

The road between research production and use often seems rife with potholes, and this research initiative should help us understand where those potholes are and how to patch them. In refining our own research interests in this area, we have been reminded of the different ways researchers, policymakers, and practitioners define *research* and *evidence*. These definitions are often strongly held and defended, and they need to be recognized so that people do not talk past each other.

Researchers often use the terms *research* and *evidence* interchangeably, either implicitly or explicitly defining evidence as empirical findings derived from the scientific method. Even among researchers, there is not unanimity about what constitutes research for use in policy and practice. Early in this initiative, the Foundation described our interests in understanding the use of *research evidence*, which we defined as empirical findings derived from systematic research methods and analyses. In our minds, this definition was inclusive of studies examining a variety of research questions, employing various types of research designs, and conducted by many types of organizations. We quickly learned that some researchers interpreted our definition as constrained to research conducted by academics. Others in education and prevention science read it as limited to experiments testing the impact of programs—an interpretation that is not altogether surprising given increased funding of social science experiments by the Institute for Education Sciences, the National Institutes of Health, and our Foundation. The more important lesson, though, lies in how quickly and easily the conversation about using research becomes messy and confused due to differing definitions of *research*.

Policymakers and practitioners often have broader definitions of *research* and *evidence* and more often emphasize the need for multiple types of evidence in their decision-making. In their 2008 literature review (published in *Education Policy*), Meredith I. Honig and Cynthia Coburn found that school district staff defined *evidence* as encompassing social science research, student achievement data, expert testimony, practitioner knowledge, and parent and community input. More recently, we supported Jim Kohlmoos at the Knowledge Alliance and Steve Nelson, Jim Leffler, and Barbara Hansen at Education Northwest to interview congressional education staffers and conduct focus groups with chief state school officers, state legislators, school superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and school board members. The education policymakers and practitioners in their study employed a broad definition of *research* that included empirical findings, data, personal experiences, and gut instinct. Yet another definition is the one mandated by law. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002, subpart 37 of section 9101) employs the term *scientifically based research*, defined as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs.” The definition in the statute is inclusive of research using “observational or experimental methods,” but those interviewed often associated the term with “gold standard” randomized controlled trials (not unlike many researchers’ definitions).

This issue of multiple definitions extends beyond education to other service systems. With Foundation support, Lawrence Palinkas at the University of Southern California conducted focus groups and interviews with local leaders of child welfare, probation, and mental health agencies. Palinkas asked agency leaders about *evidence-based practice*. Most researchers define this as practices with evidence of demonstrated impact in randomized controlled trials. In contrast, the practitioners interviewed held varying definitions, including practices that have been tested widely and subjected to a variety of studies; have a body of research to support them; have proven effectiveness as reflected in positive outcomes or measurable changes; come with curricula, manuals, and training; or have specific requirements for training and fidelity to curricula.

In addition to these definitional issues, it is also vital to understand how policymakers and practitioners assess the credibility and relevance of research. As researchers and research funders seek to improve research, are they doing it in ways that matter to policymakers and practitioners and are understood by them? The research community has invested considerable time and money in producing stronger research on the impact of programs and practices. Do the program managers who adopt programs view that more recent research as more credible and relevant than that from earlier studies?

The exploratory studies by Nelson and Palinkas suggest that policymakers and practitioners often assess the relevance of research in terms of their local contexts. Respondents valued research conducted with local data or in sites that were similar to theirs in terms of size, demographics, or location (urban or rural). When it came to reform models or evidence-based practices, they seemed to be swayed less by the strength of the research design or methods than by whether the models or practices were endorsed by trusted colleagues and by a desire to see them implemented.

Nelson's study also suggested the importance of understanding how policy and practice audiences evaluate the credibility of research. Some education stakeholders in their study expressed skepticism about the trustworthiness of research evidence, suggesting that research was often used to serve a political agenda. One example they raised involved the impact study of Reading First—a component of No Child Left Behind that offered grants for reading programs based on research. Some state and federal staffers believed that practitioners' successes with the program were ignored or discounted in favor of the findings from what they termed a "narrow" evaluation study. As greater emphasis is placed on rigorous evaluations, it is vital to understand how they are viewed by researchers as well as the policymakers who use the findings and the managers who administrate the programs.

## *What are promising directions for studying the use of research evidence?*

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The exploratory work discussed above has been useful for helping us shape our research interests and priorities on the use of research evidence. In the past year, we have been reviewing applications for strong theory-building studies employing robust research designs and methods. We received over 170 letters of inquiry in response to our *RFP for Understanding the Acquisition, Interpretation, and Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice*, and invited 17 project teams to develop full proposals of their studies. We are in the final review stages for these proposals. In addition to the RFP, we also reviewed and funded a handful of investigator-initiated proposals on research use. We discuss our impressions from this early work on promising directions for what to study and how to study it.

### What to study

As public and private funders raise the stakes for using evidence, it seems important to understand the effects this is having on public and nonprofit agencies, their frontline staff, and ultimately, the youth and families they serve. Two recently funded studies, led by Alan Daly and Kara Finnigan and by Robert Asen and Deborah Gurke, are examining school districts' use of research evidence under the policy context of the No Child Left Behind Act. Daly and Finnigan are specifically interested in schools in corrective action under the Act. In addition, Palinkas is focusing on the leaders and mid-level managers in county mental health, child welfare, and probation agencies in California and Ohio. In such county-administered systems, local managers are important to study because they choose evidence-based programs and practices, shape the process and conditions for implementation, and make resource allocation decisions. Mid-level managers are also a more stable presence in agencies, less affected by the political forces that cause frequent turnover in agency leaders.

Within these and similar contexts, we need to know how policymakers and practitioners acquire research. Researchers often focus on disseminating findings through short, written products such as reports and policy briefs. The problem is that policymakers and practitioners have a lot of information waiting to be read and little time to read it. More importantly, research findings do not have definitive policy or practice implications—findings need to be interpreted into implications that apply to specific problems and decisions. Those implications, in turn, must be feasible and reflect the realities of staffing, budget, and political climate.

Grantees are also finding that relationships, rather than written materials, are more often the venue for bringing research to the attention of policymakers and practitioners. In making decisions, the policymakers and practitioners in Nelson's and Palinkas's studies sought information from trusted peers grappling with parallel concerns, serving similar populations, and working under comparable conditions. Given this, it seems promising that Palinkas, Daly, and Finnigan are applying social network methods to map these relationships and understand how they influence practitioners' acquisition and use of research. Palinkas is mapping the relationships between agency leaders and managers in county child welfare, mental health, and probation offices. Daly and Finnigan are examining relationships between district and school leaders and within schools. They are mapping the social networks of these staff and supplementing the network data with interviews, observations, and document reviews. By integrating the network and qualitative data, the investigators will identify what types of relationships facilitate or constrain the diffusion and use of research.

Intermediary organizations have emerged as an important part of the puzzle, and Palinkas, Daly, and Finnigan are also collecting data on how they affect the diffusion and use of research. The number of intermediaries, particularly think tanks, advocacy groups, and professional associations, has proliferated in recent decades. There is considerable variability in their research expertise and use, but there is no denying their significance in getting research into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. For their decision-making, policymakers and practitioners in Palinkas's and Nelson's studies sought information from the intermediary organizations with whom they routinely interacted. Professional associations provided information and technical assistance to support practice and policy, while advocacy groups packaged information to influence legislative and agency decisions. It was not uncommon for political actors to want to understand the position and supporting evidence of advocates on the other side of an issue, so that they were not surprised by opposing arguments in the media.

There is increasing interest in partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, and these are useful opportunities to learn about the mechanisms and conditions that facilitate the successful use of research. In education, the Consortium on Chicago School Research is an established example that others seek to replicate. New York City and Baltimore have launched similar collaborations between university-based researchers and local school districts to generate and use research evidence and data. Palinkas is studying partnerships between an intermediary; researchers (in this case, also the program developers); and child welfare, mental health, and probation agencies. As an anthropologist, Palinkas views their interactions as a series of exchanges between cultural groups, and he is examining the negotiation and compromise that lead to agency's adoption and implementation of an evidence-based program. Stronger understanding of what it takes for partnerships to succeed would usefully inform the design of new collaboratives.

The drive toward evidence-based policy and practice will yield a variety of other initiatives to improve the production and use of research evidence. Some of these initiatives will succeed, while others will fail, but both of these outcomes present important opportunities to learn how to do this work better.

## How to study it

The applications we have received in the past two years are exciting for many reasons. They have come from a diverse group of researchers—senior and junior, from a variety of disciplines and fields including anthropology, child welfare, education, mental health services, political science, psychology, social work, and sociology. The best applications show a strong comprehension of the policy or practice context, the types of research evidence relevant in that context, and methods for assessing how research is acquired, interpreted, and used in the complicated terrain of policy and practice decision-making. They also offer an integration of theory, knowledge, and methods expertise stemming from strong collaborative teams.

Where our work has been less successful is in drawing strong collaborations that include people from the policy or practice community. We continue to believe that those individuals are important in shaping the design and implementation of studies so that they yield meaningful knowledge for policymakers and practitioners, not just researchers. For this reason, we included researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in our RFP review process and will continue to do so.

Research in this area is still at a very early stage, and theory and construct development are critical. Many promising applications are for comparative case studies in which the sampling of policy or practice issues and sites is guided by a desire to build stronger theory. Within these study designs, qualitative work is useful for building an understanding of how policymakers and practitioners define and think about research; what research acquisition, interpretation, and use look like; and what influences those definitions and processes. Such work is important for developing strong measures and hypotheses that can be fielded and tested on a larger scale. As discussed earlier, *research*, *evidence*, and *evidence-based practice* have differing meanings for people in different roles. Rather than leaping too quickly to close-ended surveys or interviews that assume what constitutes the research being used, the strongest applications propose developing a grounded understanding of what policymakers and practitioners consider as research and using that knowledge to design interview protocols, surveys, and observational coding schemes to assess research use.

Promising applicants also propose collecting and integrating multiple sources of data on the same constructs. For example, they propose observing meetings in which people deliberate about evidence and make decisions, interviewing participants in those meetings to understand their perspectives on what occurred and the evidence discussed, and finding and coding the documents that went into and came out of the meetings. This mixed-methods approach overcomes the limitation of past work that has relied mainly on individuals to report on their research use, or on informants to report how their organization or others like them use research. Research is usually interpreted and used in the midst of complex deliberations and decision-making situations that involve multiple individuals, integration of various pieces of evidence, and changes over time. It is difficult to expect individuals to accurately report on what occurred in such situations. Respondents can feel pressed to provide socially desirable answers and to impose order and rationality in describing their deliberations and decision-making. These challenges are further exacerbated when individuals are asked to report not only on their use of research, but also on their sources of research and the many factors that influenced their research acquisition and use.

## *What supports do scholars need to pursue this work?*

A strength of this area of work is that it draws investigators from different disciplines and fields. However, this diversity also presents certain challenges. There are few venues for scholars from different fields to interact to build a stronger collective body of knowledge. They publish in their own journals, attend separate conferences, interact with unique groups of colleagues, and focus on discrete segments of the phenomena. These “silos” can obstruct the cross-fertilization of ideas and methods. A similar, and perhaps wider, gap exists between the researchers undertaking these studies and the policymakers and practitioners who might benefit from the work. There are few incentives, and even fewer venues, for the types of collaboration in which policymakers and practitioners help shape study questions and designs and provide feedback during the administration of a study.

The Foundation is interested in connecting researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working in this area. In December 2009, we convened current grantees for a workshop to support further development of their studies; promote cross fertilization of ideas, methods, and measures; and begin building a community of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to better understand research use. We hope these workshops will provide a forum for people to learn from each other and build stronger theory and knowledge about how and when research is used and how to improve its use. We also plan to bring these grantees together with others doing mixed-methods work, thereby migrating mixed-methods expertise from other areas to the study of research use.

Another challenge in conducting research in a new area is the lack of strong measures. Grounded theory work is important at this stage for illuminating the texture and contours of research interpretation and use. As the work progresses, it is important that investigators share their interview and observational protocols, coding schemes, and survey measures; adapt them; and field the same instrument in various studies.



This research also requires sustained funding. Public and private funders are directing billions of dollars toward generating stronger research, but few dollars are spent trying to understand the effects of these supply-side initiatives. Similarly, there are outlays of billions of dollars to develop stronger data systems, but few initiatives to study their use. One exception is the Spencer Foundation's recent initiative to understand how various types of data are used in the education system. Now is an ideal time to generate and insert stronger research evidence into the design of evidence-based policy and practice. Understanding the use of various types of evidence is critical because policymakers and practitioners must draw on multiple types of evidence to understand complex problems and arrive at sensible solutions. Using different types of evidence also involves similar processes. Using data and research evidence, for example, requires attending to the quality, credibility, and relevance of the evidence; understanding how evidence is interpreted and transformed into implications for particular problems; and knowing the capacity needed to make productive use of evidence.

## *Looking Ahead*

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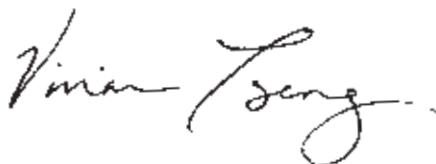
There is clearly growing interest in evidence-based policy and practice—policymakers have increased the stakes for using research, practitioners are working to find and use relevant research, and researchers are trying to produce more rigorous and useful research evidence. What is missing in all this is a strong, systematic understanding of what types of research are currently being used, when they are used, and how they are acquired, so that we might better understand what it takes to acquire and use research effectively to improve the lives of youth. I have argued that this lack of understanding is precisely why we want to study the use of research. Strong theory and empirical evidence are needed to inform policymakers' efforts to design evidence-based policy and support evidence-based practice, practitioners' attempts to implement them, and researchers' work to produce useful research.

Two years ago, when we first wrote about our interest in understanding research use, we were exploring whether this could be a viable research initiative. Would strong scholars be interested in studying research use? Would these studies yield useful knowledge for improving research, policy, and practice? We are still in the early stages of this work, but so far, the answers seem promising. A diverse cadre of researchers is proposing strong studies. They bring with them a wealth of theoretical, methodological, policy, and practice expertise. Melvin Mark and Gary Henry dubbed the 1970s and '80s a "golden age" for studies of research use, and we may now be seeing a serious resurgence of interest in this area.

Our Foundation reissued the RFP for Understanding the Acquisition, Interpretation, and Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice in early 2010. Teams who miss the RFP cycle can apply through our investigator-initiated grants program. This burgeoning area of study needs talented young scholars who will grow with the field. We welcome promising early-career researchers who want to move into this area of work to apply for the William T. Grant Scholars Program.

Our progress over the past two years owes a lot to candid, thoughtful feedback from colleagues, and we conclude by inviting readers to offer further comments to improve this research.

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