

A young boy and a woman are working with molecular models in a classroom. The boy, on the left, is wearing an orange polo shirt and a grey and white striped vest. He is holding a small white ball. The woman, on the right, is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and is holding a small blue ball. They are both looking at the models. In the foreground, there is a large blue tray containing several molecular models made of red, white, and black balls. The background shows a classroom setting with a metal railing and a wall covered in colorful dots.

# Realizing the Potential of Research in Child Welfare

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In 2009 the William T. Grant Foundation launched an initiative to better understand the use of research evidence in policy and practice as it relates to youth. Our grantees have examined the use of research evidence across a number of systems, from the federal policy context to the local level. This essay discusses our interest in the use of research within the child welfare system. The essay has two goals: (1) to stimulate interest in understanding the use and impact of research evidence in child welfare and (2) to offer promising strategies for tackling this challenge.

Research evidence has the potential to contribute to child welfare policy and practice, but we know little about its use and impact. We need stronger theories about how decision-makers engage with research evidence. We need studies that explore who uses research, when and why it is called upon, and how it is shared. We also need to understand how child welfare decision-makers integrate research with other types of evidence. In addition, we need to examine attempts to improve the use of research and to understand what is required to create organizational cultures that routinely consider relevant research evidence. A deeper understanding of how research evidence is acquired, interpreted, and used can advance its production and uptake within the child welfare system. Ultimately, this may benefit youth.

## It Is Important to Understand Research Evidence Use in Child Welfare

The child welfare system is critical to the development of vulnerable children. In 2011, 6.2 million children across the United States were referred to Child Protective Services, and more than 1 million children received services following the initial response or investigation (U.S. Department

of Human Services 2011). The system delivers a range of services to promote the well-being of youth, including in-home family preservation, foster care, residential treatment, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and assistance with housing, employment, and benefits. The organizations delivering services involve multiple governing bodies, different structures and incentives, internal and external stakeholders, and a range of decision-making processes. This system is complex and varies considerably across states and locales. This presents a challenge to understanding how research evidence is used. There is a diversity of key decision-makers, with differing needs and capacities for accessing and interpreting research, and varying ways in which research evidence might be used.

### HIGH STAKES

We need studies to identify the structures and conditions that productively leverage research evidence. Strategies for allocating resources, conducting assessments, and delivering services to promote child safety, stable living situations for children and youth, and healthier families involve high stakes. These decisions can affect both short-term and long-term outcomes for youth. Ineffective risk assessments may prolong threats to a child's safety or result in unnecessary disruptions to a child's living situation or schooling. Similarly, ineffective prevention strategies or misapplied interventions can result in wasted resources with few, if any, benefits to the child. Left unattended, risk and existing problems

may exacerbate. Research exists to guide screenings and investigations, but this evidence often fails to reach the hands of decision-makers, to answer their most pressing questions, and to move into practice.

## UNREALIZED POTENTIAL

Research has the potential to sharpen decision-makers' understanding of the issues, provide strong assessment tools, inform principles of practice, and generate evidence about the effectiveness of programs, policies, and practices (Littell and Shlonsky 2010).

While research evidence holds promise, there is room for improvement. Policymakers and practitioners do not always use available research evidence (Aarons and Palinkas 2007; Horwitz et al. 2014; Nelson, Roberts, Maederer, Wertheimer, Johnson 1987; Wang, Saldana, Brown, Chamberlain 2010). Validated screening tools and risk assessments are overlooked (Johnson et al. 2008). There is also a long tradition within child welfare of moving from one reform or program to another—even when research evidence exists to support the existing practice (Aarons and Palinkas 2007; Littell and Shlonsky 2010). Researchers also overlook questions that are salient to policy and practice. I spoke with five individuals who lead agencies that form the backbone of the child welfare system and they requested more research evidence about the costs and resources required to implement a program, practices to promote the healthy development of older youth, and scalable strategies to effectively avert entry into the child welfare system.

## Promising Directions for Studying the Use of Research in Child Welfare

What can be done to generate research evidence that is more useful and better utilized? At the William T. Grant Foundation, we think studying the use of research evidence in policy and practice is an important first step. We need to understand (1) the users of research, (2) their motivations and uses of research evidence, (3) their decision-making context, and (4) the strategies and conditions that lead to

informed uses of research. Stronger theories about these areas will result in research evidence that better informs the programs, policies, and practices affecting youth.

## UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH USERS' PERSPECTIVES

To create research evidence that is more aligned with issues and questions of policy and practice, we need to understand decision-makers' needs.

*In my 30 years as an administrator of child welfare organizations, never has a researcher asked me my thoughts about the critical issues in child welfare. Mostly they ask me about what data they can access and what programs they can study to answer their research questions. I have not seen an interest in listening to what we need.*

That was the start of a conversation I recently had with a leader of an agency that serves more than 40,000 children. The comment was prompted by my interest in how leaders engaged with research, their thoughts about obstacles to research use, and understanding some of the critical issues facing the child welfare system where research might be useful. The sentiment highlights a striking disconnect between the users of research and its producers. This disconnection hampers productive uses of research, and calls for studies that inform strategies to strengthen connections between research and policy and practice (Tseng 2013). Given the complexities of the child welfare system, we need studies to generate systematic knowledge about what drives differences in the use of research across users and their contexts.

The leaders I spoke with suggested that understanding differences in uses of research evidence requires rethinking the starting point of research and listening to users' needs. Studying the people who draw on research to inform programs, policy, and practice is critical. Legislators and child welfare administrators influence how research is valued within an organization and the structures that support its use (Palinkas et al. 2011). Administrators and mid-level managers make decisions that influence what

assessments, protocols, programs, and practices are used and how they are implemented. We welcome projects that contribute to our understanding of what decision-makers want to know and how they engage with research to meet their goals.

The child welfare agency administrators I spoke with wanted stronger theory about why programs work, who benefits, and under what conditions they work best. They were less interested in knowing which out-of-home placement worked best for youth (e.g., kinship care, adoption, or foster care) and more interested in the specific supports needed to promote beneficial out-of-home placements—regardless of their form. Despite improvements in available methods, there is a lag in researchers' efforts to move beyond the question of whether an intervention works. More studies regarding the mechanisms of programs and the conditions that promote successful outcomes are needed. Leaders also expressed a keen interest in the steps required to translate existing research evidence into effective policy and practice.

### **UNDERSTANDING HOW DECISION-MAKERS ENGAGE WITH RESEARCH**

In addition to understanding what policymakers in child welfare want to know, we also need to understand decision-makers' motivations to use research evidence, and their applications of research. A number of conceptual frameworks exist to help capture the uses of research. Research evidence is used in a variety of ways, ranging from direct uses that drive decision-making to more conceptual or indirect uses that inform how policymakers and practitioners think about problems and potential solutions (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007). At other times, research evidence is used to justify pre-existing agendas or to challenge existing or emerging policies and practices (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007). There are also instances when research is encouraged or mandated for use. State agencies have promoted the use of research to inform practice for children who have experienced trauma (Lindhorst and Herting 2013) and federal agencies have mandated the use of research-tested home visiting and teen pregnancy programs (Haskins and Margolis 2014; Orzag 2009). The system has also called for the

creation of research evidence on previously untested programs and practices (Haskins and Margolis 2014). We do not know the impact of these policies on the uptake of research evidence, how it is melded with current programs and practices, or the effects of research use on the delivery of services and on youth.

A stronger understanding of these motivations and applications may help researchers anticipate emerging questions and improve the utility and uptake of research. The William T. Grant Foundation is particularly interested in instances when decision-makers engage with research to promote high-quality services and strong outcomes for youth. For example, if packaged for easy access and in response to users' interests, syntheses can improve understanding of differences that appear across different studies, groups, and locations as well as reveal consensus in findings (Littell and Shlonksy 2010). In turn, this information can be used to guide the selection of programs, develop hypotheses about how to better deliver services, and help decision-makers make sense of volumes of sometimes conflicting information.

### **STUDY USERS' CONTEXTS**

In my conversations, child welfare leaders also encouraged increased attention to their political contexts. Politics can present obstacles to the use of research evidence, such as longstanding debates about whether to invest limited dollars in prevention or to prioritize youth who are already experiencing problems. The president of a regional child abuse and neglect prevention agency urged studying how the political context directs research use. He suggested that "the most impactful megaphone for promoting research is the allocation of resources and mandates by legislators, administrators, and regulation." For example, recent policies extended states' responsibility for caring for older adolescents and young adults, but little is known about how agencies' leaders are engaging with the thin body of research that exists to respond to this challenge (Mosley and Courtney 2012). Another agency director commented, "we just move the goal posts and extend our services to youth for a longer period of time with some age-appropriate services patched in."

Studies are needed to understand how deliberations call on different types of evidence, including research, to implement policy.

Researchers also need a better understanding of how values affect what research is considered, how it is interpreted, and its effect on the uses and effectiveness of research. Research may help to clarify some of the questions in child welfare that frequently evoke values. For example, when should a child be removed from his or her parent? When should a family be kept together? Should children be placed with their relatives (kin) or another guardian? Values regarding such questions often create conflict. Research cannot resolve such differences but it can inform the responses and the consequences of potential solutions; we need to know more about how research affects the deliberation process.

### **EXAMINE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE IN CHILD WELFARE**

The William T. Grant Foundation is interested in projects that examine attempts to improve the use of research. We suspect there are a number of strategies for increasing the use of research evidence and enhancing its integration with other types of evidence, including decision-makers' relationships with others and the organizational decision-making context.

#### **Investigate the power of relationships**

One way to strengthen the connection between research and policy and practice is to gain a stronger understanding of how research moves from the researcher (or shelf) into decision-makers' hands, and in turn how it is used. As described in our Use of Research Evidence guidance, we are interested in understanding how to leverage relationships to increase the impact of research evidence. These relationships can take various forms. Work by one of the Foundation's current grantees, Larry Palinkas, suggests relationships with peers in similar organizations reinforces and informs the decisions of child welfare agency leaders and helps them to prioritize their choices. As a director of a public child and family services agency noted:

*I let other folks take the long road and weigh the research, try out the program, and generate their own evidence. I shop around. My expertise is knowing our own issues, knowing our goals, knowing our values, and assessing the potential for fit. I want to know if the evidenced-based program or research-informed practice makes sense for our population and the needs of the families in our jurisdiction. To do this, I ask others.*

Researchers Jennifer Mosley and Mark Courtney (2012) suggest that the impact of politics and values is dampened when coalitions of key stakeholders persist through the entire legislative process. A key to this process is the presence of intermediaries who are able to communicate evidence from various sources, sustain interest, and provide resources at the various stages of the policymaking process. From our portfolio in education we are finding that formal partnerships—sustained relationships between researchers and practitioners—help to develop a common language, align agendas, and create routines for use (Coburn, Penuel, and Geil 2013).

An important exploration in child welfare is whether involvement with peers, coalitions of stakeholders, and partnerships increases practitioners or policymakers' effective use of research evidence. How do networks within and across agencies affect the flow of information and what research is ultimately applied? What conditions are required to establish and sustain relationships that can better bridge researchers with decision-makers in policy and practice? We hypothesize that such relationships will both improve the relevance of research questions and the effectiveness of the application of research evidence. We need to test these ideas and better understand what is required to facilitate meaningful partnerships.

#### **Organizational structure matters to research use**

We need studies that contribute to knowledge about how research comes to play a meaningful role in programs, policies, and practices. From my conversations with the leaders of various child

welfare agencies it was clear that the structure of an organization has important implications for how research evidence is acquired, considered, and applied.

The William T. Grant Foundation is interested in studies that provide rich explanations of how organizational goals, routines, and incentives influence how decision-makers engage with research. Internal capacity is also likely to matter. My recent conversations illustrate the potential of organizations to engage with research evidence. One leader noted, “Only a small subset of organizations keep their eye on research. The rest have to keep their heads down just to do the work. They just don’t have the resources to watch research.” In contrast, the director of a community-based organization described their internal capacity to engage with research:

*We have [someone with] a Ph.D. with research experience on staff part-time to review the research and develop interventions that fit our needs. We also review research to develop principles that we infuse in practice (e.g., the importance of bonding and attachment, an appreciation of windows of opportunity in pre-adolescence, awareness of how trauma affects brain development). We reinforce what we are learning in-house by bringing in consultants to raise awareness, and trainers to help workers translate and implement these ideas. We have even done trials to test our home-grown programs.*

What is striking about this example is the organization’s capacity to produce and integrate research evidence into its operations. They use it to frame problems and solutions, guide improvements, and make decisions about everyday practice. Research evidence is valued, involves a collective effort, and involves opportunities for internalizing the research through training and application. We hypothesize that this would lead to high-quality training, high-quality services, and positive youth development.

We need studies to explore how the structure of an organization relates to the quality of the delivery system and the effectiveness of these programs, policies, and practices. For example, the Foundation is supporting Fred Wulczyn to investigate how research evidence is used to make decisions in private child welfare agencies. The state agencies and local districts that regulate and retain private providers have expectations and preferences regarding the use of research evidence. Individual leaders also have differing research skills, knowledge, and experience. Wulczyn is investigating how agency decisions about services for foster care youth relate to leaders’ attitudes toward research as well as institutional incentives supports for the use of research evidence. Wulczyn hypothesizes that context can either facilitate or prohibit research use, and, in turn, an agency’s use of research evidence relates to the quality of services delivered.

### **A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE FOR STUDIES OF THE USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE**

Given the importance of users’ perspectives and capacities and their political contexts, relationships, and organizations, the Foundation encourages a systems perspective rather than studying research use in isolation. The Foundation agrees with a recent report by the National Research Council (National Research Council 2012). The report called for the use of systems theory to enrich explanations about how and under what conditions research is used. A systems perspective allows “insights into the way in which people, programs, and organizations interact with each other, their histories, and their environments” (Rogers and Williams 2006; National Research Council 2012). This perspective demands consideration of the context in which research and other types of evidence are being considered.

Policy decisions evolve over time and are typically made by groups. Groups of individuals deliberate and negotiate as they develop policy (Asen, Gurke, Conners, Solomon, and Gumm 2013). Studying research use from a systems perspective may help to anticipate emerging questions and build bases of evidence to drive agendas or respond to windows

## The William T. Grant Foundation Supports the Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice

The Foundation has a long history of supporting rigorous research, but we also know that research can better inform the policies, programs, and practices affecting children and youth. To address this need, the Foundation supports studies that build our understanding of how and under what conditions research is used and ways to strengthen its use.

We seek to understand the uses of research evidence, which we define as empirical findings derived from systematic research methods and analyses. We recognize that the use of such evidence is rarely a simple, linear process. Using research involves people individually and collectively engaging with research over time. It is influenced by their capacity to access and appraise research as well as their motivations, professional cultures, and political context.

Our grants support different types of studies including those that (1) enrich explanations of when, how, and to what effect research evidence is used, (2) examine attempts to improve the use of research, and (3) improve methods for capturing research use. Funded projects are strong theoretically and methodologically. The next deadline for letters of inquiry to propose a study on the use of research evidence is August 5, 2014. We encourage you to review the resources posted on our website.

of opportunity. A CEO of a community-based child welfare agency suggested that researchers provide evidence to fill gaps created by policy, such as access to services for young children who have experienced trauma. “Children need services very early on,” she said, “but Medicaid requirements make it nearly impossible for reimbursed treatment for a traumatized youth under age five. Research on the efficacy of trauma-informed very early intervention is needed to eliminate this obstacle.”

A systems perspective also facilitates an understanding of how people individually and collectively engage with research evidence. This includes considering systems over time and investigating the dynamics of various components. One such study is being led by Joanne Nicholson. Nicholson and colleagues are developing a tool to guide observations of interagency workgroup meetings. The tool will assess how agency resources and relationships support the productive exchange of knowledge about research within a comprehensive system of behavioral health care for youth. The tool stands in contrast to approaches that reduce a system to a single aspect and provide a snapshot.

## Conclusion

The study of the use of research evidence is a good place to start to better link research with policy and practice in the child welfare system. Some of our grantees are making important advances in this area, but additional studies are needed. If you are interested in contributing to this important topic, we encourage you to talk to leaders within the child welfare system. Learn about the decisions they make and how these affect the structure and delivery of services. Consider the role of research in this process. Articulate clear research questions. Anchor these ideas in strong theory about the conditions that affect their use and interpretation of research. Offer hypotheses about levers for improving its uses and potential impacts. Connect your research questions to the existing literature on research use. Use our

portfolio as a starting point and spend time with the resources we developed, including our updated Use of Research Evidence Guidance. Build a strong team to investigate your questions. Have stakeholders from the child welfare system react to your ideas and use their responses to strengthen your proposal.

Together, we think we can move one step closer to improving the usefulness and use of research within the child welfare system.

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