Studying Ways to Improve the Use of Research Evidence
PART 1
• Improving the Use of Research Evidence
• Methods: Considerations and Examples
  o Interviews
  o Surveys
• Questions

PART 2
• Methods: Considerations and Examples
  o Observation and Discourse Analysis
  o Document Analysis
• Implications for applications
• Questions
Focus Areas

REDUCING INEQUALITY

• Responses not causes/consequences
• Understand how programs, policies, and practices reduce inequality among young people in the United States

IMPROVING THE USE OF RESEARCH

• Strategies not barriers to research use
• Understand how to create the conditions that improve the production and use of research evidence in ways that benefit youth
Improving the Use of Research

What does it take to get research used in ways that benefit youth?

- Studies to identify and test strategies to improve the use of research.
- Studies to identify and test strategies for producing more useful research.
- Studies that investigate under what conditions using high-quality research improves decision making and outcomes for youth.
Assessing the Use of Research Evidence

- What does it mean to use research evidence?
  - Who is using the research?
  - Is the research being used to inform thinking, solve a problem, persuade, or some other purpose?

- How will these ideas be operationalized?

- Who or what is the appropriate sampling framework?

- What data will be collected and analyzed to assess the use of research evidence?

- How will you assess the highly dynamic process of using research evidence?
METHODS

Instrumental Ties at Time 1 & Time 2

(Yanovitzky & Weber, 2017)

This question pertains to your response “The district impact of...”

Q9. To what extent did the following types of information influence your decision for every row?

- Articles, reports, books, or summaries based on independent research or program evaluation (paper or web-based)
- Research or program evaluation conducted by central office staff
- Research conducted by teacher(s) or principal(s)
- Opinion of national expert(s)
- Materials from a program developer or publisher
- Guidance from Federal or State Departments of Education
- Materials from a professional development training
- Informal data collected by school staff
- Formal analysis of a school-wide or district-wide data
- Advice from local education leader(s) (e.g., district superintendent)
- Other practitioners’ experiences/advice

(Farley-Ripple & May, 2017)

**EDITOR’S NOTE (6.20.19)**

*Studying the Use of Research Evidence: A Review of Methods* is available at the following link: [http://wtgrantfoundation.org/studying-the-use-of-research-evidence-a-review-of-methods](http://wtgrantfoundation.org/studying-the-use-of-research-evidence-a-review-of-methods)
Methods: Part 1

Considerations and Examples
Studying URE from a Methodological Perspective

• Tseng (2012) described the core issues that have been the focus of studies of URE.

• What methods have been used to study URE and how are the choice and application of methods related to theories of URE?

• What are the recurring methodological themes and issues that emerge across studies of URE?

• What questions are being addressed (and not addressed)?

• How can the study of URE be advanced?
The Terrain of Studying URE

• Studies address complex social phenomena within complex social contexts.

• The majority of work involves multi-method examinations of cases – either single cases or comparisons among a small number of cases.

• There is significant variation in specific data collection protocols regarding URE concepts.

• Taken together, complex social contexts, case-based research and a lack of common measures has implications for the generalization of findings.
## Methods used to Study URE

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Interviews

Interviews are self-reports that can provide insight into:

- how URE (and other factors) influences thinking or decisions;
- conditions, experiences, and interactions that influence individual and institutional thinking and engagement with URE;
- the ways in which individuals and institutions engage with URE; and
- changes in individual or institutional use of URE over time.

Threats to validity include:

- social desirability in responding;
- inadequate sampling of critical actors; and
- validity and replicability of analytic approaches.
Interview Exemplar
McDonnell & Weatherford (2013)

Question - How did different stakeholders use research evidence through the evolution of the Common Core Standards (CCSS)?

Theoretical Perspectives –

• Different evidence is used as policy evolves through different phases.

• Different stakeholders, with different interests, use research in different ways.

• Policy “entrepreneurs” advocate positions in return for anticipated future gain (Kingdon, 1995).

Method – Interviewed leaders of the CCSS movement and supporters; members of CCSS committees; national and state education policymakers; researchers; and critics of CCSS.
Key Findings

Research use was used in different ways at different stages of the policy process:

1. In defining the policy need for more demanding and common standards, research was used conceptually.

2. In defining the standards, research was used instrumentally as specific research-based recommendations were called upon.

3. In enacting the standards through state adoption, there was little evidence of research use.
Methodological Issues Raised by McDonnell & Weatherford (2013)

• What is the object of study?
• What are the targets of generalization?
• Who should be included in the interviews (sampling?)
• How can socially desirable responding be managed?
• What is the lens of analysis?
Surveys

Surveys tend to be either project/case-specific or generalizable across contexts

Surveys are self-reports that can provide insight into:
• Knowledge or understanding of URE;
• Beliefs about URE;
• Experiences with URE; and
• Practices engaged in with respect to URE

Threats to validity:
• Social desirability in responding;
• Sampling and non-response; and
• Quality of survey instrument (often project-specific instruments)
Survey Exemplar 
Penuel et al (2017)

Question – How do school districts and leaders access, perceive and use research?

Theoretical Perspectives:
• theories of policy use of research
• individual characteristics and research use
• organizational characteristics and research use

Method –
• sophisticated sampling and piloting
• instructional leaders and school principals from mid- and large-sized urban districts in U.S.
• survey sent to 487 districts and 733 administrators
Key Findings

• Response rate only 51.5%

• Research used for different purposes, but most often instrumental (e.g., what reading program should the district adopt?)

• Research most commonly acquired through professional networks

• Individual characteristics related to reported research use, but organizational characteristics more strongly correlated
Methodological Issues Raised by Penuel et al (2017)

- Sampling and non-response – despite best efforts, very difficult to generalize to populations of interest
- Organizational status based on limited reporting – typically, in interviews and surveys one person or subset of people is selected to “represent” the perspectives of the organization
- The need for triangulation with other methods (e.g., observations and document analysis) to confirm patterns discovered through surveys
- Measuring latent traits vs. frequencies of behaviors has implications for analytic approach
Questions?
Methods: Part 2

Considerations and Examples
Observation and Discourse Analysis

Observations consider observed (or recorded) behaviors and statements within particular policy or practice contexts and are most frequently built on interpretive traditions providing potential insight into:

- Information communicated that is evidence of URE;
- Participants and how they interact in targeted contexts;
- Roles individuals take on with respect to URE; and
- Actions and/or decisions based on URE.

Threats to validity:

- Interpretation of absence of evidence
- Idiosyncrasy in the interpretations of actions, interactions and decisions
Observation Exemplar
Farley-Ripple (2012)

Questions – How does URE inform educational central office curricular and instructional decisions? What research is used and valued in central-office decision making? What factors shape research use?

Theoretical Perspective – Theories of policy use of research

Method –

- Observations were part of a multi-method case study
- 34 observations of central office meetings – extensive field notes
- Segments selected for analysis involved deliberations and decisions that were focused on teaching and learning and that were a response to accountability policy and status
Key Findings

• Virtual absence of instrumental use of research and only two instances of conceptual use.
• Vendors used research in political and symbolic ways.

Interviews however painted a different picture:
• Self reports of greater conceptual use by actors
• The resources used most frequently were those targeted at practitioners – publications for educational professionals, not academic publications
Methodological Issues Raised by Farley-Ripple (2012)

• The criticality of triangulation – different methods can reveal very different insights

• Sampling events (in contrast to occasions) – maximizing opportunities to observe phenomenon of interest

• Lens of analysis – a more narrow focus explicitly on URE phenomena and not the broader decision process in which it occurs
Document Analysis

Document analysis focuses on analysis of texts and can include formal documents (e.g., legislation, court briefs) and informal documents (e.g., memos, emails, minutes of meetings) to provide insight about:

- How URE is represented in the process or outcomes of policy and/or practice development and implementation;
- How documentary evidence converges with other evidence about URE; and
- How URE changes over time with respect to one focal organization or context

Threats to validity:

- Loss of viewpoints and input that contributed to examined documents
- Unsupported inferences about motivations and social processes underlying the documents
- Difficult in retrieving all relevant informal documents when they are part of analysis
Questions – How do political actors use evidence in the legislative process to address childhood obesity?
Theoretical Perspective – Persuasion and argumentation serve 3 functions: to document status; analyze the situation, and prescribe a solution

Method –
• Collected 14 years of policy documents – bills, committee hearings and reports, floor debates, executive actions
• Structured coding
  – Mechanics of URE – who; what kind of evidence; source of evidence; policymaking context; when used in the policy process
  – Rhetorical/thematic use of URE – Goal of evidence use; valence of use (pro/con); motivation for evidence use
Key Findings

• Evidence for Bills used mostly statistical facts while Hearings included descriptions of research studies, expert opinions and anecdotes.

• Motivation for Bills was almost always conceptual. Hearings were instrumental (picking among choices) and political.

• Hearings were more likely to include preferred policy responses – Bills focused more on documentation of problem.

• Significant changes over time in terms of volume and type of use as Presidential and Congressional power changed over years of study.
Methodological Issues Raised by Yanovitzky & Weber (in press)

• The use of common research to support different policy positions

• How well can motivations and goals be inferred through documentary evidence?

• Potential bias in the sampling of documents
Status of Field

• The inherent nature of the problems means that researchers need to engage with all the complicated issues that surround the contexts they study:
  • Highly collaborative
  • Pluralistic in methods
  • Pragmatic
Suggestions to Move the Field Forward

• Bring critical perspectives to URE – bringing to the fore issues of structural inequality
• Address issues of research quality
• Build a library of methods and measures
• Creating methodological templates
• Develop research reporting guidelines
Studying Ways to Improve the Use of Research
Research Use

- Richly conceptualize what you mean by the use of research evidence
- Offer an operational definition of research use
- Provide details about the methods and analyses you will use to assess the use of research
- Ensure your team has the methodological expertise to do the work
Tips for Applicants

- Prioritize the research activities
  - Lead with the research questions and offer hypotheses

- Ground the study in prior work
  - Engage with different traditions and approaches

- Closely align the research questions and study methods

- Demonstrate how the study adds value
  - Push forward what we already know
Resources

- Application Guide & Supplemental Guidance
- Blog posts on methodological considerations
- Blog posts offering tips about the letter of inquiry
- Writings by staff, grantees, and others
- FAQs

wtgrantfoundation.org/grants/research-grants-improving-use-research-evidence


Questions?
THANK YOU!

We look forward to receiving your letter of inquiry on January 9th, 2019!

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