Studying the Use of Research Evidence in Policy & Practice

Evidence-based policy and practice. Evidence-informed policy and practice. Evidence-based management. Data-driven decision-making. Translational research. Knowledge transfer. Knowledge mobilization.

This wide array of terms reflects the growing demand for researchers to produce research evidence that is useful for policymakers and practitioners, as well as for policymakers and practitioners to use research evidence in their work. The William T. Grant Foundation has had a long-standing interest in supporting research that can inform policy and practice affecting youth.

When we review our portfolio of grants over the last few years, we are pleased that our grantees have produced high-quality research evidence that is relevant for policymakers and practitioners in areas such as after-school, mentoring, K–12 education, juvenile justice, welfare, and health. We are aware, though, that many findings that appear relevant and useful are not being used in policy and practice. We also know that policymakers and practitioners are often frustrated that research that is relevant and could inform their work does not exist or, if it does, is not accessible or easily understood. We want to better understand when, how, and under what conditions research evidence is used in policy and practice that affect youth, and how its use can be improved. We believe that strengthening this understanding can improve our efforts to promote the production of useful research evidence and support policymakers' and practitioners' use of it to improve the lives of youth in the U.S.

In this essay, we discuss the Foundation's interest in generating more studies that focus on understanding the use of research evidence in policy and practice affecting youth and how to improve its use. We begin by defining what we mean by research evidence and use of research evidence, acknowledging that research evidence is only one of several forms of evidence important to policymakers and practitioners. Then we discuss reasons for studying the use of research evidence. In the last section, we offer some early thoughts about fertile ground for future studies.

Defining Research Evidence and Use of Research Evidence

We define research evidence as empirical findings derived from systematic research methods and analyses, which includes descriptive and intervention studies, analyses of qualitative and quantitative data, evaluation studies, meta-analyses, and cost-effectiveness studies. We place particular value on research evidence that builds and/or tests theory. We are interested in how policymakers and practitioners make use of these different kinds of research evidence. There are also other types of evidence, such as data, practitioner knowledge, and expert opinions, and we are interested in how policymakers and practitioners define evidence and distinguish between and use different types of evidence.

We define policymakers as individuals working in policymaking or policy-implementing organizations or in organizations that support or influence them. We define practitioners as individuals in organizations providing services to youth or their families, or in organizations that support them. Throughout the essay, we refer to our interests in a range of policymakers and practitioners including but not limited to school district administrators; agency leaders; organizational decision-makers; federal, state and local policymakers; and intermediaries who translate and disseminate research evidence and broker relationships between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Frontline staff, parents, and other adults in the community are also critical to youth development, but in studies of research use, we are interested in those practitioners whose roles or responsibilities include determining how and when research evidence gets used by those who interact directly with youth.

When it comes to defining use of research evidence, people commonly think in instrumental terms: a policy or practice problem is identified and research evidence is sought out and used to decide upon a solution. Experience suggests that research is rarely used in such a clear-cut and linear way. Instead, research evidence comes to policymakers and practitioners through a variety of paths, for a multitude of reasons, and is then used in a number of different ways. Furthermore, research evidence rarely offers a definitive answer to any policy or practice question, requiring instead that practitioners discern if the research evidence is relevant to their particular needs and judge whether they can use it given political, budgetary, and other constraints. Often, research evidence melds with all the other sources of information that inundate practitioners and policymakers, and it is difficult to isolate the determining factors in their decisions. In addition, practitioners or policymakers sometimes use research evidence unknowingly, as when a school district adopts a curriculum that is backed by research evidence of which the district is unaware.

In considering these complexities, we have found Carol H. Weiss, Sandra M. Nutley, and Huw T.O. Davies' descriptions of different types of research use particularly helpful. *Instrumental use* occurs when research evidence is directly applied to decision-making. *Conceptual use* refers to situations in which research evidence influences or enlightens how policymakers and practitioners think about issues, problems, or potential solutions. *Tactical use*, also called political and symbolic use, occurs when research evidence is used to justify particular positions such as supporting a piece of legislation or challenging a reform effort. *Imposed use* refers to situations in which there are mandates to use research evidence, as when government funding requires that practitioners adopt programs backed by research evidence. *Process use* differs from the preceding terms; it does not refer to how research evidence is used but rather to what practitioners learn when they participate in conducting research. This list is not exhaustive, and these differing uses of research evidence are not mutually exclusive. Research evidence can and often does serve multiple purposes.

We are interested in how research evidence is used when it is incorporated into tools, interventions, and organizational protocols, making it easier for practitioners to apply. When research evidence is incorporated into tools, practitioners do not need to read and review empirical studies and sometimes

may not know they are using research evidence. For example, we support work to improve measures of the quality of classrooms (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) and youth programs (Youth Program Quality Assessment). The items and scales in these measures reflect the teacher and staff practices that research evidence suggests are associated with positive youth outcomes. When school districts or after-school systems adopt these measures, practitioners do not need to read the research evidence on which they are based in order to make use of it. We also support studies testing the effectiveness of interventions meant to improve teacher and staff practices. The components of these interventions reflect theory and research evidence on strategies that improve practice. When these interventions become adopted and implemented as a routine part of schools or youth programs, practitioners do not need to review the research evidence supporting the interventions.

We are also interested in how organizations and systems make use of research evidence and in the social processes that influence its use, including how research evidence is accessed and interpreted via interactions with colleagues. Research use is too often seen as an individual-level process involving a decision-maker who seeks out, reads, and makes use of research. A narrow individual-level conceptualization decontextualizes the ways research evidence is accessed, interpreted, and used. Research frequently lands on the desks (or in the conversations) of policymakers and practitioners through their social networks and interactions. Policymakers acquire research through their communications with interest groups who interpret and distill research findings to support their advocacy positions. Practitioners access and make use of research evidence by talking with colleagues. How research evidence is used likely differs across various policy and practice contexts and across policymakers and practitioners with differing roles, working in a range of organizations. These social processes are also influenced by the technical methods researchers or intermediaries use to communicate and frame research evidence.
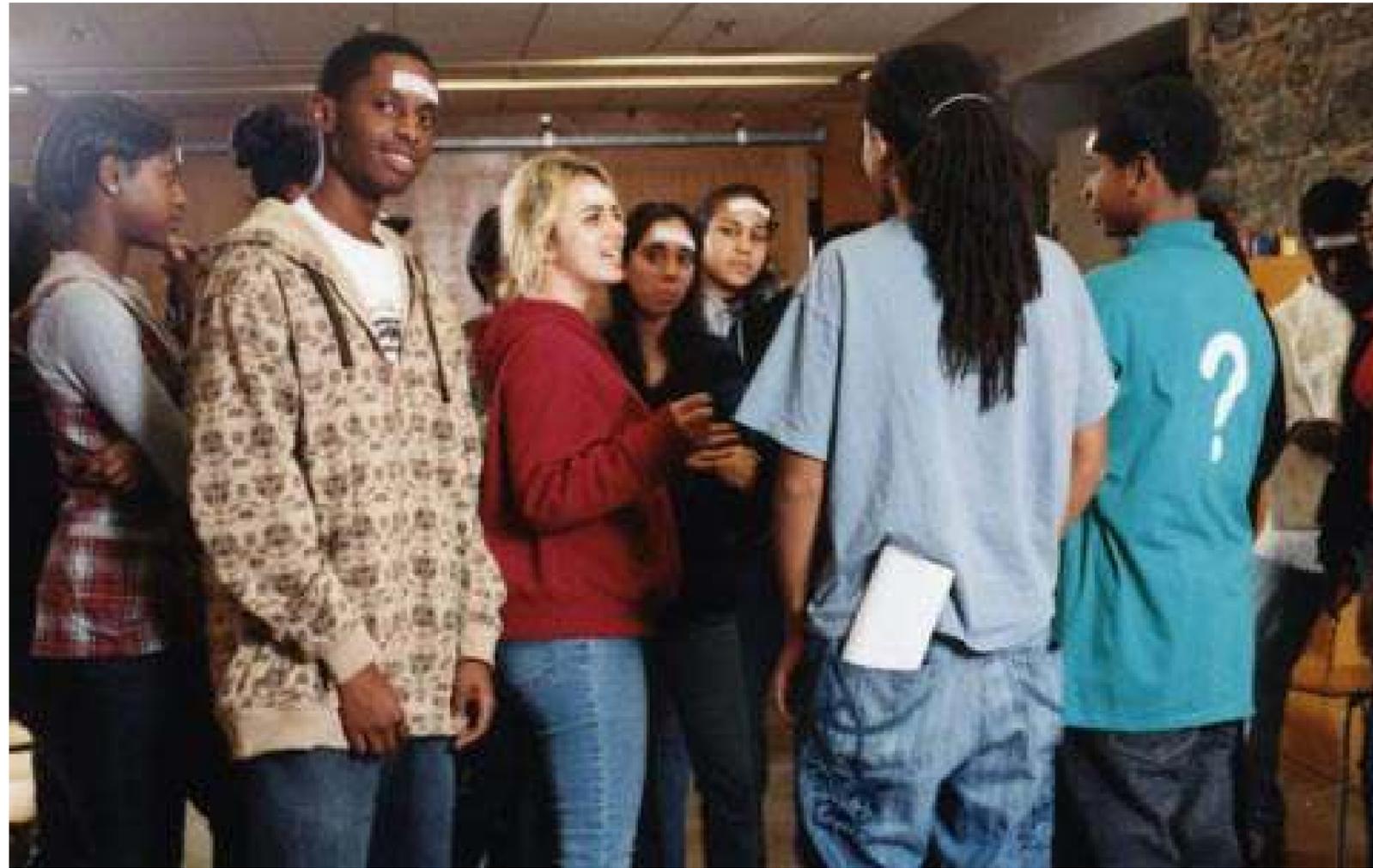
Why Study Use of Research Evidence?
As a research funder, the Foundation wants to understand how policymakers and practitioners use research evidence because it informs our staff efforts and funding to support more useful research. We currently support work to understand and improve youth settings such as families, peer groups, neighborhoods, schools, and youth-serving organizations in order to promote youth development. In the areas of after-school and education, for example, we fund descriptive research to identify staff practices that may promote youth development; measurement work to develop cost-effective, reliable, and valid assessments of staff practices; and experiments to test whether particular interventions can improve staff practices. Better understanding how after-school systems and school districts use research evidence should influence the research questions that are asked, resulting in

evidence that addresses practice needs. Similarly, understanding how organizational structures, professional networks, communication strategies, and politics influence research use can shape how researchers interact with practitioners to design studies, interpret and communicate findings, and incorporate research evidence in practice.

A better understanding of research evidence use should enhance policy and practice. For example, federal and state policies have increased demands that practitioners use research evidence and data, but how have youth-serving systems and agencies responded to these demands? Why are some systems and agencies more successful than others at accessing and making use of research evidence? Studies on use of research evidence could, for example, inform how organizations use research to improve practice by codifying research evidence into organizational protocols.

Studying use of research evidence can also offer some conceptual clarity in a confusing policy arena. There is a significant difference between requiring that practitioners use data versus research evidence. Data, such as students' test scores, provide information on how students are doing and how many students are meeting certain standards, but they do not provide information on how to improve scores. Research evidence on effective interventions can be more useful for understanding how to improve scores. Research can also clarify the types of research evidence that are most useful for addressing different policy and practice questions.

We are interested in studies that include a strong focus on potential users of research evidence, their contexts, and their interactions with researchers. These types of studies could provide much-needed information on how to produce more useful research and support its use by policymakers and practitioners. In recent years, the research community has directed more attention to strengthening research, with substantial attention to "what works" questions about the effectiveness of programs and practices. The Society for Prevention Research created a Standards of Evidence Committee that developed a set of criteria for efficacy, effectiveness, and dissemination. The National Research Council created a Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research that authored a set of scientific principles, and later created a Committee on Research in Education that produced a report on implementing randomized field trials in education. The Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, and the OJJDP-supported Blueprints for Violence Prevention have defined standards for research evidence (and syntheses of it) to create "what works" lists of effective programs. These efforts have strengthened the production of rigorous research but have not focused on better understanding research users. There is little empirical understanding of how practitioners evaluate the relevance and usefulness of different kinds of research evidence to address the problems of

practice and their local contexts. How do practitioners make use of research evidence amid the multitude of other types of information, political demands, and constraints with which they are working? And how does their use of research evidence differ depending upon their organizations and roles within their organizations? Some critics argue that researchers should first have strong research evidence to offer before delving into studies of how practitioners use research. We offer a different perspective—understanding research use can occur simultaneously with improving the quality of research evidence. Indeed, improving the field's understanding of user communities, the contexts of use (or non-use), and interactions between researchers and research users should enhance the production of useful research evidence.

Fertile Ground for Future Studies

Despite the value of studying the use of research evidence, this topic has not received large or sustained attention. Gary Henry and Melvin Mark described the mid-1970s and 1980s as the golden age of studying research use. It was a time when researchers, including Carol Weiss, broke exciting theoretical and empirical ground in understanding how policymakers use research and the factors that influence their use. In recent years, there have been numerous writings about how research should be used in policy and practice, but comparatively little about how research is used. There have also been retrospective case studies describing instances wherein research appears to have been used in policy but few prospective studies that are useful for predicting future research use.

There is fertile ground for expanding studies on the use of research evidence. We are focusing on domestic research, but there is important work being conducted in Europe and Canada. We draw heavily on the review done by Sandra M. Nutley, Isabel Walter, and Huw T. O. Davies in their 2007 book, *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services.* As with all our research funding, the Foundation seeks to support studies that contribute to stronger theory and improved policy

and practice. Theory-building is particularly important in this area because it helps the field move beyond description to explanatory frameworks with testable propositions about research use and ways to improve use. We seek theory-building about when, how, and under what conditions research evidence is used, and intervention theory about ways to improve use. These two types of theories should feed into each other—theories about use should help identify barriers and facilitators of research use and potential ways to improve use.

Adoption of evidence-based programs and practices. Prevention and education researchers tackle research use questions because they want agencies to adopt evidence-based programs and practices. Here, research evidence usually consists of "what works" findings that support the effectiveness of particular programs or practices in improving youth outcomes. Researchers such as Patti Chamberlain, David Hawkins, Richard Spoth, and their respective colleagues have been testing whether community coalitions and implementation support can influence adoption and implementation of evidence-based programs. Patti Chamberlain and her colleagues John Reid and Hendricks Brown are conducting a cluster-randomized trial to test whether providing implementation support through community development teams impacts county adoption of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, an evidence-based child welfare program. This winter, our Foundation awarded their colleagues Larry Palinkas and John Landsverk a grant to conduct an embedded study of the process of agency adoption of the program. They plan to examine how the networks of social service agency directors influence directors' decisions to adopt an evidence-based program. Of particular interest is increasing understanding of how opinion leaders and organizational culture and climate affect adoption. Semi-structured interviews and surveys will be used to collect data on the structure of the social networks and how the networks influence the ways practitioners understand research evidence. These data will be supplemented by participant observations that allow

for a less-intrusive and more process-focused examination of program adoption.

Studies focused on understanding how, why, and under what conditions practitioners adopt evidence-based programs or practice for their agencies or organizations are relatively rare. Intervention researchers often have experiential knowledge of the forces that influence adoption because they must convince practitioners to participate in their studies and adopt evidence-based programs or practices. This experiential wisdom may be useful for developing hypotheses and research questions for systematic study. The field would benefit from studies that build our theoretical knowledge of how agency characteristics, social networks, political and community contexts, and budgetary constraints influence adoption of evidence-based programs and practices. How do these forces affect practitioners' views of these programs, the research evidence behind them, and their usefulness for solving local problems? Across agencies, how do social networks influence practitioners' access to and interpretation of research evidence? Within agencies, how do organizational contexts and role responsibilities influence the ways practitioners use research evidence? What are the conditions that facilitate productive use of research evidence?

School district decision-making. Some education policy researchers are interested in research use, specifically the ways school districts respond to federal and state policies mandating the use of research. Meredith Honig and Cynthia Coburn recently reviewed 52 studies (mainly in-depth, comparative case studies) that examined this issue. They found that district personnel defined evidence as inclusive of student and school test scores, program evaluation findings, practitioner knowledge, and expert opinions. They used Carol Weiss's typology of the ways evidence is used to describe how district administrators with differing roles and responsibilities define and use evidence. They further suggested some theoretical propositions about how politics and organizational contexts affect evidence use. For example, they propose that organizational

capacity to collect and interpret data for ongoing decision-making and organizational norms encouraging the use of evidence are important forces that affect evidence use.

Future studies might build upon this review by testing some of these propositions at a larger scale. For example, studies that sample multiple districts that vary in theoretically important ways and employ strong organizational measures might test how district resources, structures, and social processes are related to the use of research evidence. What makes some districts more successful at accessing and using research evidence than others? What factors predict the use of varying definitions of evidence? In-depth fieldwork in a purposive sample of those districts may further illuminate the social processes of research evidence use within districts and reveal unanticipated barriers to and facilitators of use. Researchers will need to find ways to understand the influence of research evidence when practitioner knowledge, achievement data, news stories, local politics, and other types of information are also influencing district decision-making. Does the presence and use of research evidence alter what would have otherwise occurred without it? Researchers will also need to account for the difficulties inherent in asking practitioners to accurately report the influence of research evidence because different forms of knowledge meld together in the process of discussion and collective decision-making. This is more pronounced under the pressures of multiple priorities, busy schedules, and inundation with information, the contexts under which many school districts operate.

Research use in policymaking. In political science, John Kingdon, Charles Lindblom, and more recently Andrew Rich have been interested in the influence of research and researchers in the policy process. Rich builds on Kingdon's work on legislative agenda setting to study how research use differs across policy stages and areas and how researchers and research organizations affect research use. Through comparative case studies of four issue debates, Rich describes

how research use differed depending upon on the nature and extent of research on issues, how issues got on the policy agenda, how quickly issues traveled through the policy process, and the strength of organized interests invested in the policy outcomes. Research and researchers are rarely influential in shaping final policy actions, but research may have the greatest opportunity to be of conceptual use during the early agenda-setting stage. Later, as policy deliberation intensifies, research may become increasingly used in tactical ways to support positions that have been staked out.

Kingdon and Rich's work did not address policies for youth per se, but nonetheless suggests useful direction for future studies. Rich and Kingdon developed their theoretical frameworks by comparing various policy areas. Kingdon initially studied health and transportation in the late 1970s. Rich compared specific policy debates on telecommunication and health care reform in the 1990s and tax cuts in 2001. Future studies on research use in policy that affects youth might test the theoretical propositions developed in their work and other case studies and involve further hypothesis-generating work to unearth new insights. It would be useful to understand what happens to research evidence as it is interpreted, packaged, distributed, and used at each stage of the policy process. What role do researchers, other experts, lobbyists, news organizations, and other policymakers play at these different stages? How are different types of research evidence used? Rich and Kingdon's work also focused on federal policy and policymaking stages. Future work might examine research use during policy implementation and in state policy.

The Role of Intermediaries. Across all of the above areas (adoption of evidence-based programs, school district decision-making, use of research in policymaking), there is a diverse group of intermediary organizations and individuals who broker research evidence and relationships between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Intermediaries differ in their organizational missions, constituencies, target

audiences, brokering activities, and interest in different types and quality of research evidence. Important intermediaries include advocacy groups; membership associations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; think tanks; news organizations; and funders. Intermediaries often play a significant role in interpreting, packaging, and distributing research evidence for policymakers and practitioners. Intermediaries can be the primary means by which legislative staff and agency directors acquire research. They also provide forums that bring together researchers and policymakers or researchers and practitioners around particular topics.

Given their central role in research use, intermediaries should receive more focused attention in future studies. How do intermediary organizations differ in their brokering roles? What factors predict their use of varying definitions of evidence? What happens to research evidence as it is brokered by various intermediaries? Why are some intermediaries more successful than others at brokering research evidence or relationships? What are the conditions that facilitate successful brokering?

Other Questions and Methods. We have reviewed a few areas of inquiry for future empirical studies, but undoubtedly a range of important research questions will continue to arise as the field advances. For example, there is much to be learned about how research agendas are shaped by policy and practice. How and when do policy priorities and the problems of practice influence the research community and their production and dissemination of research? We also could learn from research comparing different strategies for ensuring research evidence is used. What are the mechanisms by which various research and policy (or research and practice) partnerships are successful at producing and then making use of research evidence? What conditions facilitate the success of partnerships?

To address the variety of important research questions, studies should include a range of methods and content expertise. Researchers might draw upon methods such as social network

analyses, observations, and document analyses to augment the more commonly used interviews and surveys that rely on individual policymakers and practitioners to accurately report their access to and use of research evidence. It may be useful to build project teams that include investigators with expertise in particular user communities and the different types and quality of research evidence relevant for users. More broadly, researchers studying the use of research evidence may benefit from discussions across different fields. We have covered disparate areas of research that focus on different parts of the puzzle of how research is used in policy and practice writ large, but there are likely ways that these disparate bodies of work can sharpen and inform one another.

Looking Ahead

We have provided our early thoughts on studying the use of research evidence in policy and practice that affect youth. Undoubtedly, we have much more to learn. This is an important area of inquiry and one in which we want to support more empirical work. We will spend the next two years further exploring whether our investments can help build a sustainable and useful field of study. As part of this process, we will be talking with scholars, funders, and influential policymakers and practitioners. Our Distinguished Fellows are learning more about how to improve

research so that it is useful for policy and practice and how to improve policy and practice by demanding and using rigorous research. We intend to continue sharing our thinking and additional resources as they develop. We invite readers to treat this essay as a springboard for further discussion with us. In addition, we encourage interested applicants to propose studies of research use via our field-initiated and Scholars Program funding mechanisms. Please visit our website, www.wtgrantfdn.org for descriptions of those funding opportunities.
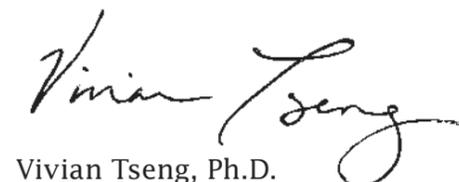
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