Challenges and Opportunities in Studying Special Populations

A conversation about research with families at the intersection of Early Care and Education, Child Welfare, and Early Intervention/ Preschool Special Education.

Nilofer Ahsan, MPP
Shannon Christian, MPP
Shannon Lipscomb, PhD
Beth Meloy, MPP
Beth Rous, EdD
Helen Ward, JD

Agreeing on Terms

- In early care and education we are including both formal programs and informal care

- Child welfare = those families who are connected to child protective services systems because an allegation of child abuse or neglect has been founded

- Early intervention = Part C = Services to young children (0-2) and their families to address developmental delays or conditions that are likely to lead to developmental delays

- Preschool special education—special education and services to address developmental delays as they impact a child's education

Growing attention to the families at this intersection

- New research on brain development
- New understandings of how trauma or toxic stress can impact normal development
- New understandings of the size of the overlap within these populations

Federal mandates the require thinking about this population

- Requirement for collaboration between HS and CW

- ACYF and Child Care Bureau Memorandum encouraging collaboration

- Overarching push for collaboration at the federal level

- Requirements to engage children in CW in Part C

Challenges and Opportunities

- Researchers often encounter challenges when attempting to link multiple services systems to answer specific research questions.

- Yet, most children and families DO receive services across multiple systems.

- Thus, conducting research at the intersection of multiple systems can support an understanding the actual level and intensity of services they receive and how these linkages affect child and family outcomes .

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Case Study

- Please take a few minutes to read the case study on the handout provided

Describing these challenges and opportunities in context

- Perspectives from two researchers working to link ECE/childcare and the Child Welfare system.
  - Beth Meloy
  - Shannon Lipscomb

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Accessing/ Finding Data

- Difficulties Linking Data→
  - Confidentiality
  - Working with multiple departments on the state level, often with different protocols by county.
- Large Child Welfare datasets often neglect CC/ECE questions→
  - No, or very crude child care variables

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Accounting for the home/ foster home context

- ECE datasets don't include measurement of Child Welfare (CW) variables:

  I. Potential for differential effects of ECE

    I. Must be able to **identify subpopulation**.

  II. ECE use & impacts may vary according to home/CW experiences

    I. Requires measures of CW experiences (e.g. number of home transitions, type of parent/caregiver, duration of CW involvement, etc.)

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Accounting for the home/ foster home context

- Families/decision-makers change over time.
  a) Likely precipitates changes in ECE arrangements (and quality?)
    i. Researcher must account for these changes if studying effects on children's outcomes; cross-sectional measures of limited value.
  b) Foster parents are often unable to report prior ECE experiences.
  c) When controlling for effects of parenting/home environment, must include assessments at multiple time points.

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Opportunities…

- Accounting for complexities in children's home environments, and associated changes in ECE, should help to reduce error & provide more precise estimates.

- Opportunity to examine effects of changes in ECE (quality and stability) more thoroughly than is possible with typical populations.

- Sheds new light on questions of differential impact of ECE experiences for children from high-risk backgrounds, and eventually on the processes responsible for these differences.

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Describing these challenges and opportunities in context

- Perspectives from two researchers working to link ECE/childcare and Early Intervention/ Special Education
  - Measurement (Beth Rous)
  - Research with parents/caregivers (Helen Ward)

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Challenges of Researching Child Care Decision-making

- Speaking each other's language
  - Requires programmatic knowledge that may be outside a researchers' expertise.

- Addressing complexity
  - Employing mixed methods to capture the complex factors influencing child care decision-making

  - Defining/ grouping types of special needs for purposes of defining the study population and analyzing the data.

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Challenges Researching Child Care Decision-making

○ Capturing the range of experiences of this population that influences decision-making.

■ Acknowledging "Uniqueness"

○ The need to capture factors of quality and satisfaction that are unique or are emphasized to a greater degree by these parents.

○ Terminology used by parents of children with special needs may differ from that used by parents of "typical" children.

Research Opportunities

- Cross-systems research captures parents' real life experiences with work and child care

- Can be a catalyst for researchers and policymakers getting out of the "silos"

- Promotes and informs policy change that emphasizes service coordination

Research Challenges

- Defining "disability" across programs/providers/families

- Measures of inclusive practices in classrooms/homes

- Identification of standards of quality for serving special populations

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Research Opportunities

- Use of administrative data, with input into data fields

- Development of standard questions for gathering data on special populations

- Use TQRIS "launch" to infuse cross state research

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Discussion