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.

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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.
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
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
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.)
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.
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.
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)
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.
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
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
Discussion