Child Care Research Strategies

Christine Ross
Mathematica Policy Research

Deanna Schexnayder
University of Texas - Austin
Child Care Research Questions
Minnesota

- Will a Quality Rating System and higher funding influence parents’ choices of care?
- Are any of the distribution models more cost effective? More likely to be used by parents or providers?
- Do the quality ratings and higher funding lead to improved outcomes for children?
- Do the quality ratings and higher funding lead to more economic stability for parents?
Child Care Research Questions
Massachusetts

- What program quality improvement activities are most effective at improving children’s outcomes?
  - For programs meeting minimum standards, which choices are more effective: teacher salary increases, professional development, comprehensive or wrap-around services?

- How to measure the progress of children in early care and education over time? Are we closing the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income children?
Types of Research Questions

■ Monitoring / Tracking
  – Descriptive questions asking, “How are families / children faring?” or, “What is the quality of our services?”

■ Effectiveness
  – Impacts of a policy choice on outcomes we care about

■ Description of program / policy
  – How have programs / policies actually been implemented?
Monitoring / Tracking Questions

**Example:** Measuring children’s progress / closing achievement gaps.

- Consider outcomes of interest
- Identify measures of the outcomes
- Define population or subgroup of interest
Consider outcomes of interest: What is most important to your agency or programs? What should these programs influence?

- Language development
- Early literacy skills; early math skills
- Social-emotional development: curiosity, ability to get along with peers and teachers; persistence; self-control
Monitoring / Tracking Questions
Measuring Progress / Closing Achievement Gaps

- Identify measures of the outcomes: existing data or new data collection?
  - Kindergarten entrance “readiness” assessment
  - State-mandated tests in grade 3 and beyond
  - Special assessment at end of pre-K year
- If existing data, can it be linked to subsidy use, or use of particular providers?
- Can the data be obtained regularly?
- Caution on high-stakes tests
Monitoring / Tracking Questions
Measuring Progress / Closing Achievement Gaps

Define population or subgroup of interest: What group will best address the question?

– Broad: all low-income
– Recipients: children receiving subsidies
– Special at-risk populations
Closing the Achievement Gap

![Graph showing standardized text scores for three cohorts from 3 yr to K](image)
Effectiveness Questions

- *Example:* Will the QRS and higher funding improve choices of care?
- *Example:* Which quality improvement strategies will best enhance children’s outcomes?

- These are the most common types of questions, because policymakers want to know which policy choices or funding strategies are most effective or most cost-effective.
Effectiveness Questions

- To address these questions, you need to set up a contrast:
  - Between the policy of interest and a different policy
  - Between two or more competing policy options
- Which policy is experienced by families must be assigned, not chosen
- Contrast 2 worlds with different policies
Effectiveness Questions
Alternative Quality Improvement Strategies

- Random-Assignment Contrast
  - The groups of providers who use particular strategies need to be equivalent
  - Can the quality improvement strategies be assigned at random?
  - If not, is there another question to be addressed?

- Propensity Score Methods
  - Need to model factors predicting the choice of quality improvement strategy and measure them
  - Results may still be unconvincing
Effectiveness Questions
Alternative Quality Improvement Strategies

- Consider outcomes of interest
  - Provider outcomes
    - Quality of care
    - Stability of staff
  - Child outcomes
    - Language development
    - Early literacy and/or early math skills
    - Social-emotional development: self-control, curiosity, persistence, ability to get along with peers and teachers

- How long should it take to observe effects?
Effectiveness Questions

Alternative Quality Improvement Strategies

- Measure the outcomes
  - Child care quality assessment
  - Fall-Spring assessments in early care and education settings
  - Kindergarten entrance “readiness” assessment
  - State-mandated tests in grade 3 and beyond
Impact of Policy Alternative on Student Achievement

![Graph showing the impact of policy alternative on student achievement over school years 3 yr, PreK, and K. The graph compares standardized test scores between control (C1-Control) and treatment (C1-Treatment).]
Program / Policy Description

- **Example**: Are any of the distribution models more likely to be used by parents or providers? Why?
  - Examine data on use of alternative models
  - Use focus groups of parents / providers using the model and those not using to understand why or why not
  - Talk to local-level administrators about their perceptions of why groups participate or not

- **Challenge**: Qualitative information should come from a representative sample