

2011 STAM – CCPRC Annual Meeting
Workshop C1
November 16, 2011, 2:45-4:00 pm

Challenges and Opportunities in Studying Special Populations: Research with Families at the Intersection of Early Care and Education, Child Welfare, and Early Intervention/Preschool Special Education

Description

This workshop used an interactive discussion format to consider the implications of studying populations of children and families that crosswalk multiple service systems: early care and education (ECE), child welfare, and/or early intervention/preschool special education. A real-life case vignette was used to ground the discussion. Panelists engaged participants in discussing considerations, challenges, and opportunities that arise when addressing key research questions about the role of ECE in the lives of children and families. Implications for both research and service provision were considered.

Facilitator/Discussant

Nilofer Ahsan, Center for the Study of Social Policy

Presenters

Shannon Lipscomb, Oregon State University – Cascades
Beth Meloy, Georgetown University
Beth Rous, University of Kentucky
Helen Ward, University of Southern Maine

Discussant

Shannon Christian, Office of the Governor, Illinois

Scribe

Jennifer Cleveland, University of Minnesota

1. Documents in Session Folder

- “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, M.P.P., Shannon Christian, M.P.P., Shannon Lipscomb, Ph.D., Beth Meloy, M.P.P., Beth Rous, Ed.D. and Helen Ward, J.D.

2. Summary of Presentations

- **Context and Definitions:**
 - This session centers on children and families at the intersection of child welfare, early care and education and early intervention services. In particular, the goal is to promote dialogue between researchers and practitioners that can lead to a tighter research agenda and systems that respond to the needs of these families. First, we need to agree on some terms:

- Early Care and Education: the system includes both formal and informal care.
- Child Welfare: families connected to child protective services due to a founded allegation of child abuse or neglect.
- Early intervention, Part C: services to young children 0–2 and their families to address developmental delays or conditions that may lead to developmental delays.
- Preschool special education: special education and services to address developmental delays as they impact a child’s education.
- There is growing attention to these families and children because of research on brain development and increased understanding about how trauma or toxic stress can impact normal development. In addition, there is a lot of overlap between child welfare and special education. Child abuse and neglect impact attachment and early executive functions. If we don’t address this early, it can have a cascading effect on children’s development.
- While Federal mandates require thinking about this population, e.g., ACYF and Office of Child Care Memorandum encouraging collaboration, we need to be proactive, providers need to be engaged, and providers need extra support to serve these children.
- Conducting research at the intersection of multiple systems can support an understanding of the actual level and intensity of services received and how these linkages affect outcomes for families and children.

- **Discussion**

- *Case Study*

- Participants were asked to consider a case study about a 4-year-old boy with autism spectrum disorder who is in foster care provided by his aunt. Child care providers have struggled to meet his needs. Some providers have denied him care. He will be returning to the care of his mother who lives in an area that is not near a therapeutic preschool. There are multiple layers to the story, and systems at play. Participants were asked what the research agenda might be, the State and policy agenda, and how we might help a family experiencing these issues.
 - If researchers are interested in TANF, for example, a concerted effort must happen to find out about the other systems that might interact with TANF.
 - There are often challenges in linking data that relate to confidentiality and working with multiple departments at the State (and sometimes county level).
 - Large child welfare datasets often neglect ECE questions, and ECE datasets don’t include measurement of CW variables.

- *Challenges and Opportunities*

- Helen Ward: Doing qualitative research, you develop questions from a family’s perspective. It’s essential to have an advisory committee from people with multi-dimensions. What are the barriers that prevent providers from caring for children with behavioral problems? For instance, understanding severity is more important than type of special need, but getting at severity requires more than a yes/no question. Also, a lot of TANF families have children with special needs; qualitative research is important here as well.

- Beth Rous: Most research is about children with special needs. Families often don't know what services they are receiving. For example, they say, "Someone comes to my home." They don't know they are receiving Part C. The fields of early childhood and early childhood special education are moving farther apart. We need more dialogue and teaming.
- Shannon Lipscomb: How do we develop a research agenda sensitive to transitions with these families? How do we account for transitions without turning it into research noise?
- Shannon Christian: More than half of the children in Illinois fall into one special need category or another. 97% of children who are wards of the State are in Head Start or in the State prek program. We're looking at getting all children who are in child welfare into one of these systems. We need a more nuanced way to determine high need, for instance Adverse Childhood Experiences. How do we identify the highest need children in the highest need places when we have limited resources when we struggle with who we can serve and how?
- What does quality mean for these children? Is it different for children with different needs? Thinking about stability may be more fundamental than quality, for example. Which dimensions are most important for which sub-groups is very important.
 - To what extent do providers facilitate parent-provider relationships? Quality may also be about family partnerships: How providers talk with parents. What is the parent's experience like when the provider calls them at work everyday?

Future Research Directions

- In a child welfare situation, a child care arrangement may be a protective factor. But what happens when the child care arrangement is changing? We have to acknowledge the complexity but not get too stuck in it. Perhaps there needs to be a map of the overall complexity. When we triangulate the findings, we can learn more. We could use an overarching framework that other researchers could add to.
- Data collection is so important. We need to create data systems that talk to each other.
 - A lot of this is being designed now in QRIS in States. What are the key opportunities that are being designed right now? How do we inform that?
 - Some of the information is available from State administrative data; linking across systems and institutions can be a challenge. Highlights the need for partnerships.
 - You may have to let go a little bit of rigorous research standards (it's important not to criticize the agency that gives you dirty data). And, it's not always possible to link. Look for mutually beneficial relationships with States. They may be motivated to share their data because your research can help them make effective policy.
 - Need to think about measurement of sub-populations and understudied populations (e.g., grandparents raising grandchildren).
- We need to be expansive and creative in disseminating findings, attend each other's conferences.
- We need a conceptual map of the policy changes that are going on in these systems right now as well as a conceptual map of the research.

3. Summary of Discussion with Presenters and Participants. Key Points:

- We could use an overarching framework; researchers could add to it, increasing the literature available on these topics.
- Administrative data can be an important resource.
- We need a conceptual map of the policy changes going on in these systems right now and a conceptual map of research at the intersection of multiple systems.
- Dissemination may be good leverage for getting a dataset. A State may care about your questions too, and be motivated to share data.