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## The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice

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### Abstract

**T**his paper presents a conceptual framework for understanding the uses of research in policy and practice, findings from recent empirical work, and early lessons from the field. The framework describes the ways policymakers and practitioners define, acquire, interpret, and ultimately use research. Relationships are vital conduits for acquiring research. When confronted with questions about a program or reform, agencies and legislators often turn to trusted peers and intermediaries. Translation is also key. Because research does not speak for itself, policymakers and practitioners must always interpret its meaning and implications for their particular problems and circumstances. This means that identifying the right translators and creating productive conditions for translation are critical. Policymakers and practitioners use research in various ways, including instrumental, conceptual, political, imposed, and process uses. Increased knowledge of these nuances should enable researchers to produce more useful work and better engage with policymakers, practitioners, and intermediaries.

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## From the Editors

Since Francis Bacon established the scientific method, there have surely been individuals trying to figure out how the knowledge generated by science could be applied and indeed be used in the “real world.” The current interest in evidence-based practice in nearly all fields of human service is based on the premise that the human service will be optimized, and/or advanced by employing practices that have scientific evidence of effectiveness. The field of Education is an important exemplar of this trend, and the success of Education in promoting the development and learning of children and youth is of primary concern for the United States and most other nations. Yet, the gap between research and practice in this country is wide.

In this Social Policy Report, Dr. Tseng examines the role of research in policy and practices in Education. She begins by asking rhetorically why one should conduct research on the use of research and provides a rationale for it being more than a self-reflective activity. Following an ecological systems conceptualization of research and factors affecting its use, Dr. Tseng discusses the different definitions of “research” by consumers (e.g., policymakers and practitioners) and educational researchers and factors mitigating its use in practice. She then describes a program of research funded by the W. T. Grant Foundation to build “stronger theory and empirical evidence on how, when, and under what conditions” research will be used. Building on the concepts of knowledge utilization, implementation science, and translational research, the projects funded by W. T. Grant address the practical, process questions that are rarely addressed in Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) and even “scaling up” studies. Dr. Tseng describes three exemplary projects that are now studying ways in which school boards, school staff, and social welfare agencies view, understand, and use research. From this research and the broader literature, she suggests early lessons learned from this research and their implications for future research.

Commenting on this paper, Dr. Aletha Huston notes the different cultures within which researchers and practitioners are situated, the importance of the similarities between the contexts of where research is conducted and where it will be used, and the threat of evaluation that some practitioners field from research because of the increased emphasis on accountability. Similarly, Dr. John Easton comments on the importance of grounding education research in practice occurring in the field, responding to the needs expressed by school districts and practitioners, and establishing partnerships between researchers and school districts. From a state policy perspective, Dr. Karen Cadigan speaks about the distant worlds of policymakers and researchers and a need for a common mode of communication between the two. She emphasizes the importance of researchers being able to respond to policymakers’ information needs in a timely (i.e., quick) manner and with an actual answer, which has never been a strength of academia.

In sum, Dr. Tseng provides a critically important set of perspectives and insights on factors affecting use of research in educational practice. Her supposition that increasing scientific rigor is not enough to impact significantly the Education enterprise in the U.S. should be taken to heart. The next best hope may well be the knowledge utilization/ implementation science work (that builds on rigorous science) now being conducted.

—Samuel L. Odom (Lead Editor)  
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# The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice

**T**he call for evidence-based policy and practice is nearly ubiquitous. It can be heard across the fields of education, child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice, youth programs, and health care. On the research side, billions of dollars are spent on efforts to generate stronger research evidence; while on the policy and practice sides, higher stakes and incentives are attached to the use of research evidence. Despite these valiant efforts, critical gaps remain between research, policy, and practice. These gaps are exacerbated by a lack of knowledge about how researchers can produce more useful work, how practitioners can acquire and use that work productively, and how policymakers can create the conditions that enable both to occur. Unless this changes, it seems likely that the hope for evidence-based policy and practice will unravel—another fad tried and failed.

The research community needs a stronger understanding of how practitioners and policymakers engage research. This understanding should include their definitions of research, their perceptions of its relevance and quality, their preferred modes of communication, and the forces that influence their use of research. Aletha Huston, in her 2005 *Social Policy Report* and 2008 SRCD Presidential Address, calls for more useable research. Nancy Guerra, Sandra Graham, and Patrick Tolan (2011) similarly argue for more use-inspired research in their *Child Development* special issue. These scholars also argue for stronger communication of research findings. Without a strong understanding of the worlds on “the other side” of the gaps, however, scholars’ efforts to make research more useful and to communicate it more effectively run the risk of missing the mark.

Understanding how practitioners and policymakers use research is an area that is ripe for scientific study. This paper discusses the importance of studying the use of research, presents a conceptual framework for understanding the issue, and draws lessons from recent work:

## Why Study the Use of Research?

The study of research use has its roots in the 1970s and 1980s, a time Henry and Mark (2003) called the “golden age” for work on evaluation use and knowledge utilization. Carol Weiss, a leading figure in this field, was initially motivated to understand why government would support research but not use the findings:

“I was asked to evaluate a program of the ‘War on Poverty’ in the 1960s. Lyndon Johnson’s policy to ‘eradicate poverty’ generated a whole range of new programs: education, health, mental health, job training, programs for the elderly and so on.... When I finished my evaluation of the Harlem program, the report came out in three volumes. We sent copies of the report to Washington: I never heard a word from them! I had the feeling I could have just dumped it into the ocean and it would have made no difference. So, I asked myself: ‘Why did they support and fund this evaluation if they were not going to pay any attention to it?’ That’s how I got interested in the uses of research: What was going on? What could researchers—or anyone else—do to encourage people to pay more attention to research?” (in Graff & Christou, 2001).

Michael McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation, which funds education research to inform practice, recently offered this perspective:

“This problem of how research becomes effective in practice is itself a social science question of considerable depth and complexity that deserves study in its own right. The paths by which research knowledge finds its way into the daily life of educational organizations, the paths by which practitioner knowledge is brought to bear and made to count in the research process, and the paths

by which researchers become interested in problems of genuine importance to practice are complex and hard to understand and warrant systematic analysis and reflection” (McPherson, 2004, p. 8-9).

These challenges are familiar to many researchers. At the William T. Grant Foundation, we have a longstanding interest in supporting research that can inform policy and practice to improve the lives of young people. We support research on after-school programs, child welfare, education, mentoring, juvenile justice, and child and adolescent mental health. On notable occasions this work has influenced practice or policy, but that has not been the norm. Like others in the field, we have strong ideas about why research is influential in some instances but not others. These ideas often stem from 20/20 hindsight about past situations in which research seemed influential, but they do not constitute a strong explanatory framework that has been tested and helps predict future uses of research. A few years ago, the Foundation launched an initiative to build strong theory and empirical evidence on when, how, and under what conditions research is used. Our ultimate goal is to understand how to develop better research, improve its use, and build stronger bridges across those notorious gaps between research and policy, and research and practice.

### **Limitations in Current Approaches**

People often describe the need to move “research to practice” or “research to policy.” Left there, these approaches can seem like a one-way street, neglecting the equally important need to move an understanding of practice and policy to research. Existing approaches focus more often on practice than policy, and reflect what Nutley, Walter, and Davies (2007) call producer-push models. The underlying logic of these approaches is that researchers should produce high-quality research, make it clear and accessible, and then practitioners should apply it to their work.

Considerable effort has focused on the first step in the model: improving the quality of research. Most of these efforts have sought to improve scientific rigor in testing “what works” questions about the effectiveness of programs and practices and in synthesizing that evidence. For example, the Society for Prevention Research created a Standards of Evidence Committee that developed criteria for efficacy, effectiveness, and dissemination studies. Several organizations have defined standards of evidence (and syntheses of it) to create lists

of effective programs; these include the Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, the California Clearinghouse for Evidence-Based Practice in Child Welfare, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention-supported Blueprints for Violence Prevention. To a lesser extent, the research community has developed scientific standards in additional areas, such as the National Research Council’s Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research (2002) and the National Science Foundation’s (2003) standards for qualitative research.

Efforts have also focused on the second part of the producer-push model: improving communication, dissemination, and marketing of research. These efforts are intended to provide research to end-consumers in more accessible forms (Nutley, et al., 2007). The most common strategy involves presenting research in written and verbal formats that are suitable for policy and practice audiences. Policy briefs and executive summaries are designed to be short and jargon-free so that they can be quickly read by busy people who do not have research training. Briefings sometimes supplement the dissemination effort. Websites and searchable databases represent another approach, wherein research is centrally stored and made broadly available. Others take a marketing approach, “packaging” research in more attractive ways so that it can compete in the marketplace of glossy products sold to practitioners.

A third body of work in the vein of research-to-practice is variously referred to as dissemination, implementation, scale-up, and translational research (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Office of Public Health Research, 2002; Flay et al., 2005; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2001; National Institute of Mental Health, 2002; National Research Council, 2009). This work draws on medical research models and resembles the phases of clinical drug trials. The prevention research model, which is based on those medical models, begins with descriptive research to understand the risk and protective factors that contribute to particular outcomes; uses those findings to develop a program to improve outcomes; and then tests the efficacy, effectiveness, and dissemination and/or implementation of the program (National Research Council, 2009). More recent iterations of the prevention model include feedback loops, in which what is tried in practice informs future research, but the predominant flow is still one of moving research to practice.



Connecting research and practice should be more of a two-way street than is implied in research-to-practice approaches. Without a concomitant focus on how practice should inform research, we risk privileging researchers' perspectives and relegating practice professionals to the receiving end of research and dissemination efforts. Moreover the producer-push models may help, but they have achieved limited success.

A more significant shift is needed to strengthen the connections between research and practice as well as research and policy. As a field, we have spent much of our energy on the supply side (Nutley, et al., 2007; Porter, 2007; Tseng, 2009), and we need to add a stronger focus on demand. Without this shift, we have little systematic understanding of whether our supply-side attempts address demand-side needs, nor how to improve our efforts.

## **A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Uses of Research**

In focusing on the demand side, the intended research users become the center of our inquiries. Below I describe a conceptual framework for identifying research users; examining how they define, acquire, interpret, and use research; and understanding the social ecology that influences those processes.

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### **Who are Research Users?**

An important starting place is identifying the intended research users. Too often, the research community makes broad-based calls for research to influence policy or practice without specifying the decision-makers they hope to reach. Up to this point, I have been guilty of using the handy but faulty grouping of policymakers versus practitioners, as if there are two distinct groups that can be clearly delineated. In reality, the landscape of actors and organizations is more nuanced and so is the range of potential research users.

One strategy for identifying research users is to consider the decisions or issues researchers seek to inform, and then work backward to the organizations and decision-makers who play key roles. Child development researchers often seek to inform federal policymakers and frontline practitioners, but miss the mid-level actors and organizations that are better positioned to draw on research to shape youth's daily settings and lives. State and local agencies are a critical group of research users. This includes state and local departments of social services, mental health, education, juvenile justice, and

employment. Within these agencies, mid-level administrators and program managers shape the frontline practices—teaching, social work, counseling, policing—of concern to many researchers. They play a critical role in designing staff development systems and adopting new programs and reforms, shaping the process and conditions for their implementation, and allocating resources in support of them. These mid-level decision makers straddle policy and practice and are well-poised to put research to work to benefit youth. In addition, they can be a more stable presence than agency leaders, who have short tenures in many places.

These state and local agencies currently face unprecedented demands from politicians, courts, and funders to use research and data. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002), for example, included more than 100 references to “scientifically based research” and required that school districts use research in their decisions about curricula, instructional programs, and professional development. The Obama administration has made program evaluation a priority across agencies, and wants to use evaluations to “help the Administration determine how to spend taxpayer dollars effectively and efficiently—investing more in what works and less in what does not” (Orszag, 2009). Recent legislative and judicial actions in some states have also required that child welfare and mental health agencies use research to redesign systems, select evidence-based programs and practices, and implement them.

Another critical group of research users is intermediaries. They are the organizations and individuals who translate and package research for use by legislators, agency staff, and nonprofit and private service providers. They also broker relationships between researchers and practitioners/policymakers. The number of intermediaries has proliferated in recent decades. Advocacy groups and think tanks play an important role in determining which policy ideas gain ground, which reform efforts fail, and how money gets appropriated. State and local agencies lacking the capacity to draw on research rely on professional associations, technical assistance providers, and consultants for research. There is considerable variability across intermediaries in their research expertise, but there is little denying their significant roles in leveraging research to shape policy and practice.

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### **How is Research Defined, Acquired, Interpreted, and Used?**

The implicit model for how research is acquired, interpreted, and used is a rational and linear one. It is easy

to imagine a decision-maker who encounters a dilemma, goes out in search of information to address the question at hand, finds research that provides the missing information, and uses it to decide. Unfortunately, this image rarely bears out in reality. Those who study research use find more complicated processes at work.

**Defining Research.** Although the terms *research*, *evidence*, *evidence-based policy*, and *evidence-based practice* are frequently bandied about, people in different communities often hold different definitions of these terms. Three decades ago, Nathan Caplan (1979) argued that language differences between researchers and policymakers obstructed the use of research; scholars have since extended his analysis to research-practice gaps. At the most basic level, the language gap begins with how researchers, practitioners, and policymakers define *research* and *evidence*. What should qualify as research and evidence for use is a hotly contested topic, and it is not my goal to engage in that debate here. Regardless of what people think “should” qualify as research, it is important to understand what people actually think it is. Recognizing definitional differences helps people avoid inadvertently talking past one another. More significantly, knowing what people in different roles believe constitutes research, and why they hold those views, is important for moving toward shared understanding about the uses of research.

Researchers often employ the terms *evidence* and *research* interchangeably, defining them as empirical findings derived from scientific methods. Studies of research use in education suggest that policymakers and practitioners have broader definitions. In their review of more than 50 studies, Honig, and Coburn (2008) found that school district staff drew on a wide array of *evidence*, which encompassed social science research, as well as student achievement data, expert testimony, practitioner knowledge, and parent and community input. Nelson, Leffler and Hanson (2009) interviewed

congressional education staffers and conducted focus groups with chief state school officers, state legislators, superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and school board members. Those policymakers and practitioners also employed a broad conceptualization of *research* that included empirical findings, data, personal experiences and the experiences of others, and constituent feedback. Yet another definition is the one mandated by law. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002, subpart 37 of section 9101) employs the term *scientifically based research*, defining it as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs.” This definition is inclusive of research

using “observational or experimental methods,” but those interviewed in Nelson’s study often associated the term with “gold standard” randomized controlled trials.

Research also comes in different shapes and forms. Most people would agree that research includes findings from a single study or syntheses of findings from multiple studies. For many people, research is also embodied within products, such as practice guidelines, curricula, evidence-based programs, and assessment tools. Researchers often

think of these products as research-based if they have been studied, were developed using research findings, and/or were part of a research and development process. These products represent an interesting case because practitioners do not need to review the empirical work, nor know of their research basis when they use them.

**Acquiring Research.** Researchers have focused a great deal on how to better push information out, but they have not developed strong knowledge of how practitioners or policymakers pull information in (Dearing & Kreuter, 2010). We have sought to better disseminate research by presenting it in clearer written and verbal formats and making it more readily accessible through online sources (Nutley, et al., 2007). What we lack is a

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deep understanding of how the intended users typically acquire research and other types of information. Shifting our vantage point to the user side causes us to ask different questions—what are their main sources of information, how do they come to trust certain sources over others, how do they seek out new information, and how does it routinely come into their hands? As I discuss below, we are only beginning to understand the answers to such questions, but early work suggests that it is important to consider policymakers' and practitioners' social systems—sets of relationships and interactions with people they trust and who are trying to solve similar problems.

**Interpreting Research.** Research does not speak for itself, nor does it have definitive implications for particular problems of practice or policy. Research users must always interpret the meaning of research and its implications for their specific problems and decisions. Knowledge from research does not remain as distinct pieces of information once it enters people's minds and discourse. As Kennedy (1984, p. 225) puts it, "evidence is not merely attached to the user's store of knowledge like barnacles are to clams...rather [it] is a formative process in which evidence is acted on by the user. It is sorted, sifted, and interpreted; it is transformed into implications and translated into inferences." The would-be users are also assessing the quality and credibility of research, and not necessarily doing it with the same criteria researchers use. The ways each group appraises research and deems it credible is based on their professional norms and training, their prior knowledge, their goals for and rules of evidence, and whether the research is actionable or challenges the status quo (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010; Caplan, 1979; Shonkoff, 2000; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980).

**Using Research.** There are also various ways of using research (see summary by Nutley, et al., 2007). Researchers often hope for *instrumental use*, wherein research directly influences a policy or practice decision. It is the rational and linear image of research use wherein a decision-maker has a question and uses research to address that question and make a decision. The research community often bemoans *political uses*, in which research is used to justify a position that has already been staked out. In this case, policymakers or practitioners know whether they support or oppose a piece of legislation or reform effort, and they marshal research to back their position. This type of use is also referred to as tactical or symbolic use. Carol Weiss (1977) introduced the notion of *conceptual use*, which highlights its enlightenment function. This is when research influences how policymak-

ers and practitioners think about issues, problems, or potential solutions. More recently, Weiss and colleagues (2005) wrote about *imposed use*. This refers to recent government initiatives that tie funding to the adoption of evidence-based programs (e.g., Safe and Drug Free Schools legislation in the 1990s and 2000s). Lastly, *process use* refers to what practitioners learn from participating in the production of research, as opposed to how they apply or learn from research findings.

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### The Social Ecology of Research Use

Research use unfolds within a social ecology of relationships, organizational settings, and political and policy contexts (Coburn, Honig, & Stein, 2009; Nutley, et al., 2007; Tseng, 2008). Prior knowledge utilization studies tended to examine research use at the individual level, focusing on decision-makers' preferences and beliefs about research and their self-reported uses or likelihood of using research. A narrow focus on cognitive, affective, and motivational processes, however, paints a decontextualized picture of how research is acquired, interpreted, and used. The science of research use needs to encompass the ways in which social, political, and economic forces affect individual and group processes.

**Relationships.** Policy and practice occur within social systems—webs of relationships and interactions with peers and intermediaries. It is not surprising, then, that relationships are important pathways by which policymakers and practitioners acquire, interpret, and use research. Indeed social capital theory suggests that individuals and groups access resources, including information, through their social ties (Daly & Finnigan, in press). Trust is key. When confronted with questions about a program or reform, agency administrators ask their trusted peers working in like positions, serving the same populations, and working under comparable conditions. As mentioned earlier, relationships with intermediaries are also vital—agencies look to technical assistance providers, professional associations, and consultants, and legislators rely on interest groups, to distill research findings into implications for their work.

**Organizational Context.** Organizational capacity, culture, and structure also shape research use. Agencies are facing demands to become more evidence-based, but for many of them it is has not been part of their historical charge. School district central offices, for example, are expected to serve as instructional leaders to improve teaching and learning, but they have historically been set up to serve more bureaucratic functions such as manag-

ing facilities, school buses, and purchasing and as administrative pass-throughs for federal and state programs (Honig, 2008). The ability to acquire, interpret, and use research requires adequate staff capacity, time, and expertise, as well as conducive organizational cultures and routines (Moynihan & Landuyt, 2009). Organizational structure is also important. Some observers have suggested that bureaucratic silos may obstruct the use of research, particularly when departments analyzing data for accountability purposes have limited interactions with those making program decisions. In contrast, individuals who work together in task force, committee, and team meetings and who have opportunities to informally converse can develop shared understandings about what constitutes high-quality evidence and the uses of it (Coburn, et al., 2009).

**Political and Policy Contexts.** Advocates of evidence-based policy often bemoan the role of politics, values, and ideology in policy; they suggest that using research should produce more rational decisions. Carol Weiss (2000), however, argues the opposite—that far from settling political debates, research is often used as a weapon in them. Nisbet and Scheufele (2009, p. 1768) too suggest that “no matter how accurately communicated and understood the science, policy decisions cannot be separated from values, political contexts, and necessary trade-offs between costs, benefits, and risks.” Rather than viewing politics as a nuisance to be set aside, it behooves us to increase our understanding of how the political and policy process works and how it influences research acquisition, interpretation, and use. In addition, are there political conditions or policy contexts in which research is more likely to be used in particular ways? This stronger knowledge would allow research producers to be better prepared for the ways their work may be used. Those who want their work to have greater impact may also learn lessons about how and when advocates, politicians, and agency leaders are able to leverage research to further policy goals.

### **Toward Stronger Theory and Empirical Evidence: A Multidisciplinary and Mixed-Methods Field**

At the William T. Grant Foundation, we have sought to build stronger theory and empirical evidence on when, how, and under what conditions research is used. We have commissioned conceptual and exploratory work (Davies & Nutley, 2008; Nelson et al., 2009) and issued an-

nual requests for proposals. We have funded 15 research studies and expect to fund more in the coming years.

Current scholarship builds on early knowledge utilization studies and more recent work on the use of research, data, and evidence-based programs. In addition, investigators draw on work from various fields that illuminates the social ecology of policy and practice—how government operates, the decision-making processes, and the central players who influence what occurs. This work comes from political science, public administration, and sociology on the policy process, deliberation, policy implementation, and organizational learning. Scholars also draw on theories and methods on social networks, diffusion of innovations, and cultural exchange in order to examine the social dynamics involved in acquiring and interpreting research.

Prior work on research use often consisted of post-hoc case studies examining past instances when research seemed to have been used, and interviews or surveys asking decision-makers about their attitudes, uses, or likelihood of using research. In our funding, we have encouraged prospective, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies (Small, 2011; Yoshikawa, Kalil, Weisner, & Way, 2008). Multiple sources of data are collected and analyzed in order to deepen understanding and validate findings across data sources. For example, investigators have observed meetings at which research is used to make decisions, interviewed participants in the meetings regarding their perceptions of what occurred and the research discussed, and coded the documents that went into and came out of the meetings. This mixed-methods work is an advance over single-method studies that relied on self-reports because it allows investigators to validate interview findings against observations and reviews of pertinent documents. Prospective data collection also helps mitigate the problems of recall bias and post-hoc reconstruction of events. Social network analysis is employed to map the social system and how research flows through it.

Many of these projects are comparative case studies (Yin, 2003). Intensive data collection in a small number of sites allows investigators to closely observe and refine the concept of research use—seeing what it looks like and how it unfolds. Sites are selected based on theory about what produces variation in the use of research. For example, Goertz and her colleagues are examining state education agencies; they hypothesize that research acquisition and use are stronger in agencies with greater internal collaboration across units and those



with greater access to local intermediary organizations (Massell & Goertz, 2012). She has thus sampled agencies that vary on these two dimensions and will examine whether her hypotheses bear out in the findings.

The projects we are supporting are still in the field, but are starting to produce findings. Below I discuss early findings from three of these studies.

### **School Districts' Use of Research**

Two of these studies are in education, which has been on a steady march toward accountability in the past few decades. Federal policies, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have created unprecedented stakes around school districts' use of evidence (Honig & Coburn, 2008). NCLB required districts to track and report student and school test scores and use "scientifically based research" in a range of decisions about school improvement. It also created a high-stakes accountability environment around evidence use by initiating a series of sanctions for schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress toward improving student achievement. Two years of inadequate progress triggers an improvement phase, which is followed by corrective action. Continued failure results in restructuring, which requires changes that can include staff reconstitution, charter school conversion, state operation, or privatization.

It is within this policy context that Daly and Finnigan (2011), and Asen and Gurke (2011) are studying school districts—a crucial group of research users. The former are focusing on district administrators and school staff and the latter on school boards.

**District Administrators and School Staff.** Finnigan, Daly and Che (2011) are conducting a four-year longitudinal study of research use in two urban school districts in which a large and increasing number of schools have been placed in corrective action. Daly and Finnigan are mapping the social networks of teachers, school administrators, and district staff to understand with whom they communicate regularly, who they approach for information about school improvement, and who they trust as sources of information. They are also conducting in-depth case studies with a subsample of schools; these include interviews with school and district staff, document reviews, and observations of meetings pertaining to school improvement.

One of their goals is elucidating how practitioners define and interpret research evidence. Through interviews, they are finding that educators in these districts hold a surprisingly narrow definition of *evidence* in which

it is equivalent to student test scores. Many do not distinguish between the terms *evidence* and *research evidence*. As one educator bluntly stated, "Evidence is just test scores—that's the bottom line."

When some staff spoke more broadly about *research*, they placed a premium on evidence of what would work in their local contexts and expressed doubt that what works in one place would work in others. Their findings echo those of Nelson and colleagues (2009), who found that a broad range of education stakeholders valued research conducted with local data or in sites that are similar to theirs in terms of size, demographics, and urban versus rural locale.

Concerns about trusting research also emerged. Practitioners in their study overwhelmingly believed that research and evidence could be, and often are, manipulated to make a point. In essence, they believed that research is often used to buttress political agendas (Nutley, et al., 2007; Weiss, et al., 2005). As one educator stated, "You know, you can find research to support anything. The problems we have in our society today. . . . People are now using research to say that all the problems are the teacher, and if you can correct the teacher, all our problems go away, which is ridiculous. . . . The point is research can be slanted to support many different viewpoints. It doesn't mean it's correct" (Daly & Finnigan, 2011).

Relationships emerge as key conduits for acquiring and using research evidence. Teachers saw their principals as important sources of evidence from outside the school or from other classrooms. This was particularly true in the lower performing schools. Principals, in turn, seek to learn about evidence and research-based ideas from district staff. This suggests that whether teachers have strong ties to principals—and principals with key district administrators—influences whether research-based ideas get into schools. If this hypothesis bears out in further testing, it suggests that principals with stronger relationships to their districts and to their teachers are better positioned to access and make use of research, and that interventions to strengthen these ties may improve the diffusion of research.

**Schools Boards.** Asen and Gurke are communications scholars examining research use by school boards (Asen, Gurke, Solomon, Connors, & Gumm, 2011; Asen, Gurke, Connors, Solomon, & Gumm, 2012). Gurke is also a former school board member who now advises school boards on governance issues (Gurke, Asen, Connors, Solo-

mon, & Gumm, 2011). Their study examines how research and other types of evidence are interpreted and used as school boards communicate their positions, explain their reasoning, and seek to advance their positions while opposing others. The project is being conducted in three school districts in Wisconsin. Data have been collected via observations and recordings of about 250 school board meetings including regular meetings, work sessions, committee meetings, and public hearings over two years. In semi-structured interviews, they asked board members, superintendents, assistant superintendents, and staff about the boards' decision-making processes, the information used in those processes, and their perceptions of the meaning and relevance of research for their districts. Lastly, they reviewed various district documents, media reports, and blogs related to the school board meetings.

They first employed an observational approach to identify the different types of evidence used by school boards (Asen et al., 2011; Asen et al., 2012). Consistent with other studies, they found that the school boards drew upon a broad array of evidence types. Research was used very infrequently. Examples were used most often, followed by experience, data, testimony, then research, and lastly law/policy (see definitions of these evidence types in Table 1).

Their work shows that when research was used, it was not in the way envisioned in No Child Left Behind (Asen et al., 2011). Implicit in NCLB is the notion that research should be used in conceptual and instrumental ways—to better understand problems and make more sound decisions. Instead, Asen and his colleagues find ample indications of political uses. Most references to research consisted of brief, general statements of “research says.” One presenter, for example, argued at a board meeting that “research has shown that hunger can actually explain 27 percent of the differences in aggressive behavior among children” (Asen et al., 2011, p. 204). No additional information was pro-

vided about the research, and it was not discussed again. The purpose of evoking research in these situations was not merely to report information. Rather research was raised because it strengthened the speaker's argument for a particular course of action (in the above case, offering more nutritious school meals). Evoking research also bolstered a speaker's credibility and authority.

Vague references to research may mask the real points of contention. In one meeting, for example, two board members disagreed about what research showed about early education programs. Because their references to research remained general and neither engaged with each other's research, it is not clear that they were discussing the same research. Instead, the debate about research obscured their underlying disagreement, which

related to conflicting values about whether communities should pay for early education for low-income families. Perhaps prophetically, a third board member commented that “at the end of the day, you're both going to be able to find studies that counter the other ones” (Asen et al., 2012, p. 25).

Proponents of evidence-based policy often argue that research should inject better information and more rationality into the policy process. These studies and others suggest a more complicated relationship between research, politics, and policy (Honig &

Coburn, 2008). Asen and Gurke's study illustrates the ways research is used in political debates, while Daly and Finnigan's work suggests that the high stakes associated with test scores may create unintended negative consequences, such as narrow definitions and distrust of research. Nelson and colleagues (2009, p. 24) similarly found a common belief among various education stakeholders that “research could be found to support any point of view and was therefore of little valid use.” In *Spin Cycle*, Henig (2008) documents how advocates on both sides of the charter school debate marshaled

**Table 1.**  
**Definitions of Evidence Types**  
**Used by School Boards (Asen et al., 2011)**

Term	Definition
Research	Empirical findings derived from systematic analysis of information, guided by purposeful research questions and methods
Experience	First-hand knowledge, skill, or perspective derived from direct observation of or participation in events or activities
Testimony	Representing through quotation or paraphrase the perspective of an individual or group
Data	Measurable quantitative or qualitative information systematically collected to describe a set of conditions or trends
Example	A specific case or incident used to illustrate typical or exceptional characteristics of a topic or issue
Law/Policy	Rules and regulations that permit or prohibit particular actions, behaviors, or programs

their research evidence and sometimes their distinct interpretations of the same studies to sway public opinion and policymakers. Far from settling political debate, research seems to become part of the fodder.

### **Evidence-based Programs and Child Welfare Agencies**

There is widespread concern that despite a growing body of evidence-based programs, these programs fail to be adopted and implemented on a large scale. The National Research Council's (2009) report on *Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People* recommends that federal and state agencies prioritize the use of evidence-based programs and promote ongoing rigorous evaluation of them. There are currently six federal initiatives relevant to children and youth that tie program funding to evidence of effectiveness (Coalition for Evidence-based Policy, 2012). These initiatives span home visiting, teen pregnancy, education, employment, and youth programs.

Despite the ascendance of the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement, relatively little attention is paid to how agencies define and appraise EBPs even though they are the would-be adopters and implementers of programs. Among researchers EBPs are usually defined as those with evidence of demonstrated impact in randomized controlled trials (Flay et al., 2005; National Research Council, 2009). While there is not unanimity in researchers' definitions, differences are often about the appropriate level of scientific rigor and evidence undergirding claims about effectiveness (Guerra et al., 2011).

Palinkas and colleagues (2011a, 2011b) are studying how agency leaders and managers define, acquire, interpret, and use research when they consider adopting and implementing an evidence-based program. The study builds on a randomized controlled trial in 40 California and 11 Ohio counties. The experiment tests whether Community Development Teams lead to stronger implementation of Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) by mental health, child welfare, and probation agencies as compared to control sites that obtain technical assistance but are not involved with the Community Development Teams. MTFC is an evidence-based program for youth with emotional and behavioral problems that has been found effective in randomized controlled trials.

Using interviews and focus groups, Palinkas and his colleagues (2011a) find that practitioners hold widely varying definitions of evidence-based practice—none of which mentioned validation through randomized con-

trolled trials. They said evidence-based practices were practices that have been studied, have been applied to different populations, come with extensive training manuals or curricula, have been around for a long time, have been monitored and tracked carefully, require rigorous training and fidelity to curriculum, have published outcome data, are found on lists of EBP practices, or change a client's behavior and way of thinking. While some of the definitions refer to research, others do not; and none strongly matched researchers' definitions.

Palinkas and colleagues (2011a) also used the qualitative data to develop quantitative measures to assess practitioners' sources, evaluations, and uses of evidence. His measures assess these processes for individual practitioners and for group consensus. They find that system leaders evaluate research evidence primarily for its relevance to their local circumstances and implementation concerns. This is indicated by how well the study's population matches their population, the program's effects in counties with similar demographics as theirs, how much the program costs to implement, and how much time is required to train staff. System leaders use research to support decisions to adopt a program, compare information from experts or community members, determine a program's potential harm, decide how much adaptation is necessary for their circumstances, and find programs that meet the needs of their populations.

While researchers have focused largely on questions of internal validity, the questions at the forefront of practitioners' minds are often questions of external validity and implementation. This is not to say that evidence of internal validity is not important to them, but it does suggest that researchers' significant progress shoring up internal validity claims about program effectiveness has not met the questions at the top of practitioners' minds. Moreover, there is currently little empirical evidence on their questions.

Similar to Daly and Finnigan (in press), Palinkas and his team (2011b) have been interested in the role of relationships in practitioners' acquisition of research. Their findings suggest the importance of opinion leaders, whose positions in a social network enable them to influence others. Palinkas (2011b) used social network analyses to identify the individuals who were seen as sources of information and advice about evidence-based programs and innovative programs more generally. Longitudinal analyses two years later demonstrated that these opinion leaders worked in counties that made greater progress implementing MTFC. In semi-structured interviews, agency

leaders and managers elaborated on their reliance on other counties and intermediary organizations for information about funding, staffing, and clients. Small, rural counties were more isolated and relied to a greater extent on other counties for information and advice.

Like many EBPs, MTFC requires collaboration across agencies (in this case, local mental health, child welfare, and probation departments) to be successfully implemented. Palinkas seeks to understand what shapes consensus on evidence use and the types of interactions between researchers, practitioners, and intermediaries that facilitate the use of research evidence. Because his work is embedded within a randomized controlled trial, he will be able to test whether the Community Development Teams create stronger interactions between researchers, practitioners, and intermediaries and whether those interactions are associated with greater progress implementing MTFC.

### Drawing Early Lessons

This is still a relatively young field of study, and it needs to develop a more robust evidence base. If findings bear out in further study, however, the lessons could be sobering.

We can be more strategic in identifying the would-be users of research and increasing our understanding of their work. Child development researchers often seek to inform federal policymakers and frontline practitioners, but agency leaders and managers at the state and local levels should not be overlooked. In child welfare, juvenile justice, health, mental health, and education, these are the organizations and people who shape the reforms, programs, curricula, and staff development that influence youth's daily settings and lives.

Early lessons also suggest that the research community's valiant efforts to improve rigor—though vitally important—are insufficient. In the area of evidence-based programs, the research community has come a long way in strengthening standards of evidence on what works, but little progress has been made on critical questions for the would-be adopters of programs. Their questions about what it takes to imple-

ment programs and whether they would be effective with different populations, under different operating conditions, and in different contexts have been studied too infrequently. Building a robust evidence base on these questions should be a priority.

Getting the research “right” and communicating it clearly can only get us part-way down the road to research use. Practitioners and policymakers always need to interpret the meaning of research and its implications for their particular problems and circumstances. Thus, we do not simply face a communications problem of better conveying research; nor is it merely a dissemination problem of better distributing research. Translation is critical, and we should reflect more intentionally on who makes for the best translators and how to create productive contexts for translation. Some people argue that researchers should be the translators because of their expertise drawing conclusions based on research design and knowledge of how

findings fit with the broader literature. Others contend that intermediaries are better positioned as translators because their jobs focus on influencing policy and practice, and they already have trusted relationships with decision-makers. In either case, people need productive contexts for deliberating over research. As important as getting the right people in the room is creating the conditions for back-and-forth discussions about the research and its implications for particular circumstances.

A third option is for intermediary organizations to be relationship brokers, bringing researchers and decision-makers together to focus on core problems of practice or policy. This approach capitalizes on the expertise of intermediaries and researchers without asking them to stretch beyond their means. Decision-makers will always have questions about how research applies to their local circumstances, and there is limited research evidence on many of those questions. However, researchers and decisions-makers can jointly discern between more

or less plausible conclusions from existing evidence. Furthermore, researchers' sustained engagement with

In the area of evidence-based programs, the research community has come a long way in strengthening standards of evidence on what works, but little progress has been made on critical questions for the would-be adopters of programs.



decision-makers can drive them toward more relevant research agendas. Policymakers, in turn, could start to see researchers as trusted sources and develop a better feel for what research can and can't provide.

What it means to use research and, more specifically, what productive research use entails is still wide open for debate, and it is a debate worth having—not simply within the research community but with those we hope will put the research to use. Proponents of evidence-based policy and practice often aspire to rational, instrumental uses of research. Weiss (1977), however, argues that research more often achieves influence through a slow, diffuse process in which it seeps into policy and shifts how people think about problems and orient themselves to issues. This conceptual use of research is harder to track, but it probably better matches real-world complexities. Like all of us, policymakers and practitioners integrate new information into their existing store of knowledge, and when research is used, it has already been transformed into implications and inferences (Kennedy, 1984; Nutley et al., 2007). Policy and practice work is also complicated—influenced by different types of evidence and negotiation of political and fiscal conditions—and thus it is the rare occurrence when research plays the defining role in a particular decision.

This brings us to the political uses of research, which are hard to judge in absolute terms as either good or bad. Policymakers and practitioners need to justify their stances and using research to “add weight and heft to a position” that is supported by a body of research is not necessarily a negative event (Weiss, 2000, p. 299). Intentional distortions of research, however, are discomfiting, as are passing evocations of “research says” that muddy what research actually says and mask the real points of disagreement. The general distrust and cynicism of research expressed by would-be users are also troubling. Gurke et al. (2011) suggests that these issues can be mitigated if school boards identify the specifics of the research they are discussing and acknowledge their own values and that underlying the research. Nisbet and Scheufele (2009) too argue that public deliberation of research should acknowledge stakeholders' diverse values and goals.

Relationships are emerging as key conduits for research, interpretation, and use. Policymakers and practitioners rely on trusted peers and intermediaries. Rather than pursuing broad-based dissemination efforts, there may be value in understanding the existing social system and capitalizing on it. Dearing and Kreuter (2010) lay out

a strategy that involves (1) clearly delineating the sector you seek to influence, (2) collecting data to map the social structure within that sector and identify its opinion leaders (i.e., the states or localities others look to for innovative ideas, intermediary organizations that are seen as trusted sources of information), and (3) recruiting those opinion leaders to help with dissemination efforts.

Building partnerships with policymakers and practitioners is another strategy. In education, there is an increasing number of institutional partnerships between researchers and school districts. Many are modeled after the long-standing Consortium on Chicago School Research, in which researchers study the core problems facing the district and seek to build the district's capacity to improve practice (Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009). The Institute for Education Sciences' new contracts for Regional Educational Laboratories support similar alliances with multiple local and state education agencies. Bryk (2009) and Donovan (2011) also argue for partnerships focusing on core problems of practice, but envision researchers' roles as co-developing and testing innovations with practitioners. With the intensive, iterative engagement of research and practice partners, these partnerships models may yield broader lessons for the field about how to produce rigorous, usable, and timely research that is constructively used.

I began this paper with the simple idea that we need to better understand the would-be users of research. I would like to end by encouraging us to recast our gaze back on our research community. Understanding users, taking on translation roles or working with translators, and building partnerships require shifts in our practices, incentive systems, and expertise. Relationships are resource-intensive. It takes time and money to build relationships, establish trust, and develop shared commitments—and more of the same to maintain them (Donovan, 2011). As we move forward, we will need to critically reflect on how to bring our work and institutions in line with our aspirations for research use. ■

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# Commentary on The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice

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This critically important topic—the use of research in policy and practice—is one that should be on the mind of every researcher interested in applied sciences and everyone, researcher or not, who believes that social science has a role in making the world a better place. In this article, Tseng makes some dramatic claims. Without strong theory and empirical evidence, she notes, “it seems likely that the hope for evidence-based policy and practice will unravel—another fad tried and failed.” She asserts that “scholars’ attempts to make research more usable and to communicate it more effectively run the risk of missing the mark” without a better understanding about “the other side” of research use.

These assertions are spot on; researchers, research institutions, and those that provide resources for both should heed them urgently.

This commentary is focused on the uses of research in a state level policy sphere, that Tseng accurately dubs an “oft-missed but critical group of researcher users.” This context is especially important because of the significant influence states have not only on other levels

of policy, both local and federal, but also on practice. For example, local school district policies and practices are impacted by a state’s policies on whether or not kindergarten is mandatory, on whether children with risk factors are included in Part C eligibility, and on what the state’s testing requirements are before high school graduation. At a more macro level, states long have been understood to be the “laboratories for democracy.” As then Justice Louis Brandeis described, “a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country” (New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann, 1932). In choosing a single one of those concentric rings, then, from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979), the role of the state policy in the macro system is critical for the impact it has on children’s development.

Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010)—who have spent significant time both practicing and studying the practice of connecting research to state-level policymaking—posit a community dissonance theory to explain the gap, which I find the most satisfactory framework to date. This theory brings together Kingdon’s

(1995) idea of open policy windows and Caplan’s (1979) two communities description. That is, even on the occasion when a policy problem is well matched with research, communication between knowledge producers (researchers) and knowledge consumers (policymakers) is difficult. These difficulties arise from a complex mismatch of culture between the two communities. In other words, there are challenges both on the supply and demand sides of research use in policymaking, and these challenges are deeply rooted on each side.

A peculiarity about state policymaking that sets it apart, I believe, from the general “policy and practice” settings that Tseng describes, is that in the context of the two communities theory, the distance that researchers and state policymakers have to reach one another is a long, long way. In other cases, the research producing and research using communities are more proximal, with some shared language and other cultural artifacts that allow for improved research use. For example, the “distance” between local school boards and research on early reading intervention can likely be bridged with some improved translation of research, presenting to important decision makers in a way that makes

it relevant for their context, showing cost-benefit analyses, and using other tools that researchers have to make research compelling. Practitioners and even local policymakers may be in differing time zones from researchers—hard to reach, but reachable. Researchers and state level policymakers are communities on different planets.

Six months ago I moved to the other planet (state agency leadership) from University life, and my perspective on the gap has changed dramatically. As those who work at policy education, especially those other 26 states that are Family Impact Seminar sites, know there are supply-side challenges in the practice and study of connecting research to policymaking (e.g., Bogenschneider, Little, Ooms, Benning, Cadigan & Corbet, 2012). University promotion and tenure systems, for example, largely do not put emphasis on translational activities or allow for the time commitment that is required in building relationships with policy makers. Many public and private grant makers stay far away from funding outreach activities or research that includes policymaking, often with the (incorrect) assumption that any thing relating to policymaking is political or advocacy based on the part of the researcher. “The only thing we’re advocates for,” I used to say, “is the use of research in policymaking.”

Now on “the other side,” I’m aware that my understanding of policymakers’ needs was like the shadows in Plato’s cave, naively limited in its view by partial understanding of the context. I certainly don’t claim to be much closer to fully understanding the context in which I now work. It still feels like being on a field trip in a foreign land. This

decision-making context is one that Tseng succinctly summarizes as “a complicated relationship between research, politics, and policy.” I crave an understandable, comprehensive, and useful description of why using research in a policy setting is so difficult, and look forward to learning a better way, informed by the research agenda Tseng suggests.

The good news is that there have been many instances, more than I expected actually, in which I made a decision—some small, some big—based on my knowledge of research or my ability to access it quickly. The occasions where my knowledge and connections to research/researchers paved the way for policy to be informed by research have been those with a common recipe of clear problem definition, open policy window, and personal power. The decisions “best” informed by research have been those with a discrete number of options, where a choice needed to be made, in which I was the only or the lead decision maker, and in which there was no politically charged context of note. In my experience thus far, whether a final policy direction has been informed by research or not, a common denominator has been the speed of turn around time. The pace with which decisions are made, the volume of the work, the enumerable priorities in state level leadership are all beyond what I could have ever imagined. This is one of the major differences between the policy making and research producing worlds. An unfortunate result of this difference has been that on more than one occasion I sought out research to inform my decision-making and found my research colleagues and my beloved research institution to be something closer to irrelevant

than essential. In most cases this was simply because the response came weeks, not hours later. Sometimes the relevancy challenge was that the response was a set of ideas, not an actual answer. This is a hard thing to admit, but I feel some responsibility to be honest about it because I believe it provides an accurate description of how difficult it is to bridge the gap between research and state level policy making, even when the demand side is set up nearly as well as it could be.

These issues of decision-making volume, pace, power, and policy windows all lead me to conclude that here’s what it comes down to: infusing even the most useable research into the policy world isn’t enough. Infusing researchers into the policy world is needed, too. We need more expatriates.

The call for more expats, is supported by several findings that Tseng notes: “relationships and trust are important conduits for acquiring and using research evidence” and that “research use unfolds within a social ecology of relationships, organizational settings, and political and policy contexts.” Especially because of the important role of relationships and social contexts in acquisition and use of research, having someone with research knowledge in a policymaker or implementer role can have significant ripple effects. I expect that one of the marks of my tenure in state government that will last after my presence will be my hiring of those who have research experience and teaching others how to find and apply research to their work.

The focus of bridging the gap between research and policy must include not only the supply side (where researchers spend all their time and, as Tseng notes, where the

study of these issues has focused), but also on the demand side. I maintain hope for and commitment to significant improvement in evidence-based policy making. While researchers' study of the gap is important for this improvement, it is also the case that more researchers should think beyond just understanding policymakers and should think about becoming them.

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## Commentary

# Commentary on The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice

**John Q. Easton**

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Since becoming director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in June 2009, I have added my voice to the chorus calling for more relevant and useful educational research to help improve teaching and learning and the systems that develop and support them. As the federal government's home for education research, evaluation, statistics and assessment, IES influences how some education research is planned, conducted, and to a lesser extent, used. One of our main strategies to promote usability and relevance has been to encourage partnerships among researchers, practitioners and policy makers. In the fall of 2010, our advisory board,

the National Board of Education Sciences, approved a new set of research priorities for IES that includes the following statements:

The work of the Institute is also grounded in the principle that effective education research must address the interests and needs of education practitioners and policymakers, as well as students, parents and community members. To this end, the Institute will encourage researchers to develop partnerships with stakeholder groups to advance the relevance of the Institute's work, the accessibility of its reports, and the usability of its findings for the day-to-day work of education practitioners and policymakers (IES, 2010).

We encourage these partnerships in our grant making, and some-

times we require them, as for example in a new research topic called Research-Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research (IES, 2012). One premise here is that practitioners are more apt to "take up" research findings that they've had a part in planning and conducting. Another is that the researchers are highly tuned in to local needs, capacities and context.

The IES emphasis on relevance and usability is influenced by my own previous experience at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago where we worked as research, evaluation and analytic partners to the Chicago Public Schools as they assessed their needs and developed and implemented improvement strategies (Roderick, Easton

& Sebring, 2009). In recent years, numerous similar researcher-school district partnerships have developed across the country in Baltimore, New York City, San Diego, and Kansas City, MO, for example. These, like CCSR, are predicated on the value of close relationships and high levels of trust between the researchers and leaders and staff in the school districts.

Tseng's paper provides a service to both researchers who want their work to help improve schools and to educational leaders seeking assistance in how to make better decisions about school improvement strategies and tactics. The conceptual framework helps build a common vocabulary and lays out topics that frequently confuse and frustrate both researchers and practitioners. The W. T. Grant Foundation's investment in building a knowledge base around the use of research is commendable, as the need is great. The fruits of this research can inform our work at IES as well as countless others concerned about this topic. It also provides stimulus to researchers to test many of their assumptions about the role of trust, relationships, social networks and local context, for example.

Other scholars and practitioners across the country are engaged in related work. In a recent paper, Peurach and Glazer (2011) describe the process of replication or "scaling up" as a collaborative, long-term relationship between program developers (researchers) and schools or school systems (users), rather

than as a linear progression from research to implementation. Using the development of Success for All as a case study, Peurach and Glazer describe how the researchers regularly redesigned their programs to accommodate local context and to meet the need for adaptability. At the same time, the users were constantly providing feedback. The replication or scale-up effort became a research endeavor in its own right as the knowledge gained in implementation was reincorporated in the program development. The use of research is actually part of a continuous improvement cycle.

In a similar vein, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching have launched a series of programs based on premises of improvement science, which balances efforts aimed at developing and discovering "what works" with equally important efforts to understand "how to make it work" (Bryk, 2009). The second step here—understanding how to apply research findings in new situations—is especially critical given the great variability in context, needs, and capacity across different learning environments. This is a fundamental shift from the dominant "research to use" paradigm. Tseng's paper and the W. T. Grant Foundation research initiative are helping to advance and understand this shift as they legitimize the dynamic relationships between researchers and users as an important and researchable topic.

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# Commentary on The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice

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**T**hough many scholars are committed to providing policymakers with research-based knowledge, the dearth of information about how that knowledge is (or is not) used is striking. After a long hiatus in the study of knowledge utilization, the WT Grant Foundation is making an important contribution by taking the scholarship several steps forward. In these comments, I note some of the most important points made by Tseng, then I offer some additional thoughts based on my own experience (which is informed by, but not limited to research).

The core question is: What does it mean to use research? Ambiguity about the answer to this question is one reason that researchers' communications often miss the mark and why "uses" of research are so difficult to study. Because humans typically use their whole base of knowledge, often without distinguishing the sources from which it is drawn, it is sometimes difficult or impossible to identify a particular knowledge source. This is particularly true for "conceptual" or indirect uses of research, in which evidence-based knowledge becomes part of a policymaker's broad store of information. How can we detect conceptual uses? Is it necessary for "users" to recog-

nize that they are using research? Some of the research described here includes clever strategies for identifying use or non-use, but the problem continues to be thorny.

Tseng argues cogently for distinguishing policy from practice, with the further point that practitioners are often the "users" of research. I would frame the issue slightly differently, in line with Tseng's other important point that mid-level managers (e.g., directors of state and local health departments, school administrators, directors of agencies overseeing early education and child care subsidy programs) are often the decision-makers about what practitioners do. Those managers are policy-makers as well as practitioners, making decisions about such matters as adopting maternal-child health programs, educational curricula, and quality requirements for child care. I would add still another group of practitioners—individuals in the judicial system, including family court judges and professionals who deal with juvenile offenders, many of whom are eager for more information about how to make good decisions.

The research community now spends a great deal of time and effort trying to reach legislators, especially at the federal level—effort that might be more effectively

targeted to individuals in state and local executive departments and the judicial system. Reaching the mid-level managers and practitioners has the added advantage of infusing information more broadly through the social networks identified in the studies of users. An administrator considering changing programs is likely to call on people in parallel positions to ask them what they have tried and how it has worked. Data and "research" may well come into the conversation, but the information is transmitted through trusted personal contacts.

Some of Tseng's points illuminate the broader issue of the different "cultures" of scholars and practitioners, described so well by Shonkoff (2000). Practitioners define "research" much more broadly than is usual in the scholarly community. For example, one current policy effort in the early childhood field is getting integrated data systems that combine data on child care subsidies, child care use, Head Start, pre-kindergarten, and other programs with the assumption that good information will follow. Most scholars would assume that "research" involves skilled analysis of those data systems once they are in place to examine particular questions.

Practitioners and policymakers want information about external

validity and applicability to local conditions, requirements that often involve replications and extensions that are not rewarded or very interesting to researchers. When I present findings from our study of New Hope in Milwaukee to local audiences, for example, one of the first questions is whether a similar program has been tested in Texas. Replication across contexts is often touted in discussions of research, but is less often rewarded with funding or scholarly recognition.

One issue not addressed in this report is the threat to practitioners often posed by research and evaluation. The No Child Left Behind sanctions are a good example. If teachers perceive “research” as a threat to their competence, salary, or job security, they are unlikely to welcome the knowledge that it could provide. If administrators believe that “research” will be used to make decisions about funding or defunding for their programs, they may understandably view it with alarm. Are there data on how research is used in such situations?

Finally, I would like to see efforts to infuse systematic research methods into practice; that is, to have each practitioner ask for and think about data to inform their activities. Behavior analysts, for example, collect and use data on the individual’s behavior of interest to make decisions about the next steps in an intervention. Teachers can monitor children’s progress to determine when and how to introduce new material. Teaching practitioners and policymakers at all levels to respect and value systematic information in everyday decision-making could go a long way toward increasing “uses” of research.

## About the Authors

**Vivian Tseng, Ph.D.**, is the vice president, program, at the William T. Grant Foundation, a funder of research meant to improve the lives of young people. She leads the Foundation's grantmaking, and spearheads its initiatives to increase understanding of the use of research in policy and practice and to improve research-practice connections. She also oversees the William T. Grant Scholars Program for promising early-career researchers and has significantly enhanced the program's mentoring components. Previously, she was an assistant professor in psychology and Asian American studies at California State University, Northridge. She received her doctorate in community psychology, with a minor in quantitative methods and a concentration in developmental psychology, from New York University and her bachelor of arts in psychology, with a specialization in Asian American studies, from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research has focused on understanding how immigration, race, and culture affect youth and their families. Her work has been published in *Child Development*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and the *Handbooks of Parenting*, *Asian American Psychology*, and *21st Century Education*, among others. Her recent publications focus on evidence-based policy and practice and mentoring for young scholars.

**Dr. Karen Cadigan** is on leave from the University of Minnesota to serve as the Director of Minnesota's newly formed Office of Early Learning. With her leadership, the Office of Early Learning cross agency team together wrote, was awarded, and is implementing Minnesota's \$45 million Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant. Before entering this director role, Cadigan had been a researcher, teacher, and policy educator at the University of Minnesota since 2001. Dr. Cadigan co-created and led the development of *Wonder Years: The Science of Early Development*, a National Science Foundation-funded collaboration with the Science Museum of Minnesota. Dr. Cadigan is a licensed school psychologist and spent seven years working in public schools in rural Virginia and Minnesota. She is a past director of the Minnesota Family Impact Seminars and a current steering committee member for the national University-based

Child and Family Policy Consortium ([www.childpolicyuniversityconsortium.com](http://www.childpolicyuniversityconsortium.com)). In addition to earning a Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Minnesota, Dr. Cadigan is a graduate of Arrowhead Head Start in Hermantown, MN.

**John Q. Easton** is director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), where he started his six-year term on June 1, 2009. Dr. Easton comes to IES from Chicago, where most recently he was Executive Director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. He was affiliated with the consortium since its inception in 1990, and became its deputy director in 1997. Dr. Easton also served a term (2003-07) on the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policies for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). He holds a Ph.D. in measurement, evaluation, and statistical analysis from the University of Chicago; a master's degree from Western Washington University; and a bachelor's degree from Hobart College. Dr. Easton is the author or coauthor of numerous reports and articles, and two books: *Charting Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism as a Lever for Change* and *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2010.

**Aletha C. Huston, Ph.D.** is the Priscilla Pond Flawn Regents Professor of Child Development Emerita at the University of Texas at Austin. She specializes in understanding the effects of poverty on children and the impact of child care and income support policies on children's development. She was Chair of the National Research Council Workshop on the Early Care and Education Workforce in 2011, and she was an investigator in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Her books include *Developmental Contexts of Middle Childhood: Bridges to Adolescence and Adulthood* (2006), and *Higher Ground: New Hope for the Working Poor and their Children* (2007). She is Past President of the Society for Research in Child Development, the Developmental Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association, and the Consortium of Social Science Associations.

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