

# Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Education and Care Implementation

Wendy K. Jarvie

University of New South Wales, Canberra  
Australia

Governments around the world have boosted their early childhood education and care (ECEC) engagement and investment on the basis of evidence from neurological studies and quantitative social science research. The role of qualitative research is less understood and under-valued. At the same time the hard evidence is only of limited use in helping public servants and governments design policies that work on the ground. The paper argues that some of the key challenges in ECEC today require a focus on implementation. For this a range of qualitative research is required, including knowledge of organisational and parent behaviour, and strategies for generating support for change. This is particularly true of policies and programs aimed at ethnic minority children. It concludes that there is a need for a more systematic approach to analysing and reporting ECEC implementation, along the lines of "implementation science" developed in the health area.

Key words: early childhood education and care, implementation, qualitative research, implementation science, ethnic minority children

## Introduction

Research conducted over the last 15 years has been fundamental to generating support for ECEC policy reform and has led to increased government investments and intervention in ECEC around the world. While

neurological evidence has been a powerful influence on ECEC policy practitioners, quantitative research has also been persuasive, particularly randomised trials and longitudinal studies providing evidence (1) on the impact of early childhood development experiences to school success, and to adult income and productivity, and (2) that properly constructed government intervention, particularly for the most disadvantaged children, can make a significant difference to those adult outcomes. At the same time the increased focus on evidence-informed

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wendy K. Jarvie, visiting professor, School of Business, University of New South Wales at Canberra, Northcott Dr., Canberra ACT 2600, Australia. Electronic mail may be sent to w.jarvie@adfa.edu.au

\*This paper was originally prepared for the OECD Early Childhood Education and Care Network Meeting, 24 January 2012, Oslo, Norway.

policy has meant experimental/quantitative design studies have become the “gold standard” for producing knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and pressures for improved reporting and accountability have meant systematic research effort by government has tended to focus more on data collection and monitoring, than on qualitative research (Bink, 2007). In this environment the role of qualitative research has been less valued by senior government officials.

### **Qualitative Research-WhatIs It?**

The term *qualitative research* means different things to different people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For some researchers it is a way of addressing social justice issues and thus is part of radical politics to give power to the marginalised. Others see it simply as another research method that complements quantitative methodologies, without any overt political function. Whatever the definition of qualitative research, or its role, a qualitative study usually:

1. Features an in depth analysis of an issue, event, entity, or process. This includes literature reviews and meta studies that draw together findings from a number of studies.
2. Is an attempt to explain a highly complex and/or dynamic issue or process that is unsuited to experimental or quantitative analysis.
3. Includes a record of the views and behaviours of the players - it

studies the world from the perspective of the participating individual.

4. Cuts across disciplines, fields and subject matter.
5. Uses a range of methods in one study, such as participant observation; in depth interviewing of participants, key stakeholders, and focus groups; literature review; and document analysis.

High quality qualitative research requires high levels of skill and judgement. Sometimes it requires pulling together information from a mosaic of data sources and can include quantitative data (the latter is sometimes called mixed mode studies). From a public official perspective, the weaknesses of qualitative research can include (a) the cost-it can be very expensive to undertake case studies if there are a large number of participants and issues, (b) the complexity - the reports can be highly detailed, contextually specific examples of implementation experience that while useful for service delivery and front line officials are of limited use for national policy development, (c) difficulty in generalising from poor quality and liable to researcher bias, and (d) focus, at times, more on political agendas of child rights than the most cost-effective policies to support the economic and social development of a nation. It has proved hard for qualitative research to deliver conclusions that are as powerful as those from quantitative research.

Educational research too, has suffered from the view that education academics have over-used qualitative research and expert judgement, with little rigorous or quantitative verification (Cook & Gorard, 2007).

### **Qualitative Research and Early Childhood Education and Care**

In fact, the strengths of qualitative ECEC research are many, and their importance for government, considerable. Qualitative research has been done in all aspects of ECEC operations and policies, from coordinating mechanisms at a national level (OECD, 2006), curriculum frameworks (Office for Children and Early Childhood Development, 2008), and determining the critical elements of preschool quality (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003), to developing services at a community level including effective outreach practices and governance arrangements. Qualitative research underpins best practice guides and regulations (Bink, 2007). Cross country comparative studies on policies and programs rely heavily on qualitative research methods.

For public officials qualitative components of program evaluations are essential to understanding how a program has worked, and to what extent variation in outcomes and impacts from those expected, or between communities, are the result of local or national implementation issues or policy flaws. In addition, the public/participant engagement in qualitative components of evaluations

can reinforce public trust in public officials and in government more broadly.

In many ways the contrast between quantitative and qualitative research is a false dichotomy and an unproductive comparison. Qualitative research *complements* quantitative research, for example, through provision of background material and identification of research questions. Much quantitative research relies on qualitative research to define terms, and to identify what needs to be measured. For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) studies, which have been very influential and is a mine of information for policy makers, rely on initial qualitative work on what is quality in a kindergarten, and how can it be assessed systematically (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003). Qualitative research too can elucidate the “how” of a quantitative result. For example, quantitative research indicates that staff qualifications are strongly associated with better child outcomes, but it is qualitative work that shows that it is not the qualification *per se* that has an impact on child outcomes—rather it is the ability of staff to create a high quality pedagogic environment (OECD, 2012).

### **Challenges of Early Childhood Education and Care**

Systematic qualitative research focused on the design and implementation of government programs is essential for governments today.

Consider some of the big challenges facing governments in early childhood development (note this is not a complete list):

1. Creating coordinated national agendas for early childhood development that bring together education, health, family and community policies and programs, at national, provincial and local levels (The Lancet, 2011).
2. Building parent and community engagement in ECEC/Early Childhood Development (ECD), including increasing parental awareness of the importance of early childhood services. In highly disadvantaged or dysfunctional communities this also includes increasing their skills and abilities to provide a healthy, stimulating and supportive environment for young children, through for example parenting programs (Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman & Elder, 2011; The Lancet, 2011; OECD, 2012).
3. Strategies and action focused on ethnic minority children, such as outreach, ethnic minority teachers and teaching assistants and informal as well as formal programs.
4. Enhancing workforce quality, including reducing turnover, and improved practice (OECD, 2012).
5. Building momentum and advocacy to persuade governments to invest in the more “invisible” components of quality such as workforce professional development and

community liaison infrastructure; and to maintain investment over significant periods of time (Jarvie, 2011).

6. Driving a radical change in the way health/education/family service professions and their agencies understand each other and to work together. Effectively integrated services focused on parents, children and communities can only be achieved when professions and agencies step outside their silos (Lancet, 2011). This would include redesign of initial training and professional development, and fostering collaborations in research, policy design and implementation.

There are also the ongoing needs for,

- Identifying and developing effective parenting programs that work in tandem with formal ECEC provision.
- Experiments to determine if there are lower cost ways of delivering quality and outcomes for disadvantaged children, including the merits of adding targeted services for these children on the base of universal services.
- Figuring out how to scale up from successful trials (Grunewald & Rolnick, 2007; Engle et al., 2011).
- Working out how to make more effective transitions between preschool and primary school.
- Making research literature more accessible to public officials (OECD, 2012).

Indeed it can be argued that some of the most critical policy and program imperatives are in areas where quantitative research is of little help. In particular, qualitative research on effective strategies for ethnic minority children, their parents and their communities, is urgently needed. In most countries it is the ethnic minority children who are educationally and economically the most disadvantaged, and different strategies are required to engage their parents and communities. This is an area where governments struggle for effectiveness, and public officials have poor skills and capacities. This issue is common across many developed and developing countries, including countries with indigenous children such as Australia, China, Vietnam, Chile, Canada and European countries with migrant minorities (OECD, 2006; COAG, 2008; World Bank, 2011). Research that is systematic and persuasive to governments is needed on for example, the relative effectiveness of having bilingual environments and ethnic minority teachers and teaching assistants in ECEC centres, compared to the simpler community outreach strategies, and how to build parent and community leadership.

Many countries are acknowledging that parental and community engagement is a critical element of effective child development outcomes (OECD, 2012). Yet public officials, many siloed in education and child care ministries delivering formal ECEC

services, are remote from research on raising parent awareness and parenting programs. They do not see raising parental skills and awareness as core to their policy and program responsibilities. Improving parenting skills is particularly important for very young children (say 0-3) where the impact on brain development is so critical. It has been argued there needs to be a more systematic approach to parenting coach/support programs, to develop a menu of options that we know will work, to explore how informal programs can work with formal programs, and how health programs aimed young mothers or pregnant women can be enriched with education messages (The Lancet, 2011).

Other areas where qualitative research could assist are shown in Table 1 (see p. 40).

### **Implementation Science in Early Childhood Education and Care**

Much of the suggested qualitative research in Table 1 is around *program design and implementation*. It is well-known that policies often fail because program design has not foreseen implementation issues or implementation has inadequate risk management. Early childhood programs are a classic example of the “paradox of non-evidence-based implementation of evidence-based practice” (Drake, Gorman & Torrey, 2005). Governments recognise that implementation is a serious issue:

Table 1  
*ECEC challenges and qualitative research*

Challenge	Examples of Qualitative Research
Creating coordinated national agendas for early childhood development that bring together education, health, family and community policies and programs, at national, provincial and local levels	Best/good practice studies, identifying <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. key drivers of policy and program reform</li> <li>ii. the role of advocates, government ministers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs)</li> <li>iii. organisational structures that support joined up action (national, provincial and local)</li> </ol>
Building parent and community engagement in ECEC/ECD including increasing parental awareness the importance of ECEC and parents' role	Studies of <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. successful/unsuccessful communication with parents and communities</li> <li>ii. community liaison infrastructure</li> <li>iii. parent perspectives, and how they can be influenced, including the role of parenting programs.</li> <li>iv. Financing arrangements, legal instruments</li> </ol>
Finding lower cost ways of supporting highly disadvantaged children	Studies of the best mix of universal and targeted services
Strategies and action focused on ethnic minority children	Studies focusing on successful and unsuccessful programs (including meta studies) for <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. building public servant and professional capacity</li> <li>ii. building community member leadership capacity</li> <li>iii. outreach</li> <li>iv. ethnic minority teachers and teaching assistants</li> <li>v. bilingual approaches</li> <li>vi. cultural acknowledgement</li> <li>vii. remote service delivery/mobile approaches</li> </ol>
Enhancing workforce quality	Studies on the impact of working conditions on ECEC quality, and which conditions matter most for child outcomes
Persuading governments to invest in the more "invisible" components of quality	Cross country studies of <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. successful advocacy and leadership and</li> <li>ii. where /why quantitative data has been effective in driving government commitment</li> </ol>
Driving a radical change in the way health/education/family service professions and their agencies understand each other and to work together	Trials of <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. changes to initial training and professional development for professions, including multi-disciplinary elements</li> <li>ii. coordinating infrastructure at local level</li> </ol>
Parenting programs - identifying effective ones and linking to ECEC service delivery	Research on <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. extent to which high variability in outcomes is linked to implementation variability</li> <li>ii. Enriching nurse or health worker delivered services with education messages/support for parents, especially for the 0-3s</li> <li>iii. how to link formal delivery with informal/in home parenting support</li> </ol>
Scaling up from successful trials	Studies that identify key elements of successful and unsuccessful scaling up including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. government/management oversight structures</li> <li>ii. timeframe and resourcing</li> <li>iii. local flexibility versus national prescription</li> <li>iv. workforce development and working conditions</li> </ol>

there may be a lot of general knowledge about “what works”, but there is minimal systematic information about *how things actually work*. One difficulty is that there is a lack of a common language and conceptual framework to describe ECEC implementation. For example, the word “consult” can describe a number of different processes, from public officials holding a one hour meeting with available parents in allocation, to ongoing structures set up which ensure all community elements are involved and reflect the spectrum of community views, and to continue to build up community awareness and engagement over time.

There is a need to derive robust findings of generic value to public officials, for program design. In the health sciences, there is a developing literature on implementation, including a National Implementation Research Network based in the USA, and a *Journal of Implementation Science* (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman & Wallace, 2005). While much of the health science literature is focused on professional practice, some of the concepts they have developed are useful for other fields, such as the concept of “fidelity” of implementation which describes the extent to which a program or service has been implemented as designed. Education program implementation is sometimes included in these fora, however, there is no equivalent significant movement in early childhood education and care.

A priority in qualitative research for ECEC of value to public officials would then appear to be a systematic focus on implementation studies, which would include developing a conceptual framework and possibly a language for systematic description of implementation, as well as, meta-studies. This need not start from scratch—much of the implementation science literature in health is relevant, especially the components around how to influence practitioners to incorporate latest evidence-based research into their practice, and the notions of fidelity of implementation. It could provide an opportunity to engage providers and ECE professionals in research, where historically ECEC research has been weak.

Essential to this would be collaborative relationships between government agencies, providers and research institutions, so that there is a flow of information and findings between all parties.

## Conclusion

Quantitative social science research, together with studies of brain development, has successfully made the case for greater investment in the early years. There has been less emphasis on investigating what works on the ground especially for the most disadvantaged groups, and bringing findings together to inform government action. Yet many of the ECEC challenges facing governments are in implementation, and in ensuring that interventions are high quality. This

is particularly true of interventions to assist ethnic minority children, who in many countries are the most marginalised and disadvantaged. Without studies that can improve the quality of ECEC implementation, governments, and other bodies implementing ECEC strategies, are at risk of not delivering the expected returns on early childhood investment. This could, over time, undermine the case for sustained government support.

It is time for a rebalancing of government research activity towards qualitative research, complemented by scaled up collaborations with ECEC providers and research institutions. A significant element of this research activity could usefully be in developing a more systematic approach to analysing and reporting implementation, and linking implementation to outcomes. This has been done quite effectively in the health sciences. An investment in developing an ECEC 'implementation science' would thus appear to be a worthy of focus for future work.

## References

- Bink, S. (2007). A Large-scale Policy Research Programme: A Canadian Experience. In Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Evidence in Education: Linking Research and Policy* (pp. 109-116). Paris: OECD Publishing.
- COAG (Council of Australian Governments). (2008). *A National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from [http://www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2008-10-2/docs/indigenous\\_early\\_childhood\\_NPA.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2008-10-2/docs/indigenous_early_childhood_NPA.pdf)
- Cook, T. & Gorard, S. (2007). What Counts and What should Count as Evidence. In Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Evidence in Education: Linking Research and Policy* (pp 33-49). Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2005). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*(3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Drake, R. E., Essock, S. M., & Torrey, W. C. (2002). *Implementing adult "tool kits" in mental health*. Paper presented at the NASMHPD conference, Tampa, FL.
- Engle, P. L., Fernald, L. C. H., Alderman, H., Behrman, J., O'Gara, C., Yousafzai, A., Cabral de Mello, M., Hidrobo, M., Ulkuer, N., Ertem, I. & Iltus, S. (2011). Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries. *The Lancet*, 378(9799), 1339-1353.
- Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blasé, K. A., Friedman, R. M. & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature* (FMHI Publication #23). Retrieved from University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, the National Implementation Research Network website: [http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIR\\_N-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf](http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIR_N-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf)
- Grunewald, R., & Rolnick, A. (2007). A Productive Investment: Early Childhood Development, In M. Young & L. Richardson (Eds.), *Early Child Development From Measurement to Action: A Priority for Growth and Equity*(pp. 15-26). Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Jarvie, W.K. (2011). *Governments and Integrated Early Childhood Development Policies and Services*. Paper presented at the 2011 International Conference on Early Childhood Development, Beijing.
- Naudeau, S., Kataoka, N., Valerio, A., Neuman, M. J. & Elder, L. K. (2011). *Investing in*



*Young Children: An Early Childhood Development Guide for Policy Dialogue and Project Preparation.* Washington, DC: The World Bank.

OECD. (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care.* Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD. (2012). *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care.* Paris: OECD Publishing.

Office for Children and Early Childhood Development, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2008). *A Research Paper to inform the development of an early years learning framework for Australia.* Retrieved from [http://deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy\\_Agenda/EarlyChildhoodWorkforce/Documents/AResearchPapertoinformthedevelopmentofAnEarlyYears.pdf](http://deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/EarlyChildhoodWorkforce/Documents/AResearchPapertoinformthedevelopmentofAnEarlyYears.pdf)

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P., Melhuish, E., & Elliot, K. (2003). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Intensive Case Studies of Practice across the Foundation Stage* (Technical Paper 10). London: DfEE/Institute of Education, University of London.

The Lancet. (2011). *The Debate: Why hasn't the world embraced early childhood development?* [Video Post] Retrieved from <http://www.thelancet.com/series/child-development-in-developing-countries-2>

The World Bank. (2011). *Early Child Development in China: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty and Improving Future Competitiveness* (Report No. 53746-CN). Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/9383/709830PUB0EPI0067926B09780821395646.pdf?sequence=1>