

A3: Adaptations and Innovations in Research Methods During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Wednesday, June 28, 2023

10:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. | Mt Vernon

1. Descriptive Information

A3: Adaptations and Innovations in Research Methods During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the context for research projects that focused on child care and early education (CCEE) programs, the workforce, and the families and children they serve. Research projects shifted their strategies to address new questions (that were more relevant for the pandemic context) and use new or revised methods to accommodate the needs of CCEE programs. These changes may have implications for those who participated, the quality of the data collected, and the findings that were generated by the projects. This session poses questions to specific projects and to the broader CCEEPRC research community to learn about the changes that were made, analyze the impact of the changes, and consider the extent to which changes should be incorporated into new projects going forward. This discussion is intended to support capacity building and shared knowledge about best practices and research strategies in the CCEE field.

Presenters

Kathryn Tout, Child Trends
Zipi Diamond, Child Trends
JoAnn Hsueh, MDRC
Michelle Maier, MDRC
Gretchen Kirby, Mathematica
Sara Bernstein, Mathematica
Kyle DeMeo Cook, Boston University
Elizabeth Cavadel, Mathematica
Margaret Gillis, SRI
Hailey Heinz, University of New Mexico

Scribe

Katie Caldwell

Number of Attendees: 29

2. Documents/Presentations Shared (Please list any electronic documents, PowerPoint presentations, or web links used during the session.) **Collect presenter PowerPoints or other documents on the flash drive provided.**

Adaptations and Innovations in Research Methods during the COVID-19 Pandemic

3. Brief Summary of Presentations

- **Summary of Presentation #1: Kathryn Tout and Zipi Diamond, *Adaptions and Innovations in Research Methods during the COVID-19 Pandemic***
 - Audience poll – all researchers in the room
 - Significant ways COVID impacted research?
 - Delayed recruitment and switch to virtual research methods were most common impacts
 - Context for child care and early education changed dramatically during the pandemic

- Held a virtual convening in April 2023 to discuss what changed due to the pandemic. Hosted by Child Trends as part of the CCEEPRA project funded by OPRE
 - 9 OPRE-funded projects represented at the April convening
 - Key Themes:
 - Recruitment challenges
 - No on-site field staff, switched to virtual recruitment methods
 - Shifted research activities to be virtual (e.g., online focus groups)
 - Cancelled activities
 - Child assessments, classroom observations
 - Revised protocols to include COVID-19 context
 - Implications
 - Care and concern researchers had for participants
 - Relied more heavily on CCEE program staff for recruitment and data collection
 - Determined recruitment staff on research team would benefit from more sensitivity training prior to beginning work
 - Offered participants options of phone and email participation
 - Understood and created solutions to support those more impacted by COVID-19 or with lower capacity to participate
 - Revised research activities
 - Virtual classroom observations- researchers and CCEE programs needed significant technical support and solutions
 - Child assessments- options were parent report, teacher report or at home data collection kit
 - After having to do virtual trainings, in-person research staff training for the research team is preferred
- **Summary of Presentation #2: Hailey Heinz, Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability in a Majority-Hispanic Border State project**
 - Studied diverse families across New Mexico
 - Really hard to collect data for everyone involved in the study. All families were experiencing a crisis and feeling burdened. Differentially difficult for Native families due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on their community
 - Virtual data collection worked relatively well for urban families. Rural area families (tribal families especially) were really difficult to reach:
 - Broadband not available/sufficient
 - Many used paid minute phone plans so a 30-minute phone interview was too burdensome for phone plans
 - Roads in and out of tribal lands were closed for a long time- not possible to access
 - Prompted ethical conversations about how appropriate it was to get Tribal families to participate in research during this time as tribal communities were even more burdened by COVID-19
- **Summary of Presentation #3: Kyle DeMeo Cook, Understanding Children’s Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten project**
 - Study focused on children transitioning out of Head Start into kindergarten. Qualitative multi-case study.
 - Collected data from families, teachers, and administrators
 - Biggest change: moved data collection from Spring 2021 to Spring 2022
 - Moved many things to virtual. No observations had been planned so that made the move to virtual easier
 - Building rapport with families and programs took longer
- **Summary of Presentation #4: Michelle Maier, Variations in Implementation of Quality Interventions project**

- Professional development ended up being virtual. Had to work with curriculum developers to break up full day sessions into multiple days
- Creative about taking attendance due to logging on in different ways (individual, group sessions)
- Did live virtual coaching: gave all classrooms an iPad, earpiece, and a robot that gives a 360-degree view of the room. Had to train coaches on how to use the technology. Developed a hotline for technology issues.
- Couldn't provide feedback in the moment. Natural for a coach to lean over and speak to a teacher when in person, but very jarring for a teacher to have a coach speak to them in an earpiece.
- Coaches helping in the classroom (i.e., cleaning up, picking up chairs) helps build rapport and that was impossible in the virtual setting
- Wanted to do in person child assessment – switched this to teacher and parent reports.
- Instead of in-person classroom observations, did virtual live (e.g., not video recorded) classroom observations. Had to train folks on classroom observation tool virtually and had more folks fail certification than normal. Had to choose a classroom observation tool which allowed training to be virtual
-
- **Summary of Presentation #5: Sara Bernstein, Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey project**
 - Direct child assessment and observations were originally planned for 2020
 - OPRE asked for special data collection in 2021, to better understand family and staff well-being in the context of the pandemic
 - Added new items to parent survey (since no direct assessment), mostly about children's social-emotional development given the focus on well-being, and that many children spent more time at home early in the pandemic than in a non-COVID year. Limited in ability to add items to the parent survey given the other information about family well-being collected in that survey, and needing to keep survey length in mind. The team has done some preliminary work examining associations between teacher child report and direct assessment measures and found associations vary depending on the measure: for example, teacher-reported approaches to learning is only weakly associated with directly assessed executive function, while teacher-reported literacy skills scale is moderately to strongly associated with directly assessed language and cognitive skills. However, the same work also finds some associations between teacher-reported scales (but not the corresponding direct assessments) and children's background characteristics, indicating potential bias. Given the same associations were not observed with the direct assessments, there are concerns about bias in the teacher-reported measures.
 - For studies like FACES, that have been going on for many years, comparability to prior rounds is always a consideration. An open question, for example with classroom observations, is whether we can compare data collected in different modes (e.g., in person vs. virtual) even with the same instrument?
- **Summary of Presentation #6: Margaret Gillis, Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Subsidized Child Care in California project**
 - Delayed in almost everything- case studies were planned for fall of 2020- delayed by 1 year.
 - Pushed to virtual- no one wanted extra people in the classrooms, administrators didn't want to put extra burden on teachers
 - Only had 1 family recruited initially for case studies
 - Outreach to all child care providers who took subsidies
 - Tried to look at administrative data but that became more difficult because California implemented "hold harmless" policies- meaning programs would get reimbursed for full capacity instead of who was actually there so data did not accurately reflect attendance
- **Summary of Presentation #7: Elizabeth Cavadel, Assessing Models of Coordinated Services project**
 - The project gathered information about how states and communities coordinate services for children and adults (with a focus on organizations that had early care and education as a core service).

- In-person site visits to organizations providing coordinated services were supposed to start in 2020
 - Were initially delayed due to the pandemic and the burden that staff and families were facing.
 - Eventually, the site visits were conducted virtually
 - The virtual format worked well for program staff- flexibility to be able to schedule across a 2-week period was welcomed and the research team reached out to staff to schedule so there was less scheduling burden for the points of contact at the organization.
 - The virtual format allowed researchers to talk to a greater number of staff. For example, the team could include a person who worked in a remote location, something that was not possible with in-person visits.
 - In contrast, virtual parent recruitment was very difficult. Virtual focus group format was not feasible. Parents schedules did not allow for a group conversation and many parents were stretched too thin to engage in the project. Had to switch to one-on-one conversations with parents.
 - Parents who did participate appreciated the flexibility but were often distracted (driving, cooking dinner) while being interviewed.
- **Summary of Presentation #8: Gretchen Kirby, Assessing the Implementation and Cost of High Quality Early Care and Education project and Early Care and Education Leadership Study project**
 - Assessing the Implementation and Cost of High Quality Early Care and Education (ICHQ) project
 - Measure development project for center-based settings
 - Wanted to measure quality via classroom observations but couldn't observe classrooms so had to use QRIS rating and NAEYC accreditation as a proxy of quality
 - Had to adjust approach to validating the measures a bit but also included an externally validated teaching staff survey to validate the implementation measures
 - Recruitment
 - Was extremely challenging- had a slight advantage that we could shift costs to recruitment because classroom observations were cancelled
 - Intense data collection for administrators- cost workbook (8 hrs to complete) and, implementation interview, and support for the teaching staff surveys
 - Recruited 80 centers- did have drop off, couldn't get all centers through cost data collection
 - Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS)
 - Recruitment continued to be challenging
 - Reached out to over 3000 centers, completed data collection with 110. Exhausted outreach to 1300 centers. 567 said no, 700+ passively said no. Large sample list is key
 - Carefully consider how we achieve equitable representation in participating centers
 - Incentives study – tested in different ways in both projects
 - Provided a prepay token of appreciation through physical gift code and then an electronic post pay token immediately on survey completion
 - Tested prepay and post pay vs just a post pay (previous way of offering incentives). The addition of the prepay token resulted in a 20 point increase in response rate.
 - 15 minute survey for teaching staff. Incentive was \$10 pre test and \$10 post test
 - For a 45 min survey we tested amount variation. Offered \$10 prepay then \$40 post pay (vs \$25 and \$25). Slightly higher response for smaller prepay and larger postpay than offering equal amounts; it was a statistically significant difference.

4. Brief Summary of Discussion

- Q: What steps did you take to respond to any captive audience bias?
- A: Margaret- did not have a captive audience bias. Not a lot we could do.

- A: Kyle- we used a nomination process- looking for 6 sites to do this across the country. Some self-nomination, some other nominated. Tend to get people already interested in the work in thinking about transitions.
- Q: Data collection issues- what do you do when it comes to missing data?
- A: Gretchen- validated implementation measures to another measure- tried to incorporate other ways to do validation measures. Incorporated COVID questions in as well
- A: Michelle- collected data from other sources as well- attendance data, etc.
- Q: For the pre- and post- survey incentive findings, did you set out to test this or was it an adaptation to low participation rate?
- A: Gretchen- Both- set out to do a test but had to adjust when COVID hit
- Q: How to negotiate the discrepancies in teacher report and direct child assessment?
- A: Always a problem with multiple observers in one room. Really thinking through who is the best reporter for the measures before you get to analysis.

5. Summary of key issues raised (facilitators are encouraged to spend the last 3-5 minutes of sessions summarizing the key issues raised during the session; bullets below are prompts for capturing the kinds of issues we're looking for)

- Some virtual methods for research worked well, but there are considerations and checkpoints that need to be put in place to identify unintended consequences or challenges. Some observation protocols, measures, and training practices may be more challenging or infeasible to implement virtually.
- Conducting research during a crisis like COVID-19 brought up some deep thinking about the ethical issues of engaging people experiencing multiple stressors with participating in research projects.
- Providing an incentive prior to participating in a research activity and after completing that activity (survey, etc.) had a significantly higher response rate than just offering a post activity incentive.