

SECTION 3, CHAPTER 11

**THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO
UNDERSTANDING IMPLEMENTATION
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES
AND PROGRAMS**

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of any educational initiative is a complex endeavor that requires stakeholders to learn new knowledge and skills, apply this learning to their own context, and figure out ways to sustain the reform over time despite changing contextual demands. Much of the implementation research in early childhood education has focused on whether policies or programs work (Weiland, 2018) or whether they are implemented with fidelity. However, implementation is not embodied in a policy or a program—it is the outcome of how groups of people interpret, translate, and practice aspects of policies and programs in particular educational settings (Honig, 2006). As a consequence, innovations vary in how they are implemented, whether they are implemented, and to what extent they are implemented.

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In this chapter, I argue that qualitative studies examining implementation of early childhood programs can provide practical information to help policymakers and leaders understand why early childhood programs do or do not fulfill their promise. Qualitative researchers take an interpretive stance, investigating how implementation of an innovation occurs in educational contexts and from the meanings of participants involved in the implementation process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). By paying attention to the local and contextual, qualitative research offers a unique position from which to learn about the multiple and conflicting ways innovations go from policy to practice.

CONCEPTUALIZING IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH

What constitutes implementation research? Theories and perspectives differ, but in this chapter, I use “implementation research” as an umbrella term that encompasses any systematic inquiry of an innovation (e.g., program/intervention/method/pedagogy/policy) in practice, the factors that influence its enactment, and the relations between the innovation, influential factors, and outcomes (Century & Cassata, 2016). Implementation research can examine an innovation vertically (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006) by how it is taken up and employed at different levels of the educational system (e.g., state, district, and school). Implementation studies may also look horizontally (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006) at how an innovation is implemented across a number of sites in a range of communities or geographic areas. They can also examine an innovation at different stages of development. For example, in New Jersey a number of quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted on the state-funded public preschool program, documenting both its impacts over time (e.g., Barnett, Jung, Youn & Frede, 2013) as well as how policy mandates are taken up in local classrooms and communities (e.g., Graue, Ryan, Wilinski, Northey & Nocera, 2018). Because early childhood policies are complex, it is also possible for implementation studies to look

at different aspects of a policy, such as how curriculum models are taken up by teachers (e.g., Ryan, 2004), the approaches of instructional coaches in a program (e.g., Hnasko, 2017; Ryan, Hornbeck & Frede, 2004), or how the higher education system complements a state early childhood policy (e.g., Kipnis, Austin, Sakai, Whitebook, & Ryan, 2013). In this way, implementation researchers can help policymakers adjust aspects of an innovation to achieve improved program quality at the local level.

Implementation has been conceptualized in different ways. The earliest studies in K-12 education tended to look at implementation from a top-down perspective, examining whether a policy or program was implemented as intended or with fidelity (Honig, 2006). This approach tends to view implementation as a technical enterprise in which teachers and other stakeholders accept policies and programs as written and put them into action accordingly. Fidelity studies have often been conducted in early childhood settings when examining the implementation of specific curricula (e.g., Piasta, Justice, McGinty, Mashburn, & Slocum, 2015). Though many policymakers aim to achieve fidelity to implementation when scaling up a particular approach to early childhood programming, not all communities or teachers are willing to implement an initiative as intended, leading to other ways of conceptualizing implementation.

One such way derives from school reform studies of state interventions, such as the Rand Change Agent Study (Mclaughlin, 1987). These studies tended to show that implementation on a large scale was a matter of mutual adaptation as teachers and leaders altered policies and programs to fit their contexts. This perspective assumes that there will always be some adaptation of innovations and researchers should therefore pay attention to whether and how innovations are taken up and what these adaptations look like in practice. Implementation science attempts to do this by developing logic models that identify the various levers and contextual factors that might shape or constrain how an innovation is implemented, as well as the relations between differing aspects of an innovation and how these might lead to expected outcomes. This conceptualization of implementation rests on the assumption that although the policy or program may be changed a little, those doing the implementing will follow the intent of the innovation.

More recently, implementation researchers have begun to theorize about implementation as *enactment*—a complicated network of relations that assumes the movement from innovation to practice is multidirectional, not just top down or bottom up, as well as deeply political (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006). From this perspective, the implementation process is influenced and shaped by many agents (from children to policymakers) with varying levels of power and influence within educational settings that constitute a nexus of multiple policies at any one time. Researchers working from an enactment perspective look at the politics of innovation, and how a wide range of stakeholders working in various networks resist, transform, and implement policy depending on organizational ethos and resources, professional theories, and perceived need (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010).

QUALITATIVE STUDIES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Qualitative or interpretive research is interested in how individuals construct their social worlds and how those worlds are mediated by context and culture (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Research from this perspective typically involves spending a lot of time in educational settings, observing and talking with participants to develop an understanding and interpretation of educational phenomena. Qualitative researchers interested in implementation therefore examine innovations in sites of practice, often observing what takes place in schools and early childhood settings; they also shadow key stakeholders (leaders, teachers, families, state-level policymakers, coaches, etc.) and question them about an innovation and the reasoning behind their approach to implementing it. Using both the mutual adaptation and the enactment perspective, this research tends to focus mostly on the implementation of various public policies guiding prekindergarten or preschool.

► Qualitative studies of the implementation of public preschool

Qualitative studies of preschool programs are not new. Early ethnographic studies (e.g., Lubeck, 1985; Lubeck Jessup, deVries & Post, 2001; Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) examined teaching in local sites of practice in the U.S. and elsewhere to illustrate how different values shaped what preschool looked like in action. These small comparative case studies provided some sense of how local actors and community values mediate practice, but they did not look at the findings in relation to bigger policy issues like program improvement across a multitude of sites. However, investments in public preschool have catalyzed a new genre of policy-capturing studies that tend to look at public preschool implementation at the local level of classrooms and school districts.

► Implementation at the local level

Qualitative studies of implementation at the local level are most often conducted in classrooms, examining preschool teachers' experiences and perspectives of a particular policy (such as a curriculum requirement) or, more broadly, what state or district preschool policy looks like in action. Most researchers employ a case study methodology using multiple data sources (interviews, documents, and field notes) to describe life in preschool classrooms. Some studies look not only at classrooms but also at how preschool is embedded in a district and community. In this way, they illustrate the interplay among the various stakeholders who are trying to create public preschool in a particular location. Such studies shed light on the tensions that arise when school districts partner with community providers to enact preschool systems, as well as the factors that mediate implementation.

Tensions between prekindergarten and K-12. The expansion of public preschool has brought changes to the landscape of early childhood services. In most states, oversight of preschool has transitioned to departments of education (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017), which in the past were not typically responsible for the education of 3- and 4-year-olds. Many states are also using a mixed service-delivery system in

which preschool is offered through a partnership between local education authorities and traditional service providers such as Head Start and child care sites. Though it is logical to work with experienced providers, a number of qualitative case studies of preschool policy implementation have examined what happens when preschool teachers from different auspices begin to work within this new preschool-to-12th grade system.

People who work with children under five years old often operate with different philosophical and instructional goals than those who teach in K-12. For example, they tend to emphasize that knowledge of young children's learning and development—or what is often termed developmentally appropriate practice—should be the starting place for curriculum and instruction (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In contrast, K-12 education tends to focus on subject matter, resulting in more didactic and teacher-led instruction. While this dichotomy is problematic in itself, several studies (Brown, 2009; Brown & Gasko, 2012; Desimone, Payne, Fedoravicius, Henrich & Finn-Stevenson, 2004; Graue, Ryan, Norcera, Northey & Wilinski, 2016; Wilinski, 2017) have examined the clash of values that occurs when preschool teachers start to work with their K-12 colleagues.

For example, Brown (2009) conducted a case study of one large urban district where the prekindergarten teachers worked with administrators to develop an assessment system for 4-year-olds to inform kindergarten teachers. The new assessment tool infused developmentally appropriate indicators in six academic areas (such as language arts, math, etc.) aligned with the state's prekindergarten guidelines, and teachers were encouraged to assess children's learning along a four-point scale using anecdotal records. However, observations, plus interviews with key stakeholders after the first year of implementation, illustrated the tension that arose between the prekindergarten teachers' views of teaching and assessment and that of their elementary school colleagues. Elementary stakeholders argued that the tool did not imbue high academic expectations and that it was not clear how these developmentally appropriate indicators would ensure children had the necessary knowledge and skills for success in kindergarten. Though the prekindergarten administrators and teachers had hoped the assessment tool would facilitate more alignment of child-centered practices, the tool was eventually revised to embody more explicit attention to the content knowledge and skills 4-year-olds must acquire before entering kindergarten. Brown concludes that some of the tensions that arose in this case occurred because district resourcing was tied to third-grade test scores. Therefore, leaders believed it was more important to achieve academic alignment across the P-12 system by focusing on content rather than children's development.

Several other case studies have looked at the tensions between preschool and the K-12 system from the perspective of standards. Standards-based reform began in earnest in the K-12 sector with the No

Child Left Behind Act (2002), which held states accountable for student learning, school progress, etc., according to their standards. The expansion of publicly funded preschool in the U.S. also led to a standards movement. Since 2009, all 50 states have had early learning standards about what young children are supposed to know. Several case studies (Brown, 2010; Graue, Wilinski & Nocera, 2016; Graue, Ryan, Nocera, Northey & Wilinsky, 2016) of prekindergarten have asked: Which standards guide the work of teaching and learning?

Graue et al. (2016) conducted a multi-site case study of prekindergarten implementation in two states: Wisconsin, where programs are locally controlled, and New Jersey, where programs are highly regulated by the state. By observing classrooms in each state over the school year, and through interviews with teachers and administrators, the researchers found that although each state had early learning standards, most prekindergarten teachers felt they had no choice but to align at least part of their curriculum and teaching with K-12 standards by incorporating more instruction in academic content. For example, in one district in Wisconsin, a prekindergarten teacher in a public school was told that in the upcoming year she must use a math curriculum that was designed for 5- and 6-year-olds. In New Jersey, a Head Start teacher reported that the administration expected teachers to infuse more literacy into the Creative Curriculum to ensure that children were ready for kindergarten. To do this, she would bring small groups of children together to work explicitly on key skills during center time, and each week in large group time they focused on a new letter of the alphabet. Therefore, regardless of the policy standards context, it seemed that in these classrooms teachers felt pressured to address K-12 content standards by altering some of their more student-centered practices that were reflected in their respective state's early learning standards.

Looking across these studies, it is possible to see the curriculum and instructional challenges as school districts and community-based providers partner to provide preschool in a particular location. Tensions often stem from the neoliberal discourses shaping education as a whole (Brown, 2015, Graue et al., 2016). With the emphasis on accountability as children move through the school system, both preschool teachers and their elementary counterparts feel particularly pressured to ensure that young children will succeed academically, as measured on academic tests. As a consequence, the research in this area suggests that it is preschool teachers who are shifting their practices to be more in alignment with the demands of the K-3 grades.

The findings from this group of studies suggest that policymakers and leaders of preschool implementation efforts need to consider how to bring key stakeholders together in the initial phases of a program to learn about each other's understanding of preschool, and to try to reach some consensus about the purposes of preschool and what it should look like in action.

FACTORS MEDIATING IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of any educational reform is mediated by a number of organizational factors (Fullan, 2001). A handful of qualitative studies that look beyond the classroom to examine relationships between teachers and the organizations and the communities in which they work provides some insight into the factors that shape preschool implementation in local settings. In general, these factors tend to be related to resourcing and leadership.

Resourcing. In K-12 education, public schools in a district are governed by a similar funding formula. But Head Start and community-based providers have traditionally received less funding than public schools. Moreover, some services, such as Head Start, receive public dollars, while private for-profit or nonprofit child care centers tend to rely on parent fees. To be sure, in mixed service-delivery systems, child care sites and Head Start supplement their funding with state prekindergarten dollars. However, the limited funding of child care and Head Start sites often means fewer opportunities for professional development, mentoring, planning time, etc., for teachers, as well as limitations when it comes to facilities, among other things (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Some qualitative studies have observed how these funding differences play out in teachers' practices and the delivery of quality learning experiences for young children.

For example, in their multi-state case study of six preschool settings, Graue et al. (2018) describe how the resources available in a given organizational context impacted what teachers could do. In New Jersey, where preschool teachers receive equal pay across settings, the auspice shaped how specific routines were enacted. This was most striking with the policy requirement that all children have 45 minutes of outdoor playtime. In two of the prekindergarten programs visited regularly, gross motor time was limited because of inadequate facilities—most notably in the Norwood district, where the classroom was part of a Head Start program with no outside play space. A room had been converted to a gross motor area that included an indoor slide and various equipment like stilts and balls. However, there was no consistent schedule for using this space, in part because on some days adult-to-child ratios could not be met because of limited funds for substitute teachers, and assistant teachers were moved around to meet ratio requirements in various rooms. As a consequence, the schedule for physical play was constantly changed. Celia, a prekindergarten teacher at this site, explained that “sometimes they would have it in the morning, another day we would have it in the afternoon. The kids are going out of control, they need consistency.”

In her case study of three programs in one Wisconsin district that received funding from the state to implement public prekindergarten, Wilinski (2017) describes the economic costs of creating mixed service-delivery systems. In the district of Lakeville, both half-time and full-time programs could apply for 4K funding to offer half-day public preschool. Though they received a per-student rate from the state,

districts determined locally how much funding partner sites would receive. Thus at many sites that had anticipated public funds to offset costs, the reimbursement offered by the district was not enough. As a consequence, some sites lacked the funds to purchase materials or find appropriate substitute teachers, given that the state required qualified teachers in prekindergarten. Complicating things further, schools offered transportation for preschool children to their own sites but not to partner sites, limiting access for families who needed wraparound care in addition to a half-day preschool program for their children.

The most compelling difference in resourcing between many early childhood settings and public schools is teacher compensation. Teachers in public schools typically have better benefits and wages than their counterparts working in Head Start and community-based programs (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). In some states, parity is achieved by giving teachers equal pay for similar qualifications regardless of auspice, but in other states, programs receive a particular level of prekindergarten funding, which they may or may not use to equalize wages. Several studies highlight how the differences in

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compensation produce tensions not only between schools and partner sites but also between prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers. For example, Graue et al., (2018) describe how teachers working in partner sites in New Jersey were frustrated because, as a result of belonging to a different union, they were expected to work in more difficult conditions for similar pay but without the same benefits. Similarly, Wilinski (2017) describes how because districts could determine salaries of prekindergarten teachers, there were inequities in teacher compensation depending on where teachers worked. One district, for example, required that prekindergarten teachers in community sites be paid at least 90% of what a public

school teacher with similar credentials earned. Not only was inequitable compensation a problem, but, as Wilinski points out, the child care sites lacked any kind of pathway for teachers to improve their compensation, leading to teacher turnover from child care sites to public schools.

Even when preschool teachers work in public schools, tensions around resourcing can still arise. In a focus group study with 42 teachers (20 preschool and 22 kindergarten teachers) working in four schools involved in a whole-school reform network, Desimone et al. (2004) found that because of union contracts, preschool teachers in a given school were paid salaries closer to those of teachers in child care sites, despite the fact that many had master's degrees. With preschool having been added to public schools with little space, Desimone et al. (2004) also found that kindergarten teachers were wary of

sharing resources like technology with their preschool colleagues. As a consequence, preschool teachers in this study reported feeling a lack of support from their elementary colleagues and uncertainty about their place in the elementary school.

Policy implementation is constrained or enabled by a site's monetary and physical resources. These studies highlight how important it is for policymakers to think about equity for services and teachers when partnering for public preschool. If equity between public school and community-based settings is lacking, then young children may get less access to a high-quality education.

Leadership. Research on school reform initiatives (e.g., Desimone et al., 2004; Fullan, 2001) has illustrated time and again how important school leaders are to any initiative. Principals provide resources and time for teachers to learn about an initiative and to consider how they might implement it in their own classrooms. Effective school leaders also recognize that change takes time, and therefore they help teachers maintain small steps towards implementation. For example, in their interview study with preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers involved in implementing preschool in public schools, Desimone et al. (2004) found that both school principals and district administrators were key to including preschool in their elementary schools. District leaders provided the clout to ensure that principals persisted with the reform, while knowledgeable principals who were committed to the initiative worked hard to get preschool and kindergarten teachers to collaborate.

Few qualitative studies focus solely on early childhood leadership in the implementation of public preschool. Though of late the field has seen a lot more attention given to workforce issues, in general the research on principals, directors of early childhood settings, and other leaders in different parts of the system is limited. Some evidence is available from case studies of preschool implementation in districts (e.g., Brown, 2009; Graue et al., 2018; Wilinski, 2017), which often interview leaders as well as teachers. In general, these studies would suggest that leaders in educational communities shape the resources available to teachers as well as what teachers are expected to teach.

One of the few studies focused solely on leaders was conducted by Whitebook, Ryan, Kipnis, and Sakai (2008), who interviewed 98 Head Start and private child care directors in 16 of the 31 districts offering public preschool in New Jersey about partnering with school districts to provide preschool. Though the directors conveyed that the infusion of money and district resources had been beneficial to their sites, the majority reported struggling with governance issues between policy requirements and those of the auspice in which they worked. For example, different reporting requirements as well as different staff qualifications meant they were constantly trying to keep on top of paperwork and remain positive in an organizational context in which the public preschool teachers were paid more and had access to on-site coaching as well as more professional development opportunities.

Similarly, in a recent mixed methods dissertation study of leaders of state preschool programs, Northey (2018) found that governance was a constant barrier to achieving the goals these leaders had for the program. State leaders said they struggled to have a voice in policy conversations in their state's department of education and therefore had less opportunity to obtain and maintain resources for their programs. Most leaders in this study were early childhood professionals with leadership training, and yet they felt their expertise was undermined as they—like many of the preschool teachers in their state—attempted to bring quality early childhood practices into K-12 education.

Braun et al. (2011) have argued that implementation researchers often fail to recognize that educational settings are sites of multiple policies interacting simultaneously. Whether they look at a director in a school district or a leader at the state level, these leadership studies suggest that public preschool may be a partnership in name but not always in practice. Without some thought by policymakers as to how to bring different levels of the preschool system together, what children experience as a preschool education may vary considerably.

TOWARD A QUALITATIVE IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH AGENDA

Focusing on the implementation of early childhood programming in local sites of practice and on the perspectives of participants helps us understand whether and to what extent a policy is implemented as intended, makes it possible to see how policies and programs are shaped by context and local actors, and can help with theorizing change and improvements in practice. However, the research base is limited to a handful of studies, and few of these look at implementation across multiple sites, multiple states, or at all levels of the system. The research reviewed in this paper suggests three possible paths toward a more comprehensive, critical, and policy-capturing use of qualitative research to improve the implementation of high-quality early childhood education systems. These include moving beyond classrooms and school districts to investigate multiple levels of the early childhood system, focusing on multiple stakeholders in the early childhood system, and, finally, considering equity.

► Investigating multiple levels of the system

Think about the multiple levels through which early childhood policy takes place within and across states. To date, most qualitative studies focus on the classroom and teachers' implementation of preschool. Some also look at how classrooms are nested within educational sites and, in some cases, how these educational sites interact with local communities. However, the implementation of early childhood programs such as preschool occurs at multiple levels of the system (Paulsell, Austin, & Lokteff, 2013): for example, through infrastructure organizations such as Head Start grantees, through the system of higher education, and through organizations at the state level. In some states, preschool policy entails a number of system-level supports (e.g., coaching and professional development) that also need to be investigated. By qualitatively mapping and documenting the multiple levels and sites in and through

which early childhood policy is implemented, it might be possible to gain some sense of what shapes stakeholders' interpretations of practice and of which aspects of policy get put into practice and why, as well as to map the way policy becomes practice through multiple layers of the system from the top down, the bottom up, and across key agencies and individuals.

To be sure, qualitative mapping in this way would need to focus on the key components of a system, and might need to focus on some critical cases to show differences across the system depending on where a child is and which agencies and stakeholders are interacting around that site. Such work might thus be able to illuminate the politics of enacting early childhood programming in one community versus another and to isolate the factors that contribute to differences in implementation. This kind of work could then lead to more extensive quantitative and mixed methods studies of the implementation of early childhood programs in a state. It might also contribute to the development of tools to help other states and agencies understand the multiple parts of any early childhood system. At the moment, most would agree that the early childhood system is fragmented, and some of the issues around implementation of any policy or program arise from the fact that most stakeholders only know the parts of the system they interact with.

► **A focus on all stakeholders**

A second and related pathway for inquiry is to concentrate a lot more research attention—through interview studies as well as case studies—on the multiple stakeholders who implement early childhood programming. The current qualitative research base on preschool implementation focuses primarily on the preschool teachers who are on the frontlines of implementation. However, the qualitative studies reviewed here all highlight a tension between the values and practices of preschool educators and those working in the K-12 system. We need more extensive investigation of K-3 teachers' beliefs and practices. This focus would help us understand the sources for their approaches to teaching young children and their resistance to what is known about high-quality early education. It would also help us learn what supports they might need to sustain developmentally appropriate yet academically rigorous instruction in the primary grades. If preschool is to achieve its intended outcomes, children need to experience a high-quality education in the early elementary grades. Yet to date there is little research on systems-building work in preschool through third grade, even though some states have initiatives in place.

Implementation of any early childhood program depends on knowledgeable leadership, whether at the state level, in a particular agency, in a school district, or at a local site of practice. Yet there is a dearth of research to help understand what leaders at various levels of the system are doing as they facilitate the implementation of early childhood programming. This line of inquiry is all the more important given that there is no required credential or certification for early childhood leaders; programming specific to early childhood leadership is limited (Goffin & Janke, 2013); and even in the K-12 system, where leaders are expected to have certain credentials, many who are leading P-3 systems building lack knowledge of early childhood education. Future research needs to gather

demographic data on the leaders implementing early childhood programming, their experience and expertise in early childhood education and leadership, and their professional development needs. Another line of inquiry might be to investigate exemplary leaders of program implementation to get a sense of what skills and strategies these leaders use at different parts of the system to support change.

Early childhood programming and systems building is a social construction involving many stakeholders (e.g., coaches, higher education faculty, community members, agency personnel, etc.). To understand where policies and programs either work or go awry, the perspectives and work of other stakeholders are important. Yet because the current qualitative research base suggests that both leadership and the relations between preschool teachers and their primary school counterparts are sources of tension, these seem to be important starting points.

► Issues of equity

Finally, the qualitative research base on implementation indicates that inequities are occurring in current systems of preschool education, and that these may have inadvertent consequences. The first of these inequities is the difference in resourcing and compensation experienced by teachers depending on where they work (Graue et al., 2016), union contracts (e.g., Desimone et al., 2004), or the state policy guiding the programs. Other authors, such as Wilinski (2017), have highlighted how local control of programs in Wisconsin can lead to a lack of access to high-quality preschool programs and resources like busing for families. In other words, despite the rhetoric that participation in a high-quality preschool program can level the playing field for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, it seems that implementation of policies can have unintended consequences that may contribute to children having less than ideal educational experiences.

To date, most research on the implementation of early childhood programming has been on what works and not on what programs look like in action or who benefits and at what cost (Weiland, 2018). Therefore, another line of inquiry is to look at children's experiences in programs and whether those experiences vary by race, class, gender, social class, and languages spoken. Even with targeted programming for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there is always variation in who gets the most from curriculum and instruction. Qualitative studies with children and families can be particularly informative here, as they can provide detailed accounts of students' lives in early childhood programs by examining the subtle social relationships that take place in classrooms, and whether some children have more opportunities than others for high-quality interactions with teachers and materials.

Along with studies of children's experiences and learning from families about programs, it is also essential to continue exploring inequities across the early childhood workforce and the impacts of differences in compensation, work environments, and benefits (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). If a lack of parity in compensation, benefits, and opportunities for advancement means that educators leave their programs, then the quality of children's

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experiences is lessened. Qualitative interview studies with early childhood educators can help us learn how early childhood policies may lead to retention or turnover and provide insights into effective strategies for building a qualified and stable workforce. With careful sampling, it might be possible to look closely at differences in staffing patterns quantitatively across states, but also to go deeper by eliciting educators’ perspectives on the intersections between policy, their work environments, and their decisions to stay or leave.

CONCLUSION

The early childhood field has assumed for some time that with evidence of best practices, it is possible to scale up and replicate what works in one site to many programs. But implementation research from a qualitative orientation illustrates that what may be evidence-based is often transformed, adapted, or even ignored in local sites of practice. To date, the potential of qualitative studies to guide policy and practice has been limited to a few states and sites, and rarely have the data from these studies been integrated into larger studies of policy implementation in a state. As the field moves away from questions of what works to investigating the implementation of early childhood programs, it will be necessary to bring researchers from differing orientations together to come up with mixed methods designs that look across programs at a macro scale while also employing qualitative studies to go deeply into variations in context and implementation strategies. With more qualitative studies of implementation across multiple sites, it might be possible to identify which local adaptations make sense and which may unnecessarily undermine best practices for young children and those charged with their education.

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