Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF): The Influence of a Research-Based Taxonomy on Funding and Evaluation Efforts

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Setting the Context: The MELF "Innovation Grants"

❑ One of four grant priorities for the non-profit foundation;

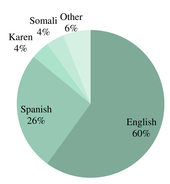
❑ 12 community organizations, all focused on measuring the school readiness trajectory for children 0-5;

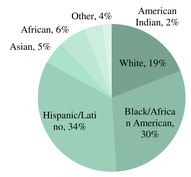
❑ Funded projects offered promising strategies that have not been well-researched and/or met the needs of underserved populations using strategies requiring further research evidence.

❑ Individually, the projects each test ideas on how to bring high quality interventions and opportunities to at-risk, underserved communities through
- Home visiting programs;
- Preschool programs (e.g., 1 versus 2 year, language immersion, questions on dosage, school district-child care partnerships);
- Family Literacy programming, and/or
- Partnerships and collaboratives.

❑ Collectively, the projects
- highlight measurement challenges and successes (e.g., child progress, parenting, program quality),
- build local capacity to meet child and family needs;
- employ a shared evaluation framework to understand how program activities affect outcomes for an at-risk sample (497 children; 278 parents) that is both linguistically and ethnically diverse:

Demographics based on 497 children, 278 parents enrolled in the evaluation:





What is the Taxonomy?

The taxonomy is an evidenced-based framework of features of effective early childhood programs that is designed to guide the decisions that directly impact the lives of children and families

Purpose:
- Delineates and defines the elements that comprise effective early childhood programs
- Summarizes research on each feature
- When warranted, puts forth program and policy implications.

Intended Audiences:
- Early childhood program managers
- Government staff
- Funders
- Evaluators
- Policy makers

Instrument Development

❑ Elements were identified by a team of researchers in early childhood education and were based in part on the work of Reynolds and Neuman (2006), but were designed to capture effective features of programs that served birth to five year olds and go beyond classroom-based interventions;

- Neuman, S. and Reynolds, A. (2006, June). *Top 10 Critical Features and Practices for Effective Early Childhood Programs.* Presentation given at the Minnesota Governor's Summit on Early Childhood, Minneapolis, MN.

❑Literature reviews of each element were conducted in the initial development of the taxonomy to identify the research evidence available. Based on this review, a rating was made on a 3-point scale about the quality of the evidence available upon which to make recommendations:
- There is good evidence upon which to make a recommendation and is usually experimental or quasi-experimental;
- There is some evidence, but it is not experimental/quasi-experimental, and recommendations are made based on a compilation of positive findings;
- There is insufficient evidence upon which to make a recommendation.

❑ These research ratings allowed the taxonomy to both provide some guidance around rating both existing and developing programs and identify gaps in the research base.

Implementation Lessons Learned

❑ Guiding the selection of promising, innovative programs:
The taxonomy began to inform the foundation's selection of innovative programs throughout the state, but was simultaneously under development and expanded to include programming to meet the needs of children birth – 3 years of age;

❑ Contributing to the research base:
The innovation grants facilitated the development of the taxonomy elements, and provided an opportunity to test run the tool which was based on the empirical literature;

❑ Deepening the foundation's understanding of their portfolio:
Revising and revisiting the tool expanded the foundation's understanding of how their grantees addressed the elements, identified gaps in services and funding in the process, and strengthened their awareness of how the grants would contribute to the foundation's ultimate goals; and

❑ Evaluation capacity building:
The process of developing and testing the tool pushed the evaluators to clarify the degree to which taxonomy elements were evident in a) the initial proposals, b) grantees' actual use of funds, c) the ultimate evaluation plans, and d) their relationship to the intended outcomes.

Next Steps

❑ Increasing relevance and utility of this research-based taxonomy
- Determining audiences, use, and enhancing user-friendliness;

❑ Creation of a more replicable literature review process;

❑ Gathering input from stakeholders.

Materials available at http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed/projects/MELF/

Other MELF partners:

Service Delivery	Timing		Duration		Intensity		Quality		Ratio Case Load		Program Fidelity		Curriculum		Supervision	
	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees
Infants/ Toddlers		2		1		1		1		1		2		1		1
Preschool				3		2		3				4		5		1

Service Model	Comprehensive Services		At-risk Populations (targeted vs. universal		Compensatory		Cultural Continuity		Transition/ Service Coordination		Professional Status/ Development	
	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees	Research Evidence	# Grantees
Infants/ Toddlers		1		1				1		1		3
Preschool		1				3		1		1		2