Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology 40 (2015) 57–62

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology

Comprehensive community initiatives: The road ahead for research and practice

Emily S. Lin [a], Jonathan F. Zaff [b,*], Amy R. Gerstein [c]

[a] nFocus Solutions, United States
[b] America's Promise Alliance and Boston University, United States
[c] Stanford University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 8 August 2015

Keywords:
Comprehensive community initiative
Evaluation
Research implications

ABSTRACT

In this concluding article, we summarize the body of articles in this special issue to identify and explore themes for the next wave of research and practice in CCIs. We suggest that these articles reveal that while evaluation, data, and assessments are a powerful way to frame clear, actionable tactics within complex systems, any efforts to be data-driven in CCIs must be grounded in strong relationships built on trust between stakeholders. We propose that people who wish to use data more effectively in the work of CCIs should not take the position of the removed analyst, but rather that of an engaged, data-informed leader, taking responsibility for enabling members of the CCI to build and maintain the relationships and collective identity of the CCI. To explore this proposal, we articulate a vision for what data-informed CCI leadership could look like, based on theories of sense-making grounded in developmental science. We then examine how these theories play out in real-life using examples of how three CCI leaders have tried to engage in data-driven work. Finally, we propose implications of this conception of leadership for collaborative, community-based efforts in the future.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The articles in this special issue describe and study multiple dimensions of multiple Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs). While the points of analysis are different, and their results varied, one point is clear—implementing CCIs is hard. Indeed, compared to more narrowly focused policies to address social issues, CCIs are expensive, time-intensive, complex, and extremely difficult to implement. A reasonable question, then, is why would CCIs be presumed to be a worthwhile intervention to address social inequities and promote youth and community development?

The short answer is that, despite our natural cognitive bias toward simple, reductionist explanations (e.g., Feltovich, Spiro, & Coulson, 1993; Grotzer, 2012), complex social problems do require complex solutions. As a symptom of poverty and economic inequality, many of the issues CCIs are designed to address share characteristics of "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973): there is no definitive formulation of the problem (i.e., the problem looks different in different places, for different people, at different times); the causes of the problem are multiple, interconnected, and contested; and there are no static solutions (i.e., any intervention effectively changes the problem space). As such, attempts to resolve such issues should be responsive to the local, complex, and dynamic nature of wicked problems (Gibson, Smyth, Nayowith, & Zaff, 2013, September 19).

The introductory article to this issue considers CCIs as such an attempt to respond productively to complexity, using a relational developmental systems perspective (e.g., Lerner, 2012; Overton, 2013) that understands young people as constantly interacting in mutually developmentally influential ways with multiple contexts over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The dynamic, evolving, and emergent nature of developmental systems (Overton, 2013) means not only that young people are continuously adapting as they influence and are influenced by their contexts, but that those who seek to intervene in those contexts must similarly adapt to the changing personal, social, physical, and political conditions around them. In addition to the mandate to align resources, needs, and strategies among multiple parties and levels of stakeholders within a CCI, then, those attempting to use CCIs to address "wicked problems" must recognize that the nature and needs of the stakeholders themselves, as well as the relationships between them, are negotiable and subject to constant change.

Thus, it becomes clear that, beyond simply ensuring the provision of high-quality child- or family-facing services and actions (which—while a challenging task—can and is being done by a number of individual organizations around the country), CCIs seeking to address inequities of opportunity should likely be prepared to respond to the continuously changing conditions of young people's lives and the multi-layered ecology within which they are embedded. As proposed in the introductory article, a "youth system" framework can serve as a helpful planning and evaluation heuristic, piecing together the ecology around the young person and leading communities to strengthen the supports around a

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: jonz@americaspromise.org (J.F. Zaff).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2015.07.002
0193-3973/© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

young person to produce a “supportive youth system” (Zaff, Donlan, Jones, & Lin, 2015).

Using the idea of a supportive youth system, we summarize the body of articles in this special issue to identify and explore themes for the next wave of research and practice in CCIs. We suggest that these articles reveal that while evaluation, data, and assessments are a powerful way to frame clear, actionable tactics within complex systems, any efforts to be data-driven in CCIs must be grounded in strong relationships built on trust between stakeholders. We propose that people who wish to use data more effectively in the work of CCIs should not take the position of the removed analyst, but rather that of an engaged, data-informed leader, taking responsibility for enabling members of the CCI to build and maintain the relationships and collective identity of the CCI.

To explore this proposal, we articulate a vision for what data-informed CCI leadership could look like, based on theories of sense-making grounded in developmental science. We then examine how these theories play out in real-life using examples of how three CCI leaders have tried to engage in data-driven work. Finally, we propose implications of this conception of leadership for collaborative, community-based efforts in the future.

Summary of special issue

The articles in this special issue address the idea of tackling the complex nature of large-scale community issues in multiple ways. Zaff et al. (2015) observed that the complexity of CCIs can lead to misalignment in perceived needs among stakeholders, and therefore divergence in strategies to address those needs. With families and direct service providers focusing on meeting basic needs, and with CCI leadership focusing on long-term academic and positive developmental outcomes for youth, a clear misalignment of goals emerges, which make any efforts to tame complexity even more difficult.

Osher et al., (2015) gave another example of a CCI in which intentions to align efforts in a community did not play out as planned on the ground. They proposed that the extent to which there was a mismatch of outcome with intention in Say Yes, that mismatch could be explained by was due to a lack of thorough implementation, such as ensuring quality of programming, maintaining consistent goals during leadership transitions, and providing institutional support for changes to routines. In addition, they noted that plans for a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system did not get realized in practice, particularly at the individual level, suggesting that the lack of follow-through on this aspect to be a barrier to the ultimate success of the CCI in producing positive outcomes for youth. As data tracking was one of the key components of Say Yes, Osher and colleagues note that while Say Yes Syracuse was able to develop many useful tools for data tracking across all levels of the CCI, technical, social, and structural issues (such as a leadership changes and a lack of professional development time) made for unfavorable conditions for “constructive data use.”

In contrast, with their emphasis on “homegrown” initiatives, Lanspery and Hughes (2015) made the case for an organic approach to systems change, in which local organizations and constituencies came together because of perceived mutual benefit, rather than being brought together by outside forces, such as a funder. Their argument was that without a financial incentive to come together, partner organizations had to articulate—early on—clear, shared goals and benefits in order to get any action moving at all. Such clarity drove them through the inevitable moments of uncertainty that came later and also helped create common language across stakeholder types, as evidenced in their descriptions of the work in both Detroit and Philadelphia. As a result, potentially controversial individual-level tactics, like using assessments as a means of matching youth to targeted skill development and interventions, could be implemented on a groundwork of trust and understanding. The implication here, then, is that the work of reducing complexity can be accomplished through technical, data-driven solutions, but that solutions are best implemented when relational work is done prior to moments of crisis in the system. Mancini and colleagues' (this issue) work on the role of social capital in helping young people deal with unexpected events emphasizes this perspective. As Kim, Oesterle, Catalano, and Hawkins (2015) show, a community can collect representative data of a youth population and the data, if collected over time, can provide important insights into what development typically looks like; as well as where intervention points emerge.

Altogether, this body of articles seems to reveal that while evaluation, data, and assessments are a powerful way to find a coherent throughline in complex systems, any efforts to be data-driven in CCIs must be grounded in strong relationships built on trust between stakeholders.

Using data and evidence in CCIs

The need for both of these principles to work hand-in-hand is particularly important now, as the systematic use of data and evidence is increasingly touted as a key tool for promoting organizational learning in complex environments (Data Quality Campaign, 2011). Data and evidence can be broadly understood to be information about phenomena relevant to youth development, gathered from observations conducted in a systematic or otherwise documentable method, and interpreted by actors at multiple levels of a system. This broad definition has been concretized within a myriad of standards of evidence (e.g., Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, 2014; Coburn & Turner, 2012; Data Quality Campaign, 2011; Smyth & Schorr, 2009; Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006; McLaughlin & London, 2013; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). Regardless of the specific standard, “data-driven decision-making,” “continuous improvement,” and “evidence-based practice” are all variations on a general belief that community-based work produces better outcomes for young people when the work is responsive to data and evidence at multiple steps along the way.

This belief has captured the imaginations and priorities of practitioners and researchers alike, and the recent proliferation of tools and power to both capture and analyze large amounts of data has led to predictions of data use transforming fields ranging from health care to government to business (Manyika et al., 2011). Yet, despite the clear value of this information to strategic learning and action, the body of research on the actual use of data and evidence in youth policy and practice at the community or school district level (see Honig & Coburn, 2008, for a review) has shown that not only do many communities frequently lack the capacity to gather, interpret, and use evidence effectively, but also that deeper cultural, relational, structural, and belief barriers can impede data use (e.g., Diamond & Cooper, 2007; Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009; Nutley et al., 2007).

Since the 1970s, evaluation researchers like Carol Weiss and Michael Patton have built a body of theoretical and empirical knowledge on the different ways research, evidence, and data are used, mis-used, and not used in educational and social change settings (Patton, 2008; Weiss, Murphy-Graham, & Birkeland, 2005). For example, formative evaluation data are often intended to be used to test and refine theories of action (conceptual use) or to make programmatic or strategic decisions (instrumental use). However, such intended uses can clash against the cognitive bias that predisposes us to seek information and adopt interpretations that confirm rather than challenge our pre-existing beliefs (e.g., Brandtstädter, 2006; Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith, 1985). Prior research in education practice and policy has corroborated the existence of this bias when stakeholders engage with evidence (e.g., Spillane, 2000; Spillane & Callahan, 2000). As a consequence, evidence acquisition and evidence use in social settings tend most commonly to be political, used to support an argument or justify an action, even in cases where the evidence was not consulted in developing that argument or action in the first place (e.g., Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Marsh, 2006; Robinson, 1988).

Of particular concern for leaders of CCIs is the fact that they must not only make sense of data for themselves, but for multiple stakeholders

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/359632

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/359632

Daneshyari.com