



Strengthening stakeholder buy-in and engagement for successful exploration and installation: A case study of the development of an area-wide, evidence-based prevention and early intervention strategy



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Implementation
Implementation stages
Intervention appropriateness
Implementation strategies
Stakeholder buy-in
Evidence-based programmes

ABSTRACT

Background: The implementation of evidence-based programmes (EBPs) designed to improve outcomes for children and young people and prevent disadvantage is an increasingly important international policy imperative. However, the integration of EBPs into existing service settings and systems is a complex and multifaceted undertaking.

Methods: A process evaluation was conducted to appraise the design and development of a large-scale, area-based, prevention and early intervention initiative. This initiative, called Youngballymun, consisted of five service strategies comprising a range of EBPs (e.g. the Incredible Years Programme, Highscope) targeted at children and young people and their families (from birth to 20 years). The initiative was designed to promote the development, adoption and implementation of EBPs within routine children and youth services in a disadvantaged urban area in the Republic of Ireland. The analytical approach involved the systematic analysis and triangulation of data obtained from relevant documentation (e.g. programme manuals, meeting minutes), as well as a series of one-to-one interviews ($n = 27$) and six group discussions with key stakeholders ($n = 29$).

Results: Adopting aspects of an implementation stages framework (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, & Friedman, 2005), we examined the key implementation stages of exploration and installation. Data gathering and needs assessment and strategic organisational development played an important role in implementation. However, resistance to innovation amongst local service providers emerged as a major challenge to implementation. Factors identified as crucial to overcoming this challenge and promoting stakeholder buy-in for innovation included: encouraging and supporting stakeholder engagement; and adopting a flexible approach to implementation planning.

Conclusion: Generating buy-in amongst stakeholders is central to ensuring a fit between innovative programmes and practices and the systems in which they are to be embedded. Some key lessons, such as the need for the active involvement of community-based service providers in the planning process at the earliest stages of implementation, are identified. The kinds of implementation strategies that may be used to address challenges to practice change and innovation, particularly stakeholder responsiveness to, and perceived compatibility of, EBPs, are discussed.

1. Introduction

Early exposure to social adversity is linked to poorer outcomes across the lifespan, including behavioural and socioemotional maladjustment, educational under-attainment, poor health outcomes and dependence on the welfare system (Metzler, Merrick, Klevens, Ports, & Ford, 2017; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). These outcomes may

often occur from one generation to the next, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and inequality in the same families (Serbin & Karp, 2004). However, it is now recognised that comprehensive early intervention and prevention programmes can successfully address these kinds of maladaptive trajectories (Anderson et al., 2003).

Many countries have developed, or are in the process of developing, policies designed to promote positive child outcomes as a means of

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preventing and reducing intergenerational disadvantage (Black et al., 2017; Britto, Lyes, & Proulx, 2016). An increasingly popular policy and approach that aims to tackle childhood inequality, involves the delivery of area-based prevention and early intervention services. These strategies target resources at a defined geographical area to tackle disadvantage and involve representatives, advocates and groups from across the community in planning and implementing services and innovations (Sridharana, Gob, Zinzowc, Grayd, & Gutierrez Barrette, 2007).

Area-based strategies often comprise evidence-based programmes (EBPs) that have been proven to help to improve outcomes for children and young people (Novins, Green, Legha, & Aarons, 2013; Shapiro, Prinz, & Sanders, 2012). The use of EBPs can lead to significant economic benefits due to their ability to prevent and/or ameliorate the need for costly intervention later in life (Heckman, 2011). Increasingly, the use of EBPs in health and social care services is becoming mandated (Reding, Chorpita, Lau, & Innes-Gomberg, 2014), a trend which is also reflected in the increasing drive toward evidence-based service delivery in child and youth services (Allen, 2011). However, there are significant barriers to embedding effective practices and programmes in child and youth services (Powell et al., 2015; Proctor, Powell, & Mcmillen, 2013), with the result that the uptake and implementation of EBPs across family services is often inconsistent and limited (Novins et al., 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to explore how EBPs are adopted and installed within usual care systems and services for children and young people and the factors that influence this process (Berlin, Brooks-Gunn, & Aber, 2001; Horwitz, Chamberlain, Landsverk, & Mullican, 2010).

1.1. Implementation and intervention-context fit

Implementation is recognised as a complex, multiphase process which involves many varied resources, inputs and activities (Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013; Hasson, 2010). The implementation stages framework (one of the five frameworks which forms part of the Active Implementation Framework; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, & Friedman, 2005), recognises implementation as a dynamic process. Within this well-established and widely used framework four functional stages of implementation are identified: exploration, installation, initial implementation and full implementation (Metz et al., 2015). Exploration and installation can set the stage for initial implementation and, over the longer run, influence the success and sustainability of new programmes and practices (Odom et al., 2013; Panzano & Roth, 2006). During exploration, a community or service need must be recognised, a potential programme or practice which may address that need must be identified and the assets or resources required to support implementation must be assessed (Metz, 2013). The installation stage refers to the activities needed to prepare for programme implementation and involves acquiring and/or developing the resources and supports which are important for implementing innovative practices (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The factors which influence and shape the implementation process as it unfolds, are varied and wide ranging (Hurlburt et al., 2014; Nilsen, 2015). Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that for implementation efforts to be effective, fit between those innovations and the systems in which they are implemented is vital (Aarons & Sommerfeld, 2012; Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011). Many implementation theories, models and frameworks (e.g. Diffusion of Innovation; Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research) have highlighted the importance of intervention-setting fit (Damschroder et al., 2009; Rogers, 2010; Tornatzky & Klein, 1982). Proctor et al. (2011) use the term “appropriateness” to refer to the perceived compatibility between an innovation and the implementation setting. Perceived fit between implementation settings and EBPs is particularly pertinent to the early stages of the implementation process and may exert an influence on the adoption of effective programmes (Lyon et al., 2014). The responsiveness and meaningful engagement of practitioners and

implementers or their buy-in for an evidence-based program or practice, is an important feature in environments conducive to implementation (Greenhalgh, Robert, Mcfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004). An absence of buy-in for EBPs is likely to stymie innovation before it can be adopted or compromise its effectiveness if implemented. Conversely, engagement and commitment amongst key stakeholders can nurture and sustain innovation (Cabassa & Baumann, 2013).

Although research on implementation has developed considerably in recent years, there remains much to learn about how to successfully align the implementation of EBPs with existing child and youth service resources and capacities. The issue of fit between EBPs and the setting they are implemented remains under-researched and further exploration of strategies which can successfully address the compatibility between a given intervention and the implementation context is needed (Lyon et al., 2014). Implementation strategies comprise “the specific means or methods for adopting and sustaining interventions” (Proctor et al., 2013; 139). A wide array of implementation strategies which can be used in community and/or professional practice settings to enhance implementation efforts have been identified (Powell et al., 2015).

Powell et al. (2015) developed a detailed and comprehensive compilation comprising 73 implementation strategy terms and related definitions. Several strategies identified therein are relevant to the potential interaction between implementation efforts and the context in which implementation occurs, whilst they may also be pertinent to addressing intervention-setting ‘compatibility’. Strategies such as those aimed at ‘assessing readiness and identifying barriers and facilitators’ or conducting a ‘local needs assessment’ within communities may help to build an understanding of key stakeholders’ perceptions of a proposed intervention and its appropriateness to the context. Local consensus discussions are an implementation strategy which Powell and colleagues define as involving local providers/stakeholders in discussions to explore the appropriateness of a planned intervention and identify stakeholder priorities and may also be a potentially effective implementation strategy for helping to address intervention-setting fit. These strategies may be used in a stand-alone manner or as part of a larger multifaceted implementation plan. Nevertheless, the manner in which strategies such as these might be used to address intervention-setting fit, successfully promote positive stakeholder perceptions of innovation and secure buy-in for programme adoption and practice change remains under-researched. Indeed, Powell et al. (2015) note that further research is needed to determine the evidence-base and causal mechanisms inherent in these kinds of implementation strategies, as well as their utility in different circumstances.

1.2. The current study

In this paper we present the findings of a detailed case study of the design and early implementation of an area-based prevention and early intervention initiative called Youngballymun (youngballymun.org). This initiative aimed to embed EBPs, on an area-wide basis, within usual care services for disadvantaged children and young people living in an area of Dublin, called Ballymun. This case study formed part of a larger theory-based evaluation of the Youngballymun initiative which was undertaken to appraise and understand its aims, inputs, outputs, activities, processes and outcomes, to examine barriers/facilitators to successful implementation and to identify the causal processes and mechanisms that are anticipated to lead to intended or expected outcomes (Reference withheld for anonymous review). The evaluation was conducted by an independent research team who had no involvement in the set-up, delivery or implementation of Youngballymun.

The aims of this case study were: (1) to analyse the planning processes involved in the exploration and installation phase of the Youngballymun initiative; and (2) explore the facilitating and inhibitive factors which influenced the uptake of EBPs within child and youth services, with a particular focus on the implementation strategies used

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