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Implementation Research Overview

Working Document

What Is Implementation Research?

Simply put, implementation research is the “scientific inquiry into questions concerning implementation”.

¹ More specifically, USAID’s Office of Education defines implementation research as “the body of methods that include **collecting data while implementing an education intervention and using that data to improve implementation**. The intent of these methods, regardless of the terminology used, is to ‘**understand what, why, and how interventions work in “real world” settings and to test approaches to improve them**’.²

Why Is Implementation Research Important?

USAID supports education programming, from pre-primary to higher education, in many different countries and contexts and the real-world conditions of educators and learners in each of these countries vary considerably. USAID, as stated in the 2018 Education Policy, strives to base “policy and investment decisions on the best available empirical evidence.” But what happens when evidence-based interventions are implemented in different contexts with different challenges by different people to different populations?

- The evidence-based components of the intervention may not be implemented.
- The evidence-based intervention may not be implemented with fidelity to its original design.
- What is implemented with fidelity may not be implemented at sufficient scale to affect social problems.
- What is implemented with fidelity and at scale may not be sustained for a useful period of time.

The problem is that **the way one implements an intervention will influence its effectiveness and its cost-effectiveness**.

Implementation research provides a response to this problem by generating data and evidence--through simple but useful studies--that illustrate **how and why implementation is working or not working**, and what different approaches can improve implementation. This data and evidence can improve the adoption and adaptation of promising interventions, elevate the perspectives and opinions of educators and learners, inform the pathways to scale, and shape how effective programming translates into real-world policy and practice at the individual, organizational, or systems level.

What Can We Learn From Implementation Research?

Whereas much of USAID’s research and evaluation focus on the impact, effectiveness, equity, or reach of an intervention, implementation research looks at a different set of outcomes. The figure below,

¹ *Implementation Research in Health: A Practical Guide*. World Health Organization. 2013.

² Peters David H, Adam Taghreed, Alonge Olakunle, Agyepong Irene Akua, Tran Nhan. *Implementation research: what it is and how to do it*. *BMJ* 2013; 347 :f6753 <https://www.bmj.com/content/347/bmj.f6753>



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from the WHO's *Implementation Research in Health: A Practical Guide* (2013) presents several examples of outcomes variables that can be the subject of implementation research.

Acceptability	The perception among stakeholders that an intervention is agreeable	Factors like comfort, relative advantage, credibility
Adoption	The intention, initial decision, or action to try to employ a new intervention	Uptake, utilisation, intention to try
Appropriateness	The perceived fit or relevance of the intervention in a particular setting or for a particular target audience or problem	Relevance, perceived fit, compatibility, perceived usefulness or suitability
Feasibility	The extent to which an intervention can be carried out in a particular setting or by a particular organization/institution	Practicality, actual fit, utility
Fidelity	The degree to which an intervention was implemented as it was designed in an original protocol, plan, or policy	Adherence, delivery as intended, integrity, quality of programme delivery, intensity or dosage of delivery
Implementation cost	The incremental cost of implementing the intervention in a particular setting).	Marginal cost, total cost†
Equity	The degree to which the population that is eligible to benefit from an intervention actually receives it.	Equity, reach, access, penetration (focusing on the degree to which an intervention is integrated in a service setting)
Sustainability	The extent to which an intervention is maintained or institutionalised in a given setting	Maintenance, continuation, durability, institutionalisation, routinisation, integration

Implementation research can strengthen USAID-funded interventions and the results they produce while contributing to a country's [Journey to Self-Reliance](#) by handing ownership of research and implementation to [local partners](#).