

Tracer studies: an opportunity and a challenge

David P Weikart

*David P Weikart is the founder and President Emeritus
of High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Michigan, USA*

If we want to understand where tracer studies fit into the broader research field, we need to look back to the first part of the twentieth century. Until the late 1930s any type of educational research was a small, occasional thing, the province of specialised academics with obscure interests. Then came the second World War when efforts to improve the training and the effectiveness of servicemen brought to the fore the psychological and educational assessments available at the time. They were found to be sadly lacking. In the United States of America, major federal investment was required to build a research base to facilitate assignment of men to military tasks. This interest and recognised need spilled over into the post war work of these professions, and serious focus was given to developing a body of

sophisticated research designs, assessment methods, and procedures of analysis. With increased understanding of these elements, this trend has continued, greatly facilitated by the availability of sophisticated computer programmes to simplify computations.

Most of the projects that could be the subject of such research positively assist those who participate: the mother with her infant; the teenager with education; the labourer with skills. But from a public or educational policy perspective, participant satisfaction is **not** the point. If the service idea is to have use beyond those served in a single locale, it must demonstrate that investment of time and money can produce something that participants could not obtain without the project. Further, to have strong policy implication, the project outcomes

must be replicated elsewhere with similar individuals.

In order to reach these goals, one of the most important research elements recognised today is the absolute requirement of a properly designed sample of participants for any study. All aspects of a project, the daily administration, the training of staff, the equipment and materials available, the enthusiasm of the participants, can be in place. However, if those assigned to participate and those assigned not to participate (the experimental and control groups) are not sampled and assigned correctly, none of the project information will be worth more than passing interest. In a very real sense, the way in which the groups are established forms a rigid gate into the value of the project.

It is on these issues that the tracer studies present both an opportunity and a challenge for the broader field of educational research. Internationally, the need to find effective means to support children and families, especially those living in poverty, is widely recognised. These studies offer important information.

An opportunity

Tracer studies represent an opportunity for many of the right reasons. First, the projects represent diverse geographical locations and cultural settings serving a wide range of individuals in very different countries. Too often our ideas about what services should be provided are driven by information generated in the economically affluent world, especially the United States of America.

This fact is a natural result of vast resources and large numbers of well-trained staff available for educational projects. However, even for the industrialised world, verification of educational approaches or service processes is required. The tracer studies step into the complexity of settings that stretch and test a broad range of service ideas in new ways.

Second, the projects are fundamentally democratic, a trait increasingly seen as an essential ingredient of any modern society. The projects these studies examine are usually focused on community members discovering ways to help others in their community. This approach is one of empowerment and entitlement. All people respond better when they can see that the product of their effort is accepted and respected. This dimension of the tracer studies establishes their leadership for the broader field of research and educational evaluation.

Third, the studies look at project participant outcomes over time. Too often, the development of information stops at the end of the service component of the project for participants. Looking at outcomes over time is a very important step in the process of separating those approaches that actually change circumstances from



USA: HighScope, *Father and child*

those that simply enable some event to occur earlier in time. The tracer studies ask difficult questions regarding effectiveness of services that the broader field of research and evaluation often overlooks.

A challenge

Tracer studies are challenged by the mainstream field of research and

evaluation. The field's accepted research standards tear at the fabric of the work to date. First, most of the tracer studies have not developed an adequate sample size, nor have they undertaken random selection and assignment. Without meeting these basic criteria, the information generated is interesting for developing ideas and suggesting lines of thought, but offers little guidance to shape public social or educational policy.

Second, many of the tracer studies focus on programme ideas undergoing development, making it unclear just what the specific service or approach actually was. Policy can only be built around information from stable programmes. New programmes that are in constant change, as they rightly respond to the experience of delivering services, are not good candidates for policy information because it is unclear

what aspect of the project is actually being evaluated.

Third, when project ideas are new, it usually means that instrumentation to assess the project outcomes has yet to be developed. While interviews with participants and judgments by project staff are especially vital for the development of a new service, such data are highly suspect as outcome information. Much of the information presented in the tracer studies, from the initial phase of the project as well as the follow-up phase, comes from such interviews and judgements. Of course, that does not mean that it is always safer to use traditional outcome assessment approaches: are they standardized for this specific population? Is translation of instruments or training procedures involved, and who checked the new forms for accuracy? How were the trial field tests of the instruments conducted? In short, the tracer studies have tackled a very difficult problem indeed, but for the findings to be meaningful, there must be answers to these questions.

The contribution of tracer studies to educational research and evaluation

All that said, however, there are many lessons generated by the tracer studies,

and the broader field of educational research and evaluation can learn extensively from them. From my point of view one of the most important lessons is from the new community or educational service patterns. Working on limited budgets and often short staffed, these projects have explored new patterns of enabling individuals to meet and overcome problems. Big New Ideas in service are hard to come by. Adding parenting issues to health services was one such idea. Another was training parents to assist other parents instead of using professional staff. But these and similar ideas are from the past; breakthroughs in the 1960s and 1970s. What can be gleaned from these tracer studies that would form the basis of a breakthrough in service ideas for this decade? They may be hidden in this body of work; the requirement is to discover them.

Another lesson of value from the studies stems from their diversity: diversity in methods of service; diversity in culture and language of participating groups; diversity in economic development of the community; and diversity in ethnic composition. These studies are not 'poor cousins' to the large scale, well-financed studies in affluent countries, they are storehouses of improvisation and resilience in the demanding daily lives of communities.

Thus while educational research and evaluation usually demand clarity of project operation and project outcomes, these studies offer complexity and a wealth of information about actual day to day work with people. With this initial information, future projects can be more fully implemented and evaluated with more traditional standards.

The Next Big New Idea

The key to valuable information from the tracer studies is to present the project information obtained, qualified by the standard research reservations, such that the restless and innovative approaches are clear. They need to be studied closely for ideas that might suggest major changes in service methods. If the Next Big New Idea were obvious, we would be doing it. However, it is buried in other fields, other approaches, other ways of looking at problems.

For example, use of computers and other electronic technologies are out of the question in many parts of the world because of cost, availability of trained personnel, and lack of knowledge as to how to effectively use such technology even if it were available. But somehow, within technology is one Big New Idea. Not just to use computers and

technology, but how they are used. Can parents be linked with other parents and project staff in ways that give immediate support for immediate problems? Can training of centre-based staff be improved with video streaming of demonstration classrooms with voice over by a knowledgeable commentator? With the advent of digital communication devices (including cell phones) linked to satellites, is a new training vehicle opened?

The point is that to innovate, deliver, and document effective programmes is a difficult task. The tracer studies encompass a wide range of diverse efforts which can provide intellectual building blocks for newer undertakings, if we can only learn to build on the old while attempting the new. The availability of such studies to the broader field of research and educational evaluation moves forward the potential of knowledge about high quality service. ○