Can Following Footsteps affect policy?

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This article was compiled from interviews and conversations conducted during the Following Footsteps tracer studies workshop, Jamaica, April 2002.

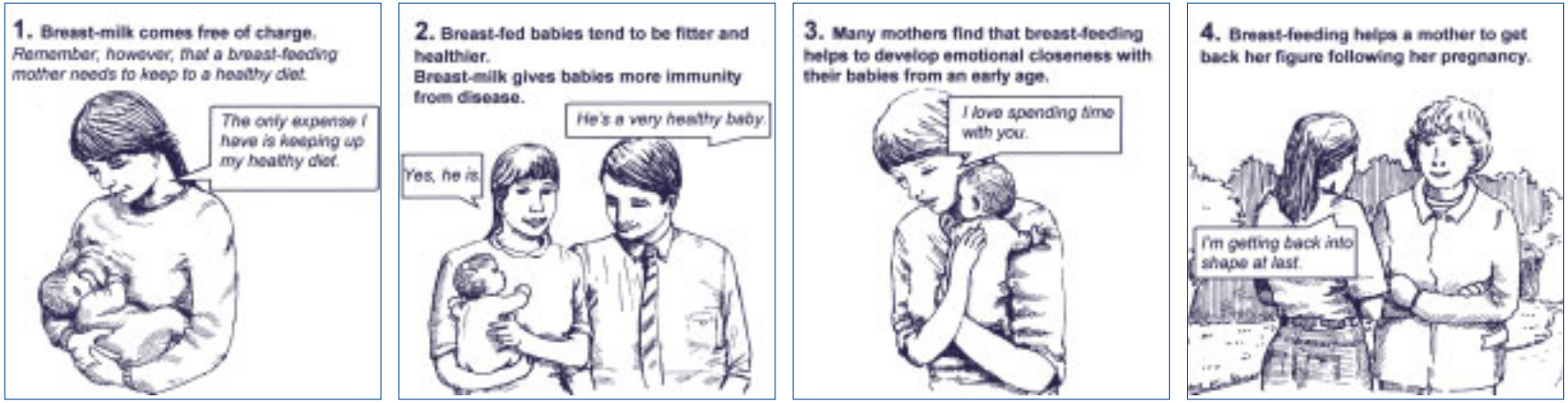
Is it possible that a study that follows up former participants of an early childhood programme can have an impact on policy – within its own environment or even further afield? Here we look at four examples that can help us to understand the relationships between the original programme, the choices that were made about how to conduct a study, decisions about what elements to include in it, and the impact that could be made on policy.

The examples are from very different settings, from very different programmes, and concern four studies that are very different from one another. There is the 'grand-daddy' of all ECD follow-up studies, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study in the USA that is a longstanding randomised controlled research programme. In Ireland, the follow-up in the Community Mothers Programme is also based on a randomised control group. The tracer study in Kenya was large-scale, included almost one thousand children, and used a comparison group; while in Botswana the tracer study simply followed up all the children it could find and, mostly because of inadequate record keeping, was more qualitative than quantitative and included no comparison group.

One caveat or word of warning: it is almost impossible to attribute changes in local or national policy to any one single cause – there are always other intervening factors and variables. But there can be little doubt that in three of the cases discussed here, the results of the studies have contributed to changes in thinking and, very possibly, to shifts in the allocation of resources.

USA: High/Scope Perry Preschool Study

This longitudinal research study was, according to David P Weikart:



Ireland: Community Mothers Programme
Teaching materials for promoting breast-feeding

quite accidental. We were setting up a preschool programme in 1962 to find out if it would make a difference in the lives of the children, but there were local experts who felt it would harm the children and that was the challenge. That changed it from being only a service to a research programme. There was a population of 500 families and we selected from them disadvantaged families who were suitable for the programme, but there were too many and we made a random selection. So we had a group of participants and a control group.

Five cohorts of children were followed up from age seven and at intervals since – the current follow-up is age 40. The first study was on programme effects at third grade. When the researchers saw how many differences there were between the groups of children (programme and control), the objective of the later studies has been to influence policy.

The initial target was local decision makers and High/Scope went directly to local business people and local leaders on the premise that if they were in support of it that would influence policy. The work has had influence on local schools, at state level, at national level and beyond. It has been used extensively to support preschool programmes at state level, to justify universal kindergarten. In fact, it has been used for many purposes that were not part of the study, but which are intended to improve opportunities for children.

Ireland: Community Mothers Programme (CMP)

The CMP is part of a statutory local health system. At the end of the initial phase (1988 to 1990) the programme commissioned an independent group to carry out a randomised controlled study when the children were one year old. Results were encouraging:

programme families had a better uptake of immunisation; children and family had better diets; mothers' self-esteem was higher. The objective had been to find results, to sustain the programme, not so much to impact policy.

Brenda Molloy, Director of the CMP, explains:

> *We felt that the study was important in its own right, and we made an informed choice to publish internationally in recognised peer reviewed journals. We did a follow-up when the children were seven years old because we were convinced that rigorous evaluation was important, and we wanted to strengthen the original findings.*

By the time the study[1] was published in 1993, parent support was becoming important and from about 1994 the CMP started to be mentioned in policy documents in Ireland. As Brenda says:

> *It was as if people were beginning to understand the importance of peer-led intervention programmes. Gradually we began to identify key people in our system who should be targeted, those with resources and/or influence. I began to meet them, to converse with them regularly. I also became more strategic in presenting things to people, not just sending them reports on paper.*

The programme was also being mentioned internationally through write-ups in the media, and was influencing policy further afield. Brenda recalls a visit from a local official who had gone to Australia to find out about early childhood programmes and care and support and had been told, 'I think you need to go home'. As she says 'It was only by going outside that he realised he had something on his own doorstep'.

Kenya: Embu District Centre for Early Childhood Education

The study in Embu District proposed to find out whether there were differences between children who had been cared for in preschools with trained teachers and children who had been with untrained teachers. Three cohorts were traced seven, eight and nine years after leaving preschool, in 18 schools. Some differences were found but, as Anne Njenga, the lead researcher says:

> *We have learned we must improve our primary schools, we must improve transition from preschool to primary school, and it is time that we address this issue of what makes a quality primary school. The problem is that most of the parents recognise the problems but can't do anything about it.*
>
> *The teachers know very little about the children, maybe the head teacher thinks he knows a lot, but when we came up with figures of repetition and drop-out rates, most of them were shocked, they never knew, they saw children as figures, as numbers, no-one ever asked how many of the children in class 1 in 1990 are in class 8 eight years later – no-one knew that.*
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> *Only when we came up with our report they said, 'I think we have to start talking with one another, to try to evaluate.' So studies like this can be very useful.*

Anne knows why the teachers, education officers and communities are taking notice of the results. It is because the researchers ensured that communities were aware of the study and why it was being done, as were the district administrators so that when the researchers went back:

> *They know about it. We have been able to disseminate the results and it has been accepted because they knew about it from the beginning. That is a very important aspect of policy change.*

Botswana: Bokamoso Preschool Programme

The original tracer study[2] was carried out 1993-1995 and followed up all the San children who had been to the Bokamoso preschools who could be found. The objective had been to assess and improve the programme, not to impact policy, but the results showed that there were several aspects of the primary school system that needed attention. However, according to Willemien le Roux and Gaolatlhe Eirene Thupe, the report has never made an impact in terms of policy, even though it was sent to all the people they knew who were involved in education.

There seem to be a number of reasons for this. For one thing, after sending the report to officials, they never followed that up with personal communications or visits. For another, the study had never been officially sanctioned. It was Willemien who found out the main reason:

> *It was at a dance and I was dancing with a high-ranking government official who told me the government would never take the study seriously 'because you did not follow the communications channels for communities set up by the government'. So the report was rejected because of the way we undertook the research. Yet we knew that if the people had been asked in the official way, we would never have been able to get the data we required. The lesson we have learned from this is that, if we wanted to do another study, we would need to do it in parallel with official procedures.*

The 'magic' ingredient

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned here is that, if we wish to influence policy, the original programme must be strong and of good quality, and the research process needs to be transparent as well as rigorous – which is not necessarily the same as academically respectable.

The importance of knowing the right people to approach, and the right ways of approaching them cannot be underestimated.

And then there is the matter of figures. Anne Njenga believes that:

> *As you do research you have to be very flexible, there are issues that you have to capture if you are going to convince people. You have to have figures. We traced the children for nine years so they could see how attendance and results went down and down. If you did it for just one year I don't think you could convince them.*

For David Weikart and Brenda Molloy, the figures are Dollars and Euros. In fact, David says that:

> *If there can be said to be one 'magic' ingredient that has influenced policy, it has been the cost-benefit study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study.*

Ireland: Community Mothers Programme

> *Everyone has warm feelings about children, but because we tracked them over the years, we could calculate the costs of what had happened to them – school, welfare, prison system, extra services – and show the differences between the two groups in the study.*

As in the USA, in Ireland people want to see value for money. Brenda has given presentations on the costs of the programme which have helped people to understand that 'It does not take a huge amount of money to provide this support'.

Both of them agree that you cannot calculate all the hidden costs, such as the costs of volunteers. But David's advice is that if you want to do a costs analysis then use an economist: some of this work is 'More complex than a human mind can calculate'.

notes

1. Johnson Z, Howell F & Molloy B (1993), 'Community Mothers Programme: randomised controlled trial of non-professional intervention in parenting' in *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 306, pp 1449-52.
2. See page 22, 'The story behind the story: tracing San children in Botswana'.