**EARLY
INTERVENTION
FOUNDATION**

Supporting evidence-use in policy and practice

Reflections for the What Works Network

May 2021

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About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

EIF IS PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF
THE WHAT WORKS NETWORK

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The aim of this report is to support policymakers, practitioners and commissioners to make informed choices. We have reviewed data from authoritative sources but this analysis must be seen as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, professional judgment. The What Works Network is not responsible for, and cannot guarantee the accuracy of, any analysis produced or cited herein.

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Introduction

Our mission at the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is to ensure that effective early intervention is available and is used to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes.

As a What Works Centre, we know that better use of evidence will lead to improved services for children and families, and ultimately to better outcomes for children. Our focus is on generating relevant evidence and ensuring the use of this evidence in policy and practice decisions both locally and nationally. By evidence, we mean both research and intervention evaluation evidence as well as the broader range of evidence that our audiences can draw on to support their decision-making. This broader evidence includes local data about population needs, user experience and practice knowledge.

Since EIF was established in 2013, we have tried different ways to get evidence used.

- **Telling people about the evidence:** we have produced guides and tools designed to support local decision-makers to apply the evidence in their local context. We have used conferences, seminars and workshops as ways to bring evidence to our audiences and facilitate discussions about what this means in their role and local context.

- **Working through intermediaries:** we have partnered with national sector and workforce bodies to strengthen evidence-use amongst particular professions. For example, by building this into leadership programmes.

- **Encouraging peer-to-peer learning:** we have facilitated networks to encourage peer-to-peer learning.

- **Direct support to local places:** we have offered intensive, bespoke implementation and evaluation support to local areas.

More recently, we have been sharpening our approach by seeking to engage our end-user audiences in the development of our research, and to develop plans to support evidence-use that are rooted in an understanding of context and behaviour. We have developed an impact framework based around the COM-B model of behaviour change, which proposes that Capability (knowledge and skills), Opportunity (conditions in the external environment) and Motivation (automatic reactions or reflective intentions and beliefs) interact to influence behaviour.[1]

We have also reviewed the recent academic literature on evidence-use (or knowledge mobilisation), spoken to experts in this broad field, and worked with an advisory group to help us apply key concepts to our work. This briefing sets out five key insights from this work on how to think about supporting evidence use. We hope that it will be of value to the What Works Network, and to the wider community interested in evidence-use.

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1   Michie et al., 2014

1. Understand your role in the evidence ecosystem

The concept of the evidence ecosystem refers to the interplay between evidence producers, evidence users, and intermediary organisations.[2]

There are many roles that What Works Centres could and already do play within this ecosystem. However, single organisations cannot do everything and are unlikely to have an impact if they attempt to. It is important that you consider how to best work with or align your efforts with others within the evidence ecosystem to achieve evidence-use goals on any given issue.

FIGURE 1

Roles within the evidence ecosystem
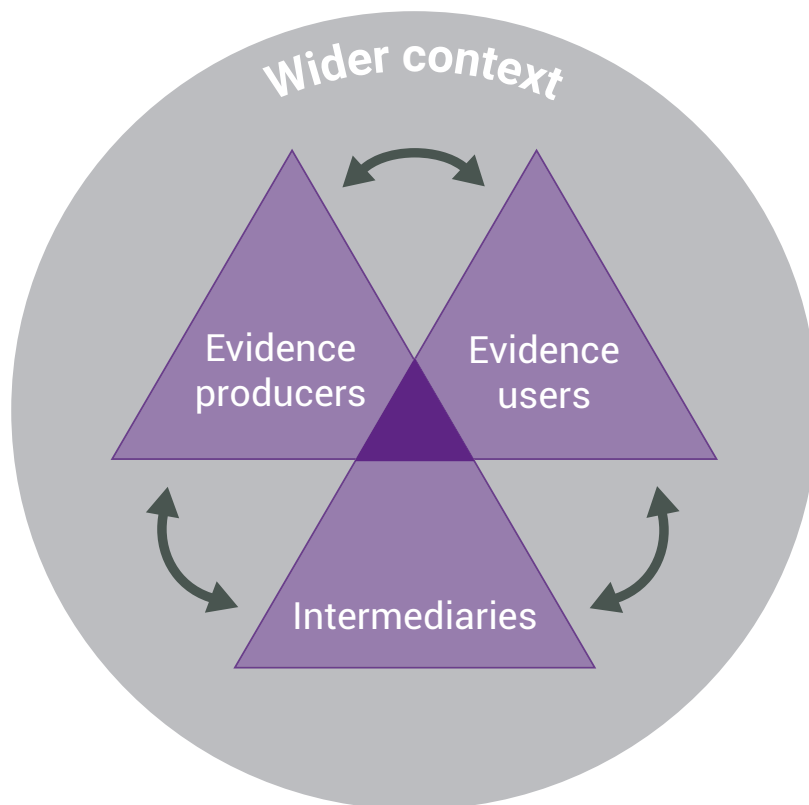
Conceptual framework for evidence use within the early intervention system, adapted from Campbell and Levin (2012).

Crucially, as figure 1 shows, the evidence ecosystem sits within a wider context. This wider context includes multiple actors and influencers, each with their own priorities, processes, timescales and motivations, including policy, funding and accountability systems.[3] The central concept that you (as a What Works Centre) need to engage with is that multiple factors at different levels of the system need to align to enable purposeful evidence-use. Supporting evidence-use in policy and practice is not a mechanistic or linear process.[4]

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2   Shepherd, 2014

3   Best & Holmes, 2010

4   Nutley et al., 2019

2. Understand the wider context

To support the use of evidence, it is crucial to first understand the context you are operating in, recognising that complex systems 'cannot be controlled so must be understood to effect change'.[5] The better you understand context, the better you will be able to support evidence-use.

Rather than seeking to identify the barriers to evidence-use within the system, it is important to start with a broad and neutral observation of the real-world context. It is important to stand in the shoes of your audience and ask: 'What are our audiences trying to do (to improve outcomes for children), and how is the wider system impacting on their ability to do this?' Then it is possible to ask: 'How does evidence feature in what they are trying to do and how is the system incentivising or disincentivising evidence-use?'

Case example: Understanding the context for social and emotional learning in primary schools

Our work with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) on social and emotional learning sought to understand the context at different levels: individual teacher behaviour, school leadership team behaviours, and wider system factors.

We began by looking at current behaviour, through a survey and qualitative work. This showed us, for example, that teachers were very motivated to support children's social and emotional development and placed a high value on this. They also thought that social and emotional problems were on the increase. It also showed that the way schools delivered social and emotional learning varied considerably. Some were implementing evidence-based programmes, others designing their own curriculum, and others leaving responsibility with staff with specific pastoral roles. In relation to evidence use, we found that there was little evaluation or monitoring of current activity, and a preference for word-of-mouth recommendations over research evidence when deciding what to deliver and how.

The second stage of this work explored the factors at different levels of the system that were hindering (or potentially enabling) evidence use and a more evidence-informed approach to social and emotional learning. We ran focus groups and conducted interviews using the COM-B model to structure the conversations. This second phase enabled us to develop a nuanced understanding of the influence of these various factors. For example, we found: heads and leadership teams who felt that social and emotional learning was important to them and that they were prioritising it in spite of the lack of incentives in the system; a tendency for social and emotional learning to be seen as instinctive and as core to what it meant to be a good primary teacher; and a resistance to approaches seen as unduly prescriptive. Understanding context in this way, up front, helped us to plan and sequence a set of activities to support the use of evidence that were responsive to the needs of our audiences. This is described in more detail in section 5.

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Source: Waddell & Sharples, 2020

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3. Think about what is meant by evidence

Standing in the shoes of your audience in this way can help to challenge assumptions about 'quality' evidence. It helps to show that there is a broad range of evidence and wider

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5   Haynes et al., 2020

knowledge that can be useful for policy and practice and so can help to improve services for children and families. Our audiences are asking a set of questions well beyond 'what works?', and it is important to think about the different types of evidence that can help them to answer these questions. For example, quantitative data can help answer questions about how prevalent a problem is, or what its root causes are. Qualitative research can shine a light on issues about access to services or the experiences of children and families. Similarly, process evaluation, case studies, grey literature, and expert opinion, all have a value and a place in helping our audiences to make informed decisions. It is also important to look beyond research evidence to broader forms of knowledge — such as practice experience — and consider how you can help your audiences to integrate these different perspectives into their decision-making processes. To understand impact, or 'what works', experimental methods such as randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs are needed. In our view, these are the only routes to proving that an intervention is effective, through rigorously establishing causality.

> **Case example: What Works Wellbeing & the value of case studies**
>
> What Works Wellbeing explicitly recognises the value of practice-based case studies as an important source of knowledge and learning that can complement research-based evidence by illuminating aspects of implementation in real-life settings. They have developed guidance on producing useful case studies in a way that maximises their usefulness for others, and have also developed and piloted advice on a step-by-step approach to synthesising case studies.
>
> What Works Wellbeing, Case Study Synthesis: Centre Guide:
> https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/case-study-synthesis-centre-guide/
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> _____
>
> Source: Hardoon et al., 2021

This guidance provides a step-by-step approach to synthesising practice-based case study evidence. It is motivated by the opportunity presented by combining case studies, in order to make the most of the data case studied contain, whilst also producing robust, potentially transferrable findings.

Findings from the synthesis of a number of individual case studies may allow for translation to other settings and the generalisability of the findings form the synthesis of a number of practice-based case studies may also be increased by linking back to theory.

4. Identify what meaningful evidence-use would look like

Developing a sound understanding of context and thinking about how evidence can help your audiences to achieve their goals is the foundation for thinking about what good evidence-use would look like – both at an individual and an organisational level. Describing this clearly can help bring clarity to your impact goals. It is also important to think about and describe the factors in the wider context that could facilitate evidence-use behaviours, such as, national investment in evaluation or inspectorate focus on evidence-informed decision-making.

There are various frameworks which can help with this. We are particularly interested in the work being led by Monash University in Australia, under the Q Project to 'define and elaborate what "quality use of research evidence" might mean in education,' and have

adapted their Quality Use of Research Evidence (QURE) framework[6] to help us think about the important factors at different levels of the system.

FIGURE 2

Conceptual framework for evidence use within the early intervention system

CORE BEHAVIOURS	Individual capability, opportunity & motivation	Organisational level factors	Factors within the wider system
Making and acting on evidence-informed decisions Engaging thoughtfully with a range of different kinds of evidence, using this to inform decision-making, and focusing on effective implementation of these evidence-informed decisions.	**Capability** The knowledge and skills required to make and act on evidence-informed decisions.	**Leadership** The organisational vision, commitments and role models that support the use of evidence in decision making and the implementation of evidence-informed decisions.	The complex interactions and interdependencies within the system that support the use of evidence in decision making and the implementation of evidence-informed decisions.
	Opportunity Conditions in the external environment necessary to enable an individual to make and act on evidence-informed decisions.	**Infrastructure** The organisational structure, resources and processes that support the use of evidence in decision making and the effective implementation of evidence-informed decisions.	
	Motivation Automatic reactions or reflective intentions and beliefs which impact on an individual's motivation to make and act on evidence-informed decisions.	**Culture** The organisational ethos, values and norms that support the use of evidence in decision making and the effective implementation of evidence-informed decisions.	

Adapted from Rickinson et al (2020)

6   Rickinson et al., 2020

The adapted framework at figure 2 retains the idea of a core set of individual behaviours which interact with factors at the organisational level and the wider system level. However, we have replaced the original Skillsets/Relationships/Mindset framing at individual level with the Capability/Opportunity/Motivation structure. There are a set of 'desired behaviours' relating to evidence-use at the centre, which stem from the interaction between an individual's capability, opportunity and motivation. You can then consider the factors at an organisational level and at a wider system level that can impact on individual capability, opportunity, motivation and behaviour. As the COM-B model emphasises, this is not a linear model. All these factors interact with and influence each other.[7] Using this framework to pinpoint a specific set of components under each of these headings, as the Q Project has done, would help to define a clear set of goals in relation to evidence-use. For example, the Q Project lists 'endorsing evidence-use through school planning and policy documents' and 'supporting specific research-informed professional learning' as components of 'leadership.'

Case example: The EIF maturity matrix

We have taken steps to describe the features of an evidence-informed system and to root this in what we know about the priorities and goals of our local audiences and the ways in which they currently engage with evidence to help them achieve these. Our maturity matrix is a good example. This self-assessment tool was developed to support local areas to take a system-wide approach to improving outcomes for children and families. It sets out the broad features of well-functioning early intervention systems, and positions evidence use as a facilitator. The maturity matrix was originally created as a theoretical framework, building on the work of the Good Governance Institute, and has since been tested and refined in every local authority area in England.

Early Intervention Foundation, Maturity Matrix: Maternity and Early Years:
https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/eif-maturity-matrix-maternity-and-early-years

Source: Lewing et al., 2020

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5. Develop context-informed plans to support evidence-use

Plans for activity to support the use of evidence in relation to a particular topic need to be based on a sound understanding of context, consideration of the potential roles of other organisations within the evidence ecosystem, and an assessment of where you are most likely to have an influence. Thinking about the factors at play at different levels of the system help to sharpen your focus, deciding what you can potentially influence, and making clear strategic decisions about where to place effort and resources on any given topic.[8]

This is not straightforward. There is no convenient list of evidence-based approaches to support evidence-use. Ideas about the importance of context to evidence-use are still relatively new, and there is a lack of tools and guidance to help us operationalise them.[9] However, there are practical things that can help.

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7   Michie et al., 2014

8   Gough et al., 2018

9   Haynes et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2017

Actively engage end-user audiences at an early stage

What Works Centres have long recognised the value of engaging end-user audiences in the process of interpreting evidence and identifying policy and practice recommendations. The NICE approach to producing guidelines is notably stakeholder driven. Other What Works Centres have developed less intensive but consistent processes for developing guidance or recommendations, informed by this approach. The EEF's process, for example, involves teachers, policy makers, academics, and other stakeholders from the initial scoping phase. A panel of teachers and academics helps to interpret the available research evidence to arrive at practical, accessible, understandable recommendations.[10]

However, for audiences, being consulted or involved in advisory groups is not the same as having power in deciding what will be researched or how findings will be interpreted.[11] End-user involvement or collaboration can happen from an earlier stage, including in decisions about where to focus resources and the questions that evidence reviews seek to address. This is likely to result in evidence that is viewed as more relevant and is more readily accepted and used by its target audiences.

Select and sequence knowledge mobilisation activities in response to an understanding of context

A range of strategies beyond simply communicating research and enabling access to evidence are needed to support evidence-use, and knowledge mobilisation plans should be multi-faceted. It is important to make decisions about the activities included in a knowledge mobilisation plan based on a careful consideration of context. It is also important to describe and test the rationale for these decisions by working through a theory of change which considers the nature and causes of the problem, the assumptions that underpin this, the reasons why the activities have been selected, and the short and longer-term outcomes.

The 2016 *Science of Using Science*[12] systematic review of the evidence on research use draws some important conclusions that can inform this thinking. Perhaps the most important message from the review is that activity to facilitate evidence-use needs to consider and respond to multiple factors. For example, creating access to evidence only impacts on decision-making if the user also has the opportunity and motivation to use this evidence.

Beyond this, the review highlights the following promising approaches:

- communication that incorporates techniques to build motivation to use evidence (for example by framing study findings for particular audiences)

- using training and education to build evidence-use skills and enhancing this by incorporating the knowledge from social science on adult learning principles

- considering ways to embed evidence-use within structures and processes, for example through decision aid tools.

Behavioural science frameworks including the Behaviour Change Wheel and the EAST framework are also useful and do offer structures that can help to think through the various mechanisms that could be used to respond to the factors that influence behaviour.[13] The Behaviour Change Wheel proposes that different types of intervention (for example, training, persuasion, incentivisation) are suitable for addressing different behavioural barriers. The EAST framework uses the principles of easy, attractive, social and timely to structure thinking about behavioural approaches.

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10 Gough et al., 2018

11 Gough et al., 2018

12 Langer et al., 2016

13 Michie et al., 2014; Service et al., 2014

> ### Case example: Activity to support the use of evidence in relation to social and emotional learning
>
> Our knowledge mobilisation plan to support use of evidence in relation to social and emotional learning was developed in direct response to our understanding of the behavioural needs of teachers and school leaders.
>
> To give an example, opportunity barriers (lack of money, pressure on the curriculum, and so on) were readily identified by the teachers and school leaders we spoke to. Using the COM-B framework prompted us to probe issues around capability and to develop a more nuanced view of the gap between knowledge and behaviour, and between what people say they do and what they actually do. This led to an insight that shaped the knowledge mobilisation plan: school leaders tended to overestimate the extent to which their teachers were consistently implementing evidence-informed practices and strategies. In response, we prioritised the development of tools that could drive a focus on quality and implementation by encouraging critical self-reflection (such as red/amber/green self-assessments), as well as case study videos that exemplified effective SEL teaching strategies.
>
> This example illustrates the potential for a sound understanding of context and behaviour to refine the design of knowledge mobilisation plans in subtle but potentially significant ways.
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> Source: Waddell & Sharples, 2020

Align your efforts with others in the evidence ecosystem

It is important to consider multiple factors and to develop multi-stranded plans to support evidence-use, which move beyond communicating and providing access to evidence. In doing this it is crucial to think about the roles of others in the evidence ecosystem – research producers, research users, and intermediaries – and the opportunities to align efforts to make the best use of resources and achieve shared goals in relation to evidence-use. Indeed, Gough et al. (2018) suggest that 'the effectiveness of What Works Centres is a function of how well they integrate with external organisations and the systems in which they operate.'

We have regularly worked with other organisations in intermediary roles. Our Early Years Transformation Academy for example, was a collaboration with local areas and national partners. We partnered with the Staff College (the professional development arm of the Association of Directors of Children's Services), who led work to develop the skills and knowledge of local system leadership teams so that they were able to act as local champions for evidence-use. We also partnered with two early years implementation organisations (Better Start Bradford and Born in Bradford) to show evidence-use in context and to support the application of early years evidence to local systems.[14]

We have also used the Local Government Association's peer challenge teams as intermediaries with local areas in our work on speech and language in the early years, and have collaborated with the Department for Work and Pensions regional integration leads, who are deployed from the department to work with every local authority area to reduce parental conflict.

There are opportunities for more active or more strategic involvement of end-user audiences as intermediaries in supporting evidence-use, and for the development of more structured, longer-term partnerships. The work on research practice partnerships led by

14 Lewis & La Valle

the William T. Grant Foundation is interesting as a route to developing long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations that promote the production and use of research.[15]

> ### Case example: The Research School Network
>
> The Research School Network is a collaboration between the EEF and the Institute for Effective Education. Schools within the network aim to lead the way in the use of evidence in teaching practice, building affiliations with other schools in their regions, and supporting the use of evidence at scale. The first evaluation of the Research Schools Network was published in 2020 and its conclusions are promising: "There is evidence that as the EEF's evidence and knowledge broker, the research schools have played a vital role in a systemic shift towards evidence use". This is perhaps the clearest and most ambitious example of developing practice intermediaries within the What Works Network, albeit one that demands significant financial investment.
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> _____
> Source: Gu et al., 2020

Test and learn

A key message from the literature is that evidence-use activities in general are not well-documented or evaluated, which has limited the strength, coverage and utility of the evidence-base on evidence-use itself.[16] We need more impact evaluations on interventions to increase evidence-use, to see which approaches are most effective.[17]

What Works Centres have an important role to play in contributing to the evidence on evidence-use, by taking a 'test and learn' approach and by investing in evaluation of this kind of activity and sharing the results with others. This clearly needs to be proportionate to the scale of the activity. We have taken recent steps towards this, for example, through a formative evaluation of our Early Years Transformation Academy,[18] and user testing in relation to the EIF Guidebook.[19] At the most ambitious end of the scale, the EEF Literacy Octopus trials provided valuable insights into the insufficiency of light touch interventions and the level of support and engagement necessary to have an impact on evidence-use.[20]

Conclusion

We are part of a shared endeavour to make sure that the evidence, in all its forms, is used to change policy and practice, and ultimately improves outcomes for children and adults. We hope that the insights from academic thinking and our experience of trying to put these into practice is helpful to the wider community of people interested in evidence-use. We are grateful to all those who are supporting us on this journey.

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15 See https://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/

16 Nutley et al., 2019

17 Breckon & Dodson, 2016

18 Lewis & La Valle, 2020

19 See https://www.eif.org.uk/blog/generating-evidence-on-using-evidence-does-the-eif-guidebook-work-to-support-vital-decisions

20 Sharples, 2017

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