GPE KIX EMAP HUB

KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

BUILDING EVIDENCE IN EDUCATION

KIX EMAP Skills-Strengthening Workshop Series:

Implementation Research

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Network for international policies and cooperation in education and training

KIX EMAP Skills-Strengthening Workshop on Implementation Research

The first workshop of the new KIX EMAP Skills-Strengthening Workshop Series was held on 19-20 June, in partnership with the Building Evidence in Education (BE2) working group. It focused on implementation research, a type of research that focuses less on "what works" in education, but on how it works and why something was successful in some context but perhaps not in another. It addresses why and how an intervention or reform works by considering the context, stakeholders, and process of implementation. This type of research is particularly important in the preparation of and during the scaling of interventions.

This two-day virtual workshop was based on BE2's Guidance Note on Using Implementation Research in Education. The BE2 guidance note includes different resources, e.g., decision trees, case studies, data analysis maps, and references to other resources. The guidance note is currently available in English, and will soon be available in Russian and Arabic as well.

The workshop was facilitated by Christy Allison and Maria Brindlmayer[1], in collaboration with the KIX EMAP Hub team. It was aimed at participants who design and oversee implementation research in order to answer questions and learn lessons about the contextual factors impacting the implementation of an intervention or reform. The workshop was held in English, with interpretation in Arabic and Russian. Out of nearly 400 applicants, 100 education stakeholders were selected to participate in the workshop. These included representatives from government, research institutions, civil society and development institutions across 28 countries in the KIX EMAP region.

The workshop helped education stakeholders to:

- Understand what implementation research is and how it compares to other types of research;
- Why use it;
- When to apply it;
- Explore how it can align with participants' national, regional or local priorities;
- Discuss a case study;
- Develop a pitch for an implementation research based on their own context;
- Understand the skills required for implementation research;
- Discuss research outputs; and

[1] Christine Allison is a contractor for BE2; Maria Brindlmayer leads the Secretariat for BE2.

- Explore how it can be applied in an inflexible education system that is not geared toward rapid change.

The workshop combined presentations with guided discussions and time for questions and answers with highly engaged participants.

Key Takeaways

BE2 defines implementation research as

> "The scientific inquiry into questions concerning implementation—the act of carrying an intention into effect, which can be policies, programs, or individual practices (collectively called interventions)."[2] It is an "examination of what works, for whom, under what contextual circumstances, and whether interventions are scalable in equitable ways."[3]

Implementation research is concerned with learning about an intervention or reform in real-time, therefore generating feedback loops and learning about wider lessons for implementation in other contexts or using alternative strategies.

Participants shared a wide range of ideas and real-life examples for when implementation research could be applied in their country or context, including:

- A government is now developing a strategy to make English a second language in the education system. This is one of their prioritised education development policies. Implementation research would be a useful tool for practitioners, stakeholders and policy makers to develop implementation plans to take this ambition forward; or
- Using implementation research in the roll-out of a national project for reforming secondary education in another country.
- Using implementation research during the transformation of education by using digital tools in the classrooms.
- Applying implementation research when rolling out a literacy program based on research that has proven to be effective in helping children being able to read within a country. The project is now at the stage of being rolled out in another country. Working together with the local education authorities,

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[2] David H. Peters, Taghreed Adam, Olakunle Alonge, Irene Akua Agyepong, and Nhan Tran, "Implementation research: what it is and how to do it," The BMJ 347 (2013): 1.

[3] Nancy Edwards and Pierre Barker, "The Importance of Context in Implementation Research," Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome 67 (2014): S157.

IR would be a useful tool to inform all stakeholders about how and why the intervention works in this new context.

- Understanding the contexts of implementing professional development programs for male and female teachers in a country and the factors that reflect on their success or limited success. Understanding what the necessary changes are to make the program successful.
- A priority in a country is implementing gender equality and inclusion (GESI) in community schools. While policies exist, there is a gap in how they are interpreted and practised in community schools, especially in rural areas. Implementation research could help understand how GESI frameworks are adapted at the local level, which stakeholders are involved, and what supports or hinders effective uptake in the classroom.
- Implementation research could be a powerful tool for another country when it is aligned with the Cambridge International Curriculum to ensure the transition is effective, inclusive, and culturally respectful, supporting a smooth and sustainable transformation of education.

The facilitators highlighted that much of the responsibility for conducting implementation research will remain with the implementer of the intervention. The technical staff who are responsible for implementation are also those who should be driving the implementation research. They usually serve as the primary data collectors responsible for obtaining and documenting information. M&E personnel or outside researchers may contribute and support, particularly with establishing easy-to-use systems for data collection, storage, and analysis, but they are generally not those primarily responsible for conducting the research. Additional stakeholders may be involved in planning and in some data collection activities, depending on the research design and the extent to which they have the capacity to engage in research-related tasks.

The facilitators also stressed that implementation research can only support improved delivery when an intervention's implementers and stakeholders make use of the findings to improve the quality or reach of services rendered. This requires an agile system, continuous information flows between system actors, and commitment on the part of the relevant stakeholders, e.g., policymakers, school leaders, and implementation partners, to adapt based on the research results in real-time.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

The workshop addressed important questions raised by the participants. A selection of the FAQ is provided below.

Definition of implementation research (IR)

How is IR similar or different from action research?

IR is similar to action research in that the implementer drives the research and stakeholders engage in the process, but it is often at a larger scale than action research (which, in education settings, is typically employed at a small scale in schools).

We use IR / Implementation Science (IS) concurrently. Is there a particular distinction?

IR is grounded in IS. In the education sector, IR can be seen as a subset of IS, drawing on the work pioneered in public health to focus specifically on questions of scale within education (Peters et al., 2014). IS was born out of the recognition that the uptake of medical and clinical innovations depends on contextual factors, not just the effectiveness of the innovation (Bauer and Kirchner, 2020). (Source: Implementation-research-in-Education-Laterite-December-2024.pdf)

Is IR complementary to impact evaluation/assessment?

Yes, impact evaluation focuses on what (and sometimes how), whereas IR will dive deeper into how and why.

Uses and suitability of implementation research

If IR is in real time, how can we utilise it in terms of time constraints, for example, if we only have 2 weeks to give recommendations for regulation implementation improvement? Is it better to use IR or should we use another approach?

If you have a time constraint as tight as 2 weeks, IR is unlikely to be the right tool unless you already have a system in place that is capturing relevant data. In that short a time frame, it is likely that you can review administrative data and hold a handful of stakeholder consultations to inform recommendations (one of which

might be to allow for flexibility in implementation and IR to inform ongoing improvement processes).

IR often researches ongoing activities. Can it be used to validate presumptive results of a program?

It would not necessarily validate data captured through an impact evaluation, for example, but it would provide evidence on why and how the outcomes varied.

How does IR navigate the tension between generating context-specific solutions and producing generalizable knowledge for policy and practice?

IR is not focused on producing generalizable knowledge. The data generated can be reused for academic publications or policy, etc., but the research parameters should be clear.

Is IR related just to the running of projects and reforms, or to newly implemented policies?

IR can be used in the service of any of those.

Can IR be started in the middle of an ongoing education program or action research process? Or does it have to be planned from the beginning?

It can be started any time, but it is often easiest to start at the beginning.

Is it more effective to conduct IR in the piloting stage before scaling up?

It depends on what you need to know when. If you anticipate scaling an initiative, it can be very effective to conduct IR during the pilot stage, as you may identify early issues with adoption, acceptability, etc. But as the stakeholders and contexts change with scale, it is important to address those new needs and conditions.

How can IR be applied in emergency situations, especially when data is difficult to obtain?

Overall, working in emergency situations is not easy, but there are often fairly constrained objectives to an emergency response (i.e., stabilisation of the situation, hazard mitigation, maintenance of basic living needs, and safeguarding of civilians), and research questions that focus on improving service delivery should gain the buy-in of the implementers. Emergency response organisations (whether governmental or nongovernmental) also have required reporting structures in place, even if the data they capture is focused on critical needs. Depending on the structure and duration of the emergency response, there might be a few options. I would not recommend trying to implement any research activity in the initial phase

when response organisations do not yet have their operations fully developed. However, as they get their operation fully staffed, you should be able to work with them to support them in IR, particularly for a longer response duration. Suggest using existing data collection measures (adding questions to existing reporting forms, for example).

Of special note - you will need to get data sharing agreements in place to make IR work, which will not be anyone's priority in an emergency situation. To the extent that you know which types of agencies might respond to specific kinds of emergencies in advance, work out agreements in advance that will govern the relationship once an emergency occurs.

How can IR be effectively designed and executed in a fragile and conflict-affected education system to scale evidence-based early-grade reading interventions, given constraints such as political instability, limited infrastructure, gender disparities, and fragmented stakeholder coordination?

You might consider starting with a focus on questions around appropriateness and acceptability of different educational delivery mechanisms in differing contexts to various stakeholder groups. Start with communities where there is greater acceptance that all children should have access to a quality education (even if details of delivery differ for boys and girls, for example). Engaging some of those stakeholders in the process may reduce wariness or hostility towards the Ministry and/or donor efforts.

Applying implementation research

How to be effective in IR?

Being effective requires some steps: 1) be clear about the gaps/barriers and develop concise research questions to address them; 2) plan for flexibility so that adaptation is possible in response to research findings; and 3) ensure that you have the political will to achieve the goal (as opposed to implementing a specific process or approach). Goal attainment may come through a variety of means that are effective, even if not necessarily what was originally envisioned.

Which of the frameworks comes first in the research process?

Any number of conceptual frameworks might apply, depending on the questions to be asked. The overall framework for IR in general is that it should be driven by the

implementer, with extensive engagement by key stakeholders. What that looks like differs depending on the circumstances surrounding an intervention.

Is the process of monitoring and evaluation continuous throughout the research steps? Or can we focus on monitoring and evaluation during the process of implementing a suggested policy or reform?

Yes, IR is additive to the M&E process. You could certainly use a process evaluation design during a reform as well, but that would not be driven by the implementer, and it might not get to questions around acceptability and adoption by stakeholders.

What is the importance of data collection in IR?

Data collection is a critical process for quality control, and it is often perceived as a pain point for implementers. Where you can, plan around those key decision points identified. Be realistic about the timing of data collection and analysis so stakeholders will have the data to guide informed decisions. The data methodologist should design a data collection system that will provide the data needed to answer the research questions while maintaining rigour. This likely involves assessing local stakeholders' capacity to capture, analyse, and interpret the data. It is also important to:

- Review existing tools and reporting, and harvest the data they are already collecting.
- Add questions to existing instruments where feasible rather than creating new tools.
- Leverage planned processes – both for monitoring and for implementation (i.e., site visits to communities). This will also help minimise the additional expenses associated with implementation research for the implementer.
- Be aware of the incentives for stakeholders in the education system and how that might influence any data collected (particularly perception-related data). This will also mean mentoring whoever will collect the data (particularly the technical staff who may have little research experience) to ensure they follow procedures.

Is there a need for quantitative data collection in IR?

IR uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods - the methods depend on the questions being asked.

How can we validate the research conclusion and findings if the situation is ongoing?

It depends on what the research questions were. Some may align with existing research and bodies of knowledge, but it is often difficult to validate. That was part of the reason we emphasised getting concurrence among stakeholders on what constitutes progress and engaging stakeholders in the data interpretation process - that is key to data validation in IR. It is also useful to note that although cycles of IR may be rapid, it makes sense to continue to track key metrics beyond the initial research period to ensure that fidelity remains high and the outcomes remain consistent with the approaches implemented.

Can you explain how to contextualise research measurement tools, and what is the sequence of actions?

The following reflects the workshop's instructors' opinion and practice, and other researchers may use a different approach. Think of the questions below as a decision tree - if the answer is no, do not continue.

1. Determine alignment and objectives - does it directly address your research questions? Does it capture data elements in the format you will need to answer your questions? (i.e., does it use ranges or scales when you need discrete variables, etc.)
2. Examine prior performance - how did the tool perform in its prior uses? Did it generate rigorous, robust data?
3. Assess audience suitability - does the tool work for the subjects in your study? Is it written at the correct literacy level? Is it in the right language, and if not, can it be translated easily without losing meaning? Are there geographical/cultural differences, historical events, or biases reflected in the tool that will affect your data or mislead your subjects?
4. Assess methodological fit - how does the tool fit with your overall research design and other data collection methods/instruments?
5. Disclose limitations - ensure that you describe any limitations of the tool to stakeholders and gain agreement prior to using it for your implementation research study.

Sometimes, researchers become confused about the level of detail in statistical presentations for the IR stakeholders. What data presentation skills are needed by researchers to work with quantitative and qualitative data?

Research translation is a critical skill that will be needed in the IR process. It will be important for the data interpretation phase to identify what level of information various stakeholders need and to prepare multiple versions of the results corresponding to those needs. (For example, classroom teachers might need a lot

more detail on specific behaviours or reading score components than the parents, who might just need overall information on reading scores.)

Roles and responsibilities in implementation research

Who will be the authentic authority to select the issue to be covered by IR, as well as the time? Does the decision come from the funder or policymakers?

Primarily from the implementer, with support and concurrence from funders/stakeholders.

Can a think tank do IR of a government program without actually working with the government?

Not effectively - the implementer has to be the one to drive implementation research (along with the resulting adaptations).

Implementer's involvement in data collection, analysis and interpretation may create controversy regarding transparency and reliability of IR. How may this challenge be addressed?

First, agreement on metrics for change should be made up front. Second, the data collection plan should reflect potential concerns with capacity building for data collection, multi-stakeholder involvement in data collection, and data transparency (so alternative analyses could be conducted).

What type of relation would be between funder/client and researcher?

Typically, the researcher would be engaged by the implementer, but could also be engaged by the funder. The main responsibility should be to the implementer in either case (as opposed to independent, as in the case of evaluation).

If a program is implemented through independent 'implementing partners' across different regions, how can we conduct program-wide research—especially when 'implementation knowledge' is difficult to obtain from these partners? A key risk is that partners may be protective of their implementation processes, making it challenging to gather consistent information. What methods can we use to work around this challenge?

Partners will continue to protect their competitive advantage as long as they have to compete for funds/programs. You can integrate IR into the learning agenda for each partner, and if you do not require sharing across partners, they may be willing to be more transparent. One option would be to run it as a competition with

additional funds attached (a bonus, if you will) for any partner that identifies key barriers and strategies to overcome them. In order to gain the funds, they would have to be willing to publish their findings, but that at least creates an incentive for them to do it and be in the driver's seat rather than as though they are subjects of an evaluation.

How to be participatory in IR?

The Guidance Note has tools to assist with stakeholder identification/mapping, which can help identify who should participate. In addition, build in resources and time for capacity building, where feasible, to ensure that stakeholders with limited capacity can engage more fully. In addition, consider how to incorporate stakeholders in meaningful roles (service deliverers, data collectors, data interpreters, etc.).

How do we ensure that IR remains truly participatory throughout the entire cycle, especially in systems where power is centralised or where stakeholders like teachers or parents are rarely consulted?

This is a challenge in many cases. It requires dedicated resources (staffing and financial support) to ensure that stakeholder consultations and other forms of engagement are well designed and useful to all. Consider what role they could take and are willing to take. The Guidance Note also has additional information on stakeholder engagement.

Why are we not prioritising learners' and parents' significant role as key stakeholders during IR in the education sector?

Depending on the research questions asked, they would typically be prioritised. The challenge is that they are difficult to engage at scale in this process. Parents (and learners, when it can be made developmentally appropriate) should have opportunities to participate in the IR process. The Guidance Note offers some options for thinking about how to engage different categories of stakeholders.

Complementary Resources

Workshop materials:

- Guidance Note (English) *Russian and Arabic versions coming soon*
- Day 1 PowerPoint slides (English) *Russian and Arabic versions coming soon*
- Day 2 PowerPoint slides (English) *Russian and Arabic versions coming soon*
- Case Study: Scaling Effective Teaching Practices for Early Grade Reading

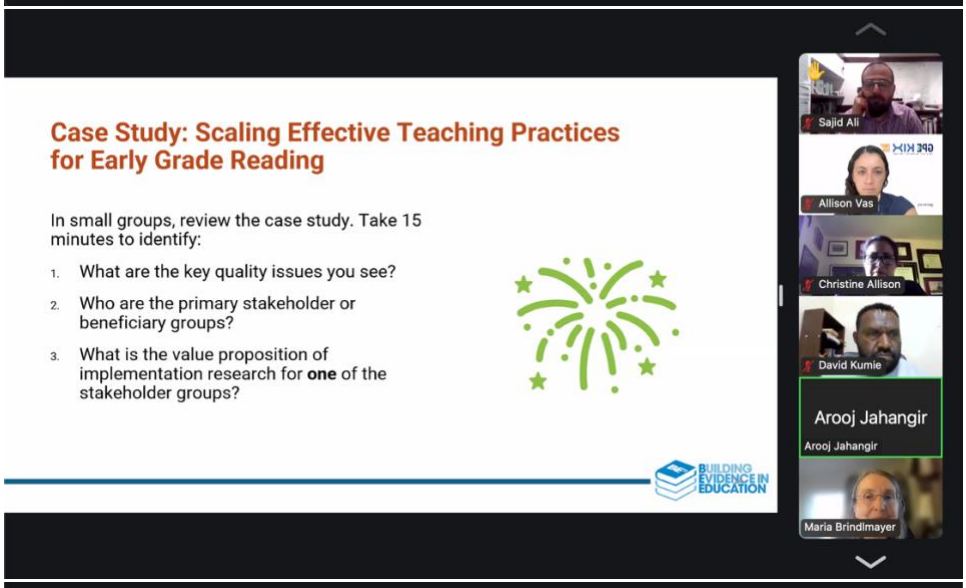
Workshop recordings:

- Day 1 recording (English): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYU4feNFypg
- Day 2 recording (English): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9mSVhu8seI
- Day 1 recording (Arabic): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpsWw1SPmkI
- Day 2 recording (Arabic): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4Ic5GW-eVM
- Day 1 recording (Russian): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5CE-r3AYHo
- Day 2 recording (Russian): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyrJWne2RSE

Additional resources:

- Building Evidence in Education (BE2) website
- Additional case study example from UNICEF

Event Photos

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