

The Implementation Science at Work Podcast

Transcript - Episode 4: Policy Implementation: Creating Supportive Infrastructure and Systems

Guests: Robin Jenkins and Diana 'Denni' Fishbein from the Impact Center at Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, UNC-Chapel Hill

Host: Meera Kumanan

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Meera Kumanan (00:00):

From the Impact Center at UNC's, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, I'm Meera Kumanan, and this is Implementation Science at Work. On today's episode, we're talking about policy implementation, and we're joined by Dr. Robin Jenkins and Dr. Diana Fishbein from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. Welcome. Could you both start by introducing yourselves?

Robin Jenkins (00:28):

I'm Robin Jenkins. I am associated with Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute in a particular work group. We call ourselves the Impact Center at FPG. Our work group focuses on implementation science, practice and the sort of scale-up of local capacity, depending on the thing that folks are trying to implement.

Diana Fishbein (00:51):

And I'm Dr. Diana Fishbein AKA Denni. And I'm in the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, the Director of Translational Neuro Prevention research. And I'm a senior scientist.

Meera Kumanan (01:06):

You both work for the policy division. Could you describe what the division's role is?

Diana Fishbein (01:12):

Yes. Okay. So Ayse Belger, Dr. Ayse Belger, the director of FPG, has set up a policy division so that we can facilitate the translation of the basic research and some of the applied work that's being done in FPG to policy makers so that it doesn't just sit right in our, in our literature, in our journals. And nobody knows about it, but us scientists, but to make sure that policy makers are aware of it so they can know what the science is showing and how it is policy relevant to their own agendas in informing their decision making.

Meera Kumanan (01:47):

Thank you for sharing. This is a very exciting episode for us because we've been having a lot of conversations around translating science into community practice and building grassroots capacity. This is the first time we're discussing policy implementation. So for our listeners, could you describe what policy implementation is and perhaps some of the nuances and distinctions from legislation or policy making?

Robin Jenkins (02:14):

I think generally when folks are thinking about policy, they're really thinking about legislation or administrative rules or guidelines or expectations that get formulated into law, formal law or administrative policies and procedures that are then expected to have some sort of public impact. So when we think about policy implementation, then we're thinking about the systems that enable that policy to land and to have effective outcomes as the policies are designed. So the systems might be the translation system, how policy gets written into actual administrative rules, policies and procedures that it might be training, it might be education consulting, coaching. Along the way it might be evaluating that policy and it might be providing feedback to the policy makers on the effectiveness of their work in a big sort of loop or a feedback system. So the support system for policy really is about from the time that it's made to how it's governed and how, how the accountability system gets created to ensure that it gets moved into public benefit, and then the support of that public policy at the agency level and then down into wherever it's get, wherever it's being locally implemented.

Meera Kumanan (03:43):

Often, when we think about policy, we really think of it as existing at the highest levels of our ecological models. Can you talk a little bit about how policy might be relevant to our listeners who exist at all levels of the implementation and public health network?

Diana Fishbein (03:58):

Right. Yeah. I think a lot of people don't realize that once policy is made at the highest levels, that it still needs to be interpreted and executed at lower levels. And so even if it comes from congress, from our legislature at the federal level, it still needs to be adopted and, and implemented at the agency level and below that in communities. And so, you know, it's important to understand what it means to implement policy at the levels that, that Robin just delineated, you know, at agencies federally, locally in the states. And then what does that process look like? Because it can certainly look a lot different than what it's intended, you know, when it's initially formulated.

Meera Kumanan (04:48):

Definitely. And I think it speaks to that notion that all public health is on some level local, and the ways you're talking about your work is very similar to the overall goals of some of our past guests who've worked at the provider or organizational level. Something else we've talked a lot about on this podcast are frameworks and theories in implementation science

that can be used to guide our work. What are some of the frameworks and policy implementation or any best practices that you may employ?

Robin Jenkins (05:18):

Well, speaking for myself conceptually, the use of implementation frameworks for policy translation and impact can look very different depending on the policy actors where the policy is intended to land.

There's a lot to be said for really comprehensive frameworks like CFIR, the consolidated framework for implementation research, because it really speaks to both those outer contextual environmental, if you will, ecological influences that policies need to tend to and the inner issues, the inner agency issues around what it takes for administration training it, the adopters within a system to do that policy well. But then there's also this idea about how you create readiness. So the active implementation frameworks are really strong. The, you know, as process frameworks for getting organizations prepared for the adoption, as Denni mentioned, there's often, even though policy is pretty clear cut and very rule bound, there tends to be some adaptation at the local level there.

Robin Jenkins (06:21):

It tends to be implemented according to culture and context of various agencies culture and climate. And so, you know, there's implementation sort of strategy and framework issues around how those how those adaptations occur and whether they sort of sufficiently get off center from the intention of the policy or not. That also feeds into the evaluation question, you know, so what are the process and outcome evaluation tools? We need to figure out whether the policy's landing and the way that it was designed. So I think, you know, there are one, you know, like getting the outcomes. Those are, that's a framework that we, we like to use in public policy, which really stands well the test of time as policy gets implemented in, in broad community context when you're trying to scale up something at the local level, like a, maybe a prevention program or a youth violence intervention or a crime prevention program or something like that. So this sort of getting the outcomes idea is a very nice multi-step sequential way of mapping strategy onto particular implementation steps and stages to align that readiness with the adaption adaptation in the adoption of the policy. I think I'll stop there and ask Denni if she wanted to weigh in on that.

Diana Fishbein (07:41):

Yeah, I, no, I think you said so much there. To my knowledge, I don't think that they're universally accepted frameworks except those that extend from your work, Robin, yours and others, other people like you that have developed frameworks that are optimal and that can be adapted to different settings, different community needs, different agency goals and agendas and so forth. But you know, what the Impact Center does, that's somewhat unique and there are a few other shops that attempt to do this certainly, but really to kind of proliferate these frameworks so that they can be taken up and and utilized so that things do function better and that there's, you know, better implementation, better

evaluation, better monitoring, oversight, workforce training and you know, all across these different spaces.

Robin Jenkins (08:33):

And that's a very eloquent way of, of extending what I mentioned frameworks are just that there's sort of, you know, theoretical steps that are put together in ways that research or practice experience. Tell us if you follow them in certain ways and if you, you know, get the co-creation partners and the agency buy-in and the leadership and teaming structures and the workforce development strategies and all those things that we know to be best practices and implementation, the frameworks guide us down that path of effective implementation. But they're all tailored, they're all tailored to the unique context of each agency or the system in which they're being applied. And that's where the issue of implementation competencies come in, practice competencies. So I think what Denni's bringing up rightly so is this idea of how frameworks actually are applied in the policy environment. And that's the issue of, you know, facilitating coaching, guiding teaming, and using the co-creation process to create that sort of enabling environment where policy can be effectively translated using these frameworks and strategies.

Meera Kumanan (09:45):

Robin, you mentioned co-creation as a key part of implementation and policy and at a much larger level public health overall. Can you talk a little bit more about what co-creation is?

Diana Fishbein (09:57):

Yeah, I mean I'll just, I'll just say that without that co-creation with the community, you're not going to get their buy-in. These kinds of implementation of best practices need to be driven by the community. And you know that co-creation is, you know, researchers and implementation scientists and experts come in and, and they need to exchange capacities with the re between the researchers and community stakeholders so that, you know, the researchers bring in a certain number, you know, number of capabilities that are absolutely necessary for good quality implementation, but the community has to provide their input so they, they can determine what it is that will be implemented from the get go. So it's just, you know, this teaming process that Robin referred to that is absolutely essential if you have researchers going in and say, Well, this is what the science says and so we're gonna give you these programs and this is how we're gonna implement them, irrespective of what your needs, preferences, customs values are it's not gonna work. And so it's very important and that means that implementation looks different across all different communities cuz it needs to reflect the flavor and you know, what the communities are really driving for.

Meera Kumanan (11:21):

Thanks, Denni. A lot of the language you're using actually reminds me of how Triple P

practitioners and program purveyors adapt the system of interventions to communities. And it's a nice reminder to see that co-creation and community-driven adaptations must exist at all levels, from on the ground implementation to the policy level. When you talk about community involvement, what does that actually look like? When I imagine community and policy, I generally think of grassroots movements and town halls with quote the people. Is that correct? Can you walk us through what co-creation is really like and who a co-creative partner may be?

Robin Jenkins (12:04):

It needs to be said and, but it should not have to be said that co-creation centers itself on equity centers itself on recognizing power, relationships, diversity, inclusion, sense of belonging, that people have the right voices in the process. Co-Creation should embed and include all of that co-creation. Really the job of co-creation to oversimplify is really to help create that enabling hospitable environment for successful implementation. So you're trying to assemble the right people at the right time in the right places among the system. For example, your co-creation partners at let's say you have a big piece of federal legislation coming down the pipe. Well your co-creation partners in the federal government will look very different than your co-creation partners when that, when that policy lands in Raleigh, North Carolina or Durham or even a more rural area. So it's not that you have one co-creation group. Your effective implementation staging and strategies will help you understand where that co-creation needs to occur. And it's all along the implementation pathway. And so you can sort of add and exchange or move co-creation partners around in that system to ensure that you are creating the right culture and context for implementation depending on the level and the support system you're trying to address. So those partners really are about creating, you know, we, we we're working in complex, messy open systems and those co-creation partners help bring in definitions of what are the problems you're trying to solve with this implementation approach? What are the resources that need to be at the table or in the conversation if we don't know enough, whom else do we need to invite into the conversation? And what can we do to create that supporting system to overcome the known implementation barriers and to be comfortable in our own space talking about the unknowns that crop up along the way. And some of those can be very powerful as you know, but that's the role those co-creation partners is to help create the system and then help navigate through the system as you're applying the implementation strategies to make the policy come to life.

Meera Kumanan (14:21):

We've been hearing a lot about co-creation and community involvement within, you know, public health and more of these social justice spaces. How do we ensure that we're doing it authentically and correctly and not just kind of tokenizing different groups?

Robin Jenkins (14:38):

A major mistake that a lot of people make, and this is not just about implementation, but this is just about in terms of helping change happen, is that they invite stakeholders. What

we sometimes refer as co-creation partners to conversations and feel like they've done their job, they assemble this committee or this design group, and then they go about staging and, and doing the work of implementation, but they don't check back in and build a hygiene, a nurturing a a taking care of process for this stakeholder group, this co-creation group. And so they can co they can sometimes feel left behind that their voices were, were valued maybe at one point in the front end of the process, but maybe it can feel like tokenism because they're not kept in the loop, they're not used for feedback, they're not used for evaluative, informative conversation along the way. And when that happens, then there can be a feeling of tokenism and, and powerlessness in that whole co-creation conversation. So nurturing those co-creation partners as active engaged partners in the implementation is as critical as anything in the, in the work.

Meera Kumanan (15:47):

Thank you for that reminder, Robin. As someone who's also starting out in their career in public health, I really take this advice to heart and really look up to everyone at FPG and specifically within the Impact Center who really practice what they preach when it comes to community involvement and making sure that they're cognizant of power structures. I'm always excited hearing about what everyone's working on that's building a little bit more of an equitable community and society. So if I can ask you to reflect a little on your own very impressive careers, what are some of the biggest lessons that you've learned? Do you have any words of wisdom to our listeners and those who will be helping shape the future of this field?

Diana Fishbein (16:29):

I have, I have learned so much from Robin and Will, the Director of the Impact Center. I've just over the years, cuz this goes way before I came to fpg, I've known these guys for, for many, many years and I have just learned a tremendous amount about the importance of implementation and science. I'm more of a basic scientist that is, you know, actively engaging in policy and advocacy based on that basic science. But that middle part <laugh> that is so essential, the implementation part, I was never formally trained in that. And so now I have been very well informally trained and still have just so much to learn. But I, you know, in terms of, you know, being the expert in it, that's really the robins of the world. But I think that what has become so clear to me is the importance of making sure that it, to the extent that we can right, that policies that emanate from say the federal level.

Diana Fishbein (17:31):

And, and I wanted to point out too that policies also are not just legislative. I think, you know, Robin came out with that initially that administrators within agencies create policy also. So some, you know, we have a tendency to think about it being legislative. That's just one aspect of it. And actually where most of the work gets done is at these other levels that are, that are mandated to execute the legislation that comes down from the top. And so, you know how important it is that it isn't just at the surface, it's not just on the face of it, Oh, this is a great policy, so much has to do with with how it's executed at the state and

local levels. And you know, there's always a concern, particularly in prevention science, that not a lot of folks at the state and local level really understand prevention science and really know what it involves and that there's a science to it, nor do they know that there's an implementation process to it. And so for me working at that level, just, I'm always the, the one trying to make the connections, like not necessarily having the deep expertise like Robin has, but trying to, you know, connect people who do have that expertise with the folks on the ground, the community stakeholders and the agencies to make sure that it's done right. Because if it's not, it gives the science a bad name, then we're investing in something that is not producing that the desired outcomes.

Meera Kumanan (18:59):

Denni, you and me both with that basic sciences background, I think your portfolio is a real testament to how we all can and should engage with implementation. And as we've talked about all that translation of research into practice and policy, regardless of what your own background may be, really should be the backbone to all public health.

Robin Jenkins (19:19):

A couple things, me, because it's a, it's a really great question. I used to be a state government bureaucrat and I used to also work in non-profit community. I, I've worked at almost every possible level where a service can be delivered. And what I'm getting ready to say is that policy is thought of as accountability. Compliance. Somebody says, here's a rule or here's a law or here's something, go do it. And the way that we're gonna make sure that you're doing it is we're gonna quote, "hold you accountable." We're gonna check boxes or do audits or do performance reviews or something. It's, it's, it's, it's sort of autocratic top-down stuff in most people's eyes. What implementation and even prevention science in a really good way has taught us is that in order for any change strategy to happen, whether it's a policy program or practice, there needs to be a supportive system in place that ensures successful translation of it, the successful delivery of it and the successful sustainment of it.

Robin Jenkins (20:30):

And what we frequently leave out are those parts B and C, we're pretty good at delivering policy, but we're pretty bad at supporting it and really bad at sustaining it. And so I think what I would suggest to who folks who might be listening this is that we, implementation science is really helping public entities begin to get their, their heads around, begin to learn about the importance of creating these supporting infrastructures and systems that make policy much more likely to be successful in the long run.

Otherwise it's all compliance driven top down stuff. And you know, if it's not consistent with either people's personal goals or values or what the agency is about, or even inadvertently some policies can have harmful effects on the service populations they're designed to serve or to affect, then those policy outcomes can be disastrous. So ensuring that support system and ensuring the ability to sustain and maintain it with high quality coaching use of data, strengthening the workforce, giving feedback and data back to the

policy makers so that people can continue to align what they're trying to do in service to the problem they're trying to solve by developing that policy.

Robin Jenkins (21:48):

And if we do that well, we get much better policy outcomes.

Meera Kumanan (21:52):

Well, thank you both so much for spending some time with us today. I learned a lot and I am sure our listeners will too. Hopefully this is just a start of many more policy-related podcast episodes to come. Throughout today's episode, we've learned what policy implementation is, the importance of co-creation and the value of involving an entire network of the multi-level implementation approach in bettering population outcomes. To learn more about community engaged implementation science or implementation practice at work, visit impact.fpg.unc.edu. This episode was produced and edited by Meera Kumanan, original music by Robin Jenkins, Artwork by Julie Chin. Special thanks to concept and creation to Sandra Diehl and Mira Kumanan. Technical advice from Katherine Neer and funding from the Duke Endowment and the North Carolina Division of Social Services.