

Decades of Pursuing Knowledge for Action

A review of



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Child Development and Social Policy: Knowledge for Action

by J. Lawrence Aber, Sandra J. Bishop-Josef, Stephanie M. Jones, Kathryn Taaffe McLearn, and Deborah A. Phillips (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

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This edited volume of 16 chapters plus an introduction and epilogue describes several decades of efforts to use research to improve the life circumstances of children and families. Its subtitle is therefore appropriately “knowledge for action.” Most of the contributors are researchers. All are trained in research. Together they make the important but often neglected point that action should always be based on knowledge and science is one of the most important vehicles we have for gathering knowledge.

Celebrating the Life and Scholarship of Edward Zigler

No other scholar of developmental psychology has been more active or more influential in bringing research to bear on social policy than has Edward Zigler. *Child Development and Social Policy: Knowledge for Action*, therefore, celebrates the life and scholarship of Zigler, Sterling Professor of Psychology emeritus and founder and director of the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy, Yale University. This impressive volume, part of the Decade of Behavior series of the American Psychological Association, is a fitting documentation and recognition of the outstanding lifelong contribution Zigler has made to this field. The volume itself is a product of a *festschrift* in honor of Zigler. In the introduction, editors and authors J. Lawrence Aber and Deborah A. Phillips state, "As the term *festschrift* implies, this volume is a celebration of a life of action, a life of contribution to the nation's children and families, and to the future for generations to come" (p. 3). Understandably the volume pays appropriate homage to Zigler and does an excellent job of summarizing his accomplishments across the years in trying to connect the worlds of developmental research and policies for children and families. In this way, the volume makes an important contribution to documenting the history of this field. Younger readers may think that this field has always been as visible and valued as it is today, but that is not the case. I remember when important members of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) argued that it was not appropriate for a research organization to attend to policy. It is interesting to note that one of the first challenges to this view was the election of a conservative Congress in the middle of the Clinton administration. As this Congress began to attack much of the policy apparatus we had built to protect children, such as the school lunch program, even research-oriented members of SRCD recognized the need to use our science to protect children and families. Now SRCD has its Office of

Policy and Communications in Washington, D.C., funds a Congressional Science Policy Fellowship, and is thoroughly engaged in the type of work described in this volume. The first chapter by Deborah A. Phillips and Sally J. Styfco, "Child Development Research and Public Policy: Triumphs and Setbacks on the Way to Maturity," does a good job of describing this history. Most important, they conclude by describing the field as having now reached maturity.

One of the important ways in which this volume documents Zigler's legacy is by illustrating the amazing cadre of researchers he has produced to lead this field into the future. Most make a contribution to this volume, and they include J. Lawrence Aber, LaRue Allen, Janice Gruendel, Stephanie Jones, Kathryn Taaffe McLearn, Deborah Phillips, and Deborah Stipek, to mention a few. All are now leaders in the field and carry on Zigler's legacy.

Reaching to the Future

It is important to mark Zigler's impressive contributions and very appropriate that his students undertake the task. However, this volume makes an equally important substantive contribution to the field. It is one of the few comprehensive summaries that have emerged in recent years. By so thoroughly reviewing the field, often in a historical context, and presenting challenges as well as accomplishments, it reaches to the future of the field. Directions for research and policy can be uncovered from most chapters.

The 16 chapters are divided across four sections dealing respectively with history, early development, vulnerable children and families, and strengthening children, families, and communities. Each chapter is outstanding, so I could easily describe the contribution made by each. Because it is not possible to do so in a brief review, I instead highlight the contributions that are most innovative.

All four historical chapters are noteworthy. However, I was particularly impressed that this

section contains chapters on communication (by Janice Gruendel and Lawrence Aber) and on program evaluation (by Kathleen McCartney and Heather Weiss). Both areas are critical to the endeavor of using research to influence policy. Communication is the vehicle with which we researchers inform nonacademic audiences of our research results; there is a science to communication just as there is methodology to research (Sherrod, 2002).

Unfortunately, the need for understanding about communication (what works for whom and under what conditions) is often not recognized. I was pleased to see these authors discuss strategic frame analysis, addressing how people filter and process the information they receive from the media. These authors describe three examples to illustrate how it works. Gilliam and Bales (2001) provided a more detailed example with regard to news coverage of youth issues and the public's reactions to today's youths.

Communication represents an attempt to disseminate research so that it influences the design and construction of policies for children and families. In the *Social Policy Report* that Jeanne Brooks Gunn, Columbia University, and I edit for SRCD, we refer to this as "giving child development knowledge away." Evaluation represents the other end of the process—of continuing to learn from what we do to help children and families. Regrettably, evaluation is too often interpreted to mean simply asking if the program or policy "works," and the experiment is viewed as the only acceptable methodology even though it is frequently difficult or impossible to do and may not always be the best choice of design. The chapter on program evaluation adopts a broader and more useful view. It begins by summarizing the history of the field. Thereafter it summarizes four lessons learned that focus on the use of mixed methods, the need to attend to effect sizes, the need to synthesize findings, and the importance of holding reasonable expectations. The most important contribution of this chapter is its presentation of a heuristic model of evaluation as a continuous learning system. I have previously proposed that programs and policies

constitute an important part of the context in which many children grow up; they therefore merit study from this viewpoint rather than from one that is simply “evaluating” them (Sherrod, Busch, & Fisher, 2004).

The four chapters on early development cover the usual suspects: Head Start, child care, universal prekindergarten, and “school readiness.” All chapters are excellent, but it was the last one that struck my fancy. I put school readiness in quotes because this chapter by Deborah Stipek and Kenji Hakuta deals with a broad array of topics relevant to school readiness. Titled “Strategies to Ensure That No Child Starts From Behind,” the chapter evokes associations to the current and powerful No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy. By examining topics such as inequalities in school resources and full-day kindergarten, the need for quality child care and early education, age of school entry, and English-language learners, the chapter highlights how narrow is the focus on classroom achievement and testing that is currently inherent to implementation of NCLB. A much wider array of policy options must be pursued if no child starts from behind, and starting from behind is a good predictor of being left behind.

The third section on vulnerable children covers poverty, maltreated children, teen pregnancy, and children in foster care. There is of course an array of additional populations that could have been covered, such as homeless families, immigrant families, sexual minority youths, and children in the justice system. However, fuller coverage of this topic would require at least a full volume in itself. This selection of four topics allows a wide coverage of issues specific to subpopulations that vary in their vulnerability. The section therefore highlights one of the great challenges to policy making; policy tends to follow by necessity a one-size-fits-all approach, yet this approach rarely works given the diversity of children and families in the United States.

The chapter on poverty in this section by Lawrence Aber, Stephanie Jones, and Cybele

Raver is one of the best summaries I have seen of this broad and complex area. By pursuing a historical approach to summarizing research and policy, it highlights the changing nature of both. Developmental psychology involves the study of individual change and stability across the life span. This chapter makes the important point that the contexts in which individuals grow up also change. Change at multiple levels means that not only do policies change but the knowledge on which they should be based also changes. This represents another challenge to using research to influence policy. There is a constantly evolving playing field.

The final section covers parental education, family support, mental health interventions, and—interestingly—use of the Internet to disseminate research and public policy. This last chapter by Fred Rothbaum, Nancy Martland, and Sandra Bishop-Josef represents the most innovative portrayal of strategies for strengthening children, families, and communities. It therefore makes the important point that creativity and taking advantage of opportunities are critical aspects of this field.

Producing Knowledge for Action

One of the advantages of scientific knowledge is its objectivity, thereby freeing it from ideology and other such contaminating factors that can reduce its credibility with policy makers. Hence it is critical that only knowledge from research that meets the highest scientific standards should be used to guide action. That also increases the chances that the action will produce the desired result. This volume presents research that meets those standards.

Knowledge for action is also frequently interpreted to mean applied research. That is not the case. Basic research is equally important. Social problems arise faster than one can

generate research to address them. Hence, what is needed is information from basic research that can be brought to bear on new problems (Sherrod, 2002). Applied research includes both policy-relevant research (e.g., the impact of poverty on children) and policy analysis (e.g., evaluation of welfare reform programs; Huston, 2005). Therefore, knowledge for action includes the full scientific community. It is not just relegated to those of us who identify as applied scientists.

Training is key. This volume demonstrates the vital role that training plays in the development of scholars who pursue knowledge for action. There are now a variety of programs such as the one at Fordham University that directly train students in dissemination, social policy, and program evaluation. However, this volume demonstrates how effectively a single mentor can have the same results. There are also other training opportunities such as the SRCD Policy Fellowships (refer to <http://www.srcd.org/policyfellowships.html>). Nonetheless, the field needs to attend more forcefully to training to ensure that all students who want to pursue knowledge for action have the opportunity to do so (Sherrod et al., 2004). This volume should prove useful to courses in social policy; I used it in my graduate course this spring.

This is an outstanding volume, appropriately dedicated to Edward Zigler, that should help chart our future course in producing knowledge for action.

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