

Inputs Versus Outputs in Early Care and Education Public Policy

Richard Fiene, Ph.D.

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This is expansion of a short opinion paper I wrote addressing the balancing of structural and process quality indicators. This short paper addresses the role of inputs (the resources of a program such as the number of teachers, the qualifications of the teachers, etc...) and outputs/outcomes (how well children are doing in a particular program such as their developmental progress). In the past five years there has been a much larger role for various state Departments of Education to be more involved in the early care and education field and with that involvement a gradual shift in the emphasis from inputs/processes to outputs/outcomes. This shift is important to note and one that is important but there is a potential problem that I see in that with the increased emphasis on outputs/outcomes it has come at the expense of the input side of the equation. The argument circulating around state capitals is that what really counts are the outputs/outcomes which is true. We all want to design and deliver early care and education programs that benefit children's development but without a way to monitor what outputs/outcomes are tied to specific inputs/processes we are at a loss from a public policy perspective to determine the most efficient and effective means for doing this.

So before we get too far down the road of outputs/outcomes as the next best thing, I think we need to be cognizant of the relationships that exist between inputs/processes and outputs/outcomes. Research needs to be undertaken in the upcoming years to determine what are the key indicators that link outputs/outcomes to inputs/processes. We have begun this work in the licensing of child care programs but it needs to be expanded into QRIS and Pre-K programs.

The public policy implications of this research is enormous. In the past, public policy has been driven by the input/processes side of the equation. Moving to a public policy agenda that links inputs/processes to output/outcomes based upon empirical evidence is the most effective and efficient model. Moving to an output/outcomes only public policy agenda is putting "the cart before the horse". The ultimate problem with this approach is that you never know what contributed to the ultimate outputs/outcomes for children, so it becomes more like a "scatter gun approach" rather than a targeted program monitoring approach based upon key indicators that statistically predict the best outputs/outcomes for children.

This controversy between inputs/processes and outputs/outcomes has provided 40 years of back and forth amongst advocates of both approaches. It has only been in the past 5 years that the dialogue has increased as the various state Departments of Education and the Pre-K and Charter School movements have become more prominent as a delivery system.

For those interested in continuing this discussion, please contact me at the following website: <http://DrFiene.wordpress.com/home> or go to <http://RIKInstitute.wikispaces.com/home> for additional information about quality ECE key indicator research. I can also be reached at DrFiene@gmail.com