Collaborative for Implementation Practice
UNC School of Social Work

Fit and Feasibility

Best Practices and Tools to Assess Programs or Practices' Contextual Fit and Feasibility

Introduction

Assessing the fit and feasibility of programs or practices within a given context is a critical step for ensuring successful implementation and achievement of equitable outcomes. Fit is defined as how well the program or practice aligns with the implementing site and focus populations' perceptions of strengths and needs, values, culture, and history, other initiatives and priorities, as well as internal capacity resources available for implementation. Feasibility is defined as how well the program or practice can be integrated into the implementing site based on how operationalized the program or practice is, the supports available at the site to support implementation, and the strength and availability of research data.

What is Contextual Fit?

Contextual fit is the match between the strategies, procedures or elements of an intervention and the values, needs, skills and resources of those who implement and experience the intervention.[1] When selecting, developing, replicating and/or adapting a new program or practice, it is critical to understand the context in which it will be implemented. Using programs or practices with a base of evidence, such as evidence-based practices (EBPs) or evidence-informed practices (EIPs), is important. But simply choosing a model with a strong evidence base is not enough to ensure a good fit with population needs, quality implementation, program results or sustainability. Research indicates the program or practice selected must also be well aligned with the organization, the community and the systems in which it is situated — the local implementation context. Assessment of fit and feasibility often occurs during the exploration stage of implementation; however, it may also be helpful if a program or practice is not achieving its intended results or if the implementation context poses a challenge or has changed.

Implementation support practitioners can help teams at implementing sites consider six broad factors, which can be divided into two categories, when assessing fit and feasibility:

- Program indicators are used to assess new or existing programs or practices that will be implemented along the following domains: *evidence*, *support* and *usability*. These indicators specify the extent to which the identified program or practice demonstrates evidence of effectiveness, available sources of support for implementation and usability across a range of contexts.
- Implementing site indicators are used to assess the extent to which a new or existing program or practice matches the place where it is being implemented (the implementing

site) along the following domains: *population need*, *fit* and *capacity*. The assessment specifies suggested conditions and requirements for a strong match to need, fit and capacity for the identified program or practice.

What Are Best Practices for Assessing Fit and Feasibility?

In order to assess the contextual fit and feasibility of programs, implementation support practitioners and teams collect and analyze data from multiple sources, including administrative data, interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders and program observations. They strive to ensure the assessment is a collaborative process and includes deliberation among individuals with diverse perspectives (e.g., families, practitioners, leaders, community partners). A team with diverse perspectives is an effective structure for completing the assessment, allowing for a broad range of viewpoints and additional engagement from other stakeholder groups. As part of the decision-making process, teams seek a shared understanding of the issues so that consensus can be reached when scoring each of the domains. This process allows for a well-informed decision to be made about the use and/or adaptation of a program or practice.

Best Practices for Assessing Program Indicators (Evidence, Support, Usability)

- **Conduct a literature review** to:
  - assess evidence documented in peer-reviewed literature and rigorous research studies;
  - determine outcomes associated with implementation of the program or practice; and
  - identify culturally-specific concerns and assets by seeking out research literature featuring the focus population. This may involve: 1) reviewing materials from racial/ethnic group-specific publications; and, 2) learning about cultural context and considerations specific to the focus population when rigorous research is not available.
- **Review registries or clearinghouses** (e.g., Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse, What Works Clearinghouse) that catalog evidence-based programs and practices. When reviewing registries, note identified evidence or lack of evidence for specific racial/ethnic groups.
- **Conduct a document review** (logic models, theories of change, program information, program communications or marketing materials, trainings, contracts, websites) to understand:
  - underlying assumptions for change and inclusion/exclusion criteria;
  - whether the program has articulated guiding principles, core practice components and day-to-day activities of practitioners;
  - needs addressed and not addressed by the program;
  - culturally competent practices and adaptations available for focus population; and
  - support available from the program developer(s) or purveyor.

- **Conduct interviews with program developer(s).** Interviews should include questions about the following:
    - Research studies, evaluation reports or synthesis documents
    - Level of support provided in the following areas:
        - Staff selection, training and coaching
        - Fidelity assessment
        - Data systems and approaches for continuous quality improvement
        - Administrative procedures and policies
        - Communication strategies
        - Collaborative partnerships
        - Cultural competency
    - Core practice components and whether any of the core practice components can be modified or adapted
    - Needs addressed by the program or practice
    - Contextual issues that will facilitate or hinder implementation of the program or practice in local settings, including demographic-specific needs and assets of racial/ethnic groups.
    - Program-specific capacity and general capacity needed to use the program or practice, including the following:
        - Staff
        - Technological
        - Fiscal
        - Administrative
        - Partnership
- **Conduct interviews with agency leaders and practitioners** with experience using the program or practice. Interviews should ask about the following:
    - How supported they felt during program implementation; key questions include:
        - Was the support useful and feasible for program implementation?
        - How costly was the support?
        - How sustainable is the support?
        - Was the support tailored to the local context and focus population?
        - What additional support was needed?
    - Whether any core practices are unclear and whether there are barriers to and/or facilitators for using the program or practice as intended
    - Needs addressed by the program or practice
    - Contextual issues that might facilitate or hinder implementation of the program or practice in local settings
    - Program-specific capacity and general capacity needed to use the program or practice, including the following:

- Staff
- Technological
- Fiscal
- Administrative
- Partnership

- **Identify whether a fidelity assessment or measure of staff performance exists.**
- **Conduct focus groups with community members** who experienced the program or practice to determine their perceptions of how well-defined the programs were and how these programs aligned with their needs, assets, culture and context.

Best Practices for Assessing Implementing Site Indicators (Need, Fit, Capacity)

- **Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment** using multiple methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, review of census data, document or literature review) and multiple data sources (e.g., administrative data systems, program developers, agency leaders, practitioners individuals and families who may use the program or practice. Ensure the needs assessment considers the needs and assets of all communities who may use the program or practice, including racial and ethnic minority groups and other populations.
- **Conduct a root cause analysis** by defining and describing the problem and differentiating between causal factors and root causes. Because causal factors and root causes will differ by race/ethnic groups, use disaggregated data and conduct analyses for different populations.
- **Map initiatives** to produce a clear picture of existing programs, mandates and resource commitments.
- **Assess the site's workforce readiness and capacity** by identifying available staff to implement the program and their relevant skills and knowledge, including cultural competency and congruency with the focus population.
- **Conduct focus groups and interviews** with members of the focus population to:
  - better understand the families' and the community's perceptions of the need to be addressed;
  - assess the acceptability of the program or practice with the community and families, taking into account diverse perspectives, cultures, values and history; and
  - determine what resources are available at the implementing site related to technological, fiscal, administrative and partnership capacities.

What Principles and Competencies are Needed to Assess Fit and Feasibility?

Implementation support practitioners often partner with implementing sites to help conduct fit feasibility assessments for potential programs and practices. A thorough assessment process, including collection and analysis of disaggregated data and active involvement of stakeholders, can allow the implementing site to better understand what resources may need to be secured or developed and to anticipate and plan for potential risks and barriers that may arise during implementation.[2] Specific principles and competencies[3] relevant to assessing fit and feasibility are described below.

Principles

Principles guide and underpin implementation support practitioners' work.

- **Be empathetic:** Approach team building with regard for all stakeholders as legitimate, respected and valuable contributors.
- **Advance equity:** Integrate equity components into consideration of team membership and practice.
- **Be committed:** Bring patience, flexibility and resiliency to the process.
- **Use critical thinking:** Make conscious choices informed by evidence and data.

Competencies

Competencies are the necessary knowledge, resources and skills for the implementation support practitioners' work.

- **Assess needs and assets:** Support the identification of readily available and potential resources and assets.
- **Grow and sustain relationships**: Have difficult conversations with partners and be open to feedback.
- **Facilitation:** Ensure full participation of all relevant partners.
- **Understand context:** Involve diverse stakeholders.
- **Address power differentials**: Use facilitation techniques to make power structures visible.
- **Co-design:** Work with stakeholders to build a strong fit between the program or practice and implementation context.
- **Develop teams:** Support teams with diverse perspectives to assess the potential fit of programs and practices.

What Tools or Resources Are Available to Assess Fit and Feasibility?

The **Hexagon Discussion and Analysis Tool** is designed to assess the fit and feasibility of new and existing practices across six domains: evidence, support, usability, need, fit and capacity.

Implementation support practitioners can use the following resources to facilitate use of the Hexagon Tool:

1. **Initiative Inventory:** This tool can be used to gather information on current initiatives and implementation efforts.
2. **Developer Interview Guide:** This protocol includes questions designed to gather information from developers on resources and supports available for implementation of a practice or program
3. **Stakeholder Engagement Guide:** This resource provides guidance to ensure representative stakeholders are engaged on the implementation team.
4. **Root Cause Analysis Resources:** These resources can guide teams through two possible root cause analyses: The Fishbone Diagram and the Five Whys. Root Cause Analysis (RCA) is a process used to investigate and categorize the root cause of a problem, barrier or challenge.

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[1] Horner, R. H., Blitz, C., & Ross, S. W. (2014). The importance of contextual fit when implementing evidence-based interventions (ASPE Issue Brief, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy). Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services.

[2] Metz, A., Louison, L., Burke, K., Albers, B., & Ward, C. (2020). *Implementation support practitioner profile: Guiding principles and core competencies for implementation practice.* Chapel Hill, NC: National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/implementation-support-practitioner-profile

[3] Metz, A., Louison, L., Burke, K., Albers, B., & Ward, C. (2020).