Practitioner Feedback on Education Outcomes and Intervention Component Taxonomies

Focus on: Early Childhood Education, K12 Student Achievement, and College & Career Readiness

Mackenzie Magnus and Liz Noble

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Executive Summary

This report includes findings from the Education Genome's fall 2019 user experience study of the online data collection instrument, with a specific focus on three areas in Education. With support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), the IGP developed standardized frameworks (taxonomies) for program components and outcomes in critical areas of education: Early Childhood Education (ECE), K12 Academic Achievement (K12), and College & Career Readiness (CCR).

In order to ensure that these taxonomies accurately represent and resonate with stakeholders at all levels, the IGP engaged expert advisors and practitioners in each content area. Practitioner feedback was collected through video interviews, during which users were observed using the online instrument and probed for feedback on the specific language of the taxonomies used in it. This demonstrated:

- **Opportunity for enhanced nonprofit capacity building**
- **Good outcome and activity face validity**
- **Importance of outcome prioritization**
- **Opportunities for improved survey structure and navigation**

This process allowed the IGP team to simultaneously collect data on the taxonomies and the online reporting tool. On a whole, their feedback validated the ECE, K12, and CCR taxonomies and provided key recommendations on how to improve the user experience.

"It's a cool way to think about it, I wish we would've had this at the beginning of our strategic plan, this would have been helpful"
– program staff at a K12 organization

Introduction

The Education Impact Genome is a part of the Impact Genome Project, stewarded by Mission Measurement. The goal of the Education Impact Genome is to create universal frameworks (taxonomies) for outcomes, program activities, beneficiaries, and contextual factors used by nonprofits and others focused on fostering positive outcomes across all areas of education (ECE, K12, CCR, STEM, and Quality Education). By collecting, analyzing, and coding hundreds of studies, program reports, and evaluations, the Genome is creating a platform through which organizations, funders, and stakeholders can reliably, consistently, and effectively measure and report on the impact of their programs.

The Genome Team is committed to:

- Developing research questions and incubating initiatives, which challenge the Genome Team and the broader field to think more deeply about education interventions;
- Synergizing the fields of implementation research and social impact with the field of education;
- Learning from an Advisory Council comprised of leading scholars and organizational leaders;
- Refining its work based on practitioner feedback and use cases.

This report focuses on practitioners' impressions and reactions to the language in the Education outcome and activity taxonomies, as well as to the Instrument as a tool to help practitioners and philanthropists maximize impacts in the field of education. It also includes a section of recommendations derived from the interview data. Specific technical and methodological issues identified and reported practitioners have already been utilized to enhance the user experience.

Participating Advisory Panels and Practitioner Representation

Since this project was focused on building taxonomies for three areas of the Education Genome (ECE, K12, CCR), advisors were selected across those content areas. Each Advisory Panel provided additional literature sources and feedback on taxonomies as the Genome Team iterated on each version built from evaluations across the field. A set of practitioners were engaged in user testing interviews where they were able to provide valuable feedback on the resonance and fit of the outcomes and activities, as well as the usability of the survey tool. Similar to the Advisory Panel, these practitioners spanned the three Education areas and provided diverse perspectives.

Design and Purpose/Utility of Instrument

The Impact Genome tool is designed to enable any organization—regardless of focus, depth or breadth of programming—to respond to detailed quantitative questions and input qualitative data about their discrete programs/interventions, down to the most granular level. The Instrument is arranged according to the four taxonomies that define all Genomes:

- ***Outcomes*** that programs in that social impact area are aiming to achieve.
- ***Activities*** that programs may use to achieve one or more outcomes.
- ***Beneficiaries*** that programs commonly serve; including characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, religious-cultural characteristics, etc.
- ***Contexts*** relevant to how programs are commonly delivered; this includes characteristics of the immediate and larger environments (e.g., instructional setting, location, and program size).

The data collected through the IGP Instrument helps facilitate the "conversations" between philanthropists and practitioners, centered around outcomes and impact. The Instrument can be utilized to streamline grant applications and annual reports. For practitioners, the Instrument will support internal assessment and program improvement.

Tool User Tests

During the fall of 2019, participating practitioners provided information on a single program through the Impact Genome instrument. Program staff from 11 organizations provided feedback on outcomes, activities, and overall navigation to the Education Genome Team through private meetings facilitated by screen sharing (Zoom). The Education Genome Team watched as the program staff navigated the survey, stopping them after each section to ask several questions about the outcome or program activity validity and other additional feedback. After a 1-hour session, program staff were asked to finish the survey on their own time (1 – 2 additional hours) and provide any additional feedback.

Findings from the User Tests

Practitioners found that the ECE, K12, and CCR outcome and activity gene taxonomies resonated with how they viewed their own programs and prompted reflection for program improvement opportunities. All the practitioners provided valuable feedback to improve the online Instrument.

Overall, practitioners highlighted opportunities to use the Instrument to build nonprofit capacity in measurement and evaluation. For instance, in the area of program planning and strategy, practitioners shared:

"I think this was similar to the exercise that we tried to go through recently with our logic model and this would only help us to make that logic model more complete"

"it's a nice exercise to do because when you're in a role you get lost some time in the work and day to day…having to take a moment to pick and identify what are those outcomes we're really intending to achieve is reflective"

Based on this feedback, ***the IGP team has begun building a handbook to guides nonprofits to use the Instrument to build capacity within and between teams.***

Outcomes

The Education Genome team also aimed to understand whether programs could easily find outcomes relevant to their work within the ECE, K12, and CCR outcomes taxonomy. ***Overall participant found the language to be clear, and accurate representations of their work***:

> *"it reminds me of language in our Head Start standards and language we use to describe what we address within our curriculum approach… it mirrors how we talk to parents and how we address our funders."*

> "I thought the language was good, comprehensive…Really good descriptors which made it easy to identify what we do…[there] weren't any additional ones [outcomes] from my perspective that weren't represented."

> "I thought the language was user friendly [and] liked how everything was broken down"

In addition to language and fit of outcomes, practitioners often discussed the interconnectedness and prioritization of program outcomes. Programs have many factors to consider when prioritizing outcomes and may not always examine their work in a framework of discrete outcomes. Thus, ***the Instrument can provide nonprofits with more guidance to internally reconcile the difference between program mission, strategies, and outcomes.***

Activities

After navigating through primary and secondary outcome selection, participants described their program model and were presented with the activity gene taxonomy. ***Overall participants reported that the activity gene language represented their work and provided minor adjustments that would enhance practitioner understanding.*** One participant shared that the language was easy to navigate and straightforward. Another said that it was *"spot on…the language was strong."* Practitioners also provided feedback on the activity gene page to improve the user experience, such has defining the scale and having it scroll with the user on the page for easier navigation. The IGP team is currently working to improve this experience.

Overall it was clear that based on the user's role in the program, they may be answering from a program model vs. an implementation mindset. For instance, one program had two team members participate in the user testing. One team member was directly engaged in program delivery, where the other was focused on staff and program management. Both had valuable perspective, but slightly weighted activities criticalness to the program differently. Moving forward, ***the Impact Genome will be capturing data about the roles of staff engaged in the online Instrument process to provide additional contextual data and develop tools to support internal organizational reflection, alignment, and continuous improvement.***

Survey Experience

The Outcome and Activities sections spoke directly to the set of research questions as part of the Education Genome taxonomy development, but the IGP team also wanted to understand if the Instrument was clear, obvious, and intuitive. ***Overall practitioners appreciated the ease and goals of the Instrument, but provided some extremely helpful feedback about navigation, directions, and time.*** The IGP team is taking this feedback to make it easier to navigate between sections, select and prioritize outcomes, and understand key terms. A single grant report can easily take over 20 hours. Thus, the Instrument is intended to capture the impact of one program that can be shared with multiple funders in the matter of a few hours. ***With the enhancements suggested by practitioners through this and future user testing, the Instrument will continue to get easier to use and more readily applied to program evaluation and improvement.***

Key Findings

Several key findings emerged, pointing to clear next steps for coming iterations of the Instrument:

1. **Opportunity for enhanced nonprofit capacity building:** Users appreciated the survey tool and found it to be a useful exercise for clarifying their program's activities, outputs, and outcomes in a way that can be clearly articulated to stakeholders, internal and external.
2. **Good outcome and activity face validity:** Overall, practitioners agreed that the outcome and activity gene language accurately represented their work in Early Childhood Education, K12 Student Achievement, or College & Career Readiness.
3. **Importance of outcome prioritization:** The majority of practitioners selected more than one target outcome; when asked to select one of those as the program's primary outcome, many considered multiple factors (e.g. program model vs implementation, organizational priorities, etc.).
4. **Opportunities for improved survey structure and navigation:** Practitioners provided feedback on logistics (e.g. survey access), survey directions (e.g. definition of "life cycle"), and survey navigation (e.g. activity gene selection).

The IGP Team has already utilized the input from these Education practitioners to strengthen the Instrument. These improvements will help us further understand the reach and progress of Education programming on a larger scale, identifying gaps in service and pinpointing specific program features that can improve outcomes.

Moving Forward

The Education Impact Genome will continue to contribute to the social impact space by (a) scaling evidence standardization, (b) building practitioner tools, and (c) enhancing ecosystems.

Evidence Standardization

The IGP has completed four out of give of the Education areas: Early Childhood Education, K12 Student Achievement, College and Career Readiness, and STEM Education. The remaining genome, Quality Education, is a critical piece of the Education social impact area. The four completed areas focus entirely on student outcomes, but the Quality Education contains the other outcomes relevant to the education space – namely, school, administrator, and teacher outcomes. Building this genome is essential for uncovering linkages between those outcomes and student outcomes. Identifying those linkages can help practitioners and others understand how to calibrate their practices at different levels of the education ecosystem in order to produce desired student outcomes. ***If you work in Quality Education and want to help shape this Genome, contact us at help@impactgenome.org.***

Additionally, in the next phase of the Education work, the Education Genome Team will be examining the influence of context and beneficiary characteristics on the relationship between activity genes and outcomes for the are of K12 Student Achievement. This will provide better statistical power on which strategies are effective for achieving specific outcomes for whom and in what context.

Practitioner Tools

The Education Genome Team will also be applying its learnings through development of interactive software tools allowing practitioners to quickly and efficiently research effective program activity genes. Educators are often asked to do the impossible: serve as evaluators to rigorously define and measure desired outcomes; act as researchers to gather information on what constitutes an "evidence-based practice;" and finally, use their pedagogical skills to implement the practices***. Interactive Instruments will help them improve the way they measure outcomes, estimate success of new innovations and benchmark their programs with peers.***

Ecosystems

Standardized frameworks allow for communication between research and practice—in both directions. With the initial taxonomies and tools in place, the Impact Genome can engage with a larger community of practice ("ecosystem"), to gather practitioner data (via the Impact Genome Instrument) that will ***inform and refine the taxonomies so that they better reflect both research and practice, paint meaningful pictures of activity genes in practice, and enabling understanding, across diverse programs, the landscape and collective impact of work happening on the ground right now.***