Evidence, policy and practice: a long and winding road

CRAWFORD SCHOOL SEMINAR

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Overview

- Interested in deconstructing paths between evidence, policy and practice
- Using NTER initiative as example, valuable for its scale and relevance to 'wicked problems' relevance
- Brief overview of issues
- Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Program case study
- Implications for potential roles of attending individuals and agencies
- Discussion

Evidence and policy issues

- "There is often an uneasy relationship between researchers and policy practitioners. Each looks at the world through different coloured lenses. Each has different perspectives on what the problem is, and unrealistic expectations of each other." (Edwards 2005: 68)

- "Decision-makers accuse researchers of irrelevant, poorly communicated 'products'; researchers accuse decision-makers of political expediency that results in irrational outcomes." (Lomas 2000: 236)

Views of evidence (Young 2007)

Researcher 'evidence'	Policy-maker 'evidence'
Scientific, i.e. context free	Colloquial, contextual
Proven empirically	Anything that seems reasonable
Theoretically driven	Policy relevant
As long as it takes	Timely
Caveats and qualifications	Clear message

Other issues

- Supply side: researchers don't understand policy processes, lack of funding for policy-relevant issues
- Demand side: politicisation, policy-makers may not have capacity or willingness to take on board research findings
- Different styles and avenues of communication, e.g. grey literature, academic journals, Ministerial briefs
- Greater sophistication at level of major national questions; much less at local program level, even when these relate to 'wicked' problems

Responses

- New concepts, vocabularies, journals – a field of study in its own right
- Strategic, ongoing partnerships between researchers and policy-makers
- Knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs – at either individual or organisational level
- Methodological developments - systematic and synthetic reviews, realist syntheses (what works where for whom)
- Enforced reliance on 'scientific evidence'
- Once again, increasing focus on evaluation

Recent Australian developments

- In 2008, the Prime Minister called for greater use of evidence based policy development as a priority in public service reform

- In May 2010, the Prime Minister accepted all the recommendations of the Moran Review, *Ahead of the Game* report, including:

- strategic partnerships with external organisations for forward looking, high quality, creative policy development; and

- policies designed with implementation in mind.

Policy to practice

- Most of those affected by policy experience its impact only through its implementation
- Often LARGE disconnect between policy and practice, for range of reasons, e.g. :
- Siloed nature of government agencies, perceived cost to one agency but benefit to another
- Value conflict, particularly in social services
- Unstable context, lack of continuity and commitment
- Lack of recognition of 'what works where for whom' and textured, nuanced policies

NTER

- Announced on 21 June 2007, shortly after submission of the *Little Children are Sacred* report
- Immediate aim was to protect children and keep (remote Aboriginal NT) communities safe
- Operation of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 was suspended to enable NTER
- Major and well-known actions include income management, pornography, alcohol restrictions
- However, some smaller and less known initiatives more directly targeted to child protection and community safety were also initiated through NTER
- Case study here of Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Program (RAFCP)

RAFCP

- A program to establish a local child protection and family support resource in remote Aboriginal communities
- Local women or men offered 'complementary' jobs
- Workers' roles evolved over time, but included:
- complementing forensic investigators
- supporting investigated families to follow case plans
- community education
- responding to community-initiated requests
- transforming the NT child protection system
- In 2009, evaluation done of first full year of operation, in 13 communities.

Policy relevance

- RAFCP relevant to policy questions, including:

- What proportion of child protection resources should be invested in primary and secondary prevention, rather than tertiary programs? What should that investment look like?

- How can remote community members best be recruited and supported?

- How can – or should – a culturally grounded perspective be built into the NT child protection system?

Context

- Policy churn and spotlight - eg Little Children are Sacred, Intervention, coronials, Inquiry-2010
- Staff churn – 3 Program Managers, 2 Directors, 4 Executive Directors, 3 CEOs in period of months
- Political changes – NT government hanging on with support of independent
- Contextual changes – amalgamation of local government into Shires; split between 'growth towns' and outstations/other communities
- Evaluation context – sometimes disregarded, recommendations reversed, real ethical issues re dissemination

The evaluation

- Shoestring – approx $12,000 and in-kind support
- Program logic model workshop in Dec 2008; 'theory of change', rubrics and findings workshop in November 2009
- Evaluators observed training, work practices in Darwin, Alice, Galiwin'ku, Ti Tree, Nguiu and Ntaria
- Document review, focus groups and individual interviews with program staff and stakeholders
- Emphasis on visual tools, such as pie diagrams and 'fire tool'

The 'fire tool'

- Way for community members to discuss, quantify RAFCW impact

'Fire tool' in action

- Administered in groups, usually with food and looked at community safety factors as well as RAFCP impact

Evaluation findings

- RAFCP generally successful and had achieved much in difficult circumstances, but:

- Cultural differences in working not sufficiently understood, inc role of 'cultural citizenship' in RAFCP and disparate approaches to community education, family support

- Regional disparity in proportion of prevention investment

- Lack of formalised agreements was hampering program's impact on families, vulnerable children and mainstream child protection practice

- 1:3 ratio of oversight and support required to maintain effective workers

Evaluation report

Wanted to be culturally grounded, responsive to multiple stakeholders

- Executive Summary
- Section on history of RAFCP
- Section on evaluation methodology, including comparison of early program theory model and the five streams of RAFCP that came out of workshop in Darwin
- Section with answers to original evaluation questions
- Section with ratings against (int'l) good practice on different aspects of RAFCP
- 'Voices' section with many quotes from RAFCWs and others talking about RAFCP
- Section with recommendations

Checking on policy and practice impact

- Audit of implemented recommendations – worked with Program Manager and reviewed progress, barriers, every month or two

- Established chain of transmission and interviewing policy and practice stakeholders

- Identified gaps in dissemination and formulated presentation packages prior to interviewing stakeholders

Participating in review

- Wanted 360 degree review
- Stakeholders in four (now five) States due to job changes
- Feedback (written or through semi-structured interview) from remote worker participating in 'theory of change' workshop and another who received site visit from evaluators, Team Leader, current and previous Program Manager, previous Director (now Senior Director), two FaHCSIA representatives (one currently and one previously overseeing program), two colleagues (one previously involved in this evaluation)

Findings

- Some (stereotypical?) assumptions confounded – a stakeholder for whom the 'star' section was developed preferred the 'voices' section, and an Aboriginal worker preferred the 'programmatic assumptions' from the theory of change section

- However, clear distinctions between what different groups found interesting and important – eg 'policy vs detail' where a senior stakeholder appeared to find an over-emphasis on areas that proved of greatest interest and importance to workers

Feedback from stakeholders

- Program management found most of the evaluation of value, but <u>most</u> valuable aspect was the personal interaction with the evaluators, and their support in interpreting the recommendations and structuring the implementation

- Senior management wanted more on the policy implications; greatest value personal interaction with evaluator

- Remote workers most interested in hearing they were valued, and findings that impacted on own practice; found process culturally respectful and wanted <u>all</u> workers to have interaction on findings, outcomes

Findings

- Estimate that 1/3 of the contract should have been for the period <u>after</u> report submission – with customised presentation packages for different stakeholder groups, an implementation support package and skill building support

- Personal interaction and credibility critical for all

- Implementation audit showed that those where evaluator able to build 'buy-in', understanding more likely to be achieved

- Policy impact – diluted by staff churn, initial resistance, lack of inter-departmental communication, eg insufficient connection to Inquiry-2010 findings, and cultural distance

Implications

- One of key findings of the NTER Review Board was that blanket solutions are dangerous

- International research increasingly emphasises need to establish 'what works where for whom'

- Data and findings from smaller program and local studies are vital input to development of better textured policy, but those commissioning, managing and implementing them often lack the skill base to ensure validity and impact policy, practice appropriately

- More recent interviews with those preparing to commission evaluations have shown disparity in skills, and current process (eg tenders) reinforce this

Final implications

- Indigenous focused and managed research/evaluation an area of particular concern – ensuring that it is culturally grounded but also provides validity for (Indigenous?) decision-making

- Ethical issues also emerging – while ethics of data collection well established (eg informed consent), ethics of data use less examined

- Issues include reporting back but also respect for decision-making in representative democracy

Conclusion

- "Policy decisions will typically be influenced by much more than objective evidence, or rational analysis. Values, interests, personalities, timing, circumstance and happenstance—in short, democracy—determine what actually happens." (Banks 2009: 3)

Given that will always be true of policy – and even more true of practice – the roles of knowledge brokers and policy entrepreneurs are critical in understanding and harnessing these factors. Where do you see yourself in this?

Potential discussion questions

- Do I want to be involved in linking evidence, policy and practice – or contribute by working in one focused area?
- Are knowledge brokering/policy entrepreneurship vital skills for everyone, or are they better treated as specialist skills, with specific individuals in agencies having this as their primary role? Do you have the right mix of skills (eg story-telling, networking)?
- What could my (agency's) role be in supporting smaller scale evidence, practice and policy initiatives?
- What is my (agency's) role in supporting specifically Indigenous evidence, practice and policy development?
- Do we need to focus more on the ethics of data use?

THE END