

editorial

Mapping the field in evidence-informed policy and practice: international perspectives

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Our context

The articles in this special issue of *Evidence & Policy* have emerged from papers originally prepared for an international invited workshop event held in Ireland in April 2012. Entitled *Evidence-informed practice: creativity in challenging times*, this was the third in a series of events which has brought together a unique network of countries and organisations with the common purpose of enhancing the use of Evidence-Informed Practice (EIP). The genesis of the network was the inaugural event held in Dartington Hall in the UK in 2008. Hosted by Research in Practice (RiP) and Research in Practice for Adults (RiPfa), *Beyond rhetoric: international perspectives on evidence-informed practice*, set the tone and format for those following it. Papers from the event formed a special issue of this journal in 2009. The baton was then passed to the Canadian team. Co-hosted by Practice and Research Together (PART) and the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth Mental Health, the 2010 event, *Connecting the dots: making evidence informed practice a practical reality*, was configured in a similar way and papers from this workshop were published in an edited book (Dill and Shera, 2012). The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway and the Institute of Child Care Research, Queen's University Belfast, jointly organised the next event in 2012. Representing Ireland North and South, both units have always had a very close connection with each other, and with the practice and policy communities.

This international network is configured to include key players relevant to evidence-informed policy and practice. As such, the network includes practitioners, organisational leaders, policy makers and academic researchers. Importantly, also involved are intermediary and purveyor organisations – those outside experts or organisations involved in supporting other organisations in the adoption of specific individual programmes (purveyors), or in supporting the adoption of a range of programmes or evidence-based approaches generally (intermediaries) (Ousthuizen and Louw, 2013).

The original framework for the event involved inviting teams rather than individuals – these were assembled by contacting a ‘leader’ and asking them to bring a team of up to five. The events were scheduled over three days, enabling teams to understand each other’s work and to give proper attention to the issues and challenges that face participants. Teams were also engaged in building and producing the programme together. All leaders were tasked with providing suggestions, and the draft programme and key thematic content was sent to ‘leaders’ for comment and amendment. Participants were also tasked with operationalising the specific format for the event. This included thinking in very practical terms of ways to make presentations about work most useful to others. Suggestions for topics to explore on individual and collective challenges, and methods to address them, were also the job of all participants. Importantly, presenters were asked to prepare papers in advance which were circulated to participants.

In April 2012, thirteen teams working in the field of evidence-informed practice from the UK and Ireland, mainland Europe, North America and Australia gathered in Cavan, Ireland. Each of the teams presented a paper on the subject of evidence-informed practice related or relevant to vulnerable children and young people and their families, or a piece methodologically relevant to implementing EIP. A major focus of the presentations was to examine those factors that facilitate or impede the implementation of EIP. An important backdrop to these perspectives was the times of austerity in which researchers, practitioners, commissioners and policy makers all found themselves, to varying degrees. Contributors examined the methods and initiatives that had been undertaken to respond to barriers to implementation of evidence-informed practice initiatives, with an emphasis on cost-effectiveness. Following the 2012 event, each team revised its paper based on the feedback gathered from other workshop participants and the editing team, and were offered the opportunity of submitting to this special issue. Those revised papers were then subjected to the normal double-blind peer review process of *Evidence & Policy* and now form the core of submissions included in this publication.

Our perspective

As co-hosts of the latest workshop, we write this editorial from the perspective of university-based research centre staff and leaders, working within a massively changed environment in Ireland, north and south – high-level national strategies for children, significant investment by both state and philanthropy in services for children and families, framed within a strong intent towards better outcomes for children. Running through all of this has been an agenda of EIP, with the implementation and/or adaptation of a large number of EIPs in the prevention and early intervention field (see Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014, and Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership, 2011). Latterly, our attention has been sharply focused on the relevance and challenges of EIP as the Republic experiences a major recession and Northern Ireland faces similar, if currently less severe fiscal retrenchment. Our concerns here are practical and pragmatic and reflect our roles in generating and delivering significant volumes of high-level research and evaluation projects, particularly over the last ten years.

In the context of prolonged periods of fiscal retrenchment faced by governments globally, getting most value for state-funded services and interventions will be a, if not,

the core criterion for policy decisions into the foreseeable future. It is not surprising then that evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice and implementation science have emerged as areas of great interest for policy makers (Nutley et al, 2010). The emergence of intermediary and purveyor organisations is one representation of this interest. Enhanced research functions within policy and service organisations similarly reflect this trend.

For universities, alongside the rationalisation of the sector, austerity is also being played out in the form of a greater demand for impact from its research. This is best exemplified in the UK in the Research Excellence Framework, where 20% of the assessment score for research output will be awarded for impact, reflected in the ‘significance’ and ‘reach’ of the work (see www.ref.ac.uk). Equally, for those involved in developing proposals for the EU’s Horizon 20/20 research funding programme, specifying and justifying the impact of their work will be a key task in the years ahead (European Commission, 2011). Of course, this direction is not universally shared, with vigorous, ongoing debates about academic and institutional freedom and the importance of exploratory research that doesn’t necessarily have a technology development or enhancement endpoint (Gray, 2010; Martin, 2011, Smith et al, 2011; Parker and Van Teijlingen, 2012). Notwithstanding these debates, if the scholarship on evidence-based or -informed practice tells us anything, it is that the research report is only the start of what dissemination may involve, and often not even that. In this scenario, important questions emerge about the role of higher education researchers and academics in knowledge translation activities.

Reflecting the established notion of coproduction from within the policy studies field (Bovaird, 2007; Needham, 2008; Pemberton and Mason, 2009), the relatively new idea of research coproduction is helpful to the task of illustrating the complexity of the relationship between research and policy and practice. Martin’s (2011) model of research production, with its emphasis on all of the possible roles that practitioners can play, from simply being informants to being co-researchers, is a good example of a coproduction model. Within such a research coproduction frame, an alternative general approach one can take to the understanding of the relationship between research and policy / practice, and EIP specifically, is to see it as a field involving sets of roles and related activities:

1. Production – of research
2. Design – of methods and materials towards achieving research utilisation
3. Facilitation – interpersonal- / relationship-based work towards research utilisation
4. Consumption – accessing and using research to inform thinking and action

Mostly, though by no means always, the production roles rest with the universities and other higher education organisations, with the consumption role resting with policy and service delivery organisations – public, private and third sector. There are other knowledge producers, but as an important overarching point, we can suggest that knowledge produced from within the higher education sector brings with it a set of interconnected core expectations in relation to quality, peer review, ethics and governance, dimensions which may not always apply (or apply in the same way) to other knowledge producers. The fulfilment of the roles of design and facilitation of knowledge consumption is less clear-cut. For some, the emergence of specialist intermediaries and purveyors reflects a lack of capacity or, indeed, interest, within

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the higher education sector, for the task of knowledge translation or facilitation. Yet the pressure on academics and researchers within the sector to demonstrate impact implies the need to now unequivocally factor in these dimensions of research into all aspects of processes and practices.

Nutley et al (2010) posed an important question: ‘Is research coproduction facilitated by clear boundary maintenance between the relevant communities or do boundaries inevitably become blurred?’ (2010, 264). The general argument we make in response, and reflected in the diversity of contributions to this special issue, is that it would be a major error to offer any neat prescription on what the field should look like given the variation in social, political, economic and cultural contexts for evidence and for knowledge translation globally. The reality, as highlighted by Sanderson (2009), is that all evidence will be somehow partial, provisional and contingent and thus needs to be used as part of an ongoing process of evaluation, learning, adaption and adoption. We suggest that the focus should be on this ongoing process and within it the knowledge translation roles we play to ensure that they are fulfilled to a level of excellence within any given context. To be able to embrace this process in the times we are in requires a deep interrogation of relevance and capacity within all organisations. Together the articles presented below reflect the reality of the task of EIP. While diverse, they reflect the space within which EIP emerges, and the roles that the field requires.

The articles

This special issue illustrates ,coproduction in practice, demonstrating the globally and functionally plural field of EIP and the opaque nature of roles within and between organisations. The first article considers the production and use of evidence for policy. Humphreys, Webster and Pocock examine the place of public inquiries into child abuse and neglect in the Australian policy process and the potential for them to act as arenas for knowledge translation. The authors present two case studies which examine the role of evidence in driving and sustaining policy change: an analysis of recent child protection inquiries in the Northern Territory relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and its subsequent implementation; and an examination of the more recent inquiry into Vulnerable Children in Victoria. In the first case study, the authors contrast the processes for generating evidence and the role of external staff in the inquiries’ work, the recommendations of the two reports, and the implementation processes and outputs. The second case study highlights the different forms of the evidence utilised in the inquiry process, and the inquiry’s lament on the lack of particular forms of evidence on children and families, on needs and demands. Both case studies present a timely reminder about the importance of meaningful participation of all concerned in the policy-making process, as well as the construction and contested nature of evidence and its selected use – if at all – in the political and administrative spheres.

Both Antcliff and colleagues, and Alexanderson, Karlsson and Larsson, present articles detailing early experiences of designing and facilitating the implementation of EIP in different organisations. In their article, Antcliff and colleagues outline early findings from a collaborative attempt to introduce EIP across an entire child and family organisation in Australia. Known as the Resilience Practice Framework (RPF), it aims to improve outcomes for children through implementation of activities relating

to six different levels or domains. The article documents challenges in the initial implementation phase, and outlines the process the organisation undertook to revise the RPF. A theory of change approach was adopted with staff to identify the target group and desired outcomes, and to guide the revision process, alongside a common-elements approach which infused it with a pertinent range of evidence-informed practices. Once distilled, the revised RPF was reproduced in a series of step-by-step practice guides ready for implementation. Adopting what will eventually be a four-phased approach to implementation, the paper details the first phase, which focuses on the organisational context and fit of the implementation object (the Framework) to the organisation. While nascent in nature, the findings are positive, and highlight the potential in – and importance of – involving staff in the early phase of any EIP development to support the implementation process further along the line.

Alexanderson, Karlsson and Larsson present initial findings from a study which examines how children and young people can be involved in casework and policy affecting them. Working from a child-rights perspective and drawing on the participation literature, the authors outline a model for the incorporation of different forms of evidence at different levels of a social work system, and apply it in four settings in an organisation designed to support professionals working with children and families in Sweden. Their initial findings from the research cases or ‘circles’ highlight the different mechanisms which social workers developed to incorporate the voice of children and young people in individual case work, and in some situations in broader organisational policies affecting them. Knowledge is used in different ways in each case, illustrating the differentiated nature of its development and application, alongside the complementary roles of different actors in the implementation process. Although the second phase of findings has yet to be reported, the article offers potential regarding how the role of users in the creation of an evidence base can be structured.

Two articles from the UK illuminate different perspectives on facilitating EIP through knowledge translation. Petch and others from the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) present a number of novel ways in which they seek to fulfil their remit to support innovation and cost-effectiveness in social services in Scotland. Using their organisation’s pillars of activity as the guide for the paper, the authors provide a fascinating insight into how innovation, improvement and new technology can all contribute to increasing the use of evidence-informed practice in harsh economic times. In improving awareness and access to evidence, the use of open-source software to make available a range of audio, video and text resources permits flexible, responsive and cost-effective dissemination of the latest information in one place. Translating evidence reviews into multimedia presentations allows key information to be communicated in an efficient, consumable manner. Such mechanisms are all in addition to increasingly popular podcasts and online films, which permit collaboration with service users and practitioners in a range of fun ways. Mechanisms to strengthen the evidence base are underpinned by collaboration between practitioners and users in service design initiatives, and the coproduction of evidence by service users, practitioners and policy makers in Evidence Explorers. There is much in this paper to challenge a range of stakeholders: the researcher regarding how to get their research out; the knowledge broker about how to translate and transmit knowledge; the policy maker about how to involve practitioners and support practice in cost-effective ways; the practitioner about how to involve service users in innovative and inclusive ways.

Holmes and Brooks' article details what appears to be the ever-increasing drive for efficiency and effectiveness in the face of reduced budgets, and the opportunities that are created for children and family sector organisations to lead improvements from within. Drawing on the concept of sector-led improvement, which has recently gained purchase across a number of sectors in the UK, the authors argue that it is possible and indeed essential that, in austere times, organisations work harder than ever to implement EIP. In this regard, Holmes and Brooks detail how their organisation, Research in Practice (RiP), supports the sector to be more evidence-informed in a cost-effective and self-directed manner, through facilitating access to, and analysis and application of, a range of evidence across the sector by the sector. Evaluation of the process is also aided through peer support and assessment. In summing up, the authors characterise the nature of the relationship between sector-led improvement and evidence-informed practice as symbiotic: sector-led improvement offers the framework to be more evidence-informed, while being more evidence-informed serves to strengthen the power of sector-led improvement. RiP – and organisations like it – can play a central role in support this improvement from within.

Duda, Riopelle and Brown, from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) in the United States, present findings from their study on sustaining the use of EIPs for those working with spinal cord injury patients in Canada. Building on the work of their NIRN colleagues, these authors outline the steps taken by a number of stakeholders to translate knowledge into practice and sustain it over time. In drawing together a range of stakeholders, the authors demonstrate how the Delphi method can be used to whittle down a range of evidence-informed practices to two for cross-site implementation, based on factors including evidence-base, need, and 'scalability'. Following the NIRN literature, implementation teams and implementation drivers are respectively established and identified, which become central to the adoption of the selected practices across the sites. Throughout this process, vertical and horizontal buy-in, collaboration, leadership and a focus on continually building capacity are essential factors to ensure that EIPs become 'business-as-usual'. The article ultimately points to the need for everyone, not just practitioners, to be involved in making EIP happen, and that the ever-growing arena of implementation science offers the tools to ensure that it can happen, irrespective of the sector.

As a collection, these papers contribute in different aspects to the field of evidence-informed practice to provide a deeper understanding of some of the issues that researchers, practitioners, commissioners and policy makers face in contemporary times.

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