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Improving Research-Policy Relationships: Lessons from the Case of Literacy

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Improving Research-Policy Relationships: The Case of Literacy

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Abstract

The relationship between research and policy, a long-standing concern in education, has taken on even greater salience in recent years. Researchers feel that their knowledge is not given sufficient weight in policy or practice while policy-makers feel that they cannot get timely assistance with the questions of importance to them. The picture is not as bad as often claimed; in fact, research has had strong impacts on policy in education over time. A main barrier to greater impact is the reality that research and policy are different contexts for knowledge production and use, each producing its own incentives, constraints and pressures. Stronger links between research and policy are possible if there is greater understanding of the realities of each context and the links that can exist between them. Politics and policy-making are not well understood by those who are not directly involved, so this paper focuses largely on the nature of government and policy-making, and how research might influence that process more effectively with specific reference to issues of early literacy.

Acknowledgments

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Why and How Research Affects Policy¹

Problems in the relationship between research and policy are often bemoaned, perhaps especially so in education. Researchers complain that the knowledge they generate is not read, understood or used by policy-makers, a problem that tends to be attributed to the malign influence of politics. Policy-makers, on the other hand (in which category I include politicians as well as senior officials) complain that research does not speak to the important problems they face when they need it, or is too qualified, inconsistent or unrealistic to be a useful basis for their work.

The argument is an old one, but it has taken on renewed importance in recent years as research has come to occupy a more prominent role in public discourse around policy in many areas. The growing interest in research is supported by several developments in contemporary societies. More educated populations are more likely to be interested in what research might have to say. Programs in the media give increasing mention to research in various fields, even if the reporting of research may not always be as careful as might be wished. The phenomenal growth of the internet and its increasing use by a wide range of people as a way to get current information on many different topics is another illustration of this interest. Governments are more likely than used to be the case to try to make the claim that their policies are supported by evidence. Research conjures up images of science and of objectivity, and thus has a particular kind of appeal to the public imagination.

In part the interest in research can be linked to a growing awareness of the complexity of the main problems that confront humanity (Homer-Dixon, 2000). Over the

¹ What follows is a summary of ideas that are developed more fully in Levin, 2003a.

last few decades we have learned that issues of long-term significance are what Rittel and Weber (1973) called ‘wicked problems’ – they cannot be avoided and yet have no obvious solution. Under these circumstances we need to learn more if we are to be able to address these issues with any chance of success.

These trends apply to education, but education also has some particular characteristics that affect the role that research can play. Education is value-laden activity, inextricably connected to our broadest aspirations for society. It embodies a wide range of purposes that are not always mutually consistent. People agree on educational goals only at the most general level, with many conflicts not only about goals but about desirable means of carrying them out.

Education also has less history of basing policy and practice on research than do some other fields, although it seems likely that each policy area thinks that other areas are doing better in this regard (personal communication with John Lavis, Canada Research Chair in health knowledge transfer, McMaster University). Many factors contribute to the particular status of research in education, including the relatively low status of teaching as an occupation, the relatively recent arrival of education as a field of study in the university, and the many different disciplines that contribute to the field (Lagemann, 2000). Because everyone has gone to school, professional knowledge about education is not seen to be as esoteric or specialized as knowledge in fields such as health or law or engineering.

In recent years there have been pointed criticisms of education research in several countries including Britain (Hargreaves, 1996; Hillage, 1998), France (Prost, 2001), Australia (McGaw et al., 1992), and the United States (Coalition for Evidence-Based

Policy, 2002). To give a rather extreme example, a website closely linked to the U.S. Education Department (www.w-w-c.org/about.html) notes: “Our nation’s failure to improve its schools is due in part to insufficient and flawed education research. Even when rigorous research exists, solid evidence rarely makes it into the hands of practitioners, policy-makers and others who need it to guide their decisions.” While Canada has not had the same level of public debate about education research, discussions among education ministers and senior officials in which I have participated evidenced much unhappiness with the contribution of research, or at the least a strong sense that the contribution should be stronger than it is.

Despite the relatively poor reputation of education research one can point to many instances where research has played an important role in shaping policy and practice.

Some examples include:

- Understanding the importance of children’s early years in shaping their later success and the possibilities for interventions;
- Realizing the importance of parental and family interaction to children’s development and education;
- Supporting the moving of children with disabilities from segregated settings into regular schools and programs;
- Learning about the number of students dropping out of school and the reasons for their doing so;
- Understanding the importance of assisting adults with low levels of literacy;
- Realizing both the importance of and difficulties in operating high quality professional development for teachers;

- Recognizing that much short-term training for the workplace has very weak payoffs;
- Revealing ways in which second language learners can best be helped to integrate into a new language and society; and
- Appreciating the link between good nutrition and ability to concentrate and learn.

Research in Australia (DETYA, 2000) and in the U.S. (Biddle & Saha, 2002) has found that very large majorities of school principals and policy-makers believe that their work is actively informed by research, though in a variety of largely indirect ways.

Efforts to improve links between research and practice are not new. The ERIC system and the network of regional educational labs in the U.S. have had a longstanding focus on issues of research impact, with considerable success in many areas. However partly as a result of the current criticisms, new interest in the role of research in education has developed (Davies, 1999; Levacic & Glatter, 2001), and various initiatives in this direction have been undertaken in recent years in education. The National Education Research Forum in England (www.nerf-uk.org) and the various initiatives under that umbrella are an excellent recent example of a thoughtful effort to improve the role of research. In Canada important efforts have been made by SSHRC through programs such as the Community-University Research Alliances or the Initiative on The New Economy and associated joint ventures with agencies including the Council of Ministers of Education, as well as changes in the regular research grants programs.

If research in education has in fact had substantial impact, why is there so much criticism of it? Part of the concern grows from the frequent assumption that there should be a direct line between research and subsequent policy and practice such that

research findings point unambiguously to what governments, educators, or learners should do. There are many important questions of education policy and practice where research does not yet provide much guidance. Most of education is concerned with producing significant and lasting change in how people think or behave, yet on the whole we do not know very much about how to do this, either in schools or in other settings. Policy-makers are often faced with difficult alternative choices around how to use resources; again, research often has little to say about what choices are best. There are good reasons, conceptual and practical, for these limitations in research—to mention two, the issues are often very complex and the total education research effort is comparatively small—but the lack of clear direction is understandably frustrating for users.

At the same time, researchers have their own set of complaints about governments. Research in education is not well funded anywhere in the world, and certainly not in Canada (OECD, 2002), which makes it hard to produce substantive, reliable and timely results. Researchers may also feel that their work is disregarded if it does not fit the predispositions of decision-makers, or that it gets distorted to meet other political or bureaucratic needs. Like the criticisms of policy-makers, these also have some truth to them.

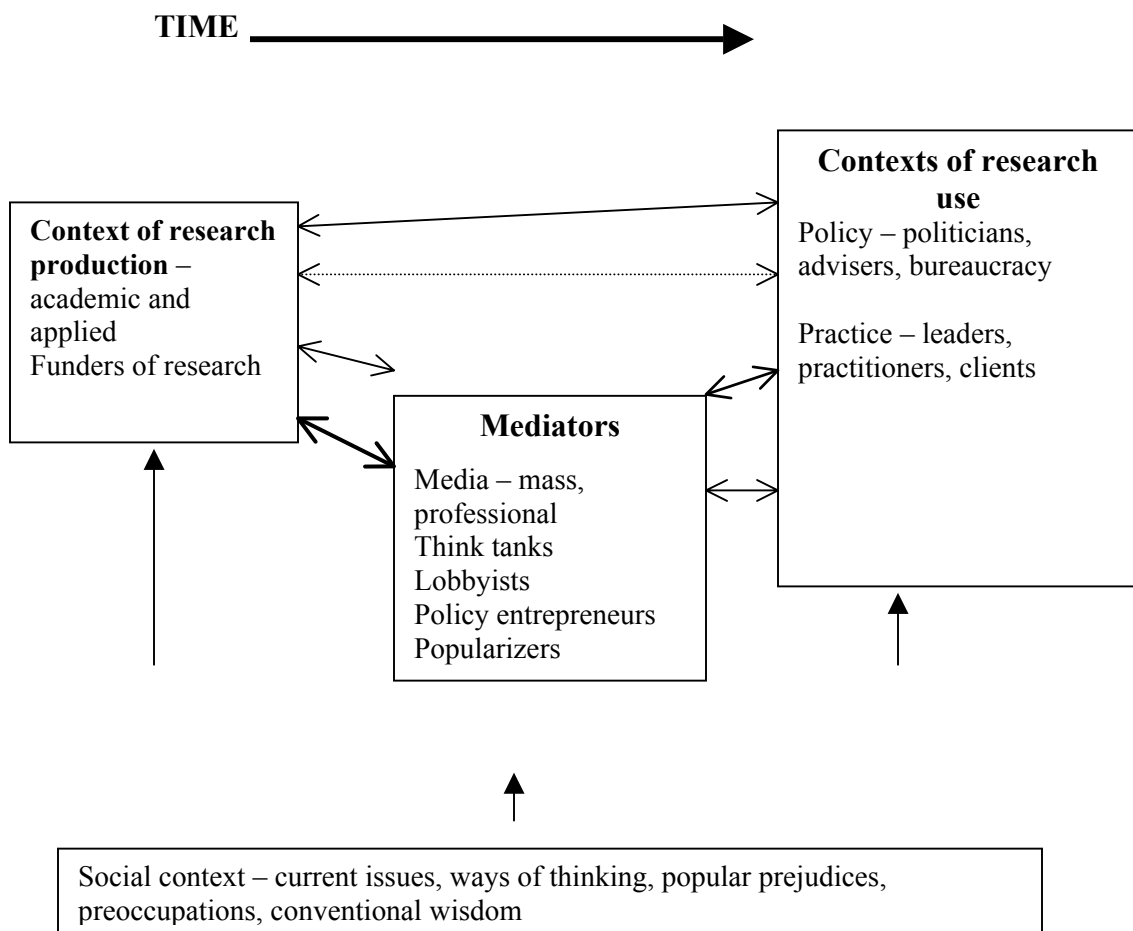
Understanding the problems in the relationship of research to policy is easier if one recognizes that researchers and policy-makers inhabit very different worlds, with different sets of incentives, constraints and pressures that shape their work. Although these two worlds do connect with each other in a variety of ways, they are also linked by another sector consisting of various people and organizations that are interested in using research to shape policy and practice. A model of research use, then, might usefully start

with the idea of three different contexts—the context of research production, the context of research use, and the various mechanisms that act as links between these two settings.

This conceptualisation is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Elements of Research Impact



An important implication of this conceptualization is that the gaps and misunderstandings between researchers and users do not arise from people's faults, but from the realities of their contexts. Of course improvements can and should be made, but these efforts should start from a realistic understanding of why people act as they do and what kinds of changes might be possible.

It is also important to recognize that the terminology around research impact is quite inadequate. The wording of 'producers' and 'users' is itself problematic in that it implies a one-way flow of information and a passive role on the part of 'users'. In reality people move back and forth among these three contexts, the relationships run in multiple directions, and so-called 'users' are not just passive recipients of the work of researchers but active constructors of knowledge and action in their own setting.

I will not in this paper talk about the context of research production, which is shaped largely by the mores, rewards and habits of the academic world. I want to focus instead on the world of government policy, which is where, in Canada, most of the important decisions about education policy are made.² To speak effectively and meaningfully to policy-makers, researchers must understand something of that world. The next section of this paper gives some description of the world of policy, followed by some suggestions on how the links between research and policy could be strengthened.

² School boards are another important site for education policy making. The political dynamics around school boards are different from those I will outline here in some important respects, which is why I do not focus very much on them.

The Dynamics of Government³

A fundamental starting point is that the use of research – indeed, knowledge use in general – in government can only be understood as part of the overall process of government and especially the influence of politics. In my experience politics is an intensely rational activity. Politicians are no more self-serving or indifferent to knowledge than are researchers or civil servants. However the premises behind political rationality are not necessarily the same as those governing education or research. Understanding the use of research in government requires an understanding of the factors that affect elected governments. Although these descriptions arise largely from my own experience, they are also supported by a substantial literature on the dynamics of government (Levin, in press a).

1. Governments have limited control over the policy agenda

Although every government comes to office with a set of policy ideals or commitments, the reality is that much of what governments attend to is not of their own design or preference; governments have to be in whatever businesses people see as important.

Government agendas are certainly shaped in part by political commitments, party platforms, and the views of key political leaders. Governments do try to keep a focus on meeting the commitments they made when elected. However they are also influenced, often to a much greater extent, by external political pressures, changing circumstances, unexpected events and crises.

³ A much fuller description of the nature of government and its relationship with education is developed in my forthcoming book, *Governing education* (Levin, in press a).

As soon as a government is elected, various groups try to influence its agenda in accord with their own. This is in many ways the essence of the political process. It means that politicians are constantly bombarded with requests or demands to do things, stop doing things, increase funding, decrease funding, pass legislation, repeal other legislation, and so on. As people are better educated and better organized, the number and intensity of the pressures on politicians has risen. Nor are people necessarily reasonable or consistent in their demands.

Unanticipated developments can also affect political agendas. When the unexpected happens, whether an economic downturn, a natural disaster, or some other new development, governments must respond in some way, even if that means taking attention and resources away from other activities that were high on the priority list. As Dror put it, there is “at any given moment a high probability of low probability events occurring. In other words, surprise dominates” (1986, p. 186). September 11, 2001 remains a perfect example of how many plans are rendered null by something unusual and unpredictable.

While some of the pressures on government relate to very important, long-term issues, others may concern small short-term details. However one cannot assume that the former will always be more important than the latter. Sometimes very small items can turn into huge political events. For example, a single instance of a problem can undermine an entire system that may actually be working reasonably well, as those working in health care or child welfare or immigration or corrections know only too well.

Governments are particularly susceptible to issues that take on public salience through the media (Levin, in press b). As most people get their information about public

events from the mass media, an issue that is played up in the media often becomes something that a government must respond to, even if the issue was no part of the government's policy or plan. Media coverage is itself motivated by a number of considerations, but long-term importance to public welfare is not necessarily one of them (Edelman, 1988). Indeed, novelty is an important requisite for the media in order to sustain reader or viewer interest, so that governments are likely to be faced with an ever-changing array of issues supposedly requiring immediate attention.

Insofar as research becomes an issue on the public agenda, it will necessarily be of concern to governments. The results of research, whether on a new health treatment or results of education tests or new data on crime rates can often become part of the public policy agenda, sometimes to the surprise of many including the researchers.

2. There is never enough time

Governments are in some sense responsible for everything. Government leaders have to make decisions about a vast array of issues – from highways to the environment, from financial policy to education, from health to justice systems. And, as just noted, they are likely to face an unending set of pressures on their energy and attention. A cabinet member not only has responsibility for her or his own area of jurisdiction – which can itself be enormously complicated and fraught with difficulties – but is also supposed to participate in collective decision-making on a wide variety of other matters facing the government. Each issue has to be considered not only in terms of its substance, but from the standpoint of public attitudes and political implications. The nature of political life is

such that there is no respite from these demands. A politician may leave her or his office, but almost every social encounter will also lead to new pressures or requests.

There is, consequently, never enough time to think about issues in sufficient depth. Some sense of this pace is captured in the TV program *The West Wing*, except that the real situation is generally more messy even than this portrayal, with more simultaneous demands and pressures being handled. Senior government leaders, both politicians and civil servants, work under tremendous time pressures, in which they are expected to make knowledgeable decisions about all the issues facing them within very short timelines and without major errors. This is impossible but it is nonetheless what we expect from our leaders.

The result is that important decisions are often made very quickly, with quite limited information and discussion. This is not because politicians necessarily like making hurried or uninformed decisions, but because this is what the office requires.

The pressure of multiple issues is also one of the reasons that policy implementation tends to get short shrift. As soon as one decision has been made there is enormous pressure to get on to the next issue. Even with the best intentions, it is hard to get back to something from months ago to see how it is progressing, since so many other issues have meanwhile arrived on the doorstep demanding immediate attention.

3. Politics and policies are both important

Everything in government occurs in the shadow of elections. Every government is thinking all the time about how to improve its prospects for being re-elected. Some people find this cynical, but it is hard to see what else politicians could do. After all,

concern for re-election is at least partly about doing what most people want, and presumably we elect governments for precisely that purpose. A government that does not satisfy people will be tossed out most of the time. The British cabinet minister in the TV series *Yes Minister* understandably reacted with dismay when his chief advisor, Sir Humphrey, called for taking a courageous stand, since this meant doing something unpopular. We vilify our politicians for ignoring our wishes, so we can hardly be surprised if they go to great lengths to try not to offend

At the same time, governments are often genuinely concerned about the results of their actions and policies. They do want to fulfill their commitments to voters, and programs and policies are the means of doing so. Moreover, a mistaken policy can create very large political costs – think of water quality in Ontario.

There is, to be sure, a cynical side to the concern with public perception in that governments sometimes do attempt to manipulate public opinion, give the perception of action even when they are not doing much, and focus on image rather than substance. Rhetoric is a vital part of politics (Levin & Young, 2000), and government statements of intention cannot necessarily be taken at face value. Governments can use research as one of the vehicles to support their rhetoric, something that may become more common as the prominence of research increases.

4. People and systems both matter

Much of what a government does is shaped by the individuals who happen to occupy critical positions, regardless of their political stripe. Any political party is likely to contain a wide range of views and positions; in statistical terms, the within-group

variance in ideas in a party is likely to be quite a bit larger than the variance between one party and another. So the individuals who come to hold certain positions are important. Some ministers carry quite a bit of weight in Cabinet and can get their way on important issues, while others have difficulty getting their colleagues to support any major policy thrust. Some politicians are intensely pragmatic and willing to reshape policy in light of changing pressures or public preferences, while others are deeply committed to particular values and work hard to promote and implement a course of action over years even in the face of substantial opposition. Some Cabinet ministers or key political operatives understand and use research while others may be ignorant or even dismissive.

The nature of government systems also matters. The roles of various departments and central agencies, the relative power of individual ministers vis a vis central government, the way in which issues come to Cabinet and the kind of information that accompanies them, are all important in shaping the way policies are constructed and delivered. Some governments or agencies have given a prominent role to research units. For example, in Canada the Applied Research Branch of HRDC and Statistics Canada have both played important evidence-based policy roles. Where such functions are institutionalized there is more potential for research to be available when needed and in an appropriate form. Insofar as research has public credibility it will also tend to have more cachet with politicians.

5. A full-time opposition changes everything

Imagine how your work might change if there were people whose full-time job it was to make you look bad. Imagine also that they could use less than scrupulous means

of doing so and that there was a tendency for people to believe their criticisms ahead of your explanations. Might that not change the way you went about your work?

Yet that is precisely the situation facing every elected government. Oppositions are there to oppose. They will work hard to show how government actions are wrong, venal, or destructive. In doing so they will not always be particularly concerned with balance or fairness in their accounts. Research is also used by the opposition to support its political stance, which is one reason governments are not always anxious to do or publish empirical work. As a minister once said to me in justifying a refusal to release research reports done by my unit, “You don’t ask a dog to fetch the stick you use to beat it.”

While many people decry negativity in politics, politicians use this strategy not necessarily because they like it, but because they think it works. If conflict is what attracts public attention, then conflict is what politicians will create, since public attention is what they must have. A politician friend once told me that he got far more publicity and recognition from a certain public relations gesture that he knew was rather narrow than from any number of thoughtfully articulated policy papers, so the public relations gesture would continue. The problem is that over time an emphasis on the negative can certainly increase voter cynicism about politics and thus worsen our politics.

6. Beliefs are more important than facts

Researchers are often convinced that policy ought to be driven by research findings and other empirical evidence. From a political perspective, however, evidence is only one factor that shapes decisions, and it will often be one of the less important

factors. I have had politicians tell me on various occasions that while the evidence I was presenting for a particular policy might be correct, the policy was not what people believed, wanted or would accept. As Bernard Shapiro, whose extensive experience includes a stint as Ontario Deputy Minister of Education, put it, "All policy decisions are made by leaping over the data." (Remarks at the Conference on Policy Studies, University of Calgary, May 10, 1991)

For politicians, what people believe to be true is much more important than what may actually be true. Beliefs drive political action and voting intentions much more than do facts. Witness the strength and depth of public support for various measures that clearly fly in the face of strong evidence. Many people continue to believe in capital punishment as a deterrent for crime, or that welfare cheating is a bigger problem than income tax evasion. Others are convinced that amalgamating units of government saves money, or that free tuition would substantially increase accessibility to post-secondary education for the poor, or that retaining students in grade will improve achievement even though in all these cases a strong body of evidence indicates otherwise. Where beliefs are very strongly held political leaders challenge them at their peril. As Marcel Proust put it,

The facts of life do not penetrate to the sphere in which our beliefs are cherished... they can aim at them continual blows of contradiction and disproof without weakening them; and an avalanche of miseries and maladies coming, one after another, without interruption into the bosom of a family, will not make it lose faith in either the clemency of its God or the capacity of its physician. (*Swann's Way*)

Just as problematic is that people do not have to be consistent in their attitudes, either across issues or over time. As Arrow pointed out long ago, public preferences do not necessarily line up in rank order (1970). The same people who demand more services from governments may also demand lower taxes. Those who in one year argued vehemently in favor of reduced government spending might the following year be just as impassioned when pointing out the negative consequences of the reductions. People can and do hold inconsistent beliefs, but political leaders must do their best to accommodate these inconsistencies in some way.

Not everything in government is subject to all these constraints. The reality is that given the number of issues any government must handle at any time, only a few will be high enough on the political or public agenda to get significant time and attention from ministers and political staff. Many activities of government are not of much public interest unless something dramatic happens. The scope for research to influence policy may be as great or greater for issues that are not high on the political radar screen. However as soon as an issue gets onto the public agenda, it will be of interest to politicians and all the problems noted will apply. On most other issues civil servants will play an important or even decisive role in shaping what a government does. Politicians and civil servants live in quite different environments (Levin, 1986). As a result, although they sometimes work closely and well together, at other times there can be substantial distrust with each party feeling that the other is ignorant and wrong-headed.

Knowledge Use and Agenda Setting

Despite all these constraints, governments do set agendas and take actions. Kingdon (1994) described political agendas as being created from the intersection of political events, defined problems and possible solutions. When the right mix of the three comes together, political action follows.

Political events might include such elements as timing in the electoral cycle, changes in individuals in key roles, or unusual events that create a political requirement to respond. Defined problems can come from many sources. Many groups, including a whole range of lobby and service organizations, work actively to create the perception that a particular issue requires political action. The media can play a critical role in noting, or even advocating, some condition as constituting a problem. One can easily list such diverse examples as spousal abuse, taxation levels, pollution or international trade as issues where active campaigns were undertaken to convince voters and politicians that some action was needed.

Definition of a problem also requires the generation of solutions. People are much more disposed to act on problems when they see the possibility of doing something that is feasible and will make a difference. Solutions are advanced by the same set of actors who try to define problems. In fact, much of the promotion of problems is done in order to generate support for a policy solution (Stone, 1997). At the same time, people who may share the view that something is a problem can also differ enormously in regard to the best solution. Everyone would agree that establishing good literacy skills is a vital goal, but the strategies people advocate for achieving that goal differ considerably, from

stressing particular reading problems to focusing on family literacy and early childhood, to believing that more testing is the answer.

Research plays a part in defining both problems and solutions. However its role in both cases is often mediated through third parties. Research comes to policy-makers indirectly, through the civil service, through the media, or through the work of people and organizations who make it their business to try to influence policy by using research. These latter are sometimes known as knowledge brokers or policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom, 2000).

Third parties recognize what many researchers do not – that the impact of an idea depends on its public salience more than on its empirical validity. That is why the main route for research to have impact is through its entry into the ongoing public debate on ideas and policies. If we look back at the list of areas where research has had a positive impact, it is clear in every case that the impact occurred over many years, and that research mattered not because a minister read a study and acted on it, but because ideas that were once seen as outlandish gradually came to be seen as desirable or even as conventional wisdom.

That process does not happen by accident. It is almost always the result of sustained effort by many people who realize that to affect public policy you have to enter into the political process in some way. Usually this work is not done by researchers but by policy advocates. Sometimes researchers themselves take on the role of advocate but more often they either rely on others or they simply provide the work – even unknowingly – that is adopted and used by others, with or without their approval.

Doing policy relevant research, or trying to link research to policy has its dangers.

In French the same word is used for policy and for politics, a useful reminder that policy is part of the political world. As a struggle for power, politics is often a particularly ruthless business. Naïve researchers – or even those who are not so naïve – can get badly burned when they find their work being used to support a political position or argument that they find inappropriate or even disreputable.

Implications for literacy policy

The ideas developed in this paper suggest some general implications for the relationship between research and policy, and some particular slants for literacy policy. Generally speaking, the description above suggests several lines of action to improve the links between research and policy. One line is to improve the research production side so that research findings are communicated more clearly and effectively in a variety of ways, and so that policy-makers are more aware of what research is being done and what conclusions are being drawn. Some indication of steps in this direction has been given earlier, but much more could be done—a subject for another paper. A second line involves building stronger links between researchers and policy-makers through a whole variety of means, including events such as this conference. It is also important to ask who the key users of research would be, and what are the barriers that prevent stronger connections?

We tend to focus on what researchers should do differently, but even if Canada produced the best research in the world, many of our key user organizations, including governments, have very limited capacity to find, understand and apply the research. For example very few Canadian school boards have any research use capacity and many of

the umbrella provincial and national organizations, such as those of school boards or school administrators, also run shoestring operations. Finally, there is inadequate appreciation of the role of third parties in the research impact process. Those interested in better links between research and practice need to recognize that working with third parties is a critical part of the effort.

Literacy issues present some particular challenges and opportunities in linking research to policy. Literacy remains a very high profile policy concern in Canada, and one that is by no means limited to education. There is strong continuing interest in learning more about how to improve literacy levels. However this will not happen simply by researchers telling policy-makers what we have learned.

Although researchers are gradually achieving a kind of consensus on many aspects of literacy education, we should not expect the public or our political leadership to be aware of or understand this consensus any time soon. As already mentioned, it can take years for research results to become widely known and accepted even under relatively good conditions. These conditions include active champions and proponents on the issue who are well connected or effective in the public and political arena as well as synergies between the ideas being proposed and existing or emerging conventional wisdom. The further from current thinking a new idea is, the harder it is to get purchase in the public mind and therefore to have an impact on policy.

In the case of literacy, the situation is difficult for at least three reasons. First, twenty years of the ‘reading wars’, with heated debate over issues such as phonics vs whole language, have left many Canadian parents as well as policy-makers feeling confused about what might be true. Since much of the confusion was stirred up, or at

least exacerbated, by vigorous if not vicious arguments among researchers, there is less willingness to believe researchers when they now claim to have reached agreement on some of the main points of contention. The heated debate in the United States over the recent National Reading Panel report (e.g. Coles, 2003; cf. Pressley, this conference) shows that these issues are by no means resolved in any case.

Second, because early literacy involves important questions about the future of children, it is also a subject that will rouse strong emotions. People will be reluctant to take a gamble with something new even if it is widely recognized that current practice is not satisfactory, because the cost of mistakes is so high. New research findings will take time and careful dissemination before they will be credible. Governments are likely to move very cautiously on this front until and unless they sense broad public support for a particular course of action. Moving public opinion in this area will also not be easy and will require sustained effort by a range of actors. Much of the discussion of these new results will have to occur through third parties such as parent groups and organizations of educators.

Third, research on literacy comes from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, ranging from neurology to psychology to pedagogy to architecture. The Canadian Learning and Literacy Research Network (www.cllrnet.ca), a very important vehicle for Canadian research in this area, brings together more than 100 researchers in a wide variety of fields who do not necessarily agree even on the important questions let alone on the answers to them. All these disciplines can make important contributions to our knowledge, but the multiplicity of perspectives is confusing to lay audiences.

Research impact is also affected by the degree of structure that already exists in a given area of policy or practice. The better established current practices are, and the larger the network of groups and organizations tied into those practices, the harder it will be to change them and, generally, the more reluctant policy makers will be to try. Elementary teaching, for instance, is a longstanding practice that is difficult to change even when a substantial effort is made (Earl et al., 2003). Literacy advocates will need to think about the areas where interest is likely to be high and resistance relatively low.

Two areas connected to literacy development seem to be promising candidates for policy action. One of these is early childhood. We have an increasing understanding of the powerful impact of early childhood experience on literacy (developed more fully in Levin, 2003b). Aspects of children's experience such as their nutrition, health and housing are important to eventual literacy but currently substantially disconnected in policy terms from efforts to improve literacy. Early childhood also offers institutional and political possibilities for change that are in many ways more promising than those related to schools. Because the sector is less developed, there is much less institutional inertia and resistance to experimenting or to changing policies and practices in this area. Public acceptance of the importance of equity in early childhood care is also likely to be stronger than in some other areas of education. The broad interest in work done by the OECD (OECD, 2001) shows the growing importance of early childhood in national policy, an importance that is due in no small measure to effective promotion of the findings of research (e.g., McCain & Mustard, 1999).

Another area that seems highly attractive is family literacy efforts, which seem to be both important and not very controversial. The efforts that have been made in this

direction are still quite small in scale despite quite a bit of suggestion that this is an area where the return on investment could be quite high (Earl et al., 2003). Nor are there yet well established organizations and patterns of provision that might inhibit a bolder approach.

There are undoubtedly other areas in which there is strong potential for research to shape policy. The key thing is for researchers to think strategically about where the chances are greatest to influence policy, and to focus on those areas.

Conclusion

One should not be unrealistic about what is possible in the relationship between research and policy. Research will never replace politics, nor should it. Although research findings are important, we also know that they are not immutable, and that in some cases yesterday's certain knowledge has turned out to be today's reprehensible practice. Research will never be more than one part of what political decision-makers need to take into account in making decisions, and given a conflict between what researchers say and what the population believes, the latter will almost always be the winner.

At the same time, I remain an optimist about the potential contribution that research can make to policy and practice in education in the near future. We are only beginning to think about how this might be done and to try various strategies. Doubtless some of these strategies will turn out to be unproductive, but over time we are almost certain to learn more about what works under what conditions. With sustained effort research can help improve policy and therefore outcomes for Canadian children and

families. Research may never be the complete guide to policy and practice in literacy or any other area, but there is no doubt that it can play a more important role than it currently does.

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