

Integrating strategies for delivering evidence informed practice

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The need for policy and practice to be informed by a high quality evidence-base has been widely recognised. However, there are many barriers to overcome in order to realise this goal. This paper describes a conceptual framework for understanding the drivers of policy and practice in the child and family welfare sectors and profiles strategies being employed across Australia to facilitate evidence-informed practice.

An integrated strategy for delivering evidence-informed practice

Implementing research requires an awareness of the practice context and of the other factors that influence decisions. The Cultures in Context Model uses an ecological framework to represent the various contextual influences on research use in the sector. The model builds on previous work such as Shonkoff's (2000) Three Cultures (research, policy, and practice) perspective of research use. A comprehensive review of the literature identified a range of barriers and facilitators to research use, which were primarily explained by the Three Cultures perspective of research use. This research posits that the different cultural characteristics of the research, policy and practice cultures create 'gaps' which then act as barriers to using research evidence to inform policy or practice (Lewig, Arney, & Scott, 2006). Findings from a national study of research use in Australian policy and practice (Holzer, Lewig, Bromfield, & Arney, 2008), suggest that the Three Cultures perspective does not provide an adequate explanatory framework. The emphasis on the individual interactions between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners has tended to eclipse an understanding of the social, institutional and political contexts within which many policy decisions are made. The Cultures in Context Model of Research Use was developed with the aim of addressing the limitations of the existing literature (Holzer, Lewig, Bromfield, & Arney, 2008).

The Cultures in Context model identifies the location of the three cultures (research, policy, and practice) within the wider socio-political context. Importantly, the model also recognises that

empirical research must compete with other types of knowledge, including, but not limited to knowledge from: practitioners, the policy community, the organisation and from service users. Finally, the model attempts to show the proximal and distal influences on children and families of different types of knowledge about the child and family welfare system by placing the key actors and settings within concentric circles, situating children and families at the centre, and then moving outwards to include practice (service provision), policy, and legislation (see Figure 1). For a discussion of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use see Holzer, Lewig, Bromfield and Arney (2008).

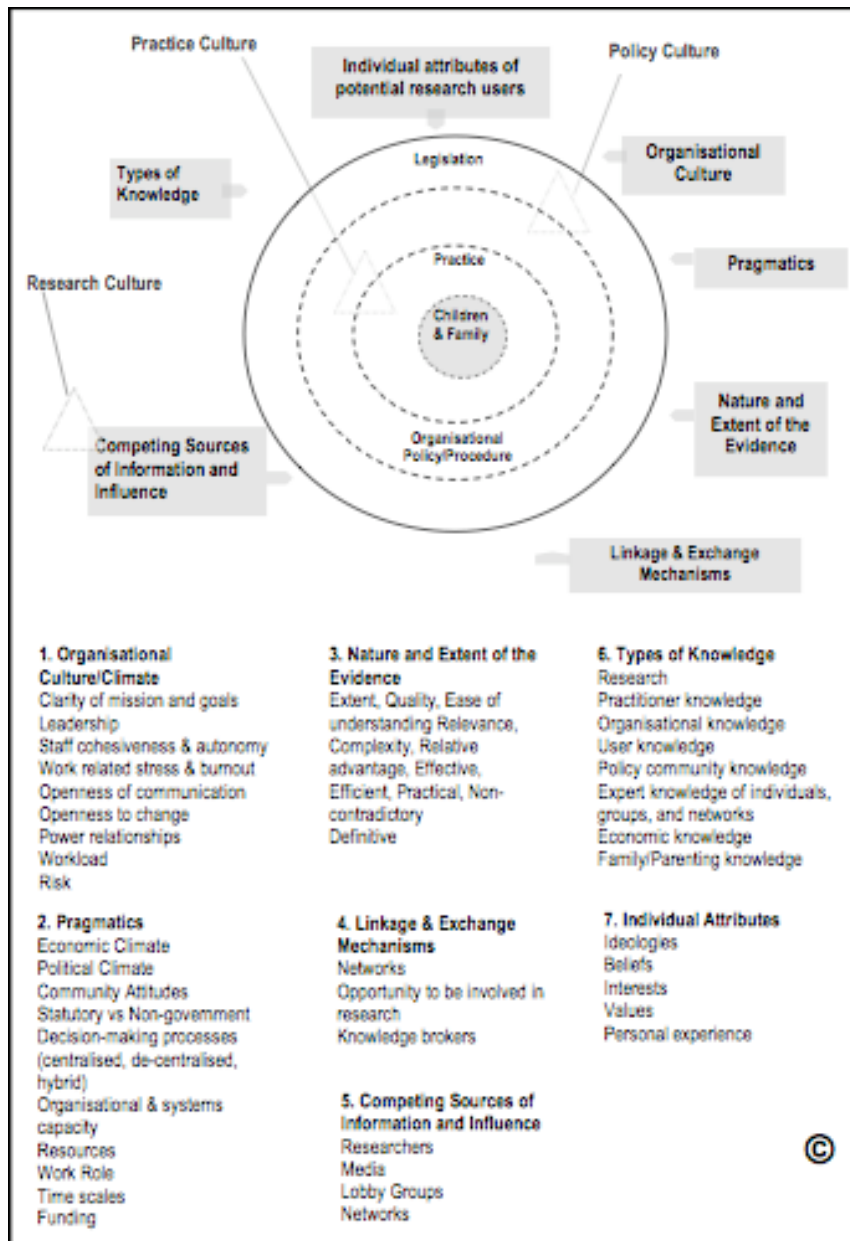


Figure 1. Cultures in Context Model

Research into practice strategies can be categorised into: (a) those that aim to increase access; (b) those that aim to directly impact implementation; and (c) those that aim to facilitate both access and application of research. There are also different ways in which research can be accessed: an individual may access research in an active way (e.g., independently seeking out relevant materials) or a passive way (e.g., research material being distributed to an individual in an organisational setting). This has implications for strategies designed to enhance research-informed practice.

Delivering evidence informed practice: Strategies from five Australian organisations

The findings from the national study, described above, provide some insight at a macro level of strategies to enhance research use, but how might this look in an organisation? In the following section of this paper, we profile strategies being employed in five different Australian organizations. The Cultures in Context Model is used as an organising framework to understand the role of each of these organisations. Prior to undertaking the analysis, there were no set hypotheses or expectations regarding the types strategies employed to facilitate evidence informed practice in each organisation or the domains of the Cultures in Context Model targeted through these strategies.¹

The organisations profiled were each represented at the Dartington Research in Practice: Beyond the Rhetoric Workshop held in England in 2008. There are many other Australian organisations that could have been profiled in this paper. The organisations selected were a sample of convenience, which comprised a mix of research, dissemination and practice agencies and included at least one person dedicated to undertaking research into practice activities in each organisation. The selection of these organisations does not suggest that the research into practice activities of these organisations is qualitatively superior to those within other organisations. The purpose of this paper is to take a snapshot of the types of research into practice activities being undertaken in the Australian child and family welfare sector, and to determine what domains of the Cultures in Context Model are represented in these activities. It is hypothesised that strategies to

¹ The key research into practice activities of each organisation has been discussed in terms of the primary domains of the Cultures in Context model to which it aligns. Organisations may be involved in other research to practice activities, which align with other domains of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use.

facilitate evidence-informed practice will have a greater chance of success if they target all seven of the domains in the Cultures in Context Model.

The National Child Protection and the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouses

The Australian Institute of Family Studies, National Child Protection Clearinghouse² is a research, information and advisory body for child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care. Similarly, the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse is a national organisation, providing high quality information about domestic and family violence issues and practice. Both Clearinghouses are funded by the Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Clearinghouses provide resources and supports for policy-makers and practitioners in government agencies, and in specialist and generalist services, and other stakeholders including, researchers, advocates, and activists. The Clearinghouses aim to prevent child maltreatment, domestic and family violence, and to enhance quality service provision through the provision of:

- Publications: Issues papers, Topic papers, Research and Practice Briefs, Resource Sheets, Stakeholder papers, Newsletters, occasional research reports and papers for external publications including other Newsletters and academic journals.
- Research and information repositories: Library repository, database and online catalogue (Child Protection Clearinghouse), research, good practice, and resource databases (Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse)
- Oral dissemination: Conference papers, workshops, seminars, teaching, a phone-based research 'help desk', and podcasts of various forums.
- News and current events: Newsletters, 'what's new' web page, *childprotect* email discussion list
- Website: All Clearinghouse resources and links to other useful information and advice (Child Protection Clearinghouse www.aifs.gov.au/nch/nch_menu.html; Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/home.html)

² The National Child Protection Clearinghouse is one of four Clearinghouses based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Other Clearinghouses at the Institute include the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia, and the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse.

- Research: The Clearinghouses also undertake new research (self-initiated and commissioned)

Recent evaluations have shown that the Clearinghouses have been successful in facilitating access to research. The 2006-07 annual report for the Australian Institute of Family Studies reported that the National Child Protection Clearinghouse website was well used during the year with 1,532,373 hits and 767,735 downloads (including 287,265 downloads of Clearinghouse publications). The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse reports an average of 22,000 unique users of their website each quarter³. Independent evaluations of both Clearinghouses indicated a high level of uptake by a range of stakeholders, including instances in which the Clearinghouses had a direct influence on policy or practice (Delfabbro & Borgas, 2007; Edwards, 2004).

In terms of the Cultures in Context model (see Figure 1), Clearinghouses are a conduit for information from researchers. Primarily the type of knowledge (domain 6) that is disseminated through Clearinghouses is research. However, policy knowledge (e.g., National comparison of child protection systems) and organisational/practice knowledge (e.g., Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse Good Practice database) may also be collated and disseminated. Clearinghouses also play a role in information exchange (e.g., as knowledge brokers). However, the primary contribution of Clearinghouses is research dissemination.

A variety of strategies are employed to enhance the accessibility of research (Cultures in Context Model, Domain 3, the Nature of the Evidence). In terms of the information itself, attention is given to providing shorter papers that are written in plain language (i.e., jargon free), are relevant to policy and practice, use case studies and examples, clearly highlight key messages and identify the implications of the findings for policy-makers and practitioners. Clearinghouses also recognise that different people access information in different ways and make information available in different modalities (e.g., research is disseminated in hard copy, electronically via the web and orally at seminars and workshops). Finally, Clearinghouses recognise that research may be accessed actively or passively. Libraries and websites act as information repositories that users

³ Comparable web data was not available for the two Clearinghouses.

may access as the need arises. Clearinghouses also aim to provide relevant resources to practitioners and policy-makers directly through workshops and forums and targeted distribution of publications to key stakeholders (rather than hoping that key stakeholders will sign up to traditional mailing lists).

The Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Alfred Felton Chair in Child and Family Welfare

The Australian Centre for Child Protection is funded by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research and is based at the University of South Australia. Established in 2005 and with around 20 staff, the Centre aims to enhance the lives of children by providing policy-makers and practitioners with evidence-informed professional education initiatives and consultation. The Centre aims to add to the evidence base around three key areas: the use of research in policy and practice, the evaluation and diffusion of promising practices in child and family services; and ways of working with disadvantaged children and their families (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families from refugee backgrounds). The Alfred Felton Chair in Child and Family Welfare is a research Chair based at the University of Melbourne and represents a collaboration between government and non-government organisations. The Chair undertakes policy and practice relevant research to ensure projects are embedded in the needs of the sector and includes a knowledge brokerage component to actively create links and disseminate information to the sector, as required.

Regarding the Cultures in Context model, the work of the Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Alfred Felton Chair focus research to practice initiatives in two key domains: Domain Four – Linkage and Exchange Mechanisms; and Domain Six – Types of Knowledge.

Key linkage and exchange mechanisms employed by the two organisations include knowledge brokers who provide policy-makers, practitioners and other researchers with evidence to inform policy and practice. This includes: providing advice on policy reform; reviewing child protection legislation in a range of jurisdictions; acting as advocates for children (for example as members of Councils for Children, and in delegations to the Federal Government); giving a large number of keynote presentations at national and international conferences; consultancies and training for

service organisations; targeted media appearances; and board memberships of organisations involved in the delivery of services to children and families.

Staff from the Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Alfred Felton Chair in Child and Family Welfare are also key members of a range of networks across Australia that focus on bringing together researchers, policy-makers and practitioners (and at times, consumers) to set research agendas, identify research questions and design and implement research projects. Such networks include those focused on: effective programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families; coordinating universal health services to improve outcomes for children; out of home care and family reunification; children's needs in the context of domestic violence; child neglect; and using health economics in child protection. Opportunities for linkage and exchange are also provided by engaging policy-makers and practitioners in all stages of collaborative research projects (e.g., agenda-setting, research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination). This includes situating research staff in service delivery organisations (e.g., health and child protection) and hosting policy-makers and practitioners within the research organisations as partners in the research process.

Recognising that research is only one type of knowledge that influences practice, it is important to view it as a complementary form of knowledge rather than as a "competitor". For example, the Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Alfred Felton Chair aim to embed research in practitioner knowledge through informing undergraduate and postgraduate training and professional development. By the same token, the Centre and the Chair aim to inform their research using practice wisdom in setting the research agenda, identifying the theoretical models to be examined and by involving practitioners (and their clients) as informants in the research and as researchers themselves (the clinician-researcher model).

Research being undertaken in a collaboration between the Australian Centre for Child Protection, the Alfred Felton Chair in Child and Family Welfare, and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse is drawing on different types of knowledge (e.g., organisational knowledge, policy community knowledge, expert knowledge) to examine how research is used to inform (and is informed by) policy and practice in the child protection sector. The Australian Centre for Child

Protection is also partnering with a team of health economists from the University of South Australia to incorporate a range of evidence to assist priority-setting initiatives for child protection services in South Australia.

The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is a NSW and Queensland-based non-profit organisation comprising 1,700 staff and volunteers and offering services to families and communities across the lifespan. The Society's purpose is *to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society* (www.bensoc.org.au). The Benevolent Society is involved in several promising evidence into practice strategies that directly address organisational culture (Domain 1) and pragmatic barriers (Domain 2) to research use.

Rather than seeing themselves as passive recipients of research evidence, services are striving to become *Learning Organisations* (Argyris & Schon, 1996), which has meant rethinking traditional approaches to knowledge. This shift does not come easily and requires resources and organisational changes, which are only just starting to be understood. For example, the Benevolent Society is making efforts to create a receptive organisational **culture**, with the right **leadership** and a clear **strategy** to implement the evidence. The senior team, including the CEO, are involved in knowledge brokering activities (e.g., challenging the traditional boundaries between sectors) and act as champions of evidence into practice (e.g., lobbying externally to try and build evidence in practice and evaluation into service funding models). In addition, a staged approach to practice change has been identified that involves **access** to evidence, **engagement** with the knowledge and putting the evidence into **use**. For example, staff took part in a workshop facilitated by staff from the Parenting Research Centre⁴ on evidence-based parenting programs (**access**), key staff were then involved in selecting the Incredible Years as the program they perceived as most likely to lead to positive child outcomes (**engagement**). Incredible Years facilitators then ran workshops for practitioners who are now in the process of being accredited to provide the program (**use**). The Benevolent Society has strived to create a learning culture and recent results of a large employee climate survey providing promising evidence that a learning culture is developing.

⁴ The Parenting Research Centre engages in a range of research activities to help parents raise children well and to translate their research into practical strategies, programs and solutions (www.parentingrc.org.au)

With so many competing demands on practitioners, there is a need for dedicated research or professional development time and resources to be allocated to practitioners to enable them to overcome the pragmatic constraints to the use of evidence. The Benevolent Society have tried to communicate clear messages that evidence in practice is central to purpose and organisational strategy, and have tried to embed these messages through practical mechanisms such as work plans, supervision sessions, team meetings and performance reviews.

Conclusion

The Cultures in Context Model of Research Use provides a useful framework with which to view the complex array of factors influencing research use by policy-makers and practitioners. A strength of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use is that it goes beyond (a) identifying lists of individual facilitators and barriers, which could inform individual strategies; or (b) focusing on a single dimension of research use (i.e., the different cultures). A coordinated strategy that recognises these different domains and specifically targets the identified facilitators and barriers of research use will have a greater likelihood of elevating the role of evidence in practice decisions. These strategies need not, and perhaps should not, be implemented by a single organisation. A research into practice push owned solely by 'the researchers' is at risk of being research centric, failing to take into account the wider context in which practice occurs, and thus failing to gain the support of practitioners.

In this paper, we have profiled the research into practice strategies being implemented by a selection of five different Australian organisations. Each of these organisations had different strategies in place, which targeted one or more of the domains influencing decision-making in practice. However, when these strategies are viewed together, the different domains identified in the Cultures in Context model were all targeted in some way. This illustrates the importance of "research-into-practice" attempts occurring in collaboration with different parts of the sector. There is a need for a high quality evidence-base, and for this evidence to be widely available for practitioners to access. To be successful, research to practice efforts and the push for evidence-based practice by definition require a sufficiently well-developed evidence base, and agreement about what constitutes "evidence". In fields such as child abuse prevention and child protection

such evidence and agreement is often lacking. There is a need for a coordinated research agenda (at least nationally in Australia, if not internationally) to further this field. Any research agenda should include dissemination and implementation strategies and measure the impact of research on policy and practice. Knowledge exchange positions actively facilitate the use of research and break down barriers between the research, policy and practice cultures. Finally, there is a need for organisations themselves to create a culture that encourages the use of research and to put in place strategies to overcome some of the pragmatic constraints that act as barriers to the uptake of research. When considered together, the research-into-practice activities of the five organisations profiled perform all of these functions. The purpose of these profiles was not to suggest that these organisations have fully realised the goal of implementing research into practice, instead the aim was to show different organisations in the sector each have an important role in facilitating evidence-informed practice. Combined cross-sector involvement and commitment to evidence-informed practice provides the greatest opportunity for overcoming the various barriers to research use in the policy and practice context.

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