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**Research Use
in the
Australian Child and Family Welfare Sector**

Prue Holzer, Kerry Lewig, Leah Bromfield, and Fiona Arney

A project conducted jointly by
the Australian Institute of Family Studies, National Child Protection Clearinghouse
and
the Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia



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Foreword

The gap between what we know and what we do to protect vulnerable children and enhance their well-being is receiving increasing attention in Australia and in other countries. Research in this area can never be an end in itself. It must always be a means to an end.

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse and the Australian Centre for Child Protection are working together very closely to help close the gap between what we know and what we do. This study is one of a series of projects exploring research utilisation in the field of child welfare. It has significant implications for research utilisation in relation to other complex social problems.

I hope that this report will provide food for thought for policy-makers, managers, practitioners, researchers and funders of research, and stimulate them to address the challenges the study identifies. It is only by overcoming the barriers to research utilisation that we will collectively be able to work effectively in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.

The authors of this study are all early career researchers who have brought to bear their excellent research skills, conceptual insights and communication abilities to produce a valuable study that is accessible to many people. With a new generational cohort of child protection researchers such as Prue Holzer, Kerry Lewig, Leah Bromfield and Fiona Arney, the prospects of a knowledge-based approach to child abuse and neglect in Australia have never been brighter.

Professor Dorothy Scott
Director, Australian Centre for Child Protection
University of South Australia



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Preface

Research Use in the Australian Child and Family Welfare Sector is a tangible example of the power of partnerships – in this case between the Australian Centre for Child Protection, at the University of South Australia and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It elegantly illustrates the innovative capacity that can flow from effective partnerships. Through the development and testing of *The Cultures in Context Model of Research Use*, the partners provide a new conceptual frame that addresses many of the limitations identified in existing models.

The aim of the report's authors was to bridge the gulf between knowledge and action, especially with reference to the Australian child welfare sector. Research evidence can powerfully inform policy and practice. Too often, however, this is not the case. This report explores ways in which the relationships among research, policy and practice can be closer. As such, it has wide relevance and application, both within the realm of child welfare and beyond.

I congratulate the authors, Prue Holzer, Kerry Lewig, Leah Bromfield and Fiona Arney, for adding an important resource to further understand and facilitate the use of research in the Australian child welfare sector.

Alan Hayes
Director
Australian Institute of Family Studies



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Executive Summary

Historically, policy and practice in the Australian child welfare sector have largely been shaped by factors other than research. This is partly because there has been a shortage of high quality evidence regarding the effectiveness of child welfare interventions. However, there are a range of other factors that have hampered the use of research in child and family welfare. To date there has been limited systematic research to identify and understand research use in this field. The aim of this project was to understand the barriers and facilitators to the use of research in a sample of Australian child and family welfare professionals. This will provide an evidence-base to enhance research use in the sector.

This research project is part of a broader program of research, which commenced with audits of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research, followed by a comprehensive review of the international literature on the barriers and facilitators to research use in the health and social science fields.

The 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. The Three Cultures perspective of research use 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. However, the Three Cultures perspective did 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 and practice decisions are made. The project team developed the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use to address the limitations of the existing literature.

The aims of this project were to:

1. Test the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use;
2. Identify the facilitators and barriers to research use in the Australian child and family welfare sector; and
3. Explore the degree of research use by Australian professionals in the child and family welfare sector.

The study employed a two-stage process to identify a group of professionals with relatively high rates of research use. The first phase of the project involved a brief screening survey of 495 child and family welfare professionals. This survey indicated that the majority of professionals in the sector use research and endorse the importance of research in their work. The second phase of the project involved in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of professionals recruited through the first stage of the project ($N = 59$). Professionals were asked

about the degree to which they accessed and applied research; the way/s in which they accessed and applied research; and facilitators and barriers to their research use.

The findings from the present study provide some support for the perspective that research, policy and practice are three distinct cultures with different time frames, language, priorities and work environments. However, the findings strongly suggest that an exclusive emphasis on the individual interactions between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners may understate the influence of the broader social, institutional and political contexts that influence decision-making. One of the strengths of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use is its recognition and explicit inclusion of social, institutional and political contextual factors. The model takes an ecological view, and incorporates various factors in addition to research that influence decision-making. In addition, the model acknowledges that the aim of research in the child welfare sector is ultimately to enhance the wellbeing of children and their families.

In the present sample, organisational factors, pragmatic constraints and individual values and assumptions were found to be influential in relation to a professional's capacity and/or preparedness to use research. Of note, the barriers to research use were less consistent across statutory child protection practitioners, policy-makers and other professionals in the child welfare sector than were the facilitators of research use. In particular, the volume of information was perceived as a barrier to research use by a greater proportion of policy-makers than by practitioners or other professionals. These findings were largely consistent with trends reported in international studies.

This initial test of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use in a sample of child and family welfare professionals indicates that the model is a generalisable, practical, simple, and evidence-based model of research use. It provided 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). In providing a comprehensive framework for understanding research use in the child and family welfare sector, the model also provides a basis on which to develop an integrated approach to enhance the use of research in child protection. The present study has identified some of the strategies that might form part of such an approach.

Chapter 1

Project Background

A trend towards evidence-based and evidence-informed policy and practice has been noted by many scholars across different sectors (for example, allied health, education, and social welfare) and in different countries (Barratt, 2003; Gira, Kessler, & Poertner, 2004; Gough, 2004; Gough & Elbourne, 2002; Lewig, Arney, & Scott, 2006; Scott & Harper, 2006; Shonkoff, 2000; Walter, Nutley, Percy-Smith, McNeish, & Frost, 2004).

The trend towards greater research use in order to achieve evidence-based and evidence-informed decision-making in both policy and practice has been attributed to multiple factors. For example, the need to justify funding for the implementation and continuation of programs and services, the need to make informed practice decisions to safeguard the wellbeing of human services' clients, and the imperative for ongoing quality improvement (Marston & Watts, 2003; Walshe & Rundall, 2001; Walter et al., 2004).

Despite this growing trend, several factors have hampered the use of research in child and family welfare (not least of which includes a lack of high quality research). As a consequence, child and family welfare policy and practice in Australia have largely been shaped by factors other than research. The aim of this project is to understand the use of research in child protection policy and practice; and by so doing provide an evidence-base to enhance research use in the Australian child welfare sector.

This research project is part of a broader program of research, which commenced with audits of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research (for further information see Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005; Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; Cashmore & Ainsworth, 2004; Cashmore, Higgins, Bromfield, & Scott, 2006; Higgins, Adams, Bromfield, Richardson, & Aldana, 2005). The research audits were followed by a comprehensive review of the international literature on the barriers and facilitators to research use in the health and social science fields (for further information see Lewig et al., 2006).

The comprehensive review of the literature by Lewig et al. (2006) identified a range of barriers and facilitators to research use, which were primarily explained by the Three Cultures perspective of research use (the Three Cultures perspective of research use is described in Chapter 2). Accordingly, the initial aims of the project were to:

- Identify the facilitators and barriers to research use in the Australian child and family welfare sector; and
- Explore the degree of research use by Australian professionals in the child and family welfare sector.

In drawing together the literature on the Three Cultures perspective of research use, the authors incorporated the barriers and proposed facilitators identified in the Three Cultures perspective into the list of barriers and facilitators identified in the existing atheoretical literature to come up with a comprehensive list of barriers and facilitators to research use. (Specifically, the gaps between the three cultures identified in the Three Cultures perspective were incorporated as barriers to research use). The Three Cultures perspective also informed the study design by guiding the selection of a sample of policy-makers and a sample of practitioners.

A key feature of this project is that the authors revisited the research literature at every stage to inform the research questions and the project methodology. It was revisited during the survey design stage of the project to determine how research use had been defined in the past (see Chapter 2). It was re-examined as raw data were reviewed to inform the project analysis (particularly for the qualitative data). At this point it became apparent that the decision to incorporate the factors identified in the Three Cultures perspective into the wider list of barriers and facilitators resulted in their being no coherent framework for understanding the data. However, the Three Cultures perspective in isolation failed to provide an adequate explanatory framework for the data collected. As a result, the authors developed the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use (see Chapter 3) to address the limitations of the existing literature. The development of the Cultures in Context model reframed the project, and the primary aim became the need to test the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use as a coding framework for the data collected.

Following the development of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use, the aims of this project were to:

1. Test the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use as a coding framework for the data collected;
2. Identify the facilitators and barriers to research use in the Australian child and family welfare sector; and
3. Explore the degree of research use by Australian professionals in the child and family welfare sector.

Chapter 2

Defining 'Research Use'

Although there is substantial literature on research use in the human services, many articles presuppose a shared understanding of what research or evidence is, and furthermore, what constitutes research use. Broadly, research refers to the systematic investigation of phenomena using prescribed methods, which informs us “about the nature of phenomena, their extent, their cause, and the impact of strategies to change the nature or extent [of the phenomena]” (Gough, 2004, p. 43; Reber, 1995) (e.g., empirical studies, case studies, literature reviews, and program evaluations). However, we need to be cautious not to presume research is intrinsically good when research can be poor quality, costly, mistaken in its conclusions or the implications drawn from the data, and used instrumentally to justify a predetermined course of action (Gough, 2004).

In order to balance the potential positives and negatives of research, Gough argued that researchers and research users need to be clear about the purpose of research and whom or what a particular research project serves. On a similar note, Gough and Elbourne (2002) argued that although research does not always inform policy and practice in a rational and problem-solving manner, research is more likely to do so where there is mutual clarity about the nature and source of research evidence, and where there is public accountability, transparency, and rigour.

2.1 The role of research in informing decision-making

Existing literature suggests that research can be used in a variety of ways. For example, research can be used in order to: (1) change policy, practice and behaviour (*instrumental use*); (2) change levels of knowledge, understanding and attitudes (*conceptual use*); and (3) justify a position or action that has already been taken or to justify inaction in a particular area (*symbolic use*) (Amara, Ouimet, & Landry, 2004).

Walter et al., (2004) explored the notion of “research use” in their comprehensive review of research use across different social care settings within the United Kingdom. Consistent with Amara et al. (2004), they argued that the term research use could mean many things, such as, reading research, referencing research in report writing to support or justify an argument, and changing policy or practice to achieve certain outcomes for service users on the basis of research.

2.2 Defining 'research use'

In order to investigate the use of research in the Australian child and family welfare sector, it was necessary to first define research use with sufficient specificity such that it could be

measured. In a seminal study, Walter et al. (2004) examined the way in which research use had been defined by other investigators in this field. The study comprised a systematic literature review of papers concerning research use, and fieldwork seminars and interviews that explored the gaps in the literature. Using predetermined search criteria, Walter et al. sourced in excess of 3,000 papers. However, only 191 of these papers were found to be directly relevant to the topic at hand, and of these, only 28 studies were found to meet the quality inclusion criteria. Most of the studies reviewed contained conceptual discussions and/or descriptive examples of different initiatives designed to promote research use. Rarely did any of the studies reviewed explicitly define research use - despite research use being the primary subject - or conduct empirical investigations into research use (Walter et al., 2004).

Walter et al. (2004) stated that the diverse ways in which researchers have defined research use (where research use is defined at all) limited their capacity to draw out generalisable findings across studies about research use (for example, degrees of research use, types of research use by professionals from different sectors, successful modes of encouraging research use and so on).

Despite the lack of clarity apparent in many studies as to how research use is conceptualised, some of the papers reviewed required social welfare professionals to provide their general definition of research use. Having analysed these studies, it was determined that there are two aspects or overarching elements to research use, namely: *access* (or how research is accessed) and *application* (that is, how research is actually applied in the context of one's work) (Walter et al., 2004).

An individual may access research in an active (for example, independently seeking out relevant materials) or passive way (for example, research material being distributed to an individual in an organisational setting). There are also multiple ways in which research can and has been applied in the human services. For example, research was found to have provided a foundation for restructuring services, to have informed policy and practice reviews, to have assisted in problem-solving, and to have provided the impetus for the development of care standards and professional training requirements (Walter et al., 2004). Consistent with this approach, research use was expressly defined in the present study as comprising 'access' and 'application'.

2.3 Extent of research use in policy and practice

It is possible to measure the extent to which research informs policy and practice only once research use has been defined. The extent to which research informs policy and practice has been the subject of much debate. Although many would agree that interest in adopting an evidence-based / evidence-informed framework to inform policy and practice developments is

growing, little is known as to the extent to which this is actually taking place (Lewig et al., 2006).

While there is increasing recognition of the need evidence-informed policy and practice, Lewig and colleagues (2006) found that policy and practice changes were rarely achieved as a direct result of research evidence. Instead, in an environment of competing demands, a variety of factors exert an influence on professional decision-making processes (Elliott & Popay, 2000; Percy-Smith et al., 2002; Walter et al., 2004). While policy-makers and practitioners are well aware that decisions will rarely be informed by research in isolation, existing theories concerning research use (such as the Three Cultures model) have failed to recognise the broader context in which decision-making occurs. It is important not to over-simplify the policy and practice context, nor to artificially inflate the importance of research over other legitimate influences on decision-making (e.g., cost, demand, time constraints). However, where there is a high quality evidence-base to inform decision-making, it is for the benefit of children and families for this evidence-base to inform decisions that will affect their lives.

With this in mind, there would seem to be two aspects to measuring the extent of research use in policy and practice: to what extent is research being accessed and applied by policy-makers and practitioners; and what are the barriers and facilitators to such access and application? This is an area of investigation the authors of the present study attempted to address in a sample of Australian child and family welfare professionals.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Research Use

3.1 Facilitators and barriers to research use

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Lewig et al. (2006) identified a range of possible individual and contextual barriers to the use of research by policy-makers and practitioners. Individual barriers included, for example: lack of time; information overload; limited awareness or access to research literature; lack of knowledge and skill to evaluate or apply research (including, for example, difficulties with technical language and statistics); and a lack of motivation or incentive to use research. Contextual barriers included, for example: lack of authority to implement change; job stress and burnout; public opinion; political pressure; and staff turnover. An organisation's culture and approach to management also influences the extent to which it is perceived to be more or less receptive to research. For example, organisations with short-term decision-making; an aversion to risk; and hierarchical organisational structures and decision-making processes may be less receptive to evidence-informed approaches to decision-making. The use of research may also be impeded by the characteristics of research itself. For example, gaps in the evidence-base; research that is irrelevant to policy or practice; and inaccessible and poor quality research are significant barriers to the use of evidence in practice. These characteristics may also contribute to a general mistrust of research findings.

A wide range of activities has also been identified as facilitators of research use in policy and practice. Factors that facilitate research use (facilitators) typically include things such as ensuring access to a relevant research base, the delivery of research in an understandable, clear and practice-oriented fashion, and the development of a workplace culture that supports research use. Some of the specific activities that have been identified include: practitioner participation in research; targeted publication and distribution of research findings; and training in critical appraisal and research skills (Lewig et al., 2006; Walter et al., 2004).

3.2 The Three Cultures perspective of research use

A number of perspectives have been presented in the literature, which attempt to provide an organising framework for understanding the barriers and facilitators to research use in policy and practice. The most common of these is the notion of the three separate 'cultures' or 'communities' of research, practice and policy (Lewig et al., 2006).

The Three Cultures perspective of research use 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 (Shonkoff, 2000). For example, Shonkoff argued:

Scientists are interested in questions. Policy-makers and practitioners are interested in answers. Scholars embrace complexity. Policy-makers demand simplicity. Scientists suggest that we stop and reflect. Service providers are expected to act (p. 182).

The policy, practice and research cultures differ with respect to: timeframes, communication styles, priorities, and work environments (see Figure 3.1) (Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 2000; Pyra, 2003; Shonkoff, 2000). For example, practitioners usually have short timeframes as in some circumstances they are expected to act immediately to protect a child, while policy-makers work in an environment with short to medium timeframes in developing strategies in response to areas of need. In contrast, researchers may have more lengthy timeframes in developing, undertaking and analysing research information. The Three Cultures model does not suggest that any one culture is better than the other. Instead the model suggests that a greater awareness of the characteristics of the different cultures will help facilitate communication and the flow of knowledge between cultures. Further, the model suggests that researchers can facilitate the use of research in policy and practice if they have a greater awareness of the policy and practice environments and are able to better attend to the needs of policy-makers and practitioners.

In investigating the research to practice gap, Barratt (2003) highlighted a range of factors that inhibit the use of research by professionals in the social services, including: limited access to research (for example, not having internet access; subscriptions to relevant journals; or other effective means of information dissemination); a workplace environment that does not encourage continued learning; and personal or individual factors, including one's values, beliefs and assumptions.

Similarly, Small (2005) reviewed factors contributing to the gap between research and practice in the family and human services sector in the United

States. Among the most prominent barriers were: the publication of research findings in traditional research journals, which practitioners typically did not view as useful sources of knowledge; the presentation of research findings in a scientific language that is difficult for non-researchers to understand; little attention paid to the practical application of research findings; and a lack of congruence between the questions and problems researchers were interested in addressing and those that were of interest to practitioners.

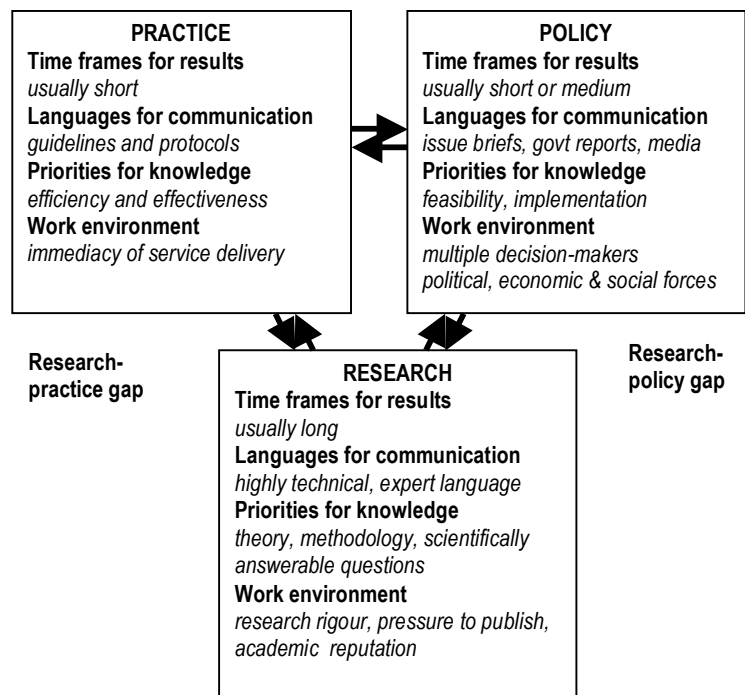


Figure 3.1: The three cultures of research, practice and policy
(Based on Davies et al (2000); Pyra (2003a); Shonkoff (2000a))

Moreover, commentators such as Humphreys et al. (2003) have noted that the nature of social service practice does not readily lend itself to the experimental methodology that evidence-based practices and programs require. Barratt (2003) maintained that the experiential rather than empirical-based culture within the social services has led to a greater emphasis on decision-making based on practice experience rather than research evidence. Further, while the value of best practice in child welfare is broadly acknowledged, common understandings of best practice vary to include practice wisdom, emulating similar systems, use of expert advice, professional guidelines, and evidence-based practice (Kessler, Gira, & Poertner, 2005, p. 245).

Consequently, it is argued that research is only likely to be used in a significant manner if long term, two-way personal communication is established at the interfaces between the three communities. For example, in the *Linkage and Exchange Model*, Lomas (2000) emphasised the importance of (1) building better links between researchers and decision-makers; and (2) finding points of exchange between researchers and decision-makers beyond the 'product' stage, in order that research has greater influence on policy.

3.3 Wider domains of influence

While various factors have been attributed to the research-policy-practice gap, additional factors have been identified that influence decision-making in policy and practice. Gibson (2003) argued that 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.

Lomas (2000) identified that the policy decision-making process is influenced by: (a) institutional and political structures; (b) values, beliefs, interests and ideologies; and (c) different sources of information and influence (such as the media, lobby groups, and researchers). The existing literature also suggests that contextual factors such as the political ideology and agenda of the government of the day, financial constraints, public preferences, and economic theory and political expediency are influential factors in determining the degree to which members of the policy community take up research (Innvaer, Vist, Trommald, & Oxman, 2002; Lavis et al., 2002; Lomas, 2000; Muir Gray, 2001; Pyra, 2003). A limitation of the Three Cultures perspective is that it fails to incorporate these wider domains of influence, or to acknowledge the alternate sources of information that influence decision-making.

3.4 The Cultures in Context Model of Research Use

On the basis of an extensive review of the research utilisation literature, we developed a research use model that attempts to address the limitations of existing theoretical frameworks. The model builds on the Three Cultures perspective of research use and the literature regarding wider domains of influence on the decision-making process.

The Cultures in Context model identifies the location of the three cultures (research, policy, and practice) within this wider context. The model also recognises that research must compete with other types of knowledge, including, but not limited to: practitioner knowledge, policy community knowledge, organisational knowledge and service user knowledge (Walter et al., 2004). Finally, the model attempts to show the proximal and distal influences of different types of knowledge on children and families involved in 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.

Essentially, the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use (see Figure 3.2) broadens the perspective on research use from a narrow focus on relationships between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers, to include a more expansive consideration of the contexts in which research is – or is not – used. This is especially important in fields such as child protection where contextual influences (such as community values and the social and political context) play a significant role. The model groups these contextual factors under seven headings:

1. Organisational culture/climate;
2. Pragmatics;
3. The nature and extent of the evidence;
4. Linkage and exchange mechanisms;
5. Competing sources of information and influence;
6. Types of knowledge; and
7. Individual attributes.

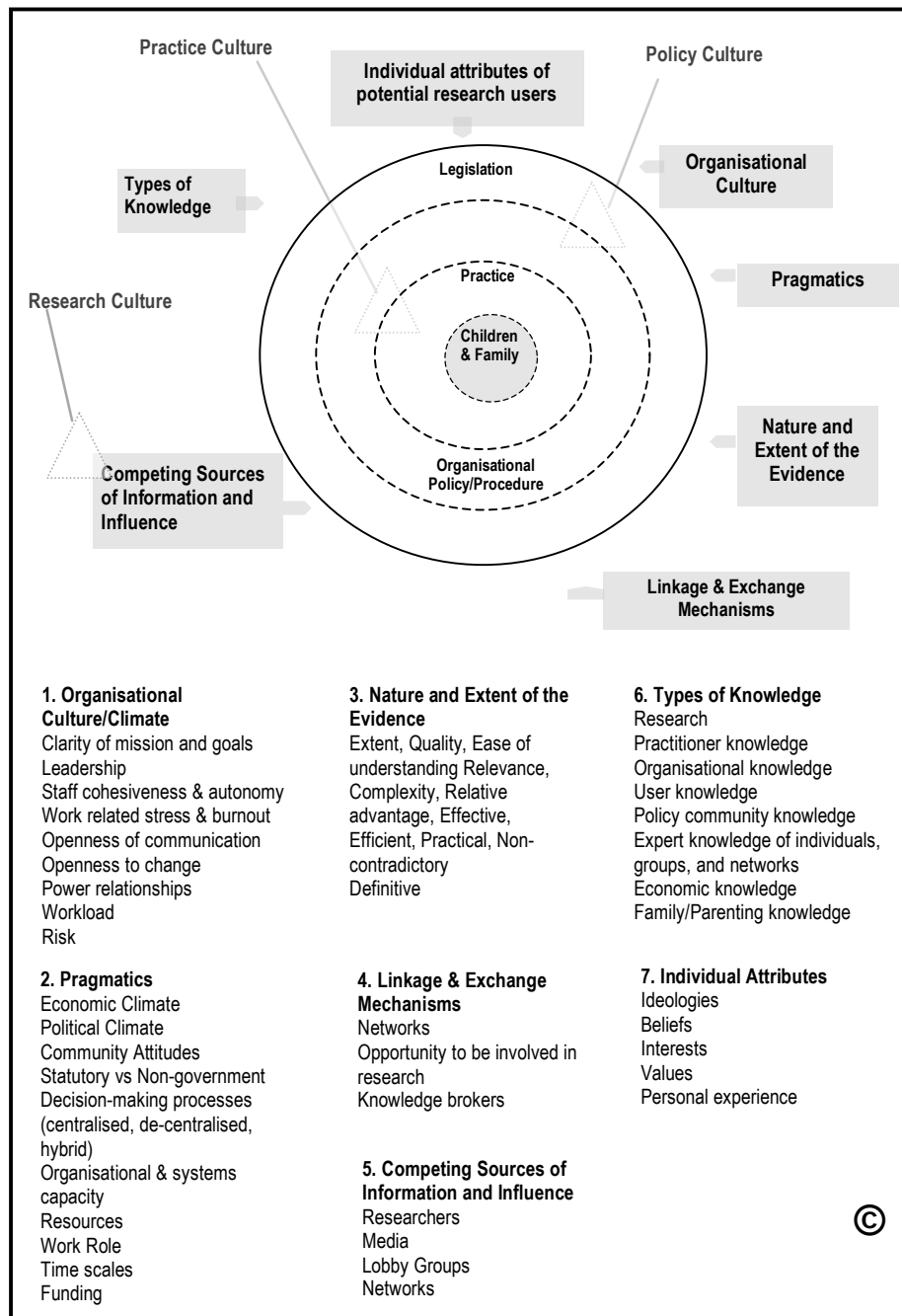


Figure 3.2. Cultures in Context Model of Research Use

3.4.1 Organisational culture or climate

The culture or climate of an organisation is often defined as the norms, values, and rituals present in the workplace. Essentially, norms, values and rituals establish 'the way things are done' in a given workplace (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). In relation to the present subject matter, norms, values and rituals are thought to be influential in providing circumstances that are – or are not – conducive to accessing and applying research.

3.4.2 Pragmatics

The term "pragmatics" is used to describe those factors unlikely to change in the short to medium term and over which practitioners, policy-makers, and—to some extent—even their respective organisations have little influence. These include organisational factors such as structure, resources and capacity to implement change, work roles, and external influences such as the economic and political climate, and prevailing community attitudes.

3.4.3 Nature and extent of the evidence

The term "nature and extent of the evidence" is used to mean the qualities and characteristics of research that promote its dissemination and use (e.g., the ease with which it can be readily understood, and its practical application or relevance to the user).

3.4.4 Linkage and exchange mechanisms

The term "linkage and exchange" was coined by Lomas (2000) and refers to the process of knowledge transfer between researchers and policy-makers. In this paper the term "linkage and exchange mechanisms" is used to describe the ways in which researchers and research users come into contact with one another.

3.4.5 Competing sources of information and influence

The term "competing sources of information and influence" refers to the various informants (e.g., researchers, lobby groups, and the media) through which professionals in the child and family welfare sector access information - intentionally or otherwise - regarding the provision of services to children and families.

3.4.6 Types of knowledge

"Types of knowledge" refers to the various ways in which professionals in the child and family welfare sector have developed views and understandings in relation to the work that they perform. For example, some knowledge on which practice decisions are based may have arisen from previous professional experiences (i.e., 'practice wisdom'), while other decisions may be based on empirical literature or research evidence. Given that this study focussed on the use of research (i.e., as a type of knowledge), this domain does not feature extensively in our analysis.

3.4.7 Individual factors

Individual factors are typically conceptualised as a person's own values, beliefs and assumptions. In relation to the work of child and family welfare, people typically possess different views as to the value

of empirical evidence compared to 'hands-on' practice knowledge and experience. Different values, beliefs and assumptions have been found to exert an influence on an individual's preparedness to use research (Barratt, 2003).

This model was used to guide the development of a coding template in order to conduct a thematic analysis of the data derived in this study. The authors also provide a discussion concerning the usefulness of the model.

Chapter 4

Method

We designed a two-phase research project to identify and interview a group of professionals with relatively high rates of research use. The first phase involved a one-page survey (Survey 1) consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions (see Appendix A) to screen for frequency of research use. The second phase of the study involved in-depth telephone interviews of approximately 30-45 minutes (Survey 2) during which respondents identified through the first stage of the study were asked a combination of open-ended qualitative questions and quantitative Likert scale questions (see Appendix B).

4.1 Participants

The sample sought for both stages of the project was informed by the literature review, in particular the Three Cultures perspective. Researchers were excluded from this study, as the aim of this research was to investigate the barriers and facilitators to the access and application of research in policy and practice settings. Participants included statutory child protection practitioners, policy-makers and other professionals from non-government organisations in the child welfare sector. Responses were compared across the three groups.

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse mailing list was used to recruit the sample for Survey 1.¹ The survey and a reply paid envelope were sent to all subscribers in one of the Clearinghouse's regular mailouts for the *Child Abuse Prevention Issues* papers. In addition to the Clearinghouse's standard mailing list to which members of the general public independently subscribe, the Clearinghouse also has a centralised distribution arrangement with contacts from the statutory child protection departments of each state and territory. As a result, Survey 1 was distributed to statutory child protection personnel in every jurisdiction. Calls for participants were also posted on the Clearinghouse's electronic discussion list *childprotect*.² The sample for Survey 2 was recruited through Survey 1. The last question of Survey 1 asked respondents whether they would consent to a follow-up telephone interview.

Of the 6,035 copies of Survey 1 distributed (approximately 4500 in hard copy and the remainder in electronic form), 495 respondents returned a completed Survey 1. These respondents formed the pool from which the authors selected the sample of relatively high research users for interview in the second phase of the project. There were some limitations to the sampling strategy employed in Survey 1 of the project. These limitations are discussed later in the report.

In order to investigate the degree of research use by professionals in the child protection sector, respondents' main roles or occupations were classified into three categories: "practitioner", "policy-

¹ The National Child Protection Clearinghouse is an Australian Government funded research, information and advisory body concerned with the prevention of child abuse and neglect. For more information, visit: www.aifs.gov.au/nch/

² *Childprotect* is an email discussion forum for people working in the child and family welfare sector. For more information on the discussion list, visit: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/join/dlist.html>

maker”, and “other”. The “practitioner” category comprised professionals who have direct contact with children and families in their main roles (e.g., as statutory child protection case workers, team leaders and managers, providers of out-of-home care services, and social workers). The category “policy-makers” consisted of statutory personnel who worked in a policy setting in child protection, child welfare, and out-of-home care (including policy development and implementation). The category of “other” professional referred to professionals working in non-statutory roles in the child and family welfare sector (primarily in non-government organisations). Examples include: legal; education; family support; and allied health professionals.

Of the 495 responses for Survey 1, 31 were removed from further analysis due to data irregularities. Of the remaining 464 responses, 267 were from practitioners, 65 from policy professionals, and 132 from other professionals in the sector. Respondents came from the Australian Capital Territory (2%); New South Wales (35%); Northern Territory (2%); Queensland (14%); South Australia (22%); Tasmania (1%); Victoria (19%); and Western Australia (5%).

Of the 495 respondents to Survey 1, 221 gave their consent to be contacted for a follow up interview. Fifty-nine respondents were interviewed for Survey 2. Interviewees comprised 28 child protection practitioners, 13 child protection policy-makers, and 18 ‘other’ professionals in the child welfare field ($n = 59$). Interviewees were based in the Australian Capital Territory ($n = 4$); New South Wales ($n = 16$); Northern Territory ($n = 2$); Queensland ($n = 9$); South Australia ($n = 13$); Tasmania ($n = 3$); Victoria ($n = 10$); and Western Australia ($n = 2$).

4.2 Materials

Both Survey 1 and Survey 2 were designed for the purpose of this study. Survey 1 was a one-page survey comprised of 6 questions, in both qualitative and quantitative formats, including, for example: “How often do you use research findings in your main role?” (responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale where 1=*never* and 5=*always*).

Survey 2 was undertaken as a telephone interview and was comprised of 34 questions. At the start of the interview, the interviewer provided definitions of key terms used throughout the interview. For example, interviewees were informed that the term *research* was used to mean, for example, “academic studies, program evaluations, and reviews of the literature”. Consistent with Walter et al.’s (2004) study, the concept of research use was broken down into *access* and *application*. Accordingly, interviewees were informed that the term *accessing research* was used to mean, for example, “looking up research (as in literature searching) and reading research”, while *applying research* was used to mean, for example, “using research to inform your work, that is, to make a decision about policy or practice”.

Following the provision of definitions in relation to key terms used throughout the interview, interviewees were asked to indicate how often they accessed research and applied research

(responses for both questions were provided on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=*never* and 5=*always*). Interviewees were also asked to provide qualitative descriptions of how they had accessed and applied research in their current role.

In addition to describing how they had accessed and applied research, interviewees were asked to discuss barriers and facilitators to research use that they had experienced in their current work place. For example, interviewees were asked: "Is there anything that helps or hinders your ability to access and apply research in your current role?" Interviewees also responded "yes" or "no" to a 19-item facilitators and barriers scale designed for the purpose of this study. Items contained in this scale included, for example: "I have time to read research reports" and "I have access to an up-to-date database on what works". These items were developed from the previously mentioned review of the research literature undertaken by Lewig et al. (2006).

4.3 Procedure

The authors' colleagues and associates assisted in piloting both survey instruments. The authors obtained ethics approval from both the Australian Institute of Family Studies' ethics committee and the University of South Australia's ethics committee. Survey 1 was distributed through the National Child Protection Clearinghouse mailing list. Potential respondents were given 6 weeks to return completed surveys. Movie tickets were offered as an incentive to participation in Survey 1 (one in every fifty responses were randomly selected to win two movie tickets).

In order to ascertain a wide range of views and experiences the sample for Survey 2 was purposefully selected on the basis of either high or low research use. Respondents were categorised as high and low research users on the basis of their responses to the questions: "How often do you use research findings in your main role?" (1=*never* and 5=*always*); and "How important do you think research findings are for your role?" (1=*not at all important* and 5=*very important*). In addition, an approximately proportionate number of telephone interviews were sought with practitioners, policy-makers and other welfare professionals in the sector. Finally, an approximately proportionate number of telephone interviews were sought with professionals from each Australian state and territory. Staff from the Australian Centre for Child Protection conducted the telephone interviews.³ No incentive was offered for participation in Survey 2.

4.4 Methodological approach to data analysis

As indicated above, the data collected in the current project were a combination of qualitative and quantitative items. Quantitative data were entered into SPSS version 11 for Mac OS X and screened for data irregularities, and then various analyses were performed on the data, the results of which are provided in Chapter 5.

³ The Australian Centre for Child Protection is a joint initiative of the Commonwealth Government (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research) and the University of South Australia. For more information on the Centre, visit: <http://www.unisa.edu.au/childprotection/>

We had intended to undertake a thematic analysis to identify the facilitators and barriers to research use and the Three Cultures perspective to understand differences between policy-makers and practitioners. However, having collated the qualitative data, it became apparent that current models of research use did not provide a coherent framework for the many factors (both facilitators and barriers to research use) contained in the responses provided by participants. As outlined in the previous chapter, we devised a new model of research use that incorporates the Three Cultures perspective, as well as broader social and contextual issues: the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use (see Chapter 3). Research staff from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and the Australian Centre for Child Protection independently coded the qualitative data according to the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use. The consistency of coding was at all times extremely high between the researchers, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Chapter 5 Results

5.1 Survey 1

Four hundred and sixty-four responses were analysed according to degree of research use by respondents' main roles (practitioner, policy-maker, other) (see Figure 5.1). Approximately three quarters of policy-makers reported using research often or always, compared to 62% of other professionals in the child welfare sector, and just over half of the child protection practitioners.

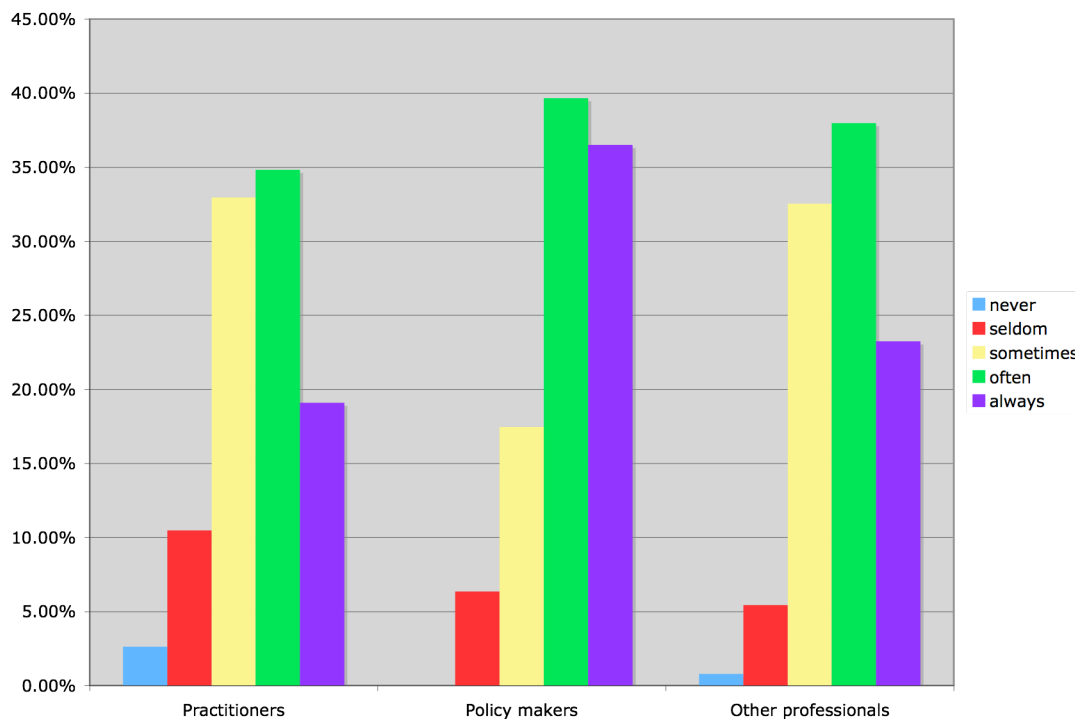


Figure 5.1: The degree of research use by practitioners, policy-makers, and other professionals in the child welfare sector (n = 459, data missing for 5 respondents)

Responses to Survey 1 were also analysed to determine the degree to which respondents believed that research is important in their work, with the vast majority of participants reporting that research use was “very important” or “important” to their work (practitioners 87.6%, policy-makers 90.6%, other professionals 83.1%; data missing for 4 respondents).

5.2 Survey 2

5.2.1 Demographics

Eighty-four percent of respondents (n = 50) were aged 35 years or older and the majority had more than 5 years experience in the sector (n = 42). All respondents were tertiary educated and over three quarters (n = 45) had undertaken or been involved in research themselves (e.g., tertiary studies, surveys, small or large projects at work). Twenty-one respondents stated that their involvement in

research had been at university only. Ninety-four percent of other professionals in the child welfare sector and all statutory child protection policy-makers and practitioners interviewed were able to see the relevance of research to their work role. Over three quarters of the respondents (75% of practitioners, 77% of policy-makers and 78% of other professionals) stated that they had some training and knowledge on how to seek out and apply research.

5.2.2 Research awareness

In order to gauge the breadth of awareness of research resources, respondents were asked which journals, research reports, books or other print sources and research organisations they were aware of in the areas of child protection and out of home care. In general, respondents used departmental or university databases, and a wide range of Australian and international websites to look for research articles as opposed to accessing particular journals for research information. Many respondents also received individual articles, reports and newsletters via libraries, mailing lists, departmental intranets and distribution lists. Where this was the case, respondents were often unaware of the original sources of these documents. The majority of respondents were therefore not able to name specific research journals or research organisations. However, most were familiar with prominent Australian and international child protection journals when presented with a list of the names of these journals. The most commonly recognised journals and research organisations are shown in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Commonly recognised journals and research organisations

Australian Journals	Number (N = 59)
Child Abuse Prevention Issues*	48
Family Matters	31
Communities, Children and Families Australia	12
Developing Practice	10
Children Australia	9
International Journals	
Child Abuse and Neglect	26
Child Abuse Review	22
Child Welfare	19
Child Maltreatment	11
Research Organisations	
National Child Protection Clearinghouse* at the Australian Institute of Family Studies	26
Australian Institute of Family Studies	10
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	7
The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect	5
Australian Domestic Violence Clearing House	4
Association of Children's Welfare Agencies	4

* Many participants were recruited through a mail out by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse of a *Child Abuse Prevention Issues* paper, therefore respondents were likely to recall this publication and research organisation.

Respondents were also asked how often they attended conferences and workshops and whether the last conference or workshop they attended included sessions that presented research findings. The majority of respondents (73%) attended conferences or workshops more than once a year. Fourteen

percent attended a workshop or conference about once a year, 7% about once every three years, 3% less than one once every three years and 3% had never attended a conference or workshop. All but one of the respondents could recall the last conference or workshop they had attended. Fifty-two percent of these conferences and workshops had included sessions that presented research findings. The majority of conferences and workshops that participants had attended focused on specific topics and had a practitioner focus (e.g., attachment, foster care, domestic violence, out-of-home care).

5.2.3 Degree of research access and application

As can be seen from Figure 5.2, policy-makers were most likely to identify that they “often” or “always” accessed research, while practitioners were more likely to indicate that they “seldom” accessed research. The application of research by respondents revealed a similar trend (Figure 5.3).

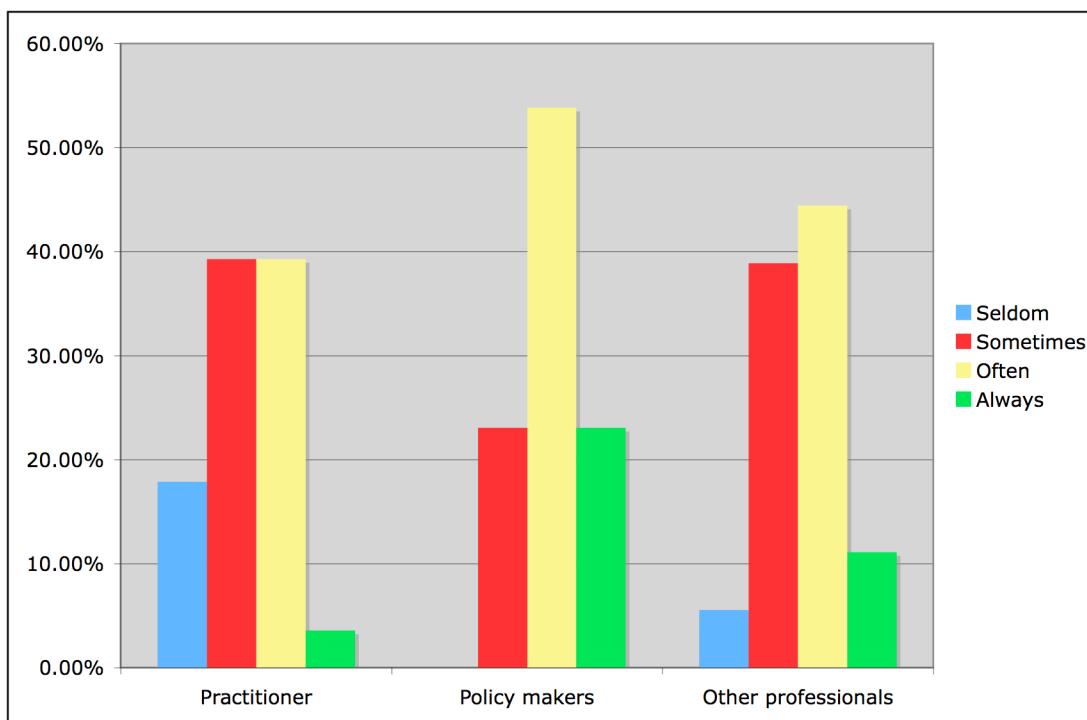


Figure 5.2: The degree to which practitioners, policy-makers, and other professionals interviewed in stage 2 of the project access research

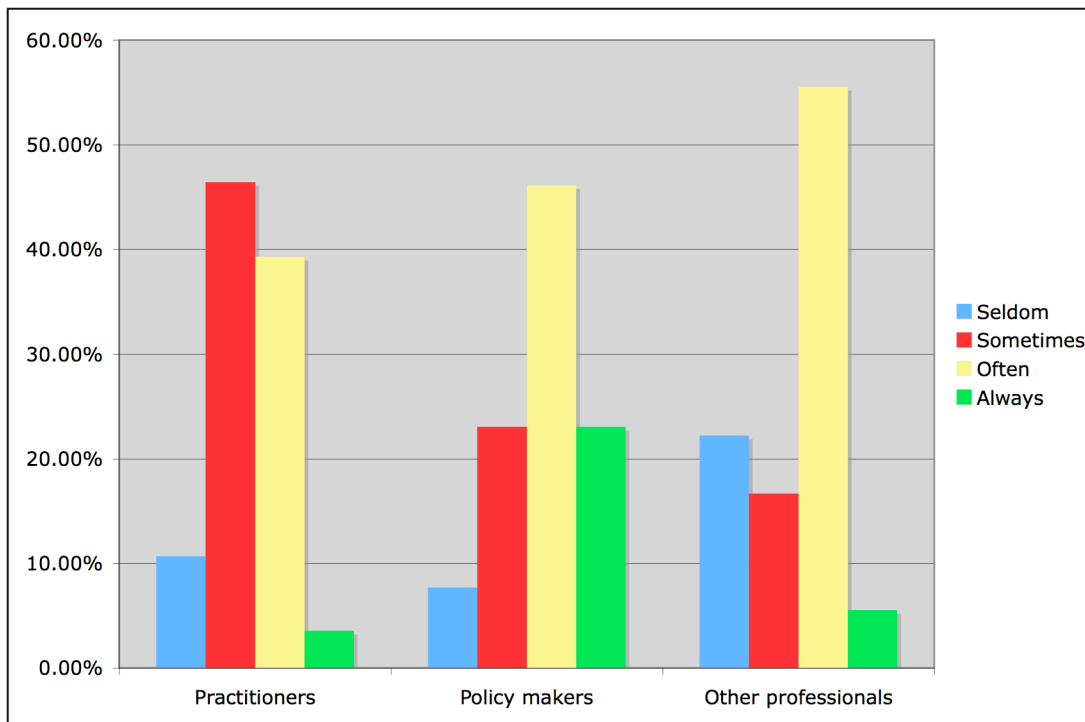


Figure 5.3: The degree to which practitioners, policy-makers, and other professionals interviewed in stage 2 of the project apply research

Respondents used a wide variety of materials to access research (see Figure 5.4), the predominant method being the internet (practitioners 69%, policy-makers 69%, and other professionals 61%). Specifically, the internet was used to: access websites and literature data bases (including university databases); subscribe to email updates and distribution lists; and access electronic journals. The data suggest that aside from using the internet, methods for accessing research tended to vary across role categories (see Figure 5.4).

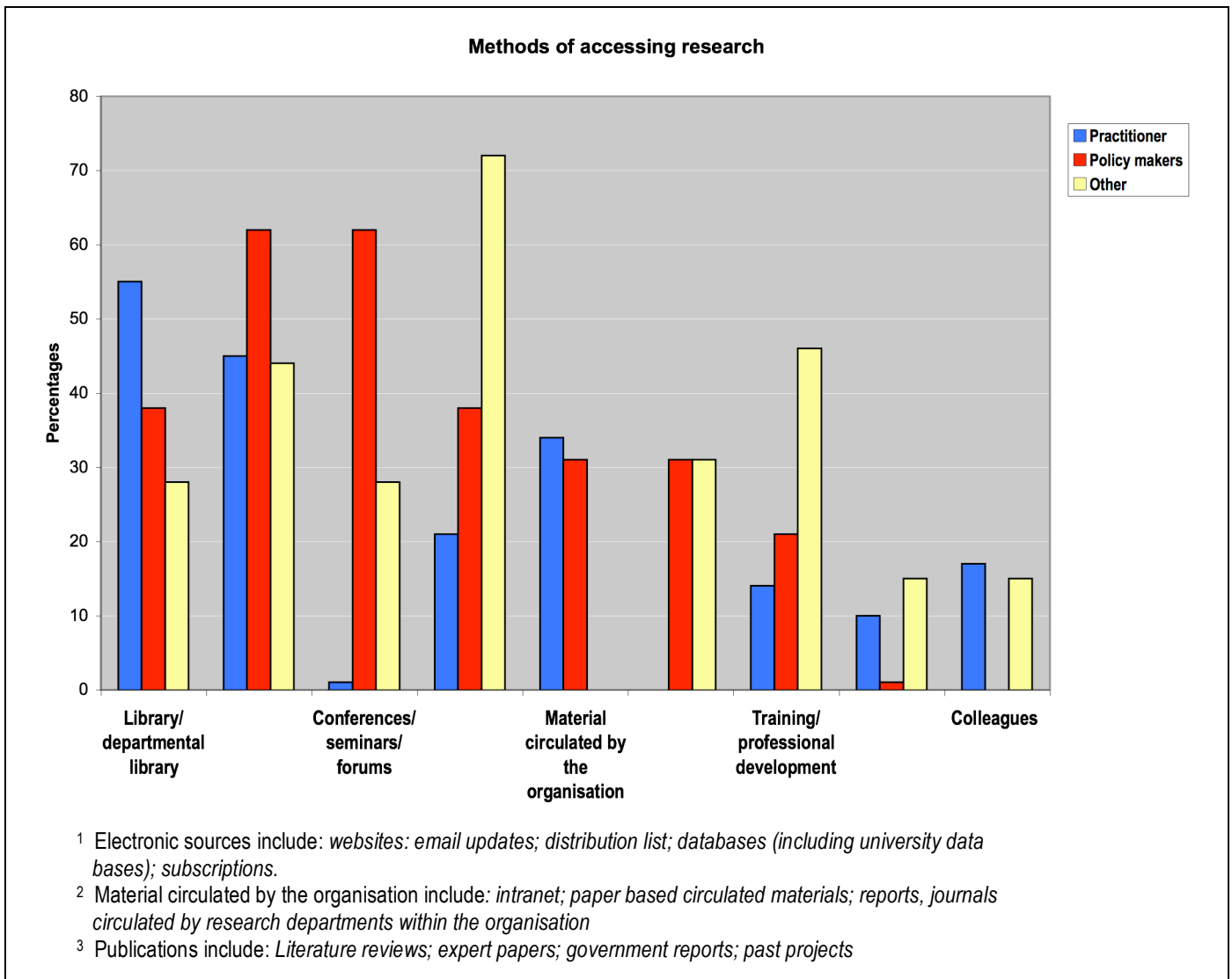


Figure 5.4: Methods used to access research by practitioners, policy-makers, and other professionals in the child and family welfare sector

Given that many statutory child protection and human services departments have developed research units designed to assist and support staff to use research (for example, the *Research to Practice* unit in the New South Wales Department of Community Services and the Queensland Department of Child Safety’s *Child Safety Research Strategy*), interviewees were asked the degree to which their employer provides them with research. The total Survey 2 sample indicated that their employers either “sometimes” (22.0%), “often” (35.6%), or “always” (13.6%) provided research to them.

Just over 50% of respondents were provided research by employers through internet and/or intranet access and emails. Approximately 28% of respondents had access to libraries and a number received regular library ‘research updates’. A quarter of respondents were provided research in training sessions and 10% of interviewees were given access to research through workshops and seminars. A small

number of respondents were provided with research by their employers in the form of handouts, study days, team meetings, and journal subscriptions.

All respondents, with the exception of one, stated that they applied research in their roles. As can be seen from Figure 5.5, the ways in which research was applied differed for practitioners, policy-makers and other professionals. However, the most frequently stated application of research for all three groups was the use of research to inform practice decisions (e.g., case management, risk assessment, therapeutic interventions). ‘Other’ uses of research included the provision of consultative services and keeping abreast of child protection issues.

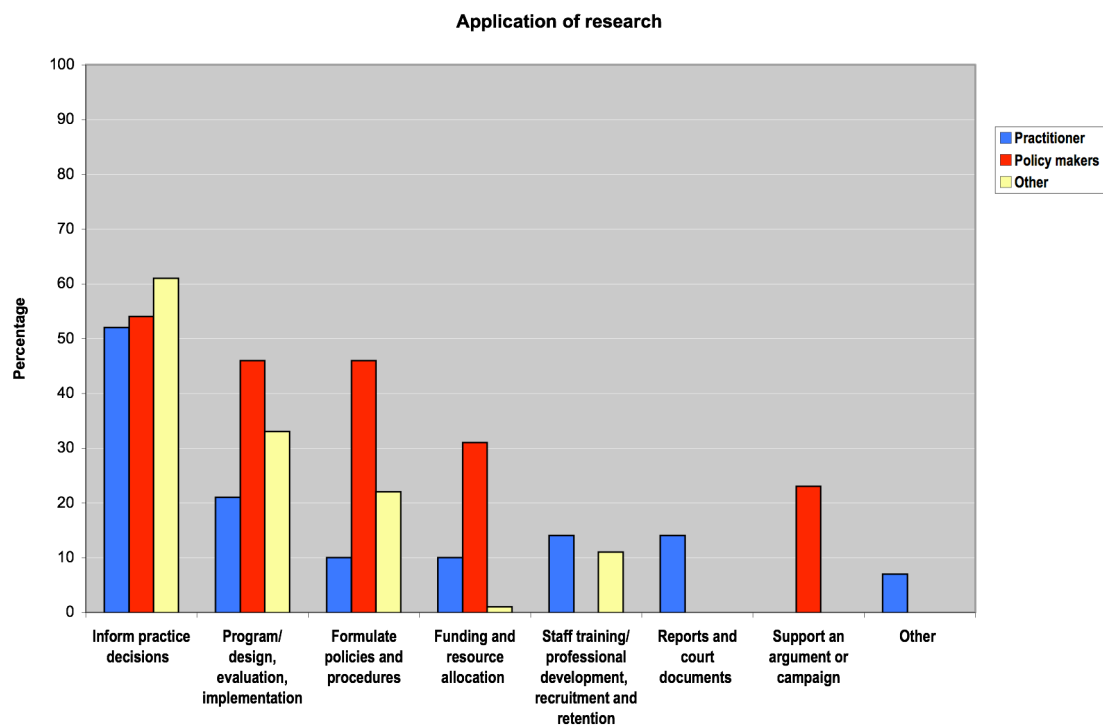


Figure 5.5: Ways in which research is applied by practitioners, policy-makers, and other professionals in the child and family welfare sector

5.3 Facilitators and barriers to research use

A combination of open-ended and yes/no questions were used in Survey 2 to elicit information about the perceived impact of certain variables as facilitators and barriers to research use. The results, summarised below, were analysed using the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use as an organising framework (see Chapter 3).

5.3.1 Pragmatics

The term pragmatics is used to describe those factors unlikely to change in the short-to-medium term and over which practitioners, policy-makers, and their respective organisations have little influence - at least in the short term. For example, organisational structure, resources, capacity to implement change, work roles, the economic and political climate, and prevailing community attitudes.

The following four themes emerged as 'pragmatic' facilitators and barriers to research use.

(a) Resources:

Having infrastructure that enables access to research emerged as an important theme in our analysis. Access to the internet, email facilities, departmental libraries, and research departments were reported as important factors aiding research use. Ninety-three percent of child protection practitioners, 92% of policy-makers and 89% of other professionals in the child and family welfare sector stated that they had easy access to research materials (e.g., via a departmental library, a research unit within the department, or intranet/internet access). However, participants who lacked facilities to access research - especially the internet - viewed this as a major barrier to research use. Staff shortages were also reported as having an adverse impact on research use primarily because this reduced the amount of time employees had to read research and apply it. Other barriers to research use included: an inability to afford journal subscriptions (particularly for non-government and not-for-profit organisations); and an inability to obtain funds and/or time release to attend conferences, workshops, and training sessions (particularly for non-government and not-for-profit organisations, and for rural workers).

(b) Organisational structure and systems capacity:

The structure and nature of an organisation (e.g., an organisation bound by policy and process) and a lack of organisational capacity to implement and sustain new initiatives (e.g., a lack of resources to implement program designs based on research) emerged as barriers to research use. On the other hand, research use appeared to be enhanced where systems were in place to support change (e.g., staff with expertise to set up research and carry it out, and good information management structures in place). Eighty-six percent of child protection practitioners, 84% of policy-makers and 78% of other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that their workplace environment was one that supported change.

(c) Work role:

Research was more likely to be used where an individual's work role provided scope to access and apply research. For example, respondents commented that more senior positions provided autonomy, influence, and the capacity to make changes to practice. In contrast, respondents noted that less senior roles (e.g., direct case work) could limit the capacity to access and apply research as there was only limited scope for autonomy, little overlap between direct case work and research, and the crisis-driven nature of case work meant that the 'here and now' was (understandably) the priority. Eighty-two percent of child protection practitioners, 77% of policy-makers, and 89% of other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that they had authority within their work role to make changes to practice. However, a smaller percentage of practitioners (64%), policy-makers (46%) and other professionals (72%) stated that they had the authority to implement research findings.

Further, due to the nature of their work role, 39% of practitioners, 31% of policy-makers and 22% of other professionals stated that they needed answers to the issues arising in their day-to-day work 'now' and could not wait for research findings.

(d) External influences:

External influences largely acted as a barrier to research use. A number of respondents raised the issue of external funding as potentially problematic in relation to research use. For example, the failure of funding bodies to recognise (and thus account for) the time required to update skills and increase knowledge was seen as a barrier to research use. Further, issues around control and dissemination of government-funded research were viewed as barriers to research use. In addition, other external influences such as the political context in which child protection is delivered, public opinion, and a lack of recognition of research by the courts were identified as barriers to research use. On the other hand, support and funding to establish local research was seen as an important facilitator of research use - especially the application of research findings.

5.3.2 Organisational culture

The culture or climate of an organisation is often defined as the norms, values, and rituals present in the workplace. Essentially, norms, values and rituals establish 'the way things are done' in a given workplace, and can be influential in providing circumstances that are – or are not - conducive to accessing and applying research.

In the present study, the following three themes emerged as 'organisational' facilitators and barriers to research use.

(a) Organisational support for research use:

Our analysis indicated that research use is facilitated when research is *formally* recognised as a priority area within an organisation (e.g., where there is a department or section of an organisation dedicated to research, or where there is policy that explicitly supports research use). In line with this theme, respondents identified the importance of their workplace endorsing research related activities and making the value of research apparent (e.g., by offering research-based student placements; seeking partnerships with other relevant organisations; and providing appropriate training). In contrast, respondents commented that research use was stifled when it was not supported and endorsed by the wider organisation (e.g., where learning and career development plans did not have time allocated to knowledge development and research use). Findings from his study show that in relation to organisational support for the use of research, 25% of child protection practitioners, 23% of policy-makers and 28% of other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that they received appropriate training in how to use research. While it is encouraging that some training is being provided in how to use research, there is further room for growth in this area.

(b) Supportive management and colleagues:

Practitioners reported that they felt more able to access and apply research in environments where colleagues, supervisors and managers supported the use of research. Seventy-nine percent of child protection practitioners, 77% of policy-makers and 78% of other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that they received support from their managers and colleagues to use research findings. This was one of the most frequently identified facilitators to the use of research.

(c) Workload:

An individual's workload emerged as an important factor influencing his or her capacity to use research. The relationship between workload and research use was most commonly expressed as a lack of time to access and apply research. This emerged as one of the greatest barriers to research use for practitioners and policy-makers in this study. Seventy-nine percent of child protection practitioners, 62% of policy-makers and 39% of other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that they had little time to read research reports or do anything with them.

Day-to-day demands of the job, large case loads, competing priorities within cases, and staff shortages were all reported to inhibit research use. Further, work stress and burnout have been identified in the literature as inhibitors of research use. Over half of the practitioners (57%) and other professionals (61%) interviewed in this study and a smaller, but still significant, percentage of policy-makers (39%) stated that they experienced work-related stress and burnout. As one would expect, research use was facilitated in contexts where workloads were more 'manageable' and where there was time for reflection and consultation.

5.3.3 Nature and extent of the evidence

The term 'nature and extent of the evidence' refers to the qualities and characteristics of research that promote its dissemination and use (e.g., the ease with which it can be readily understood, and its practical application or relevance to the user).

The following three key themes emerged as facilitators and barriers to research use related to the nature and extent of the evidence.

(a) Relevance and applicability:

Participants repeatedly stressed that their use of research is facilitated by access to research that specifically relates to the delivery of child protection services, and that is practical and applied in nature. Just over half of the respondents (57% of practitioners, 62% of policy-makers, and 56% of other professionals) stated that they have access to an up to date data base on 'what works'. Comprehensive literature reviews, secondary analyses of practice specific topics, and articles that provide a critical analysis of relevant issues, were viewed as particularly useful. Conversely, a lack of relevant research, dated research, research that is too theoretical, and research that employs a poor or inappropriate methodology were reported to inhibit research use.

(b) Presentation of research findings:

Respondents stressed the importance of clear and well-structured research reports. Publications that contain a clear aim or purpose, that outline the way in which the investigation was undertaken, and then make clear the findings of the investigation and expand on the implications of such findings for the reader were identified as facilitators of research use. Predictably, the use of jargon, an unnecessarily verbose writing style, referencing inaccuracies, and the reporting of complex statistical analyses in a style that is inaccessible to a wider audience were repeatedly identified as barriers to research use. Encouragingly, 86% of child protection practitioners, 83% of policy-makers and 78% of other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that they were able to clearly and easily understand research reports.

(c) Volume of research:

Some participants – largely policy-makers (31%) – reported that the volume of research made it difficult to keep abreast of emerging ideas, and thus inhibited the application of research. The volume of research was only seen as a barrier to research use by 14% of practitioners and 11% of other professionals in the child welfare sector.

The finding that policy-makers were more likely to identify the volume of research as a barrier to research use may be a reflection of the broad scope of areas that policy-makers are required to cover in the fields of child welfare (e.g., early intervention, placement prevention, out-of-home care). Statutory and non-statutory practitioners on the other hand are more likely to focus on very specific areas of practice. While not explicitly stated by participants, it could also be that contradictory or competing explanations for observed research findings (in addition to, or rather than the sheer volume of research) contributed to the sense that the task of using research literature was too overwhelming.

5.3.4 Individual factors

Individual factors are typically conceptualised as a person's own values, beliefs and assumptions. In relation to the work of child and family welfare, people typically possess different views as to the value of experimental / research evidence compared to 'hands-on' practice knowledge and experience. Different values, beliefs and assumptions have been found to exert an influence on an individual's preparedness to use research.

Our analysis identified a number of individual factors that acted as both facilitators and barriers to research use.

Individual factors that facilitated research use included: previous work experience in a research related area; and a personal commitment to research (e.g., as reflected in a preparedness to access and read research in one's own time; and a desire to maintain professional networks that facilitate awareness of and access to research). On the other hand, individual factors identified as barriers to research use included: previous unsatisfactory research experiences (e.g., while studying); a lack of knowledge (e.g., not familiar with how to access research; lack of exposure to research; a lack of training in research

use); and a preference for practice wisdom rather than research evidence (e.g., a lack of trust and/or interest in research, and a preference to stick with “tried and true” approaches).

5.3.5 Competing sources of information and influence

The term “competing sources of information and influence” refers to the various informants, including researchers, lobby groups, and the media, through which professionals in the child and family welfare sector access information – intentionally or otherwise – regarding the provision of services to children and families.

The variety of competing sources through which professionals access information regarding the provision of services to children and families was the most frequently endorsed barrier to the use of research (i.e., the way in which the media, interest groups, and research can act as competing sources of information and influence). This was true for 79% of child protection practitioners, 85% of policy-makers and 67% of other professionals in the child welfare sector. Competing sources of information and influence may have been identified as a barrier to using research for several reasons:

1. Critical external pressures such as media attention and lobby group advocacy can lead to the development of a policy and practice culture that is reactive and increasingly risk-averse (Connolly & Doolan, 2007; Mansell, 2006). In such a context, rather than practice decision-making being a process of consultation and assessment, decision-making may be based on the avoidance of risk (including the avoidance of risk to the organisation/department of further negative attention) (Spratt, 2001); and
2. In contexts where there are considerable time constraints and thus where “something has got to give”, it seems likely that the source most able to attract the attention of relevant professionals is going to be in the best position to communicate its message. Arguably, the fact that most participants in this study could not name many relevant academic journals suggests that traditional modes of communicating information derived from research have not attracted the attention that one would hope. Thus, the readily obtainable nature of information sourced through, for example, the media, may inhibit research use where research is seen as less readily obtainable.

5.3.6 Linkage and exchange mechanisms

Linkage and exchange mechanisms refer to the processes by which researchers and research-users come into contact with one another, and which may in turn facilitate the exchange of knowledge.

Respondents identified opportunities to speak with researchers/experts as a facilitator to research use. Fifty-seven percent of child protection practitioners and 61% of policy-makers and other professionals in the child welfare sector stated that they have the opportunity to talk with researchers. Over half of the respondents stated that these opportunities were created by: developing partnerships with universities and existing research programs; being a part of relevant networks and associations; and forming relationships with research bodies such as the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS).

5.4 Improving the dissemination of research

In order to assist researchers to better disseminate their research findings respondents to Survey 2 were asked to describe the factors that make research easy to understand. The factors that respondents considered to be important are shown in Box 5.1 below.

Box 5.1: Factors that make research easy to understand

- The use of plain English (e.g., complex ideas explained in lay terms)
- Informative abstracts / research summaries
- Logical format (e.g., historical overview, research evidence, arguments, critical review, overall conclusions, questions to be considered, practice implications)
- Purpose or aims of the particular research project are clear and are stated up front
- Context is clear
- Definitions are provided
- A good summary of rationale is provided
- Unnecessary detail is avoided
- Less emphasis is placed on background theory and details of analysis
- The research doesn't try to answer too many questions
- Methodology is clear
- There is not an overemphasis on statistics
- Data are presented in charts, graphs and tables
- Case studies and examples are used to illustrate findings and important points
- Comparisons with other studies are provided
- Emphasis is placed on outcomes and implications for practice and policy
- Study limitations are clearly explained

Respondents were also asked to describe the characteristics of any pieces of research that they had found significant and that had influenced their practice. Overwhelmingly the research that was seen to be significant to interviewees had practical application, either by:

- offering solutions that could be easily implemented into practice;
- providing a framework or foundation from which to work;
- improving understanding of practice and policy issues or;
- verifying or affirming current practice.

The research that respondents found significant was also presented in a way that demonstrated many of the characteristics listed in box 1. Large sample sizes, longitudinal studies and Australian-based research were also seen as contributing to the value and significance of a particular research project.

Conferences and workshops are another way in which research is disseminated. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I learn more from attending a conference or workshop than I do from reading a journal article". Just over half (53%) of all interviewees agreed with this statement, 12% disagreed, and 35% neither agreed nor disagreed. Respondents were also

asked to describe the features of a conference or workshop that they had attended that made the conference or workshop stand out for them. These features are shown in Box 5.2.

Box 5.2: Desirable features of a conference or workshop

- Has practical application
- Uses practical examples
- Provides practical information
- Provides materials, handouts, information packages to take back to the workplace
- Presents up to date/cutting edge research
- Includes local content
- Enables 'hands on' involvement/active participation
- Includes international speakers
- Includes a range of expert presenters
- Presents a range of viewpoints
- Provides opportunities to network
- Has presentations that are polished, clear, succinct, relevant and incorporate appropriate visual aids
- Held in an appropriate venue (small preferred)

5.5 Future facilitators of research use

Finally, respondents were asked what would help them to use research in their current position that was not presently available to them. As can be seen in Table 5.2, the most common facilitators of research use that respondents felt would help them were: more time to read, understand and apply research; greater access to resources such as journals and data bases; and managerial and organisational support to use research. Six participants reported that they were happy with their current access to and application of research and did not identify any additional facilitators.

Table 5.2: Factors that would help to facilitate the use of research in respondents current work role

	Policy	Practice	Other	Total
Time	4	10	6	20
Access to research resources (journals, data bases)	5	5	4	14
Management/organisational support	3	6	4	13
Training	2	5		7
Funding – resources to do research, training, conference attendance		4	4	8
Opportunity to be involved in research/partnerships with universities	1	5	3	9
Nature of the research – relevance and presentation of findings, applicability	1	3	2	6
More staff to ease individual caseloads and provide more time for staff to discuss research	4		2	6
Knowledge of journals relevant to my field			1	1
Autonomy			1	1

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Overview

This project represents the third stage of a multi stage research project, the aim of which is to understand the use of research in Australian child protection policy and practice. By so doing the project team hope to provide an evidence-base to enhance research use in a sector that has been influenced by a range of factors other than research.

6.2 The need for contextual models to explain research use

Current understandings of research use are commonly informed by the belief that the cultural gaps that exist between practitioners, policy-makers and researchers give rise to the barriers to research use as illustrated by Shonkoff's Three Cultures perspective. The findings from the present study provide some support for this perspective and the related argument that research use is best facilitated by two-way personal communication at the interfaces between the three communities. For example, consistent with the Three Cultures perspective, policy-makers and professionals in government and non-government organisations reported that, due to the nature of their work role, they needed answers to the issues arising in their day-to-day work 'now' and could not wait for research findings. At the same time the findings strongly suggest that an exclusive emphasis on the individual interactions between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners may understate the influence of the social, institutional and political contexts within which policy and practice decisions are made (Gibson, 2003). Indeed, it was very apparent from our study that the need to consider other competing sources of information and influence such as public opinion, interest groups and the media exerts a significant influence on the decision to use research in practice and policy. Our findings make clear that research does not operate in a vacuum, and in order to effectively examine ways in which research is used, the degree to which research is used, and mechanisms for promoting research and evidence-based practice, there needs to be an awareness of the many variables influencing the decision-making and work practices of professionals involved in the delivery of child and family welfare services.

6.3 The Cultures in Context Model of Research Use

The inclusion of multiple domains of influence (pragmatics, organisational culture, nature and extent of the evidence, individual factors, linkage and exchange mechanisms and competing sources of information and influence) is one of the strengths of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use. The model takes an ecological view, and incorporates the various factors in addition to research that influence decision-making. Further, the model acknowledges that the aim of research in the child welfare sector is ultimately to enhance the wellbeing of children and their families.

The use of such a model to explain research use is unique. Previously researchers have either (a) identified lists of individual facilitators and barriers that could inform individual strategies; or (b) focused

on a single dimension of research use (i.e., the different cultures), therefore limiting interventions to enhance research use to only those that will enhance the relationships between the three cultures.

This initial test of the Cultures in Context Model of Research Use in a sample of child and family welfare professionals indicates that the model is a generalisable, practical, simple, and evidence-based model of research use. It provided a useful framework with which to view the complex array of factors influencing research use by policy-makers and practitioners.

6.4 Barriers and facilitators to research use

This project also aimed to identify the facilitators and barriers to research use in the Australian child and family welfare sector. Child and family welfare professionals who participated in this study identified various factors that helped or hindered the use of research. Many of these were similar to those identified in the international health and social science literature; thus suggesting that much of this literature is applicable to the Australian context (Barratt, 2003; Lewig et al., 2006; Shonkoff, 2000; Walter et al., 2004).

Using the Cultures in Context model as an organising framework, the findings suggest that four of the seven domains within the model were of particular relevance to the access and application of research in the Australian child welfare sector. These domains were: (1) organisational and pragmatic factors (domains 1 and 2 respectively); (2) individual factors (domain 7); and (3) the nature and extent of the evidence (domain 3).

6.4.1 Organisational and pragmatic factors

Organisational and pragmatic factors (e.g., resources) play an important role in the ability of child and family welfare workers to use research. On a positive note, respondents in the present study reported that their work environments supported change and provided them with easy access to research materials, and that these factors helped them to use research in their work roles. On the other hand, many respondents reported that their ability to use research was hindered by a lack of time to read and/or implement research findings (due primarily to heavy workloads), and little appropriate training in research use. These findings suggest that although child and family welfare organisations support research use in principle, they may lack either the resources and/or the commitment to apply this principle in practice.

Another interesting finding was that lack of facilities to access research—especially the internet—were viewed as a major barrier to research use. The implication of this finding is that the provision of internet access could be a significant facilitator of research use. This is an important finding to communicate to the child and family welfare sector where many practitioners are not routinely provided with internet access as part of their employment. Other barriers to research use included an inability to finance journal subscriptions (particularly for non-government and not-for-profit organisations). It is worth noting that some clearinghouses such as the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, include as part

of their services a library membership scheme providing free access to library services for individuals working in non-government organisations (see www.aifs.gov.au/acssa). This research suggests that services of this kind provide an important facilitator to accessing research in the non-government sector.

Equipped with the knowledge that organisational support is an essential ingredient in the promotion of research use and evidence-based practice, various organisations have taken steps to make the human services workplace more “research friendly”. Some examples of promising initiatives that organisations have implemented to encourage the uptake of research are outlined in Box 6.1.

Box 6.1: Promising ‘research into practice’ initiatives

The News South Wales, Department of Community Services: *Research to Practice Program*

The aim of the Research to Practice Program is to disseminate research information and encourage its active use in the department by: raising staff and stakeholder awareness about the importance of research; promoting effective and productive interaction between researchers, policy-makers, educators and practitioners; disseminating departmental research to appropriate audiences; providing information and advice based on the latest research evidence and best practice; and informing practice consistency. The program uses various strategies to achieve these aims, some of which include:

- Research Publications and Resources such as electronic ‘Research to Practice Updates’, ‘Research to Practice Notes’, ‘Research Papers’, ‘Seminar Notes’, and ‘Research Guidelines’;
- Evaluation and rating of the effectiveness of DoCS’ programs and practices to facilitate policy-maker decision making on ‘what works’;
- Seminars/Workshops on specific issues for DoCS’ staff;
- Two-Way Forums/Practice Sessions enabling staff to identify research needs and assist in the development of evidence based resources; and
- A Research to Practice Network made up of credible and enthusiastic staff who act as catalysts for promoting use of research in policy and practice.

Source: www.community.nsw.gov.au/DOCS/STANDARD/PC_100859.htm

The Queensland Department of Child Safety: *Child Safety Research Strategy*

The aim of the Child Safety Research Strategy, delivered through the Strategic Policy and Research Branch, is to support and enhance links between research, policy and practice and in doing so to build a knowledge base around child safety public policy and practice. Strategies developed to achieve these goals include:

- Supporting several external research projects through in-kind assistance, financial support and access to data;
- Development of a research framework that incorporates an efficient research approval process, which meets the department’s legislative and strategic obligations;
- Identification of key research areas;
- Assisting PhD students who receive funding under the Queensland Government’s *Growing the Smart State*: A PhD research funding program in the areas of evidence-based public policy development; and
- Publication of an internal research newsletter giving practitioners and policy-makers a snapshot of recent and relevant research into child protection.

Source: www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/research/strategy/index.html

What Works for Children: a UK collaboration between Barnardo’s, City University and the University of York

What Works for Children was developed to implement a number of Children’s Funds programmes. The aim of What Works for Children is a to improve outcomes for children and young people by promoting the use of research in practice. Strategies used included:

Employment of a Knowledge Broker (Implementation Officer) whose role was to:

- Work with practitioners on issues related to the adaptation and replication of interventions recommended by research;
- Work with practitioners and service planners on a day to day basis, and share offices with some of them;
- Work with research team; and
- Collect data through literature review, document analysis and reflective practice within the research team, and in discussions with staff.

Access to a Research Team whose role was to:

- Facilitate service provider access to and understanding of research through a range of paper, face-to-face and web-based materials, including evidence summaries, a guide to the evidence, and training days.

Source: www.whatworksforchildren.org.uk/index.html

The role of funding from governments emerged as a factor influencing research use by Australian child and family welfare professionals that was not highlighted in the international literature. This factor was believed to impact on research use in a number of ways. Firstly, professionals working in non-government organisations identified the failure of government funding bodies to account for the time required to keep skills and knowledge up to date when contracting service providers as a barrier to research use in these organisations. Second, the strict control and dissemination of some government funded research was viewed as a barrier to research use by some policy-makers and practitioners as this research was not always able to be accessed or referenced. On the other hand, funding to undertake local research was seen as enhancing interest in research and improving the likelihood that research of this type would be applied in local policy and practice.

Isolation also emerged as a factor inhibiting the use of research by some Australian child and family welfare professionals, which was not identified in the international literature. The ability to access and circulate research electronically enables workplaces to share knowledge in an efficient manner, and optimise timely access to the most up-to-date information. However, not all child and family welfare professionals in this study, especially those working in rural areas, had the means to access research electronically. Given the global increase in use of electronic forms of publication (for example, some journals and information sources only publish electronically), an inability to access such sources poses a considerable disadvantage to employees seeking to engage with emerging electronic literature.⁴

6.4.2 Individual factors influencing research use

Individual factors, such as those reported by Barratt (2003), were not as prevalent in our study as were organisational and pragmatic constraints. This finding offers considerable promise to organisations that wish to advance the use of research in practice. Indeed, the great majority of child and welfare professionals in our study could see the relevance of research to their work. Their use of research was impeded less by personal inclination and more by practical and workplace constraints (acknowledging

⁴ The National Child Protection Clearinghouse, based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, regularly publishes reports in electronic form. The website statistics in relation to these materials consistently indicate an upward trend in downloads. These data are supported by wider Institute trends in web-based publications (further information is available by contacting the Australian Institute of Family Studies at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/>). More broadly, Australian data derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics in relation to household computer access and internet use reveal consistent upward trends; these data are indicative of wider social and information technology developments (see, for example, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/acc2d18cc958bc7bca2568a9001393ae?OpenDocument>)

that the sample for this study was likely to be biased in favour of those who are interested in research). Where such factors can be addressed (for example, as they have been in the above practice profiles), employees are likely to experience an improved capacity to apply research.

6.4.3 The nature and extent of the evidence

Child and family welfare professionals discussed the influence of the research itself (that is, the nature of the research, its applicability to practice, and the ease with which it is disseminated) on their capacity to use research. These findings are as relevant to researchers as they are to the organisations in which professionals work. Essentially, respondents stressed the importance of 'writing for practice'; that is, that research designed to inform child and family welfare practice should be practical and applied in nature. Respondents commented that the implications of research findings should be clearly explained in the articles and reports that stem from such work. A failure to do so (for example, the production of research that is too theoretical, or the use of complex statistical analyses that are not explained in a way that is accessible to a wider audience) can render such research redundant to many readers.

While trends in the data were largely consistent across professional groups, one interesting difference emerged between policy-makers, practitioners and other professionals. Specifically, policy-makers were more likely to identify the volume of the literature as a barrier to research use. This finding may be a reflection of the scope of areas which policy-makers are required to cover in the fields of child welfare (e.g., early intervention, placement prevention, out-of-home care) rather than focusing on very specific areas of practice which are more likely to be the focus of statutory and non-statutory practitioners in the field. However, while not specifically stated by respondents, it could be that the sometimes-contradictory nature of research findings, rather than or in addition to the sheer volume of research, explains this finding.

It is worth noting, that the majority of respondents were not able to name specific research journals or research organisations. This has implications for the measurement of research impact, which has traditionally privileged publication in academic journals. The findings from this study suggest that journals of this nature may not be the most effective means of influencing policy or practice decisions.

A preference to see 'writing for practice' was a clear theme emerging from this study. This finding corresponds with broad trends across diverse fields. For example, a preference for 'plain language' in writing has emerged in fields including, government, law, psychology, education, and social welfare practice to name a few. In Australia, the trend towards accessible writing or plain language is endorsed broadly by government legislative bodies (www.opc.gov.au/plain/); the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/plain_english_at_work/); and industry (www.plainlanguageaustralia.com/). Similar developments have emerged specific to the child and family welfare sector at a local and international level, for example: the Research in Practice initiative in England and Wales (www.rip.org.uk/index.asp); the EPPI Centre (www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/); and Early

Childhood Australia

(www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/about_us/about_early_childhood_australia.html). The results from this study suggest that such developments are welcomed.

6.5 Understanding research use: Access versus application

In order to better understand research use in the field of child and family welfare, the current project made the distinction between access to research and application of research. The barriers and facilitators to research access and research application were very similar. This was to be expected, as accessing research is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the application of research. However, it proved important to have made the distinction between research access and research application. Indeed, our results showed that child and family welfare professionals accessed research to a greater degree than they applied research suggesting that there are barriers and facilitators unique to the application of research (e.g., autonomy to use research findings, understanding how to interpret research reports, and access to a data base of research that is relevant and applicable).

The distinction between research access and research application is particularly important when seeking to identify strategies to enhance research use. Our findings suggested that it is not enough to provide easy access to research. It is also important to facilitate opportunities for practitioners and policy-makers to apply research in decision making and practice and to provide a relevant pool of research which has practical application.

6.6 The extent of research use in child and family welfare

Consistent with expectations arising from the Three Cultures perspective, the extent of research use varied between groups, with policy-makers the most likely to indicate that they frequently accessed research, and practitioners the most likely to indicate that they seldom accessed research. Professionals in non-government organisations were more likely to report applying research than professionals in statutory child protection services. This finding can be understood by reference to the organisational culture domain of the Cultures in Context model. The limitations of these findings are that they rely on self-perceptions of research use, and do not provide actual measures of the amount of research accessed or applied. Further research is needed to examine the extent of research use. Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings highlight differences between policy-makers and practitioners, and government and non-government organisations impacting on the extent to which research is used.

6.7 Limitations of the present study

The sampling strategy employed in the present study relied on the distribution network of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse has, over several years, established a centralised distribution strategy, which sees a copy of Clearinghouse publications distributed in print or electronically to every policy-maker or practitioner in statutory child protection departments across Australia. Information about this study, and Survey 1, were distributed in one of the Clearinghouse's

quarterly publications either in electronic or hard copy form. As described in the methodology section of the paper, this strategy resulted in an approximate response rate of 8% as a proportion of copies distributed. However, due to the nature of the distribution arrangements (which rely on a central contact person to distribute the materials in each jurisdiction) it is unknown precisely how many people actually received the survey prior to the cut off date for responses to be returned. The response rate for electronic surveys (which are immediately distributed on publication) was considerably higher than that for paper surveys (approximately 28.3% of electronic surveys were returned, compared with approximately 1.5% of hard copy surveys). This finding adds further weight to the argument that hard copy subscribers to Clearinghouse publications may not have received publications (and thus the surveys) in time to respond.

The data derived from the present sample revealed a fairly high degree of research use. It is possible that respondents who are not inclined towards research chose not to respond to the survey. Given that it is not possible to conduct an analysis of non-respondents, the degree to which this may be the case is unknown. However, caution should be exercised when interpreting the data, or attempting to extrapolate from the present findings to the broader Australian child and family welfare sector, as the data may not be representative of the attitudes towards research possessed by the wider body of professionals working in this area.

6.8 Implications of the model and future directions for research

The Cultures in Context Model of Research Use provides a basis on which to develop an integrated approach to enhance the use of research in child protection, and to inform a coordinated range of strategies under such an approach. The present study has identified some of the strategies that might form part of such an approach – these too need further research to test their effectiveness prospectively.

Having developed what we believe is a valid model for understanding research use, further application of the model is needed to test and refine its composition. Specifically, prospective studies and studies in different contexts (e.g., in other countries, with government and non-government child welfare services, in other related areas of welfare service delivery, and with samples of different professional groups) are needed to test the reliability and validity of the model. It will also be interesting to examine what facilitates the use of research and research-informed practices (e.g., effective discipline techniques) by those who are at the core of our model, families.

6.9 Conclusion

It is clear that child and family welfare organisations are increasingly acknowledging their role in promoting research informed policy and practice. This is evident from our interviews with child and family welfare professionals and the research initiatives being implemented by various organisations in this sector. The findings from our study suggest that strategies such as developing skills in managers to encourage staff to use research, ensuring research findings are readily accessible and implications for

practice are easily understandable, establishing formal units for promoting research use, and providing training in locating, understanding and applying research can help develop a culture of research use. It is also important that organisations commit to research use in more formal ways such as emphasising the use of research in mission/goal statements and designating time in work roles to read research and reflect on the application of research to practice and policy.

The findings from this study suggest that Australian child protection practitioners, policy-makers and other non-statutory professionals in the child welfare sector are embracing the push towards evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches to practice. Further, the Cultures in Context Model of Research use was found to provide a comprehensive evidence-based framework from which to develop strategies to encourage this trend. It is hoped that the benefits of enhanced research application will flow to children and families as practice and policy decisions are increasingly based on sound evidence in order to achieve the most favourable long-term outcomes.

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