

Evidence-informed practice: Using research to improve services for children and young people

Sandra Nutley, The Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU) at the Universities of St Andrews & Edinburgh (www.ruru.ac.uk).

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Introduction

Practitioners and service delivery organisations are increasingly exhorted to demonstrate an evidence-informed approach; that is an approach that helps people and organisations make well-informed decisions by ensuring that the best available evidence lies at the heart of a practice development and service delivery. This paper draws on a growing body of knowledge about the development of evidence-informed practice. In doing so, it focuses on seven key lessons for those seeking to improve the use of research evidence in practice settings.

What counts as good evidence?

‘Fitness for purpose’ acts as the main criterion for determining what counts as good evidence. Thus evidence from research and evaluation studies sits alongside other sources of evidence such as routine monitoring data, expert knowledge and information from stakeholder consultations. All of these forms and sources of evidence are valuable because service development relies on tacit (experience-based) knowledge as well as explicit (formalised) knowledge. An evidence-informed approach needs to draw on a wide range of knowledge in tackling why, what and how services can be improved.

Why focus on research evidence?

Research is worthy of particular attention in the above mix because it differs from other ways of knowing by being more careful and deliberative in how observations and inferences are made, by acknowledging the need for a degree of robustness and replicability, and by opening itself up to peer scrutiny and appraisal. It is also wide-ranging in its focus and it can enrich debates about the nature of social problems (such as anti-social behaviour) and provide evidence on the effectiveness of different ways of tackling these (such as the use of curfew orders or peer mentoring schemes). It can also help practitioners understand service implementation processes and how these might be improved.

Research is also worthy of attention because its findings tend to be underused in many practice settings. Researchers often despair that clear findings are overlooked or ignored when decisions are made about the direction and delivery of services. In response, those in service delivery organisations point to what they see as the lack of usable research: research that arrives too late and is too dense, and findings that provide little in the way of practical guidance. It is not surprising then that there is a growing demand for research that is useful and for efforts to ensure that this research is used in developing policies and practices.

How can we improve the use of research?

Strategies to improve the use of research can be developed by discrete groups or organisations operating in policy, research or service provider roles. They can also be developed at sector level through discussions involving people in all of these roles. At whatever level they are developed, the following key lessons should provide a useful guide.

Lesson 1: Improve the supply of relevant, credible and accessible research but don't stop there

Improving the supply of research includes ensuring the right questions get investigated by robust methods, and that rigorous syntheses of existing studies are also supported. It also incorporates mechanisms to ensure that research findings are accessible both literally and intellectually. However, there is a limit to which the timely flow of relevant research can be managed, and there is a danger that too much emphasis on managing the supply of research will threaten the independence of research and its role in holding governments to account.

Supply-side strategies for improving research use tend to rely on dissemination mechanisms that assume a one-way flow of research into practice communities. This flies in the face of what we know about the importance of two-way dialogue in order for researchers and research users to make sense of research findings in a local context.

Lesson 2: Shape – as well as respond to – the demand for research in policy and practice settings

Alongside improving research supply, there have been parallel attempts to increase the demand for research. These can take the form of training events that seek to increase practitioners understanding and appreciation of research studies. Accreditation and competency frameworks for practitioners, which emphasise the need to demonstrate evidence-based practice, have also been developed. Such initiatives focus on increasing the demand for research in general. There are, of course, occasions when the emphasis is on reshaping the demand context for a particular piece of work (see Lesson 6).

Lesson 3: Develop coherent, multifaceted strategies and initiatives that address the interface and interplay between the supply and demand for research

At the interface between supply and demand, a wide range of activities and interventions have been deployed to increase the use of research. These include various forms of targeted dissemination, more interactive opportunities for practitioners to engage with research, recruitment of local research champions, provision of technical and social support to those seeking to implement research-based practices and programs, and use of financial incentives to encourage uptake.

The overwhelming message to arise from reviews is that multifaceted strategies, which combine several of the interventions outlined above, work best. However, we need to know more about what combinations work best and in what contexts. If they are not carefully thought through, multifaceted interventions may foster an unfocused and scattergun research use improvement strategy.

Lesson 4: Draw on eight guiding principles that are consistently associated with successful strategies and initiatives

Useful guidance for developing and implementing a research use strategy or initiative is at hand. Current knowledge on what makes for effective research use has revealed some remarkably consistent messages about the key features associated with success. Whether the task is the establishment of a research-practice collaboration or the

implementation of a research-based tool, the principles for success are very similar. They are:

1. *Provide opportunities for translation* - To be used, research needs to be adapted for local practice contexts. Simply providing the findings is not enough. Adaptation can take multiple forms, including tailoring research results to a target group; enabling debate about their implications; “tinkering” with research in practice; or developing research-based programs or tools.
2. *Develop local ownership* - Ownership - of the research itself, of research-based programs or tools, or of projects to implement research - is vital to uptake. Exceptions can, however, occur where implementation is received or perceived as a coercive process.
3. *Encourage local enthusiasts* - Individual enthusiasts or “product champions” can help carry the process of getting research used. They are crucial to selling new ideas and practices. Personal contact is most effective here.
4. *Conduct a contextual analysis* - Successful initiatives are those that analyse the context for research implementation and target specific barriers to and enablers of change.
5. *Ensure credibility* - Research take-up is enhanced where there is: credible evidence; endorsement from opinion leaders; and a demonstrable high-level commitment to the process.
6. *Provide leadership* - Strong and visible leadership, at both management and project levels, can help provide motivation, authority and organisational integration.
7. *Give adequate support* - Ongoing support for those implementing change increases the chance of success. Financial, technical, organisational and emotional support are all important. Dedicated project coordinators have been core to the success of many initiatives.
8. *Develop integration* - To assist and sustain research use, activities need to be integrated within existing organisational systems and practices. All key stakeholders need to be involved. Alignment with local and national policy demands also supports research use.

Lesson 5: Surface and question underlying assumptions about the nature of evidence-based practice and how it is best achieved, particularly the common assumptions that frontline practitioners are the main consumers of research

As the eight guiding principles outlined above apply across a range of approaches to implementing research-informed practice, the question remains of what overall approach to take. For example, should the emphasis be on embedding research in a research-based program or tool, or should the approach seek active engagement of potential research users with the research findings themselves? The design of strategies to improve research use needs to be shaped by a coherent model of what research-informed practice is or should be and how this form of practice is best achieved. However, insofar as they exist, such models tend to be implicit rather than explicit and an important task is to bring these models to the surface and assess their fitness for purpose. One attempt to do this is a review of activities designed to promote research use in UK social care, which identified three broad ways of thinking about and

developing research-informed practice¹. These different approaches are encapsulated in three models (Box 1). Although the three models were developed in the context of UK social care, they also resonate with the different approaches taken to promote research use in other settings.

Box 1: Three models of research use in practice setting

The *research-based practitioner model* assumes that it is the role and responsibility of the individual practitioner to identify and keep informed about the latest research developments. These are then used to inform day-to-day professional activities. Research use is supported by the provision of access to research databases and “what works” lists. Training is aimed at enabling practitioners to search for and appraise evidence. Despite the many barriers to this model, it still tends to be the dominant or default model of research use.

In the *embedded research model*, practitioners rarely engage directly with research findings. Instead, research enters practice indirectly; it becomes embedded in systems, processes and standards (e.g. inspection frameworks, national or local policies, procedures, and tools). Such embedding occurs through the translation of research-insights into practice activities by those in national and/or local policy and service management roles. Research use depends on widespread adoption of research-based guidance and tools; funding, training, performance management and regulatory regimes are used to encourage or coerce the use of such guidance or tools.

In the *organisational excellence model*, organisations are not merely channels for getting externally generated research findings to impact on practice, they are also the locus for local experimentation, evaluation and practice development based on research. This is facilitated through organisations working in partnership with universities and other research organisations in an interactive way.

The key question is which, if any, model works best? Unsurprisingly, there is no definitive answer to this question. The evidence we have to date suggests that no single approach or model is always better than another, and this supports our concerns about the widespread use of the research-based practitioner model.

There are many barriers to the research-based practitioner model and it does not appear to be a good model on which to base an overall strategy for enhancing research use in practice contexts. However, an adapted version of the research-based practitioner model may be a more relevant approach to improving research use for those involved in service design (at national and local levels).

The approach captured in the embedded research model may offer a more practical alternative to the research-based practitioner model in specific situations. It appears to be appropriate where there is strong evidence for a particular practice or where practice tools can be tailored to local context. However, unless the implementation of an embedded approach is carefully managed, it runs the risk of stifling innovation and assuming that one size fits all.

¹ Walter I, Nutley SM, Percy-Smith J, McNeish D and Frost S (2004) Improving the use of research in social care. Knowledge Review 7. Social Care Institute for Excellence/ Policy Press

The organisational excellence model is attractive because it emphasises social interaction and two-way knowledge flows, which resonates with current understandings of the research use process. Moreover, this model begins to link 'using evidence' more effectively with other approaches to organisational improvements. Many evaluations of research-practice partnerships generally conclude that collaborative approaches have proved successful. However, establishing and maintaining the sorts of partnerships that typify the organisational excellence model partnerships is costly and time-consuming. Where they have been established they tend to be small scale, of limited reach and time limited.

Of course, the models are just that, and on the ground specific initiatives may not always reflect a clear distinction between different models. One model may shade into another or borrow some of its key elements, or different models may be used at different times or for different staff groups. Nonetheless they are helpful in teasing out some key differences in approach. A constructive approach will involve careful analysis of the context of implementation, and whether different models or approaches are required at different times or for different practitioner groups.

Lesson 6: Recognise that dedicated intermediary knowledge broker organisations or networks can play an important role in promoting and facilitating research use

The lessons thus far have focused attention on three, albeit overlapping, communities: research, policy and practice. However, there is an important constituency of "intermediaries" who also deserve attention in their own right because they can play an important role in promoting and facilitating research use. Knowledge broker organisations and networks (such as *research in practice*²) are an important route through which research reaches those who might use it. They include charitable foundations, think tanks and professional associations.

Such knowledge brokers act as a bridge between research and user communities. For example, they translate research accounts for practitioners, and can ensure that research findings are targeted at the right people, at the right time. Broker organisations may also operate in much more interactive ways through the provision of workshops, training sessions and ongoing support. However, in many fields the development of knowledge brokerage capacity has been haphazard, resulting in fragmented provision.

Some intermediary organisations, such as charities and think tanks, may have a strong research advocacy remit. As such, they rarely take the policy context for a set of research findings as a given, but seek instead to reshape it through publicity campaigns, lobbying and alliance building. Some organisations have the resources to develop demonstration projects showing "evidence in action". Such working projects provide concrete exemplars that can be persuasive as they help allay fears about "implementation failure" and can provide valuable knowledge about implementation processes that work.

² www.rip.org.uk

Although knowledge brokers can and have played a positive role in encouraging and enabling research use, a few words of caution are in order: when intermediaries become strong advocates for pieces of research, their marketing and lobbying activities may be treated with suspicion and this can taint the credibility of the research in question. To avoid this happening, knowledge brokers need to establish their credentials as "honest brokers".

Lesson 7: Evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to improve research use and continue to learn from these evaluations

The lessons above have been developed from what we already know about research use, but there is still much to uncover. Further research and evaluation has the potential to augment our understanding about research use processes as well as provide a richer, more nuanced evidence base on which to develop research use enhancement strategies. Where you develop and experiment with different initiatives to improve research use, these should be evaluated and written up in order to add to the existing evidence base.

Conclusions

Research has an important contribution to make to the development of services for children and young people. It takes many forms and can be used in many different ways. The process by which research is used often defies simple description and explanation. We know that research use usually involves more than just individuals accessing and applying research, that context is crucial, that research is more likely to be adapted than simply adopted, and that social interaction is often key.

All of this means that in developing strategies for improving research use we need to move away from simple, linear assumptions about the research use process. Strategies need to move beyond the tendency to talk about research use as an individual-level process and pay more attention to and engage with organisations, systems and the broader context of social settings. They also need to acknowledge the roles of other types of knowledge and evidence, and in doing so seek to open up rather than close down opportunities for the interaction of research-based knowledge with other types of knowledge.

In line with these conclusions this paper has provided seven lessons for those concerned with enhancing research use. Taken together these lessons have the potential to shape effective approaches to increasing evidence-informed practice in services for children and young people.

Note: This is an adapted version of a book chapter (Davies HTO, Nutley SM and Walter I, 2010, 'Using evidence: how social research could be better used to improve public service performance' in Walshe K, Harvey G and Jas P (eds), *Connecting knowledge and performance in public services: from knowing to doing*, Cambridge University Press). That book chapter, in turn, draws on the findings of a larger research synthesis (Nutley SM, Walter I and Davies HTO, 2007, *Using Evidence: How research can improve public services*, Bristol: The Policy Press).