



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILD DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH, POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

Coordinators' Notebook No. 17, 1995

by Robert G. Myers

New Directions in Human Development and Family Studies: Research, Policy and Programme Interfaces. *Those of us who are advocates of Early Childhood Development spend much of our energy promoting the concept of the whole child. We point out that children need more integrated attention than just nutritional help or cognitive stimulation. We ask decisionmakers, programme providers, and parents to consider ways to support all dimensions of the child's growth, and to pay attention to enriching the environment in which that child grows. Applying that same kind of thinking to the field of ECCD the Consultative Group promotes ways to link research, policy and programming, so they can have beneficial synergistic impacts on each other. Research is not just an intellectual exercise; it is a process of refining our understanding of young children and their needs so that we can be more responsive to them. Quality programming is not just a curriculum exercise designed at a desk; it arises from experiences, knowledge about the particular children being served, and awareness of the specific social conditions for which it is being designed. Similarly, as Judith Evans mentioned in Creating a Shared Vision, policy does not exist in a vacuum. It should be formulated with awareness of the people it will affect, and should be based on experience, research and programming. As proponents of ECCD we are searching for ways to integrate research, policy, and programming so that they can truly benefit each other. In the following short excerpt adapted from his preface to the book, **Human Development and Family Studies in India. An Agenda for Research and Policy** (Saraswathi and Kaur), Robert G. Myers suggests some possible ways of viewing research, to take into account its interrelationships with programming and policy.*

The most frequent model used to connect research with policy and programming is one in which research results are first created, then communicated from the researcher to the potential user.

The communication may be face-to-face or may occur in written or visual form. Or, the research results may be *brokered* by an intermediary acting on behalf of the researcher, such as a policy institute or a professional association engaged in lobbying. It may be, also, that *basic* research findings are first transformed into an application or technology and that application is then passed on to practitioners.

This traditional way of thinking about research and its practical consequences has several characteristics. First, in this conception, the researcher and the user are always separate. Second, and following from the first, knowledge is always transferred from one person to another. Third, research results are first produced, then disseminated (perhaps after being repackaged or turned into a curriculum, technology or application).

When judging the success of the transfer of knowledge to action, there is also a tendency to associate specific pieces of research or specific outcomes of research with specific policies or actions in the world of policy and practice.

This way of approaching the relationship between research and its use in practice is not wrong. Such interfaces occur and they can and should be fostered. However, this view of how to use research is limiting and, in my opinion, probably does not represent the principal way in which research gets converted to action. What are alternative conceptions and what do they imply?

One alternative model is that researchers might seek ways of informing a broad public. This is important for two reasons. First, it gets away from the assumption that all actions occur through governments. Research can be used directly by the public and can be *empowering*. For example, the successes of the Dr. Spock baby book in the United States, the best selling book on early stimulation in Chile, and similar popular publications in other countries testify to the potential efficacy of repackaging research results for use directly by the public. A second, less often recognized reason for using the public as an audience is that, in democracies, citizens put pressure on governments to change their policies. While this change may occur over long periods of time, such a use of research results can have an important impact on policies. In this case, the journalist, popular writer or even the television actor may become important allies of the researcher who wants to contribute to better practice.

Directing research results to the public barely breaks with the traditional way of thinking about the research/practice nexus described above. It goes beyond the traditional tendency to associate specific research findings with specific changes in policy. It also opens up the timeframe, offering a different way to influence policy, practice and those who set policy and plan programmes. However, the approach continues to separate researcher from user and is linear in conception.

There is another, more radical way of thinking about the production and use of knowledge. In this view, the researcher and the practitioner come back together; they are one and the same. In this non-linear view, the dissemination and use of knowledge begins to occur with the conceptualization of a research project. Knowledge is used and disseminated over the course of the research process. It is also embodied in the people who carry out the research and who then use the knowledge, without having to transfer what was learned to others.

We have a basis for this view in the literature on research utilization showing that, "...for a study to exert a strong conceptual influence on practitioners, interactions between researchers and practitioners must occur not only on completion of the study, but also during and, ideally, before the conduct of the study. Also, many of these contacts must be face-to-face." (Huberman 1990, 365) What is still missing from this formulation is the explicit notion of practitioner as researcher, and vice versa. It is only then that the possibility of a tie between research and use is maximized.

In this more radical view, we are led to think as much about **who** carries out the research and about what they will do with the experience as about the specific content of it. We are led to the idea of participation in research as a form of education. One common example is when graduate students are involved in research (policy-oriented or not) with the idea that they will embody the resulting awareness and move into positions as practitioners, using what they have learned in the course of the research. But it is far from being the only case. For instance, there are situations in which knowledge acquired in research is put to policy and programme use because researchers themselves move into policy or programme positions. There are also instances when practitioners are incorporated into research with the idea that the experience will inform their own work.

In this view, attempts to incorporate practitioners directly into research become as important as incorporating researchers into practice. One can imagine, for instance, cases of classroom teachers who are involved in continuing education or training that uses their own classroom as the laboratory for research. This is seldom done. Given the proper atmosphere and using methodologies that link action to reflection, such participatory research can overcome the possible problems of bias in observation, can be done without sacrificing rigor, and can lead to the immediate use of research results.

Incorporating policymakers into research is less common and more challenging, but it may be possible to find ways to achieve it. For example, exchanges can be set up where not only do ECCD students carry out internships in government offices where policies are made and programmes are directed, but also where responsible individuals in government offices (or non governmental organizations) can be provided with similar study opportunities. These study opportunities could revolve around projects directly related to their work and around research that would inform their work.

Participatory research can be designed to include parents, teachers, supervisors, programme planners and policymakers. Since each of these groups has much to contribute to our understanding of young children and the experiences which support their growth, it makes sense for ECCD researchers to draw on them in their research projects. Similarly, it makes sense for researchers to reach out in a myriad of ways to (and to be sought out by) these influential people, to make sure that the interconnections between research, policy and programming are strong and vital.

In the book for which this Preface was written, reporting on the results of a Symposium¹ that explored the interface between research and policy, several suggestions were made to facilitate that interface. The suggestions were based on the central notion that "the key to effective linkages ... lies in better communication between researchers, policymakers, programme planners and the public". To communicate better it is suggested that:

- there is a need to communicate research results without using technical jargon;
- research brokers be identified and a process of *lobbying* be strengthened in which professional organizations and national research institutes take on a more active advocacy role;
- use of the media should be increased, particularly in reaching the public;
- two-way channels be provided that include mechanisms for identifying gaps and the kinds of questions that need to be addressed from time to time;
- an interdisciplinary task force be established by the government to evolve a comprehensive framework for guiding research efforts, monitoring the translation of research findings into implications for policy and programming, and coordinating dissemination.

Other specific suggestions for improving the linkages included:

- encouraging policy-oriented research;
- building evaluation into programmes from the start and on a continuous basis;
- sensitizing graduate students to the importance of policy-oriented research and to the importance of making the linkages, by introducing appropriate concepts in methods courses, by offering seminars for drawing policy relevance from existing research, by encouraging research, and by establishing internships in government bodies or advocacy groups;
- seeking a greater understanding of the policy and programme processes and then selecting research topics with a *high impact potential*. In general these will be topics that are not only of current interest, but also ones that must be treated in a culturally relevant way, in context;
- paying greater attention to research that delves into why some programmes succeed and others fail.

For the most part, the above suggestions depend on some sort of interface by researchers directly with policymakers and planners. Major exceptions to this are the suggestions concerning the use of the media to reach the public, the incorporation of researchers into the evaluation of on-going programmes, and the encouragement of students to become involved in research with a policy orientation. I would like to stress these exceptions precisely because they do not depend on communicating research results directly or through brokers.

¹ The Symposium was titled: *New Directions in Human Development and Family Studies: Research, Policy and Programme Interfaces*. It was held November 8-10, 1990 at the M.S. University of Baroda, Baroda, India.

While it is often difficult to make these more direct connections and build the desired partnerships (It may require repeated invitations and personal lobbying to get individuals from the policy or programming realm to participate in research meetings, people from research and policy to participate in programming meetings, etc.) it is well worth the effort.

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