Knowledge and action in education policy and politics

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Abstract

The desire to make empirical evidence more salient to government action in education is longstanding. The growth of interest in recent years in evidence-based decision-making has brought new attention to this issue. In this paper I draw on my experience as a researcher and as a senior government official to look at the promise and obstacles around the use of empirical evidence by governments in education policy. The paper argues that knowledge use in government must be seen through the lens of political dynamics. A number of key political dynamics are described and their implications for the use of research and evidence are developed.

Knowledge and action in education policy and politics 1

The focus of this paper is the relationship between knowledge and action, more specifically the relationship between social science evidence and practice in education.2 (I will use 'practice' in this paper to refer both to policy and practice but will focus primarily on government policy.) This is a topic on which a great deal has been written over the years – so much so that one might wonder what else is left to say. However much of the literature focuses on the social science part of the equation, discussing what it is that researchers should do to make their voices heard. I want to focus more on the government side, paying attention to the dynamics of politics and government that are major influences on the use of evidence. These forces are also rather poorly understood by most social scientists, at least judging by the way they are generally treated in the literature.

I come to this task as someone who has spent my career moving back and forth from the world of education research to the world of education policy and management. I have been a school trustee, a school board research director, a university professor, a university administrator, and – twice - a senior civil servant. Over all this time I have been concerned with the relationship between research, policy and practice, and the extent to which research knowledge affects what really happens in schools and school systems. I am currently the chief civil servant responsible for education in the Province of Manitoba, on secondment from my academic position at The University of Manitoba. I also continue to be involved in academic research.

The literature on research-policy linkages in education expresses a number of themes. First, there is general disappointment that research has not had more impact on education policy or practice. Various reasons are adduced for this failure, such as the overall limited volume of research in education, its low quality, the lack of understanding by researchers of practitioner needs, the poor dissemination of research, and so on. Another set of issues concerns the unrealistic expectations of users that research can and will provide straightforward and

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All opinions are solely those of the author in his private capacity.

2 I adopt here a rather uncritical and essentialist view of knowledge as somehow given and objective. I am aware of the limitations of this presentation but excuse it for this exercise on the grounds that it would complicate the argument excessively to introduce the appropriate qualifications.

unambiguous answers to their questions in a very short period of time. Finally, there is a widespread belief among researchers that politics or politicians, unconcerned with anything except re-election, refuse to acknowledge or act on important findings. All of these appear to be relevant considerations, and many useful suggestions have been made as to how they might be addressed.

At the same time, this approach is too limited in a number of respects. To begin with, the pessimism exhibited about the value and impact of research in education appears to be unwarranted. There is good evidence to suggest that the impact and use of research has been improving steadily in recent years and has the potential to improve significantly more. The very fact that the value of research is squarely on the policy agenda is highly significant. The growth of interest in evidence-based or evidence-informed decision making in education is a salutary development (Levacic & Glatter, 2001). A number of developments in Canadian research, such as the funding of research networks and research partnerships, increased focus on dissemination, and special purpose vehicles for bringing research to the attention of practitioners (such as the Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda or the now-developing Campbell Collaboration) are all positive steps. Just last month the Council of Ministers of Education agreed to enter into a substantial partnership with SSHRC under the Initiative on the New Economy to promote the dissemination and use of education research. Many controversies continue over the way in which research should affect policy and practice, both in general terms and in regard to specific issues. The general trend towards greater emphasis on evidence, however, seems to me to be unmistakable and salutary.

Although I do not have empirical evidence on this point, it seems to me that public attention to and interest in research has been growing steadily. It is now quite common to see several research-related items on the TV news, and to read frequent reports of study results in the print media. Governments seem more and more anxious to be able to point to research supporting their policies. The willingness of the federal government to increase substantially its funding for research is also noteworthy. It seems reasonable to think that an increasingly educated population will be more interested in and knowledgeable about research than used to be the case.

At the same time, an exclusive focus on how research needs to change is unlikely to be sufficient. In the end decisions about use rest with users, so it is vital to understand their perspectives. In regard to teachers and administrators a burgeoning literature on topics such as action research suggests that these questions are under very active discussion (e.g. McNamara & Corbin, 2001). However in regard to policy-makers – politicians and their senior officials – I find the existing work to be far less satisfactory.[3] Some researchers, confronted with the realities of

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[3] School districts provide another level of political involvement with education policy which I do not discuss in this paper except to note that their dynamics have both similarities to and differences from provincial governments.

politics, are doubtful that research will ever have the desired impact on practice. Yet the fact is that despite all of the above, governments are major consumers of research. However the process is rarely as direct and linear as researchers tend to believe. Rather, research affects policy through political processes. One has to begin looking at the impact of research by looking at the process through which political agendas are defined. That is the topic of this paper.

The dynamics of government

A fundamental starting point is that the use of research – indeed, knowledge use in general – in government can only be understood as part of the overall process of government and especially the influence of politics. This means that researchers who wish to have impact need to understand more fully the way that government works.

In my experience politics is an intensely rational activity. Politicians are no more venal or self-serving or indifferent to knowledge than are researchers or civil servants. However the premises behind political rationality are not necessarily the same as those governing education or research. Understanding the use of research in government requires an understanding of the factors that affect elected governments. Six such factors are discussed in the following pages. Although these descriptions arise largely from my own experience, they are also supported by a substantial literature on the dynamics of government which is discussed at greater length in Levin, 2001.

1. Governments do not control their own agendas.

Although every government comes to office with a set of policy ideals or commitments, the reality is that much of what governments attend to is not of their own design or preference. A private company can determine what business it wants to be in, whereas governments have to be in whatever businesses people see as important. Nor are people necessarily consistent or reasonable in their views as to what governments ought to do - or refrain from doing.

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

As soon as a government is elected, various groups try to influence its agenda in accord with their own. This is in many ways the essence of the political process. It means that politicians are constantly bombarded with requests or demands to do things, stop doing things, increase funding, decrease funding, pass legislation, repeal other legislation, and so on. As people are better educated and better organized, the number and intensity of the pressures on politicians has risen.

Unanticipated developments can also affect political agendas, as the events of September 11 have so dramatically shown. If the economy turns sour and revenues drop, if natural disasters

occur, if new domestic developments take place, governments must respond in some way, even if that means taking attention and resources away from other activities that were high on the priority list. As Dror puts it (1986, p. 168), there is "at any given moment a high probability of low probability events occurring. In other words, surprise dominates" (1986, p. 186).

While some of these pressures relate to very important, long-term issues, others may concern small short-term details. However one cannot assume that the former will always be more important than the latter. Sometimes very small items can turn into huge political events (Bovens & t'Hart, 1994). For example, a single instance of a problem can undermine an entire system that may actually be working reasonably well, as those working in health care or child welfare know only too well.

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

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

2. There is never enough time.

Governments are in some sense responsible for everything. Government leaders have to make decisions about a vast array of issues – from highways to the environment, from financial policy to education, from health to justice systems. And, as just noted, they are likely to face an unending set of pressures on their energy and attention. A cabinet member not only has responsibility for her or his own area of jurisdiction – which can itself be enormously complicated and fraught with difficulties – but is also supposed to participate in collective decision-making on a wide variety of other matters facing the government. The nature of political life is such that there is no respite from these demands. A politician may leave her or his office, but almost every social encounter will also lead to new pressures or requests. Being a politician is a 24/7 job, as the new e-language would put it.

Consider a small jurisdiction such as Manitoba. The Minister of Education was newly elected in the fall of 1999 and had previously been a town councilor and part-time teacher. When named Minister he acquired responsibility for everything to do with elementary, secondary and post-secondary education as well as adult education and training. He has to give political and substantive direction to staff on every aspect of these systems, many of which involve great

subtleties and complexities. At the same time, every week he goes to a Cabinet meeting at which a whole range of issues from all his colleagues are also on the table for discussion. In a given week these might include a new mineral exploration license, a change in policy on highway maintenance, a loan for a new commercial enterprise, changes in legislation regulating a profession, developing a new health program, setting new entry prices for provincial parks, deciding on a communications strategy for a change in a social program, and so on for 20 or 30 or more items. In addition, he has many political functions to attend, and a constituency to look after. Some politicians even try to have time for family, friends and a personal life!

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

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

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

3. Politics and policies are both important.

Everything in government occurs in the shadow of elections. Every government is thinking all the time about how to improve its prospects for being re-elected. Some people find this cynical, but it is hard to see what else politicians could do. After all, concern for re-election is really a concern to do what most people want, and presumably we elect governments for precisely that purpose. A government that does not satisfy people will be tossed out most of the time. The British cabinet minister in the TV series *Yes Minister* understandably reacted with dismay when his chief advisor, Sir Humphrey, called for taking a courageous stand, since this meant doing something unpopular. We villify our politicians for ignoring our wishes, so we can hardly be surprised if they go to great lengths to try not to offend

At the same time, governments are often genuinely concerned about the results of their actions and policies. They do want to fulfill their commitments to voters, and programs and policies are the means of doing so. Moreover, policy errors can create very large political costs – witness decisions by many provinces in the 1990s to reduce the number of nurses. Some politicians are intensely pragmatic and willing to reshape policy in light of changing pressures or public preferences, while others are deeply committed to particular values and work hard to

promote and implement a course of action over years even in the face of substantial opposition.

There is, to be sure, a cynical side to this effort, in that governments do attempt to manipulate public opinion, to give the perception of action even when they are not doing much, and sometimes focus on image rather than substance. Rhetoric is a vital part of politics (Levin & Young, 2000), and government statements of intention cannot necessarily be taken at face value. Research is one of the vehicles used to support rhetoric, and this will likely be more common as the prominence of research increases. Murray Edelman (1964, 1984) and Deborah Stone (1997), among others, provide excellent analyses of the symbolic dimensions of policy.

4. People and systems both matter.

Much of what a government does is shaped by the individuals who happen to occupy critical positions, regardless of their political stripe. Any political party is likely to contain a wide range of views and positions. In fact, to put it in statistical terms, the within-group variance in ideas in a party is likely to be quite a bit larger than the variance between one party and another. So the individuals who come to hold certain positions are important. Some Cabinet ministers or key political operatives understand and use research while others may be ignorant or even dismissive. Insofar as research has public credibility it will also tend to have more cachet with politicians.

At the same time, the nature of government systems also matters. The roles of departments and agencies, the relative power of ministers vis a vis central government, and the nature of checks and balances are all important in shaping the way policies are constructed and delivered. Some governments or agencies have given a prominent role to research units. For example in Canada the Applied Research Branch of HRDC and Statistics Canada have both played important evidence-based policy roles. Where such functions are institutionalized there is more potential for research to be available when needed and in an appropriate form.

5. A full-time opposition changes everything.

Imagine how your work might change if there were people whose full-time job it was to make you look bad. Imagine also that they could use less than scrupulous means of doing so and that there was a tendency for people to believe their criticisms ahead of your explanations. Might that not change the way you went about your work?

Yet that is precisely the situation facing every elected government. Oppositions are there to oppose. They will work hard to show how government actions are wrong, venal, or destructive. In doing so they will not always be particularly concerned with balance or fairness in their accounts. Research may be used here, too, to support a political point, which is one reason governments are not always anxious to do or publish empirical work. As a former minister said to me, "A dog learns not to fetch the stick you use to beat it."

While many people decry negativity in politics, politicians use this strategy not necessarily because they like it, but because they think it works. If conflict is what attracts public attention,

then conflict is what politicians will create, since public attention is what they must have. A politician friend once told me that he got far more publicity and recognition from a certain public relations gesture that he knew was rather narrow than from any number of thoughtfully articulated policy papers, so the public relations gesture would continue.

There is a potential 'tragedy of the commons' in this dynamic, however. To the extent that political processes focus on the negative and the critical, even when the issues are not really substantive, they serve to increase voter cynicism about politics, which in turn leads to even more focus on the negative since this is what resonates for people. Low levels of voter turnout in a number of countries indicate that there is substantial disenchantment with politics generally, which must surely be a worrisome trend. Yet as long as the incentives push political action in this direction, we are unlikely to see a change in pattern.

6. Beliefs are more important than facts.

Academics are usually convinced that policy ought to be driven by research findings and other empirical evidence. From a political perspective, however, evidence is only one factor that shapes decisions, and it may be one of the less important factors. I have had a number of politicians tell me on various occasions that while the evidence I was presenting for a particular policy might be correct, the policy was not what people wanted or what they would accept. As McGill University President and former Ontario Deputy Minister Bernard Shapiro put it, "All policy decisions are made by leaping over the data." (Remarks at the Conference on Policy Studies, University of Calgary, May 10, 1991)

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

> The facts of life do not penetrate to the sphere in which our beliefs are cherished… they can aim at them continual blows of contradiction and disproof without weakening them… (Proust, Swann's Way)

Just as problematic is that people do not have to be consistent in their attitudes, either across issues or over time. The same people who demand more services from governments may also demand lower taxes. Those who in one year argued vehemently in favour of reduced government spending might the following year be just as impassioned when pointing out the

negative consequences of the reductions. People can and do hold inconsistent beliefs, but political leaders must do their best to accommodate these inconsistencies in some way.

Not everything in government is subject to all these constraints. At any given time much of what a government is doing happens outside the political sphere. Programs are organized, policies are promulgated, services are delivered, activities are undertaken, payments are made, without political scrutiny. Many activities of government are not of much public interest unless something dramatic happens. And the many pressures at the political level ensure that there is not enough time to look at everything no matter what one might wish to do. The scope for research to influence policy may be as great or greater for issues that are not high on the political radar screen. However as soon as an issue gets onto the public agenda, it will be of interest to politicians and all the problems noted will apply.

Knowledge use and agenda setting

Despite all these elements, governments do set agendas and take actions. The best-known account of how agendas get established in government is in Kingdon (1994), although his rendition requires some adjustment when thinking about the machinery in parliamentary systems such as Canada's. Kingdon describes political agendas as being created from the intersection of political events, defined problems and possible solutions. When the right mix of the three comes together, political action follows.

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

Definition of a problem also requires the generation of solutions. People are much more disposed to act on problems when they see the possibility of doing something that is feasible and will make a difference. Solutions are advanced by the same set of actors who try to define problems. In fact, much of the promotion of problems is done in order to generate support for a policy solution (Stone, 1997). At the same time, people who may share the view that something is a problem can also differ enormously in regard to the best solution. For example, almost everyone might agree that having many people without housing is a problem, but some advocate social housing while others may advocate market-based solutions as the preferred strategy.

Research plays a part in defining both problems and solutions. However its role in both cases is usually mediated through third parties. Research comes to policy-makers primarily through the civil service, through interpretation by the media, or through the work of knowledge brokers (also called policy entrepreneurs). The work of researchers usually enters the political

domain digested and reinterpreted by these third parties. Because politics is entirely bound up with public debate, ideas that are popular in the public domain will also tend to have considerable political resonance.

> Experience also shows that facts and statistics are seldom sufficient to bring about changes in behavior - even after the need for a change has become clear. For this reason, public policies... tend to rely at least as much on persuasion as on objective information. (Majone 1989, p. 39)

The civil service and research

Civil servants often play a powerful role in shaping policy (Levin, 2001). The precise nature of that influence depends on personal, institutional and political factors. Typically, however, civil servants are involved in formulating specific ways for politicians to achieve their objectives. The lower the issue on the political agenda, or the less committed political leaders are to a particular solution or approach, the more scope there is for the civil service to influence the policy choices.

For civil servants, as for politicians, research is only one influence on the kinds of proposals that may be put forward. Since senior civil servants live right next to the political world, they are acutely conscious of the pressures faced by politicians and fully aware of the need to bring forward proposals that are politically acceptable. At the same time, most civil servants do have a real commitment to the substantive policy field itself and see it as their job to make recommendations that are consistent with the best interests of that field. Much may depend on whether civil servants are themselves trained in, familiar with and knowledgeable about research issues. Insofar as civil servants are moved from one policy field to another the likelihood of their bringing relevant research to bear will decrease simply from lack of knowledge.

Knowledge brokers

Politicians rarely read original research. Their days are too busy and their preoccupations tend to be elsewhere. They are, however, interested in ideas that arrive in a variety of forms and from many different sources provided that these ideas are not too far from their current assumptions and dispositions. In fact, politicians are almost always looking for interesting policy ideas, since these are an important piece of political currency. The media can play an important role in this process, as they provide a main vehicle through which ideas come to public attention. More stories about research in the mainstream media will raise not only the profile of those particular studies but of research generally as providing a credible source of ideas. Of course a great deal depends on what studies are reported and how they are reported, a subject worthy of more study in its own right.

The term ‘knowledge brokers’ refers to people and organizations that work to put policy ideas forward, either by defining problems or by proposing solutions or both. As Stone (1997) points out, the definition of problems is often done as the rationale for a proposed solution. For

example, the campaign to lower tax rates has aimed at changing politicians' minds by constant repetition in the media and by changing the views that their constituents, especially powerful constituents, express to them. Mintrom (2000) uses the term 'policy entrepreneurs' for much the same set of activities.

The role of knowledge broker can be and is played by many different individuals and groups, including advocacy organizations, research centres, and individuals. The increasing importance of research is illustrated by the growth in the number, importance and sophistication of research-based lobby organizations such as the Fraser Institute or the Conference Board or the Canadian Centre on Policy Alternatives. These organizations have developed highly sophisticated ways of using evidence to try to shape public attitudes and political agendas (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 1997). Research and evidence play an important role in this work. Pick up any report by these or similar organizations and you will find reference to a variety of studies and sources of empirical evidence. Researchers often act as knowledge brokers, not only developing ideas or data but also working actively to promote those ideas in the public and political domain. Some journalists also act as knowledge brokers, using their access to the media to promote particular perspectives.

Ideas and stories

The political world is, as already noted, shaped by beliefs more than facts. Political decisions are inevitably swayed by 'what everybody knows' even if it turns out that this conventional wisdom is incorrect. In shaping these beliefs – what Schon (1971) called 'ideas in good currency' – people tend to be highly influenced by stories. Some fascinating evidence shows how powerful individual stories can be in contrast to statistical evidence (Keisler & Sproull, 1982; Khaneman, Slovik & Tversky, 1982). Civil servants often note that a few phone calls from constituents can have more impact on decisions than any number of internal memos or studies. The reality is that we are a story-telling species and do better with individual instances than with the calculation of probabilities; apparently this is true even of statisticians, who in their own lives do not tend to make great use of probabilities. This predisposition for stories is one of the reasons the media use, and people endlessly retell, individual stories as opposed to citing statistical evidence.

In much the same way as stories circulate, so do often ill-defined ideas about public policy. Such truisms as 'the virtues of the private sector', 'the importance of competition', 'brain drain', 'the need for accountability' are all deeply rooted in public thinking without necessarily having much depth to them or much clarity as to their implications. This lesson is well understood by many think tanks and lobby groups who make extensive efforts to shape public opinion via the media, and to affect the views of key stakeholders, often using research of various kinds in their efforts.

Implications for researchers

In considering the implications of these ideas for research use one needs to begin with a longer-term perspective. Carol Weiss pointed out years ago (1979) that ideas take time to percolate through the body politic until they gradually turn into conventional wisdom. There is no straight line from knowledge generation to knowledge use, which means that both producers and users of research need to see what they are doing in broader terms. The word 'dissemination' is too narrow; 'impact' is a better concept.

It is probably most useful to conceptualize the issue of research impact as a question of learning, which is how writers such as Majone (1989), Lindblom (1990) and Stone (1997) have described the public policy process. As Majone puts it,

> ...learning is the dominant form in which rationality exhibits itself in situations of great cognitive complexity. This suggests that the rationality of public policy-making depends more on improving the learning capacity of the various organs of public deliberation than on maximizing achievement of particular goals. (1989, p.183)

Learning is, we know, a complex process that involves knowledge and experience, reason and emotion, construction and reconstruction of understandings. It may move in fits and starts and have backward as well as forward motion to it. It happens through thinking and through exchange among people - what Lindblom and Cohen (1979) describe as 'cogitation and interaction'.

The particular contribution of researchers is to work to make the public learning process one that is informed by empirical evidence and careful thinking. From this perspective it is important to pay attention to use and impact from the very beginning of any research work. How does one improve the circulation of ideas, especially those supported by evidence, into the general population? To achieve this goal one needs to think from the outset about who might be interested in a specific piece of research, how interested people might find out about the work, and what it is that might help move the research onto the policy agenda.

An understanding of political dynamics of the kind described in this paper is fundamental to building research impact. One then learns to think about third parties, about the various processes that influence agendas, and about the kind of high profile issues that might draw attention towards a particular body of knowledge. One has to be aware of what issues are on the agenda, what concerns are emerging, and therefore what opportunities might exist to bring appropriate knowledge forward. One also has to do the seed work of putting ideas into people's hands as a way of gradually developing interest in them.

At present in most cases a very small proportion of the attention of researchers and funders goes towards dissemination, especially if dissemination is understood as meaning something other than writing for academic audiences. But impact is not only a matter of how much effort goes into dissemination but also of the kind of effort. The argument of this paper would suggest that individual researchers and the institutions that employ them should develop the capacity to reach a diverse set of audiences using a wide range of vehicles – print, electronic and

personal communication. Moreover, the audiences to be reached are not just the obvious ones, but also the various third parties for whom the work may be relevant.

Planning for knowledge use also has to involve the development of longer-term relationships with users. As researchers build networks of people with an interest in their work they also have the opportunity to build credibility and to create the conditions under which their work will be sought after and used at the appropriate time. Earlier sections of this paper suggest that these relationships should not only be with official holders of power but also with those who are interested in influencing power. Learning to work with the media is especially important; there is a skill to media relations that requires effort and experience to develop but can yield good returns if done well.

These are not usually skills that researchers have, so it may also be useful to employ people who have different kinds of skills, such as professional writers or marketers or public relations agents, to assist in the process of disseminating research. There is a real challenge here for public knowledge production organizations, such as universities, to emulate some of the more effective practices of think tanks and lobby groups in making information available to people who might want it in forms they would find useful.

At the same time, the more people who understand research and feel comfortable with using it, the more likely research will be attended to. Improving research literacy among a wide range of people should be another important goal of those involved in knowledge production work. For example, as teachers become more knowledgeable about research and its potential value they are more inclined to read it, to pay attention to it, and to make efforts to use what research says to them. The same would be true of all sorts of other groups. Greater research literacy would also have the salutary effect of helping people sort out what is bogus from what is genuine, and of learning to be sceptical of anomalous results from individual studies.

Some examples

A few recent examples of effective research impact may help illustrate some of these points. The idea of early childhood as a key developmental stage has been around for a long time, but in Canada in the last few years some policy entrepreneurs such as Fraser Mustard and Dan Offord played critical roles in moving this issue to the top of the public policy agenda. They promoted the importance of early childhood through policy networks such as CIAR, through public vehicles such as the McCain-Mustard report commissioned in Ontario, through their contacts with a variety of organizations and interest groups, and through highly effective use of the media. Certainly political events and interests also had to come together for this agenda to be put into practice, but the policy advocacy and knowledge dissemination work done by a relatively small number of people appeared to play a considerable part.

A second example concerns student debt. During the 1990s, rising costs and declining financial assistance had led to substantial increases in debt for many students (though half of post-secondary students were still completing their programs with no debt at all). Once again research played an important part in sensitizing people to the issue and promoting various policy options.

Canadian student organizations worked very hard to gather and publicize information on debt. Effective political portrayals of crisis were created and considerable media attention obtained. In the last few years governments across the country have taken a variety of steps to reduce debt loads of post-secondary students through improved financial assistance, tuition reductions and tax credits. Again, empirical evidence was far from the only factor in shaping the agenda on this issue, but research did play a role in defining the issues and generating potential solutions.

Some dangers

The approach to knowledge impact described in this paper is not without dangers. Those involved in research use must beware of losing their objectivity, of being seen to lose their objectivity, and of being used by other interests.

The first danger is that researchers become committed advocates for a particular point of view that goes beyond what their work and the available evidence can justify. The line, admittedly, is a fine one. Certainly researchers are entitled in their personal capacities, like anyone else, to political opinions even if these are not well grounded. However when speaking as researchers or knowledge producers there is, I believe, a requirement to be careful about the conclusions to be drawn from evidence, especially in the social sciences.

Since in politics perception is reality, is it also important to look objective. This may mean being careful not to be too closely tied to a particular political party or organization. Paradoxically one can sometimes provide more support for a cause by standing a bit apart from it.

The third caution is closely related to the other two. Given the nature of politics, the temptation of political actors to use research and researchers is considerable, especially if research is seen to have a particular cachet in a debate. It is easy to be the flavour of the month in some circle only to be replaced very shortly by a new flavour, leaving one with little accomplishment and less credibility.

In all cases the seductions of becoming an advocate can be considerable – media attention, speaking engagements, access to powerful people. There is much more demand for 'we know that x is the case' than there is for 'x might be the case under certain conditions'. Peer review, for all its faults, remains one of the main ways we can guard against unwarranted conclusions from research.

Conclusion

In a relatively short paper like this the subtleties around issues of knowledge and use are inevitably somewhat elided. Complex questions about the knowledge and objectivity have been treated rather cavalierly. However the point of the paper is not to focus on these more philosophical issues, important though they are, but to draw attention to some of the requirements for research to play a significant role in the way our societies learn about and try to address vital social issues. Even a short time working in politics provides convincing evidence that perfection is impossible, but it can demonstrate equally that improvement is clearly attainable if we work for it.

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