FORGING COMMON GROUND: FOSTERING THE CONDITIONS FOR EVIDENCE USE

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The birth of community psychology is often dated to the 1965 Swampscott Conference. In the midst of widespread social change, a group of psychologists were dissatisfied with their field's almost-exclusive focus on the individual and individual-level interventions. They wanted to examine the ways social and ecological contexts such as schools, churches, neighborhoods, and entire communities affected people. And, they sought to change those contexts as a means to improve individual and community well-being. As a young student, I was drawn to this field that aspired to meld research and action. It appealed to my predispositions—nerdy enough to enjoy research but eager to improve social conditions.

While graduate school provided excellent research training and reinforced my interest in integrating research and action, it didn't show me *how* to integrate them. The truth is that I came out more confused than I went in, and I don't think my experience is unique. As doctoral students face graduation, they often express a desire to work at the nexus of research and policy or practice—but they are unsure how. I was lucky enough to end up at the William T. Grant Foundation. Ed Seidman had just been hired as senior vice president for program, and he recruited me as a postdoctoral fellow and program associate. Ed told me that the Foundation's goals were to further research that made a difference in policy and practice, and it would be a good place to pursue the questions that had been eluding me.

In 2004—the same year I joined the Foundation—we launched our Distinguished Fellows program, which immerses researchers in policy and practice settings and policymakers and practitioners in research settings. In 2008, we issued our first RFP on Understanding the Acquisition, Interpretation, and Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice. Last year, we aligned our program development funding around improving the connections between research and practice, focusing partially on research-practice partnerships.

This essay draws on those three initiatives to offer lessons my colleagues and I have learned about ways to connect research, policy, and practice—and ultimately forge common ground. I also offer a few cautionary notes about how policymakers and researchers are currently pursuing evidence-based practice. Below I discuss (1) creating conditions for the productive integration of evidence, (2) paving two-way streets for learning, and (3) building relationships and trust.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR THE PRODUCTIVE INTEGRATION OF EVIDENCE

Political scientists Lorraine McDonnell and Stephen Weatherford were among the first round of grantees from our RFP. Their project follows the Common Core State Standards movement, an effort to promote consistency across states in what children are expected to learn from kindergarten through high school. The movement, they say, provides a window into understanding the uses of research in policy and practice. After all, "advocates for the Common Core explicitly promoted it as 'research and evidence-based' and established procedures to encourage the use of research in drafting and validating the standards." The movement began when President George H.W. Bush and a handful of governors agreed that states would develop educational standards for particular subjects at each grade level. The focus on "national

standards" during the Bush, Sr. and Clinton administrations made some inroads. But things didn't kick into high gear until the movement became a state-driven "common standards" initiative led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The Obama administration's response to the 2008 economic crisis accelerated the action further by tying economic incentives to adoption of common standards in Race to the Top. To date, 45 states have adopted the standards in math and English language arts.

McDonnell and Weatherford's work details how the writers of the Common Core Standards sought out research, but soon came upon roadblocks. In math, strong research was available to inform the standards for K–2 but not for the upper grades. In order to develop standards for a K–12 system, they needed to integrate other types of evidence. Researchers provided professional judgment extrapolated from their knowledge of existing studies and opinions on learning trajectories for the higher grades. The standards also needed to be clear to educators. Thus teachers' unions and staff in state education agencies were incorporated into development of the standards. Agency staff drew on experiences developing prior standards. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) contributed teachers' professional judgment. The AFT, for example, provided feedback on the wording of the standards, identifying areas that would be confusing to teachers and suggesting ways to clarify them. Thus, the standards reflect an amalgamation of research and other types of evidence. Moreover, the incorporation of multiple types and sources of evidence in the development of the standards gave way to later political support for their adoption.

Advocates of evidence-based policy and practice often promote the use of rigorous research but are silent about how to integrate research with other types of

evidence. Policymakers and practitioners do not use research in isolation. They must always integrate research evidence along with other types of evidence as they appraise their work and options. They draw on an existing store of knowledge—experience, local data, policies, and political contexts—to understand the problem and determine, or adjust, a course of action.

The challenge ahead for connecting research, policy, and practice is not just promoting the production and use of rigorous research, but creating the conditions that enable productive integration of multiple types of evidence. It will require building policymakers' and practitioners' capacities to evaluate different types of evidence and weigh their potential contributions to (and limitations for) solving specific problems.

It will entail creating the conditions and incentives for productively integrating different types of evidence to arrive at sound decisions. This is the topic Weatherford and McDonnell are working on for their next paper.

PAVE TWO-WAY STREETS FOR LEARNING

When David DuBois started his Distinguished Fellowship, he was already a leading expert on youth mentoring research. He published prolifically, received funding from various federal agencies and foundations, and advised local and national mentoring organizations on the latest research. For his Fellowship, he left his safe world as research expert to learn about operating and managing one of the nation's largest mentoring organizations, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and its Chicago chapter.

After his Fellowship, DuBois' greatest insights were not about how mentoring organizations could enhance their use of research, but rather about how researchers could improve their work to meet practitioners' needs. His insights were derived from participating in the agency's strategic planning process in which they discussed how "operational efficiency, fundraising, mission relevance, and staff morale"—factors often neglected by mentoring research—affect programming and other decisions. With deeper knowledge of practitioner concerns, DuBois is better positioned to conduct research that speaks to their goals and constraints. He also developed a greater appreciation for timing. Research that is not influential immediately may later find a window of opportunity, and he now has a keener ability to recognize and take advantage of those windows when they appear.

People often talk of "research to practice" and "research to policy," but neglect the ways in which practice and policy can and should inform research. Researchers often consider policy and practice implications at the end of their studies, when they determine what their findings mean for practice or policy and seek to connect with those audiences. There are fewer incentives and supports for investigators to struggle with these issues at the front end of studies. How can researchers better understand practitioners' and policymakers' concerns and formulate

researchable questions to address them? How can study designs, measurement plans, and sampling choices address practitioners' and policymakers' information needs? How can work plans be configured to deliver research in more timely ways?

Learning more about the needs of local policymakers and agency managers could usefully shape research to identify "what works." Impact evaluations often focus on estimating the effects of programs or policies, with too little attention to how well findings apply to different participants and situations. Local decision-makers are modestly interested in whether something worked elsewhere. What matters most is whether an innovation will work for them—their clients, their staff, and their contexts. When it comes to these questions at the heart of local policy and practice decisions, research has few rigorous answers—but it could. Studying variation in program impacts, for example, would provide agencies with information on what works for whom and under what conditions.

Stronger connections between research, policy, and practice could also inform the study of program implementation. Researchers often measure imple-mentation in terms of dosage (how much of the program was delivered) and fidelity (how closely the services delivered match the original model). This

is a more limited definition of implementation than what agency leaders and program administrators need. Those professionals also require knowledge of how to align financing, staffing, and training. Those questions are inadequately documented and studied in empirical projects.

Two-ways streets can foster a cycle of iterative work, of practice to research and back. After findings are shared, practitioners still need to integrate the new information into specific changes. This can include modifying professional development, curricula, or program implementation. It can also mean codifying research findings into tools or protocols that can be readily integrated into daily work. After changes are implemented, further research can reveal whether the intended goals were met. Those findings can then lead to further changes, thus fostering an ongoing cycle of learning.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

In 2006, Michael Sorum, then the chief academic officer of Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas, was approached by Professor Paul Cobb of Vanderbilt University to participate in a study. Sorum initially declined. His office was inundated with research requests. Furthermore, he had had experi-ences with researchers who treated districts simply as objects to be studied, drawing down staff time and resources, without providing findings that were useful and timely enough to inform district decision-making or that matched districts' improvement goals. But Cobb was persistent and ultimately persuasive. His team had done their homework. They knew the district—its goals, challenges, and students—and they were eager to learn more about its theory of action, capacities, and strategies for improving middle school math. These conversations spawned the Middle-school Mathematics and the Institutional Setting of Teaching (MIST) partnership.

Each year since then, Cobb's team has travelled from Nashville, Tennessee, to Fort Worth to interview district leaders about their middle school math strategies, collect and analyze data on how those strategies are playing out in schools and classrooms, and meet with district leaders to discuss findings and consider ways the district can adjust its work the following year. Then, the cycle is restarted. Sorum reports that the partnership has contributed to a smooth implementation of a new math curriculum and gradual increases in student achievement. The research-practice partnership has had other unexpected benefits: it provides professional growth and fulfillment for senior staff, contributes to the district's stability in the event of staff turnover, and helps the district focus on making continuous incremental improvements rather than chasing the next silver bullet.

Before Cobb could begin his study, he had to build a relationship with the district—and the *people*—he wanted to work with. Relationships are important building blocks to bridging research, policy, and practice. We often focus on the technical skills required to develop research questions, design rigorous studies, analyze the data, and communicate results. Similarly, we talk about the technical capacities practitioners need to understand research. Technical skills are important, but it's also crucial not to overlook the social systems in which the work occurs.

Relationships are key pathways by which policymakers and practitioners acquire, interpret, and use research. Trust is important. Studies find that when decision-makers encounter research, their trust in it is melded with their trust in its source. Confronted with questions about a program or reform, agency administrators frequently look to peers who work in analogous positions, serving similar populations, and working under comparable conditions. Intermediaries are also vital: agencies turn to consultants, technical assistance providers, and professional associations. Legislators and their staff look to advocacy groups and think tanks for what research suggests for their work. Intermediaries have the potential to broker not only information, but also relationships of trust between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.
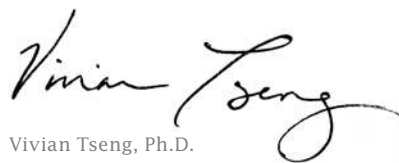
BACK TO SCHOOL

My mentors in community psychology cautioned us against "more-of-the-same" interventions. When an intervention doesn't work, there is a tendency to redouble the same efforts to make it work. I sometimes wonder whether the field's call for more "research-to-practice" and "research-to-policy" efforts aren't more of the same. When frustrated that research isn't sufficiently making it into practice or when research findings are misconstrued, researchers often push harder for the production and use of rigorous research evidence, or better translation at the end of studies. I have no doubts that rigor is crucial and that clearly communicating research is important. But unless the streets for learning run both ways, I suspect that the way we approach the problem will be more of the same.

In the past six months, I've gone back to school—literally and figuratively—in order to learn more about local education policy and practice. I've approached school district leaders about shadowing them or chatting with them about their work. Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger, chief achievement and accountability officer in Baltimore City Schools, allowed me to follow her through a day of meetings with staff, other district leaders, teacher union representatives, and consultants as they designed new evaluation systems for teachers, school leaders, and schools—all to be rolled out next year. I visited Sharon Locke, chief academic officer in New Britain, the lowest-performing school district in Connecticut with a per capita income of $18,404. It was Sharon's first year as CAO and walking through the halls of their central office, we passed a lot of empty desks—the result of recent budget cuts. Ritu Khanna; chief of research, planning, and evaluation in San Francisco Unified School District; talked with me about the capacity challenges districts face in applying research to their work, even when the studies are conducted in their districts. These visits have been humbling. They have revealed the complexity of district decision-making—the sea of information

In a recently commissioned paper, Cynthia Coburn, William Penuel, and Kimberly Geil describe a burgeoning sector of research-practice partnerships in education, which are grappling with these issues. These are long-term partnerships that depart from the more transient ways researchers and practitioners typically work together through one-off research projects and consultations. Research-practice partnerships strive for sustained, joint commitments that enable them to take on larger questions and explore issues in greater depth. Working collaboratively, researchers can better understand genuine problems of practice and the constraints and opportunities for making change in districts. Practitioners, in turn, can trust that researchers will share their findings in a timely and useful fashion and help them apply the research to their work.

and considerations to weigh, the constraints to work within, the opportunities to seize, the relationships to nurture—and the modesty of research relevant to their decisions.

People are sometimes surprised when I tell them that this is how I'm spending my discretionary time as an officer of the William T. Grant Foundation. Shouldn't a research funder be focused on the researchers who are carrying out the work? Yes and no. Yes, my colleagues and I spend the vast majority of our time listening to and talking with researchers because of the

Foundation's longstanding investment in the research community. At the same time, promoting research that matters in policy and practice requires paying attention to those voices as well. I suspect the greatest lessons for improving our work to bridge research with policy and practice will come from understanding life on the other side of the bridge.

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