

Putting Knowledge to Work *by Nicole Yohalem*

How much of the available research gets into the hands of youth development practitioners? Where do they go for advice or to interpret scientific data? What can be done to strengthen the bridges between research, evaluation, and practice?

Bridging research and practice.
Closing the research-policy gap.
Data-driven decision making.
Evidence-based strategies.

These “buzz phrases” appear more and more often in conversations, reports, and strategic plans in the youth development, education, and social services fields. But how do policy-makers and practitioners actually use research in their work? What obstacles do they face? What will it take to strengthen the links between the world of research and the worlds of policy and practice?

Recent interviews with leaders in the youth fields suggest that while overhauling the pipelines between research, policy, and practice may be a long-term undertaking, there is great potential for progress. The interviews netted the usual concerns about the need for more summaries and translations, better cross-study syntheses, and more timely and targeted dissemination. But they also underscored the extent to which those who use external information to make decisions and/or influence the decisions of others under-

stand the value of research and lament their lack of easy access to it.

Last year the staff from the Forum for Youth Investment talked with 30 stakeholders from the youth fields representing practice, policy, and philanthropy. The goal of the project was to improve our understanding of how, and how much, research influences decisions that shape policy and practice in the youth fields. A full report on the “Identifying and Mapping Key Ideas in the Youth Fields” project will be released late summer 2002 by our funder, the W. T. Grant Foundation. The mapping research is one part of a larger W. T. Grant initiative, *New Perspectives: A Working Paper Series on Youth Development, Policies and Practices*.

How Policy and Program Leaders Use Research

Perhaps the most important point is that the stakeholders we talked with do use research or evidence-based information in their work. They would like easier access, but they do use research to make arguments, shape strategies,

evaluate impact, and track trends that can affect their overall agendas.

“I wish I could rely more heavily on it [research]. Most of us . . . don’t have the time we wish we had to do thorough research, and to know how to separate the good from the popular from the bad. . . . Too often we’re making do with what we saw on the evening news instead of a recent journal.”

When looking for information, many rely on a handful of trusted sources. In addition to specific periodicals, organizations, and websites that they read or scan regularly, nearly everyone we interviewed discussed their reliance on a handful of individuals for receiving high-quality, time-sensitive information. Primary reasons for relying on individuals included trust, information overload, and lack of time.

“You get your information from so many places. It’s really important to understand who’s giving it to you. There are people who can point me in the right direction and generally I can believe exactly what they say.”

“The issue of whom I rely on for information has become a difficult one for me. I really don’t trust research unless it includes a race analysis . . . if the organization doesn’t use one I find I have to spend too much time trying to question the assumptions built into the analysis.”

In terms of how research-based information is used, stakeholders identified a range of reasons for drawing upon evidence, including agenda setting, planning, decision making, and advocacy. Some use research to inform all stages of their work, while others pointed to specific windows when they find it most useful.

“I use research throughout the process. A community’s vision statement can be built

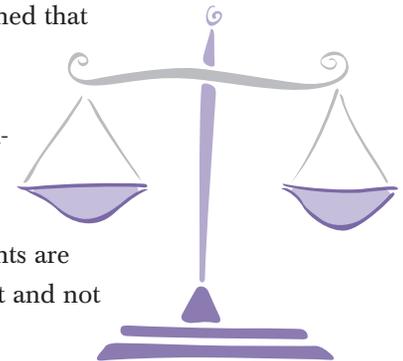
around research, research then informs the community about the state of affairs, and then programming and strategies respond to whether you’re making progress. So it’s all tied together.”

While most informants did not see research helping them define an agenda, they did see it helping to carry out agendas in very practical ways—to make the case for a certain strategy or approach, and to help them make better decisions about the direction of programs and policies.

“Research is less about agenda but becomes very important in the context of how we approach issues and move into program design and implementation.”

Interestingly, stakeholders cautioned that there is a tendency to over-rely on research or to wait for research-based evidence when a decision should actually be made on other grounds, such as equity or even conventional wisdom. By pointing out that arguments are sometimes made based on what is just and not on what is proven, those interviewed revealed a sense of realism and urgency that advocates, while they are committed to the long-term process of knowledge-development and field-building, struggle with on a regular basis.

“Sometimes we go too far trying to prove everything with evaluation. I’ve stopped trying to argue in child care or after school, when people say you can’t prove quality investments matter, I now say, ‘where did you put your children? You knew quality mattered.’ In some ways we’re asking research to do things it can’t do. . . . We have a set of evidence moving in the same direction saying it makes a difference. That’s probably the best we’ll be able to do . . . maybe we can get there with the help of common sense.”



Obstacles

Common obstacles to accessing and/or using research-based information included lack of time, information overload, and a mismatch between what stakeholders need and what is available (in terms of format, focus, and methodology). A consistent theme was the need for more and better translation of research. Policymakers and practitioners lack the time and patience to wade through non-friendly materials of unknown quality.

Format

Stakeholders were clear about needing readable information (in terms of language and length), with implications for policy and practice (when they exist) spelled out. They want syntheses of multiple studies, new studies put in the context of existing research, and databases, indexes, labels, and quarterly or semi-annual reviews. They want assistance with going deeper once they have found what is relevant.

“The latest one staring at me from the pile looks interesting, and I have been meaning to crack it open for some time. I flipped through it once and found it was not easy to glean what was there. I set it aside and haven’t gotten back to it. They didn’t do a good job on the front end . . . to really give you the five-page version, that kind of ‘at-a-glance’ that allows you to get the top layers and themes.”

“I receive papers and studies constantly. But truthfully, I have great difficulty digesting everything received and more often than not those materials are set aside to be read on the proverbial rainy day. While a lot of this stuff is peripherally interesting, there’s not a huge amount on the particular challenges we’re working with.”

“I think there is a big need to continually take the new study that comes out and put it in the context of everything else we know from the past. What happens now is they come out one shot at a time, they get the press coverage one shot at a time, and people have no idea what other studies have said, whether it reverses something found previously. They don’t know what to make of it.”

“It [research] could be labeled by type or level. Is it an evaluation of a program? Within that, is it experimental, is it cross sector? We don’t have a taxonomy for organizing this work. A taxonomy can never be perfect, but a commonly accepted taxonomy, in language people can understand, would help us sort research at a glance.”

Focus and Methodology

Stakeholders were concerned not only about the difficulty of accessing research but about the quality and relevance of what they find. They stated a need for research that answers key policy and practice questions and well-tested tools that speak to needs. They need information that connects outcomes and trends to fiscal implications. They are looking for better data about youth and their needs, and ways to talk about overall status and unmet need. They want a better understanding of the links between risk behaviors, the impact of family and community variables on youth outcomes, and the elements of systems change.

“In an ideal world you would want to know a lot more than we know now about the comparative impacts of various investments in youth development. Where should we spend our next dollar? If we’re going to try to increase proactive investments in youth development, where will we get the greatest return?”

“I think there’s a hole in terms of being able to translate at the practice level. We have programs that work. But most of those that have been well evaluated have been evaluated by the person who developed them. Then that person owns them . . . I’m struggling with needing research that generalizes some of this stuff.”

“The research/policy community does not respond as well as it could or should to what the practice folks need. We’ve got probably 40,000 after-school programs. How does good information get out there in fairly succinct and useful ways for people? That’s a job.”

There was general consensus that the youth fields suffer from a lack of methodologically “rigorous” research. While people define methodological rigor differently, and it was not defined for the purpose of this project, many stakeholders pointed to the need for more longitudinal research and studies that rely on experimental design.

Strengthening the Links

As a first step, policymakers and practitioners need more opportunities to influence research agendas. Many stakeholders do not have consistent opportunities to contribute to shaping the research agenda for the youth fields, despite the fact that they are consistent users and presenters of research. When asked whether opportunities to influence the research agenda were available, one person noted:

“Well, when I’m invited to national gatherings, I tell them what we’re doing and try to have a conversation like this one. I try to talk about what would help us at the local level do our work more efficiently and effectively. There’s a lot of action going on; we’re all working ourselves to death. The question is, is it accumulating into anything that informs the field and can make our work more efficient?”

While creating opportunities for practitioners and policymakers to influence the research agenda is important, it is critical that the conversations be two-way. We need to find ways to help those using research in policy and practice to share their ideas for future studies, syntheses, and research-tested tools. But we also need to create more opportunities for experienced researchers, and professionals well-versed in the research, to engage directly with the practice community. The benefits of increased engagement are mutual. Accessible, high-quality research improves program development and supports practitioner reflection. Experienced practitioners can expose researchers to applied theory and youth development practice as it occurs on the ground across diverse communities.

A final implication of our conversations pointed to the important role of intermediary organizations. Practitioners and policymakers, who are clearly committed to learning from research as it emerges in the field, rely heavily on the translation and dissemination work conducted by organizations like the Center for 4-H Youth Development and many others. These organizations are positioned to package and move information out to advocates, practitioners, and public media outlets. Funders should be encouraged to strengthen the capacity of such intermediaries and to increase the incentives for, and capacity of, individual research organizations to translate their research for a variety of lay audiences. ☘

A B O U T

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