Introduction

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Our children are our future. Good health and wellbeing in the early years are the foundations of well-adjusted and productive adult lives and fully functioning societies. How can we minimise disease, stop neglect and abuse and provide safe, nurturing environments? Such questions exercise the minds of members of the community at large, policymakers, the providers of various services, researchers and young people themselves. We can think of these five groups as a pentagon of stakeholders. One major challenge is to devise ways for these five groups to work in synchrony. Does synchrony matter so much? The answer is a resounding ‘yes’. It seems that our efforts around the world to address the needs of children and their families are fractured and ineffective owing to our failure to learn from different sectors and integrate new knowledge.

In this book, we focus on three of the groups—policymakers, service providers and researchers—to examine how we can enhance their ability to work together. Our particular emphasis is on how we can improve the uptake of sound research evidence into government policy and into service provision. How can research knowledge be brokered to achieve effective decision making and action that improve children’s wellbeing? Our aim is to provide examples of different ways this can be achieved, as well as laying foundations for further development of knowledge-brokering initiatives.

We organised a stimulating exchange between these three groups, by inviting six researchers, five service providers and three former policymakers to each write a paper based on their experience of, or interest in, successfully working across the ‘know–do’ gap. This was based on a method developed by one of us (Bammer and the Goolabri Group 2007). Each participant was given two of resulting papers to read and comment on, where possible, from the ‘other’ groups. Then, in September 2007, we brought everyone together in a one-day symposium to present and discuss these commentaries. Finally, the participants were invited to revise their papers in light of the symposium conversations. It is that collection of revised papers that we present here.

The exchange itself is the product of a unique Australian undertaking—the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)—which was established to bring together a range of organisations concerned about ‘worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia’s young people’ (<www.aracy.org.au>).
ARACY (through its Research Network jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council) partnered with two of its constituent organisations: The Benevolent Society and The Australian National University’s National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health. Each of these organisations has a particular interest in ‘knowledge brokering’ not only between research, policy and practice, but including the other corners of the pentagon: young people and the wider community.

For ARACY, the imperative has been to bring a national focus on working together in new, collaborative ways in order to find solutions to the complex problems affecting our children and young people. Using the latest information technology to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’ across the nation, ARACY has become a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia’s future generations.

The Benevolent Society is increasingly recognising the importance of bringing both a client/community and a practice perspective to policy and research debates, as well as trying to find better ways of integrating research into its work with children and families. It has experimented with a number of strategies to improve its contribution to the sector, including establishing knowledge-brokering roles in the organisation and investing in systems to support cross-sector learning.

At The Australian National University, one of us (GB) has suggested that improving research support for decision making and practice change should be a major pillar of the new cross-cutting discipline of Integration and Implementation Sciences (Bammer 2008). Bammer argues that improved knowledge brokering is a challenge not just for children's wellbeing, but also for many other topics in population health, education, environmental sciences and national security. There is no institutional base for allowing exchange across these areas to occur, so it is difficult for population health researchers, policymakers and practitioners, for example, to learn from the experiences of groups working on other social problems. A primary task of the new discipline is to stimulate such cross-fertilisation. Thus, while this book is designed largely for those working in the field of child wellbeing, its lessons have much broader relevance.

As our organisational summaries and the chapters in this book demonstrate, there is no one model for the activity that we abbreviate as ‘knowledge brokering’. Indeed it is the diversity of possibilities that makes this a fertile and exciting area. Organisations can work together to jointly produce and implement new knowledge. Key players can work independently, but institute clear communication channels to allow them to leverage from each other.
Organisations can be established as clearing houses. Powerful individuals can advocate for the disenfranchised. The book provides examples of all of these and more.

The structure of the book

The book has three sections, beginning with setting the scene. Ann Sanson and Fiona Stanley examine the current conditions in which children and youth in Australia grow up in order to demonstrate the need for knowledge brokering. They present research on the disturbing lack of progress in improving the life chances of young people, particularly in reducing inequalities between various population groups. Sanson and Stanley then highlight instances where knowledge is available but is not being fully applied in policy or practice. This is particularly the case for evidence that developmental pathways are complex, which points to the need for policy and practice to address upstream causal determinants of child health and wellbeing, rather than responding to problems when they occur. It was strong resolve to address these issues that led to the creation of ARACY and the chapter concludes by profiling some recent ARACY initiatives aimed at advancing capacity to capture and use knowledge to improve the health, development and wellbeing of children and youth.

In the second section, six case studies of successful knowledge brokering are presented. The first three—by Annette Michaux, Robyn Cummins and Meredith Edwards, respectively—focus on knowledge brokering as engagement between the sectors. They are followed by three chapters describing different roles played by individuals who act as knowledge brokers. One (Richard Vines) works closely with a research professor (Cathy Humphreys) providing a two-way conduit for informing research of policy and practice priorities and for research implementation. Another (Sharon Goldfeld) has employment that allows her to straddle the research and policy worlds. The third is US film director Rob Reiner, whose use of his high profile to exert influence is described by Linda Neuhauser. Importantly, each of these chapters also draws attention to a different key literature about knowledge brokering. Each of these chapters is now described in more detail.

Annette Michaux leads off with a view from the non-profit practice world describing the importance of engagement and learning between sectors, as well as some of the barriers that practice organisations experience in achieving this. She highlights that a key contribution of non-profit organisations is their connection to communities and she describes a number of promising practice examples of enhanced knowledge sharing. These include the role played by cross-sectoral project teams and committees, secondments and co-locations,
cross-sectoral forums and knowledge-brokering organisations. She describes The Benevolent Society’s evidence-based parenting programs, as well as the organisation’s involvement in ‘Partnership in the Community’ projects. She highlights that taking such successes to scale is now a key challenge.

Robyn Cummins describes the work of The Spastic Centre on cerebral palsy to show how it has expanded its traditional roles of knowledge brokering between researchers, practitioners and policymakers to also include consumers and the corporate sector. She describes two examples. One concerns an overhaul of operations to improve the use of research in service provision. The second involves tracking service innovation in providing intensive family support options. This was independently evaluated and the results were then used to change government funding arrangements. She also describes how The Spastic Centre has effectively used the Internet to offer people with cerebral palsy, their parents and practitioners mutual support and connection. Further, she describes how knowledge brokering with the corporate sector has led to improved equipment for people with cerebral palsy.

Meredith Edwards specifically examines engagement from the perspective of making academic research more relevant to policy. She draws on the research of Sandra Nutley to show that the extent and strength of linkages between researchers and policymakers are among the best predictors of research use. She provides an example of the effectiveness of such linkages in developing policy on long-term unemployment in the 1990s, which she oversaw as a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. In an appendix, she provides the recollections of the key academic and policy participants.

Cathy Humphreys and Richard Vines show how engagement can be enhanced when a specific role of knowledge broker is created. Cathy Humphreys was hired as the Alfred Felton Chair in Social Work to develop new and relevant research informing practice and policy and to enhance implementation of currently under-utilised knowledge. The second task, in particular, was strengthened through the employment of Richard Vines as knowledge broker. As well as describing the major projects they were involved in, they concentrate on one where the knowledge broker assisted by bringing together people from different parts of the service system—practitioners, business managers, information technology and research personnel, and government representatives—in formal and informal conversations about opportunities and constraints associated with using research-orientated information and data systems for child-centric reforms. The knowledge-brokering role aimed to nurture a social-learning environment within which research–policy–practice collaborations could emerge.

A different perspective on the knowledge broker role is provided by Sharon Goldfeld, who straddles two domains by combining part-time research/clinical
Introduction

and policy positions. She focuses on the skills required by knowledge brokers such as herself, including critically appraising evidence, seeing the big picture, mediation skills, along with curiosity and listening skills. She draws together insights from John Kingdon and Mark Moore to define the knowledge broker’s sphere of influence, especially in seizing opportunities to create public value. She provides examples of her knowledge-brokering role in: 1) priority setting for children in the policy context; 2) helping to set up the Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System; and 3) establishing the Australian Early Development Index for planning and community development.

Linda Neuhauser also describes the role of an individual knowledge broker, but in her case it is Hollywood film director Rob Reiner (of A Few Good Men and When Harry Met Sally fame). She describes how he used his celebrity, credibility and experience to support the development, testing and dissemination of a parenting education kit, which is now made available to about 500 000 new parents in the United States each year. One of his key roles was to promote engagement between the different parties. Linda also offers a useful six-stage process for knowledge brokering with a focus on participatory approaches to include consumers.

The final section of the book provides three sets of broader considerations that are pivotal for informing future research about, and the continuing development of, knowledge brokering.

Brian Head leads off this section by drawing on his experience with ARACY to highlight the different types of knowledge held by the research, policy and practice sectors, and how fragmentation of knowledge and the complexity of the issues being addressed militate against shared understandings. He argues that collaborative networks and partnering are important means to mobilise knowledge for collective action and that this is where future developments should be heading. He outlines some effective processes, as well as challenges to collaboration.

In contrast, Michael Moore provides a salutary reminder of the challenges of knowledge sharing in the political context. He draws on his experience as a politician to challenge the assumption that knowledge sharing is a desired outcome for government. On the contrary, he provides several recent Australian examples in which governments have sought to hold onto knowledge, in accord with the saying ‘knowledge is power’.

Gabriele Bammer and colleagues conclude the book by arguing that considerations of research–policy interactions need to be broadened for the field to develop. In particular, knowledge brokering needs to be put into a wider context and lessons need to be drawn from different topic areas. Bridging
the research–policy divide in the area of child and youth health and wellbeing
could have much to learn from similar initiatives in other areas of health, as
well as in the environment, education, security and so on. They also argue that
more attention must be paid to evaluation of the research–policy nexus and the
limitations of research as it pertains to policy. They draw on an extensive range
of literature to present differences between research and policy perspectives
and ways to stimulate improved interactions.

Where next?

There is a growing literature recognising the importance of bringing together
research, policy and practice knowledge, as well as the knowledge of other
stakeholders, such as children, parents and other community members.
Given that policymakers and practitioners have the most direct influence on
the environment in which young people grow up and the services available
for them, the importance of integrating sound research knowledge into their
decision making and actions is paramount.

This book provides a number of considerations for effective knowledge brokering
between research, policy and practice, along with exciting and insightful case
examples of where successful interaction has occurred. It demonstrates that
effort devoted to incorporating practical knowledge into research, as well as
research knowledge into practice, is worthwhile.

We want to encourage the widespread adoption of the knowledge we present
here, documentation of further successes and lessons, and continued reflection
on ways to improve the interaction between research, policy and practice. Our
children’s future and the future of our society depend on it!

References

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