What’s a policy maker doing at a research conference?: Mediating stronger partnerships between research, policy and practice in relation to schooling and early childhood development

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Abstract
This paper, written from the stance of central government policy makers, explores the sometimes tense relationships between researchers, practitioners and education policy makers in a context where evidence-based policy is espoused by governments. It is based on a belief that research in education affects, and is affected by, multiple stakeholders, and that if we are to strengthen the role of education research as a public good, making a difference to society, then we need a model and a practice that can bridge stakeholder interests. The current quest in school education policy making for ‘what works’ is influenced by economic imperatives, increased accountability for schools and teachers, and international evidence that indicates the value of early intervention to improve learning. A new era of Commonwealth-state relations and national reforms in Australia is driving policy makers to seek timely, useful evidence from a range of sources. For researchers, the drive to publish in quality journals is constant and measurable, while influencing policy is less tangible and may take a long time. Practitioners are in an interesting third space: encouraged to innovate, to reflect on data and to research their own practice, they also often lack the time and expertise to assess their efforts to influence policy or publish their findings and ideas. Using Wenger’s (1998) theory of communities of practice as a frame, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria is considered in this paper as a system example. One aim of the paper is to clarify the relationships between those involved in education policy, research and practice (researchers, policy makers, teachers and other staff, sometimes students), in order to add value to research and increase its use in decision-making. By describing and reflecting on some emerging initiatives in Victoria, we suggest how we might achieve shared goals through brokering relationships in a new community of practice.

Keywords: policy, education research, communities of practice, partnerships

Introduction
As policy makers in a central government office, the authors are constantly advised that ‘evidence-based policy making is at the heart of being a reformist government’ (Rudd, 2008). Researchers too, have observed the trend (or the rhetoric) towards evidence-based policy (Lingard & Gale, 2010). Researchers, practitioners and policy makers in education constitute separate communities with their own languages and cultures, but, we suggest, with common goals in making a difference to learning. To make our point simply, we consider researchers to be those who are mainly conducting research relating to education, policy makers as those making decisions for central governments, and practitioners as teachers and early childhood workers. We acknowledge that these roles can merge, and that students can also be involved. This paper looks at a specific problem in relation to the influence of research on policy and practice: that research evidence does not see its way into policy or large scale practice as often as many in each community would wish.
In this paper we describe ways that these communities of practice can be bridged to strengthen partnerships and achieve shared goals.

The current education policy context in Australia is directed to a productivity agenda and influenced by new Commonwealth-state relations and national reforms, public documents such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), and huge injections of funding related to infrastructure and ICT. In Victoria, the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2008a) and Blueprint One Year On documents (DEECD, 2009b), outline the arenas for reform in education and early childhood development. How to achieve the reform targets, and how to evaluate the success of particular strategies, are areas which can be usefully informed by researchers providing robust evidence.

The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) states ‘Good quality data enables governments to identify best practice and innovation and suggests that in the 21st century ‘Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation’. Policy makers want evidence for policy and innovation in order that education can enable Australians to compete in the world market. However they have concerns about what constitutes evidence, how and where reliable evidence can be gathered, and when evidence can best inform policy and practice, among other issues. Some policy makers complain that academics can be very hard ‘to do business with’ or that they are too slow, or lack an appreciation of the ‘real world’ (Banks, 2009). When researchers cannot draw conclusions because they lack evaluation data, policy makers are left in a quandary. For example, an Australian Institute of Family Studies’ report concluded:

The dearth of evaluation data on interventions generally...makes it impossible to comment on the usefulness of early childhood interventions as a general strategy to sustain improvements for children in the long-term (Wise, S., Silva, L., Webster, E., & Sanson, A., 2005, p. 48).

Researchers have expertise in identifying areas for investigation, designing and conducting studies, and the ability to provide policy makers with the evidence they need. Banks (2009) emphasises the importance of appropriate methodology, stating:

It’s important that, whatever analytical approach is chosen, it allows for a proper consideration of the nature of the issue or problem, and of different options for policy action. Half the battle is understanding the problem. Failure to do this properly is one of the most common causes of policy failure and poor regulation. Sometimes this is an understandable consequence of complex forces, but sometimes it seems to have more to do with a wish for government to take action regardless (Banks, 2009, p. 8).

This political imperative is one of the reasons that policy makers cannot always provide the quality of advice they would wish. Banks goes on to list his characteristics of good methods for policy research, such as testing a theory or proposition as to why policy action will be effective; considering what would happen in the absence of any action, including both direct and indirect effects. Further he recommends, where possible, quantification of impacts (including estimates of how effects vary for different policy ‘doses’ and for different groups); control for other influences that may impact on observed outcomes, and a capacity for third parties to replicate the study. Whatever their philosophical stance, it is important for education researchers to understand the perspective of Banks (2009) and the Productivity Commission, because, as noted above, education is seen as an economic driver and policy development will reflect this.

Pollitt (2006) acknowledges that researchers challenge, reconceptualise and think innovatively about practitioner agendas, as well as playing the role of experts offering advice. However the relationship between researchers and policy makers is strained, when policy makers don’t have a clear idea of what they want, are risk averse, or need to make decisions in a rush. While policy makers do value sound methods and theories, researchers who wish to influence policy need a language that speaks to busy bureaucrats, rather than the language of academic publications.
Understanding the processes and institutions within government that enable different perspectives and information to be brought to bear at the ‘pointy end’ of a policy decision is integral to advancing an evidence-based approach (Banks, 2009; Edwards, 2001). Beyond the individual department, Treasury needs credible research to support funding submissions, and interdepartmental committees need to be convinced prior to the cabinet submission process. Ultimately, good policy depends on well-informed discussions within Cabinet itself.

Major stakeholders in education research and policy are the learners, practitioners, parents and employers who are affected by the advice given and decisions made. Kennedy (1997) argues that a research-practice gap exists that can be attributed to research lacking practicality, relevance and accessibility. However practitioners also have potential agency in the relationship. Years ago, Piaget (1969) was surprised that teachers did not research pedagogy as a discipline from the practitioner’s point of view. Although most initial teacher education programs in Australia have included little research practice (unlike Finland, for example), some teachers engage in research through higher degree studies. Others are involved in action research. Increasingly as practitioners feel ‘research has been done on them not for them’ (Mills, 2003, p. 6) they are drawn to ‘research done by teachers for themselves’ (Mills, 2003, p. 5) [all emphases in original].

The benefits of practitioner research are being lauded as invigorating and sustaining the teaching profession (Beck & Humphries, 2000; Kamler & Comber, 2008; Kemmis, 2001). Hopkins (2002) also supports teachers as researchers, as they could potentially be more influential than other researchers on the school cultures in which they work. But, he argues, teachers who do research in their own classrooms must relate their inquiries to the work of their colleagues and the aims and direction of the school as a whole. Despite this encouragement, there remain limited opportunities in schools for this type of intellectual work. It requires commitment, mentoring and support to develop ‘researcher dispositions in teachers’ and designated time and space for the serious intellectual work involved (Kamler & Comber, 2008). In the words of one principal:

You don’t want teachers always researchers. You don’t want to take them away from their core business. Their gut feeling is that what they do works, but they're constantly being asked to prove it, and that's the researcher's role (Hartnell-Young, 2004).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) describe three types of relationship between knowledge and practice. In the first, knowledge-for-practice, knowledge is generated by outside researchers and passed on to teachers to improve practice, while in the second, knowledge-in-practice, the focus is on practical knowledge generated by expert teachers for reflection by others. The third approach they call knowledge-of-practice, whereby teachers learn when they generate local knowledge of practice within the context of inquiry communities and connect it to larger social, cultural and political issues. Unlike action research, they say, this type of inquiry is a way in which teachers work together to generate local knowledge, envision and theorise their practice, and interpret the theories and research of others.

Some practitioner knowledge and skills in research, including data literacy skills and an understanding of the language, are critical for brokering relationships and building effective partnerships between practitioners and researchers. Practitioners need to develop their skills in working with researchers in situ so they can become effective partners in the co-production of knowledge for their own context for sustained improvement (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). It is the relationship and dialogue with the researcher, the participation in research activity, and being treated as a partner in the co-production of knowledge that has impact. As one teacher suggested, it has helped make the tacit more clear and overt:

It’s probably made me think about it more. I wouldn’t have thought about it in that way. I would have thought that’s what we just do (Vacirca, 2010).

Similarly, Bereiter (2002) argues that bridges must be built between teachers and researchers if teaching is to become a modern profession, leading to a new ‘hybrid’ culture of teaching and
research. He suggests that researchers should assist in the evolution of ideas, by sharing the new ideas that emerge from practice. This requires maintaining a broad view while closely observing the field, and using background knowledge to reflect on and explain phenomena.

‘Innovation’ is a term frequently used in government, denoting some desired change. Innovation involves making new connections between existing knowledge, as well as creating new knowledge and embracing the unexpected. Leadbeater and Wong (2010) argue that innovation occurs at the margins (eg. in our schools rather than the centre), but we need ways to capture the knowledge and evaluate the evidence from the field to inform policy and practice.

Evidence

What counts as evidence, and how can policy makers determine the value of the different types? Leigh (2009), whose work in economics has had some influence on education policy, suggests that a ranking process provides a way to sift and sort the evidence and assist policymakers to avoid selective use of research that supports prior beliefs. Since on most topics social policy makers cannot hope to thoroughly read all the available studies, the question is how to rank them. The hierarchy he suggests, shown in Table 1, provides an indication of importance which can help simplify the process of classifying a large body of empirical evidence. Overall, Leigh has a preference for recent, Australian studies published in high-quality journals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Systematic reviews (meta-analyses) of multiple randomised trials</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. High quality randomised trials</td>
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<td>3. Systematic reviews (meta-analyses) of natural experiments and before-after studies</td>
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<td>4. Natural experiments (quasi-experiments) using techniques such as differences-in-differences, regression discontinuity, matching, or multiple regression</td>
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<td>5. Before-after (pre-post) studies</td>
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<td>6. Expert opinion and theoretical conjecture</td>
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Table 1: A hierarchy of evidence for decision makers (Leigh, 2009, p. 35).

Some researchers will rightly feel that their work is not represented in this table. It is important, however, to understand the directions in which governments are moving in demanding measurement and quantitative evidence. There is a shift occurring in DEECD, for example, from process evaluations looking at the successful implementation of an initiative, to a focus on measuring the progress towards outcomes and targets.

Challenging current thinking about the difficulty of isolating causal factors in education research, Christensen, Horn and Johnson (2008) argue that researchers stop their work when it is half done. They believe that determining correlations is not enough, but rather causality should be established by seeking, revisiting and explaining anomalies. They concede that correlative measures cannot predict whether specific students, classes, teachers, or districts will or should conform, so it is important to understand contexts. This points to multidisciplinary research and mixed methods.

In reality, while evidence is important, policy decisions will be influenced by much more than objective evidence, or rational analysis, leading to the use of terms like ‘evidence informed’ rather than ‘evidence-based’. The views of the populace are gathered systematically through polling and this ‘evidence’ is also important in the political process. As Banks says, ‘Values, interests, personalites, timing, circumstance and happenstance—in short, democracy—determine what actually happens’ (Banks, 2009, p. 4). Assuming however, that policy makers, researchers and
practitioners have shared goals in improving the quality of and knowledge about educational theory and practice, in order to make a difference to society, we need a model and practices that can bridge stakeholder interests and aid understanding (Hartnell-Young & McGuinness, 2005). Wenger’s (1998) model of communities of practice is helpful here.

**Communities of practice**

Community of practice is a term grounded in a social constructivist approach to learning and frequently applied to the management of organisational knowledge. A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Wenger et al. argue that a focus on intentional and systematic knowledge management has become increasingly important in the new ‘knowledge economy’, and communities of practice frequently emerge or are incubated in organisations. Each of the stakeholder groups mentioned above is likely to form a community of practice with a particular passion, language, culture and expertise.

Practice, according to Wenger (1998), is the social production of meaning, the source of coherence through which the community of practice emerges. He suggests that indicators of a community of practice include sustained mutual relationships, shared ways of engaging in doing things together, rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation, and knowing what others can do. He labels three facilities or enablers of communities of practice: engagement, imagination and alignment. Opportunities for engagement arise through mutual and shared activities, through challenges and responsibilities that require expertise and encourage people to explore new territories, and through continuity to develop shared practice and a long-term commitment. This assists knowledge building particularly by bringing people together, encouraging shared discourse and recording information.

Secondly, Wenger suggests, imagination involves orientation: locating self and learning about a wider world; reflection: looking at our situations with new eyes; and exploration: reinventing the self and in the process reinventing the world. He argues that imagination is the way a learning community can expand the definition of its practice, making time for reflection and conversation, exploration and play, through which participants create their own identities, as teachers, researchers or policy makers.

The third aspect of Wenger’s learning architecture is alignment, which encompasses larger-scale understanding of power relations and how to have an effect on the world. Therefore he suggests that any learning community must push its boundaries and interact with other communities of practice in a purposeful way, it must link participation inside with that outside the community (eg. through multi-membership of its members in other communities), it must use the styles and discourses of the areas it wants to affect, and it must become involved in the organisational arrangements of its own institution.

**Partnerships and Brokerage**

Nutley, Walter and Davies (2007) suggest that one of the best predictors of research use is the extent and strength of linkages between researchers and policy makers or practitioners. But their membership of separate communities means that an effort has to be made to develop and maintain links. Wenger (1998) suggests that different communities can influence each other through boundary objects (artefacts, documents, terms or concepts) and brokering (connections made by people). Important boundary objects include policy documents with clear rationales and evidence bases, and the particular discourses associated with various activities. For example the discourse of policy makers frequently uses terms such as ‘evidence-based’ and ‘evidence-informed’ policy, ‘productivity’, ‘risk’ and ‘advice’, while practitioners are more likely to use ‘data’, ‘pedagogy’ and ‘outcomes’ and researchers use ‘methods’ and ‘recommendations’.

Brokers are those people – teachers, principals, researchers, industry experts and students – able
to make connections across communities of practice and open new possibilities for meaning. According to Wenger (1998) they have expertise but are not narrowly focused, as they need to operate at the periphery rather than at the core of a practice. They are clearly members of a particular community, which brings the legitimacy and credibility of an insider, but marginal, looking outward for different perspectives, and familiar with a range of discourses. Knowledge brokering links decision makers with researchers so they are better able to understand each other's goals and professional cultures, influence each others' work, forge new partnerships and promote the use of research-based evidence in decision making (Lomas, 2007). Both formal and informal relationships between researchers, policy makers and practitioners can improve policy and practice. McClelland and Wiseman (2008) suggest various actions to strengthen the research-policy relationship, as shown in Table 2.

<table>
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<th>Goal</th>
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| Improve understanding and trust between researchers and policy makers | Joint roundtables, seminars, conferences.  
Joint project design and implementation.  
Coffee, lunch                                                                 |
| Strengthen formal links and processes between public sector and universities | Joint task forces. Advisory groups. Commissioned research. Data sharing agreements. ARC, NHMRC research projects. Joint appointments. Funded chairs |
| Strengthen skills and capacity of policy makers and researchers | Scholarships, secondments and exchanges. Joint courses and workshops. Study tours. Broaden university selection and promotion criteria |
| Streamline legal, contractual and IP processes | Streamline tendering process. Research panels. Revise and simplify contracts. Clarify and address IP issues |
| Improve quality and timeliness of communications | Model templates for policy briefs and reports. Websites, e-newsletters and journals. Knowledge translation officers and brokers |

Table 2: Strengthening the research-policy relationship (Source: McClelland & Wiseman, 2008).

Brokers are also important for policy implementation. Ball (1994) suggests that interpretation and problem-solving at the local level to enact policies means there is 'ad hocery, negotiation and serendipity within the state, within the policy formation process' leading to confusion (p. 16). But he also suggests that key mediators of policy in any setting can be relied upon to relate policy to context or to act as gatekeepers. Mediation and meaning making tools are therefore intrinsic to policy interpretation and implementation (Coburn, 2004, 2005). A key tool for sensemaking is a clear rationale for policy and the evidence base. To bridge relationships between the communities of practice it is the responsibility of policy makers to be transparent and open in their reference to what constitutes evidence and explicit in how this has shaped policy directions.

Research and Policy in DEECD, Victoria
The Department is conscious that a gap exists between the communities of practice with a stake in education research, and is attempting to strengthen the research-policy-practice relationship in a number of ways. Boundary objects (Wenger, 1998) in the form of public documents such as the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), and the Blueprint documents (DEECD, 2008a; DEECD, 2009b), as well as DEECD's Research Priority Areas of Interest 2008-11 (DEECD, 2008b) and the Research and Innovation Framework (DEECD, 2009a), all readily available on a public web site, can assist in bridging boundaries. The business processes in Figure 1 outline the cycle of
evaluation, planning, research and dissemination that provide a basis for DEECD's policy development.

Assessing Directions

The Department has an extensive collection of data for analysis and review, including health, development, learning, safety and wellbeing outcomes of children and young people and characteristics of children and young people (aged 0-17) and their families. Child and family participation in early childhood services, school enrolment and attendance, student, staff and parental attitudes to school, and post-school destinations and pathways are recorded. DEECD workforce data, including staff characteristics, leave, recruitment and attrition, are also available to researchers for analysis, to track progress towards its outcomes, and to identify questions that might need further research in order to be explained. The Department then works with partners to seek answers to these questions.

As an example, analysis of 2007 data indicated that some schools in disadvantaged communities were able to improve student outcomes while others did not, leading to several pieces of research that were edited and published as Signposts: Research points to how Victorian government schools have improved student performance (DEECD, 2009c). Specifically, the research was intended to better understand the practices of Victorian schools that led to consistent gains in student achievement over a sustained period, irrespective of the background of the students. Phase 1 involved seventeen Victorian primary and nine Victorian secondary schools that had demonstrated sustained improvement in student outcomes from 1996 to 2006. Primary and secondary school improvement was also assessed taking some account of Student Family Occupation (SFO) index, a measure of socio-economic status based on the family occupations of the students. In Phases 2 and 3 the research team considered a range of data from 2004-7 to select schools where achievement was better than predicted, based on the background characteristics of their students. Phase 2 compared improving, stable and declining schools and
confirmed that 16 behaviours were important in schools that were both high performing and improving. Phase 3 included a sample of seventeen schools – nine primary and eight secondary – identified as both high performing in terms of their intake, and improving. Site visits and interviews were undertaken in these schools to observe activity, interview staff and collect documents and school-generated data, in order to describe the behaviours more fully. This program of research therefore brought together researchers, policy makers and practitioners around some key questions. The resulting publication was designed to present the research findings as a resource primarily for schools.

Planning Projects

Research priorities are informed by the results of such analysis and evaluation, as well as by wider scanning of trends in education and early childhood development in Australia and overseas, and emerging initiatives such as Commonwealth funding as part of National Partnerships or in response to the global financial crisis (Building the Education Revolution). The publication of priorities assists in making decisions regarding investment in research, through commissions, partnerships or practitioner-led grants. With the development of new priorities in 2011, the Department will have an opportunity to review the process, as well as the product, of setting the research agenda.

Research partners are encouraged to work closely with the Department in the early stages of major projects, such as Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grants. This means that the questions can be important to all parties, and the results have a chance of informing policy in a meaningful way. DEECD is involved in Linkage projects with universities in several states, and including a range of government departments. Topics being studied include digital literacies, reclamation of Victorian Indigenous languages, statistical literacy in the workplace, drug education and school design. Two strongly policy-oriented projects are looking at commonwealth state funding relations and how social research influences policy. The department is keen to develop stronger links with projects prior to commencement, and throughout their development, to ensure the findings are disseminated and considered in policy and practice.

Researching and innovating

A Research Panel of about forty preferred providers, both large and small, is designed to streamline some of the contract processes noted as problematic by McClelland and Wiseman (2008), although others may tender for many projects. The Department takes a broad view of research methods, and encourages desk research such as literature reviews and environment scans; pure research such as experimental work and randomised controlled trials, econometric modelling, monitoring of projects, evaluation studies and experiments that consider the costs, benefits and effectiveness of policies, and action research and field trials in schools and early childhood settings, to develop innovative approaches (DEECD, 2009a, p. 5). Some methods, such as policy experiments through randomised controlled trials, have been rarely used. Banks (2009) suggests that this illustrates not only a lack of evidence-based policy in education, and a lack of involvement of social scientists, but also the influence of teachers’ unions and other interests. Recently, however, DEECD has commenced trials around rewarding teaching excellence (involving differential pay for teacher performance either individually or at a school level), and has commissioned researchers using qualitative and quantitative methods.

Another large trial is taking place within an ARC Linkage partnership1 with The University of Melbourne and others. The E4kids study is designed to answer fundamental questions about Australian early childhood programs that, to date, have not been studied empirically. These are:

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1 ARC Linkage Grant LP0990200: funding $2.2 million distributed over 5 years. The project also receives cash and in kind resources from The University of Melbourne, QUT Brisbane, the Institute of Education, London and the University of Toronto at Scarborough, Canada), DEECD Victoria and OECCEC Queensland Government.
• What are the contributions of different Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs on the learning and development of Australian children, and the wellbeing of families?
• What features of ECEC programs work, and which ones do not work, in promoting various key aspects of children’s learning, development and social inclusion?
• Under what conditions and for which children do ECEC program attributes have positive (or negative) learning effects, as well as effects on family participation and social inclusion?
• What is the magnitude and cost of obtaining these effects?

The research uses a stratified random sample of 2,500 three to four year olds recruited through Victorian and Queensland centres in metropolitan, regional and remote settings as they participate in childcare, kindergarten and preschool programs, and will continue tracking the children and analysing their programs through the early years of school.

In recent years DEECD has provided small grants to practitioners to enable them to investigate questions of local interest and to experiment with emerging technologies. Recent topics include the attendance of Afghani babies at Maternal and Child Health assessments in one municipality; transition between primary and secondary school; and the experience of young parents returning to school after the birth of a child. These projects have been strengthened where practitioners brokered relationships with academic researchers to cross the traditional boundaries while maintaining their separate roles. Such a partnership can help make tacit knowledge explicit, develop a shared discourse and take the explicit knowledge of both groups to a wider audience.

Informing Policy and Practice

Sharing the evidence and knowledge gained with the audiences who need to know is always a challenge. Print and online newsletters and research publications are produced by the Department for a range of audiences. However some reports from academic researchers are unable to be published for various reasons: some are no longer relevant to the government's priorities, some are not written in clear language, and some include information that cannot, for various reasons, be made public.

Forums, large and small, are held for researchers, policy makers, practitioners and the wider community to discuss research issues, projects and findings, as suggested by Wiseman (2010) and Edwards (2010). The Signposts publication and forum (DEECD, 2009c) raised the practitioner and student voices behind the research report. Telling the stories of successful schools that are able to perform well and improve despite often challenging circumstances, the teachers and school leaders detailed the behaviours and practices that led to school improvement. They, and the wider community of schools, were able to share their experiences and their successes through the conference itself, through the designated blog and through film clips now available on the Department’s FUSE web site at https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/teacher.aspx.

Roundtables (McClelland & Wiseman, 2008) can be useful and have been held at preliminary stages (eg. on ethical considerations in collecting medical data from children). Engaging early in this way is one strategy to improve relationships, and can also be achieved through conducting preliminary meetings between researchers, practitioners and policy makers to flag new areas of interest, discuss commissioned research or plan potential ARC Linkage projects.

Just as research begins with a clear question, policy development usually commences with a problem and goes through cyclic processes of gathering information and evidence, consultation and development of responses. Banks (2009) suggests that we need systems that are open to evidence at each stage of the policy development cycle: from the outset when an issue or problem is identified for policy attention; to the development of the most appropriate response, and subsequent evaluation of its effectiveness. Researchers and practitioners can therefore influence policy at various points, and in an ongoing fashion.
Recent developments in using Web 2.0 technologies in the Victorian Public Service are intended to lead to greater communication from a wide range of audiences in response to particular topics that could lead to new policies. Similarly, DEECD runs numerous open blog sites to interact with practitioners. Online interactive meetings and videoconferencing are becoming commonplace for knowledge sharing.

Conclusions and implications

This paper set out to consider models and practices that can bridge the different communities of practice in research, practice and policy, and it has described some of the issues and potential resolutions as seen in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria. In terms of engagement, each community has its own mutual and shared activities, a particular culture and, generally, a desire to explore new territories. For good research, policy and practice, a mix of political judgement, professional practice and scientific research is required, yet we also need to be pragmatic to identify how big an issue is, or will be, and if it has some prospect of a solution (McClelland, 2010). It is not a disadvantage for a community to have a strong identity and know its expertise well, as it makes it more likely that it will have the self esteem and ability to work with another. Imagination, according to Wenger (1998), includes locating self and learning about a wider world; looking at our situations with new eyes; and reinventing the self and in the process reinventing the world. This provides a challenge to the communities with a stake in education research, and requires a shared commitment to looking differently at the world we operate in.

DEECD has taken steps in several of the areas listed in Table 2 (McClelland & Wiseman, 2008), including public seminars and conferences; numerous Australian Research Council (ARC) partnerships; secondments from universities or schools into the public service, or public servants undertaking further study through partnership projects; research panels and web sites. It produces policy and research framework documents that act as boundary objects as they are publicly available. However areas such as providing guidance or templates for research reports, or joint staff appointments, should be explored. Building on the many ARC and other academic research relationships that DEECD has been involved in, the Department is now moving into longer term relationships with Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) to work more closely with researchers to inform policy and practice in specific areas of education and early childhood development. Future considerations include how to involve citizens, including learners, in the research and policy processes. For academics, consideration could be given, through the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, to valuing social and policy impact, not just through publication in journals, but through who reads them (Edwards, 2010).

However there may be a need for a specific focus on the domain of the 'research/policy/practice relationship', with the goal of making a difference to young people’s learning. Therefore we propose some strategies that cross boundaries and can be relatively easily implemented. These need not be undertaken by all members of a community, as Wenger suggests that not all need to play a brokerage role. It is more valuable to identify those in each community who do so, either naturally, or by virtue of their position. Strategies include:

a) Attending seminars and conferences of communities other than one’s own to understand the language and concerns, such as policy makers attending research conferences or practitioners attending policy forums.
b) Joining existing groups, both face to face and online, to read, hear about and discuss issues in the research/policy/practice domain.

c) Broadening the types of research that policy makers, practitioners and researchers can participate in together.

d) Establishing a formal network or special interest group that explicitly links policy makers, academic researchers and practitioners through face to face and online means, thus providing spaces for engagement. Membership would be based on interest in the ‘relationship’ rather than only on one aspect of the trinity. The scope could be national, managed by AARE, or more geographically limited.

The purpose of these intentional relationships would include building capacity and confidence of the different communities, developing change management strategies to identify policy problems, research questions and joint projects. Outputs could include joint research papers and presentations, timely think pieces and consultation strategies, all designed to strengthen the use and understanding of evidence in policy development and practice.

The authors welcome comment on the ideas put forward in this paper, as they seek to strengthen the relationships between researchers, practitioners and policy makers in education.

References


