

What has 20 years of investment in research and evaluation achieved for children in Ireland?



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1994 – 2014

What did the research landscape look like in 1994?

1980 Task Force on Children's Services recommends more research and a national longitudinal study

By 1994 Handful of empirical studies of children by educationalists, sociologists and psychologists in Ireland and NI.

1993 Ferguson, Gilligan & Torode *Surviving childhood adversity: Issues for policy and practice*

1994 Greene *Growing up Irish: Development in context* IJP

1994-2002 Journal of Child Centred Practice ISPCC

(2000 Hennessy and Hogan *25 years of developmental and child psychology in Ireland*. IJP (1974-98))

Programme evaluation: Rutland St; Community Mothers

Increased research and evaluation over the past 20 years.

More research: WHY?

- Affluence
- UNCRC (ratified by Ireland 1992) and child abuse scandals bring more attention to children (Children's Rights Alliance 1993/95)
- Keeping up with the (international) Jones's
- New interest in evidence-based policy & practice

More programme evaluation: WHY?

- New focus on accountability and value for money
- Evidence-based policy & practice
- Push from The Atlantic Philanthropies

Investment in research on children in Ireland

- **1995** onward The Atlantic Philanthropies: Early support for research on children; Disadvantaged Children and Youth Programme; joint programmes with govt. with EIP focus - PEIP, ABC programmes
- **2000** IRCHSS (2012 IRC)
- Agencies such as Combat Poverty, Crisis Pregnancy, charities...
- **2000** National Children's Office/OMCYA/ DCYA Children's strategy has major goal *that children's lives be better understood*. **2006** National Longitudinal Study: GUI begins
- Universities and ITs

Increase in research capacity:

New research centres and intermediary organisations, e.g. CES

PhDs

New lectureships in child and youth issues in wide range of disciplines

e.g. Children's Research Centre TCD

In the 15 years from 1995-2010, 13 staff and students went on to academic posts and 16 to research, clinical and policy posts.

Level of investment since 2007

What does it say when many research funds and studentships were wiped out overnight in the recession?

IRC retained most of its funds

AP still major funder - for now

DCYA budget cut, still major funder and research policy decision-maker

EU: Horizon 2020, European Research Council etc

How do we assess impact?

Impact on what?

Researcher-centred criteria or children-centred?

Academic criteria:

- Number of publications in peer-reviewed outlets
- Citation rates
- Esteem of peers etc
- Kudos gained from obtaining research funds

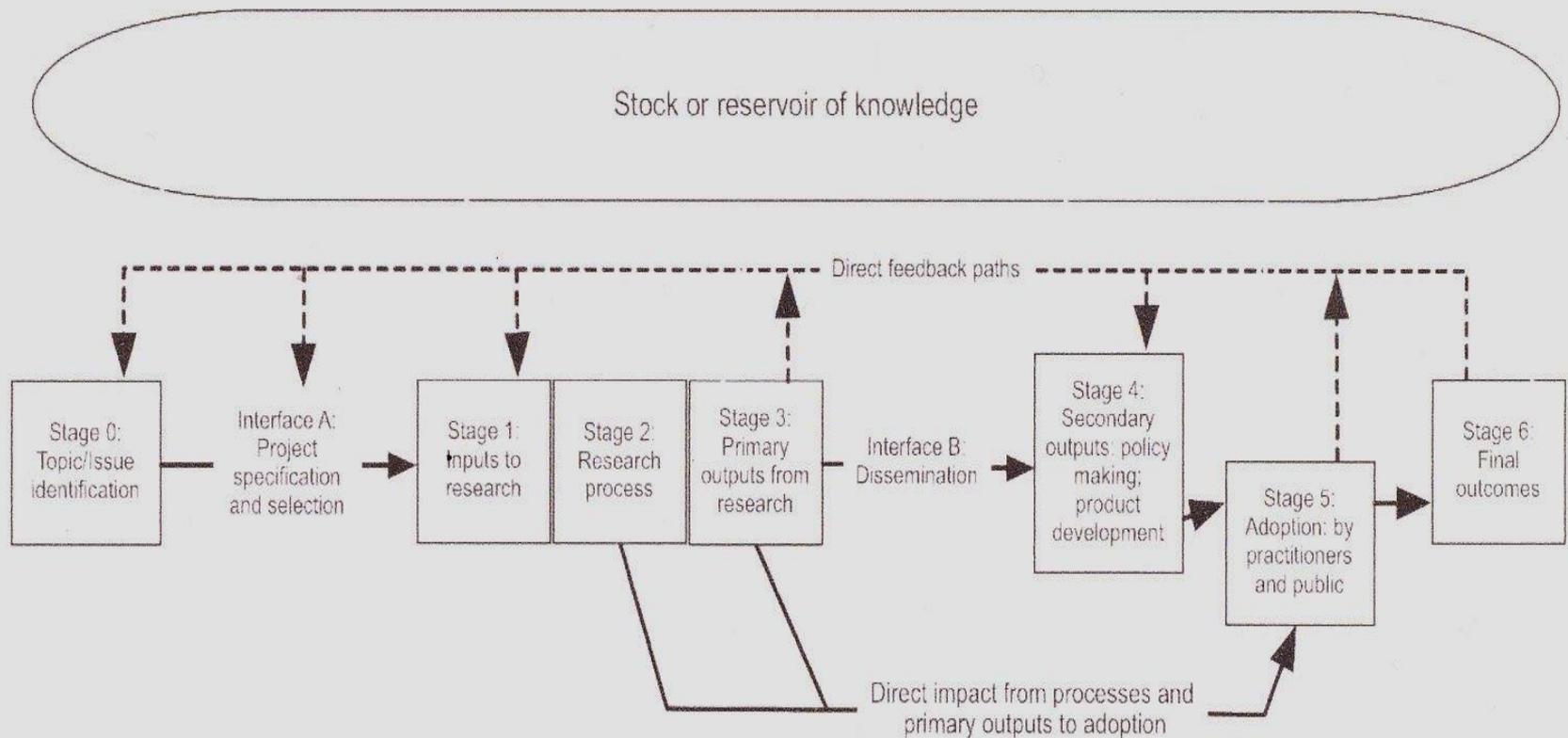
Impact on children's lives harder to assess

IRCHSS study

Kerrins and Greene 2010

- Review of research tracking non-academic impact of research
- Review of models reported in the literature
- Most work carried out in health research
- Taking two CRC projects (Listen to me! and A study of the outcomes of inter-country adoption) and tracking impact using models developed by Chaskin and Rosenfeld (2008) and Hanney and Buxton (1995)
- Problem of attribution

IRCHSS study: Hanney & Buxton model



The political, professional and industrial environment and wider Society

IRCHSS study: Chaskin & Rosenfeld model

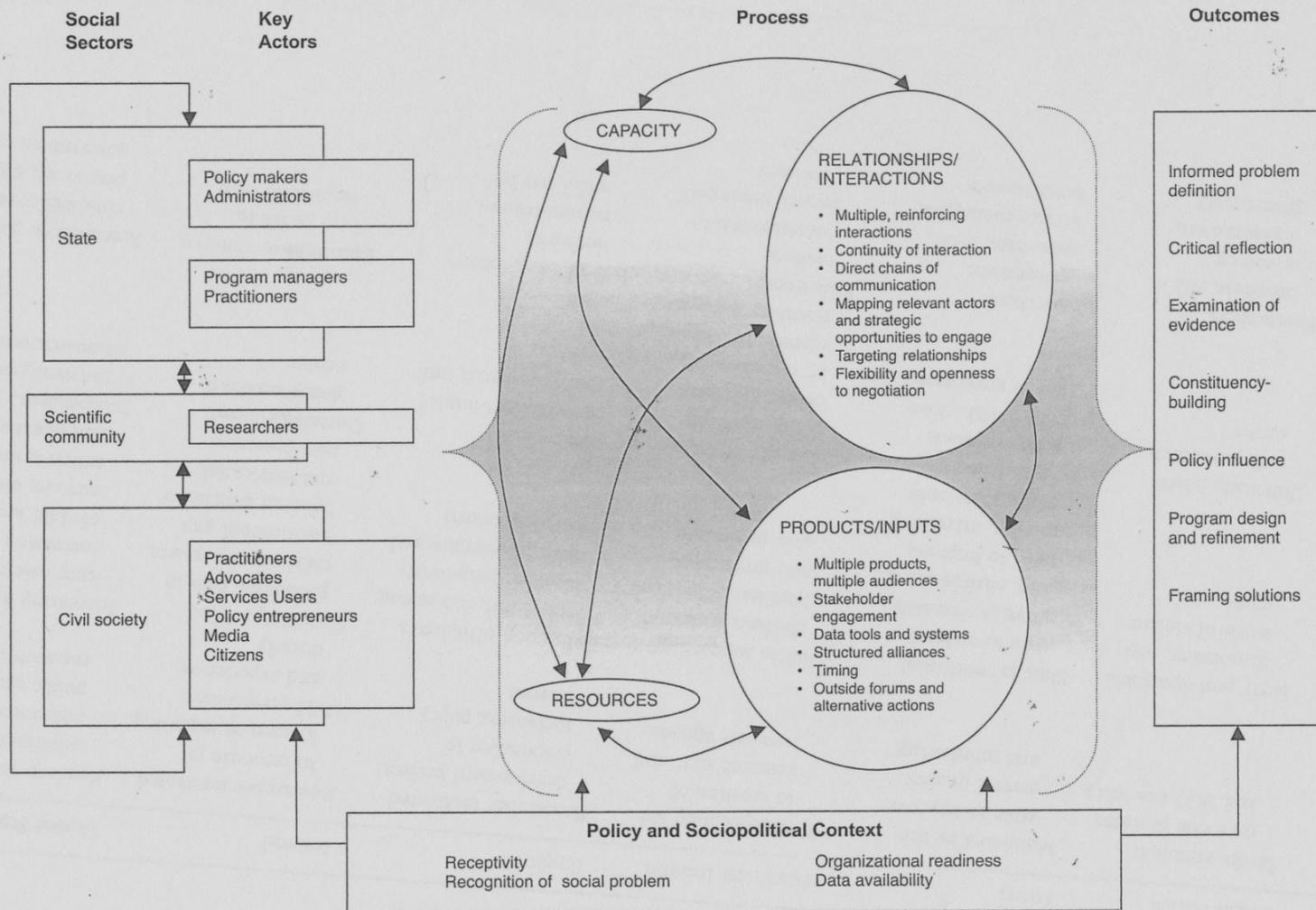


Figure 8.1 Research, Dissemination, and Utilization: A Systemic View

IRCHSS study: Method and some findings

Method: Retrospective tracking involved searching published and grey literature, counting citations, interviewing stake-holders and analysing media reports

Evidence of impact included:

1. New knowledge production. The studies were the first in Ireland to look at these issues.
2. Both reports were specifically cited as the impetus for the establishment of new services.
3. The ICA report was the first and remains the only source of information on outcomes for children adopted into Ireland and is frequently a practical reference point for both the Adoption Board and social workers in the field
4. The model developed has the potential for future use in impact assessment

What has 20 years of research on children achieved for children?

- We do know more about their lives, both children in general and particular groups. Lives not hidden as they once were. [CRA Report Cards, DCYA State of the Nation's Children]
- Information cited in policy actions/govt. strategies
- We don't really know whether research has made a positive difference
- Contributing to conceptual change as well as instrumental change (Weiss)
- Researchers engaged in programme evaluation tend to assume that they are contributing to the rolling out of better programmes.

What are the scientific and ideological frameworks that have driven investment in the past 20 years?

Efficient use of public money / Evidence-informed policy and practice / Knowledge society

Children's rights: Listening to 'the voice of the child' / Researching children's experience (Ireland ratified UNCRC 1992) / Referendum 2012

Social engineering: Intervention in the lives of disadvantaged children and their parents

However in 2014 more children in poverty, obese, in care, suffering from lack of services.....**Why?**

Researcher-funder relationship

Many different models. Ranging from open, excellence-based awards to contracts for services.

Some funders adopt the approach that he who pays the piper calls the tune...
and the researchers dance

It does not have to be this way. Examples of good relationship AND good research outcomes

But at its worst...

A negative relationship for researchers

- Rigid framework with pre-defined method and outcomes
- Lack of trust
- Lack of respect
- Denial of intellectual property and publication rights

Researchers involved in evaluation: Some specific issues

- Research or contract for service?
- Evaluation of poorly conceived and implemented programmes: Ethical concern re waste of money and time and people's expectations
- Using inappropriate methods: e.g. RCTs where assumptions for an RCT cannot be met
- Selective reporting of results

Usage of research in current policy and practice

- The rise of brain science
- Old wine in new bottles: early determinism
- The early intervention and prevention mantra
- Identifying children 'at risk' and risky children
- Preoccupation with poor parenting

Why are these perspectives popular ? Why is this cluster of dubious research interpretations favoured by politicians, policy makers and philanthropists in USA, UK, Australia etc?

Issues for the future:

- Need to justify and advocate for spending on social sciences and child research
- Need clarity about criteria we use to assess quality and impact
- Are our energies as researchers well-directed?
- Could we spend research monies differently with more impact on children's welfare?
- Where are the knowledge gaps?
- What are the priorities? Defined by govt.? See DCYA National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011-16

The future:

- Protecting funding for open, blue skies research
- Challenging govt. agenda, e.g. Research Priorities Exercise. Research and commercial return/job creation
- Working with thematic research programmes where appropriate, e.g. H2020; NORFACE
- Upping our game.
- Leaving behind the funder-researcher relationship based on the master-slave model
- Mutual respect and understanding

The future:

- Rhetoric about valuing research does not extend to supporting careers of researchers. Too many short term contracts and lack of job security
- Academics and researchers are the best-placed to criticise and interrogate academic fads
- And to question research that is feeding political and ideological agendas that may not be in children's interests

Building on last 20 years: some concerns

Making a difference to children's lives is not only about policy and practice but also about politics and ideology

Danger of a closed circuit with only certain kinds of research and evaluation being funded. A dominant political/ideological worldview frames the questions asked and can result in the valuing & funding of only certain topics and kinds of research. Research needs to be independent-minded and to question all such frameworks. The situation is not helped by the current push from universities for academics to bring in research funds

Don't just follow the money!