

**The Rubber Meets the Road:
Linking Research, Policy, and Practice in Youth Development**

Joan Sykora, Ph.D.

Ministry of Youth Development

Wellington, New Zealand

Background

The New Zealand government has a ministry devoted exclusively to promoting the development and well-being of young people. While other major government organisations such as the Ministries of Education, Health, Justice and Labour create policies that directly affect young people, the core of their business is much broader than the well-being of young people. The Ministry of Youth Development (MYD) is a small ministry that sits inside the Ministry of Social Development (MSD). As a "ministry within a ministry", MYD has the advantages of sharing the resources of the larger organisation, while maintaining a separate Minister, staff, budget, office space and population focus.

In part, it was the size of MYD that allowed the work described in this paper to take place. The forty staff in MYD are structured in four work teams and two ancillary groups; policy, service delivery, youth engagement, and regional hubs and administration and research/evaluation. An important part of MYD's work takes place through the regional hubs, where resources and support are provided to the youth sector in New Zealand. Leadership of the MYD general manager and management team along with the support of MSD are also contributing factors to the success of the research and evaluation work to date. These individuals have valued and prioritised the contribution of a credible knowledge base to the work of all of the MYD teams, and provided the leadership to make this work a reality.

The *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* has guided MYD and the youth sector over the last several years. One of the four key goals of this Strategy is to build and use a credible youth development knowledge base. When the work described in this paper began, little had been done to make this happen.

Since 2003, the "Managing for Outcomes" framework has been mandatory within New Zealand government (SSC 2003i, SSC 2003ii, SSC 2005). One of the consequences of the focus on outcomes has been an increased demand for a knowledge base (often referred to as an evidence base) to support policy direction and a subsequent expansion of

research and evaluation capacity within central government. The Centre for Social Research and Evaluation (CSRE) sits within MSD and provides research and evaluation work to support both MYD and MSD to "manage for outcomes". In November 2005, a staff member from CSRE was seconded to MYD as a project manager for research and evaluation, charged with three key activities:

- Scope the research and evaluation needs of MYD
- Create and begin implementing a strategic plan for the development and use of a knowledge base on youth and youth development
- Provide leadership to MYD and the broader youth sector in building and using the knowledge base.

The project manager was seconded full time for nine months, and worked with staff members from three of the teams who committed up to fifty percent of their time to advancing the research and evaluation work. They have been considered the "Research and Evaluation team" or the "R & E" team of MYD during this secondment period.

The youth development knowledge base is comprised of credible information generated by research and evaluation activities within New Zealand and overseas, regarding young people aged 12-24. This includes information from research and evaluations on growth, development, health and well-being.

Scoping of Needs

The R & E team identified of some key organisational needs regarding the use, and lack of use, of the youth development knowledge base. Focus groups were held with each of the four MYD teams to assess staff needs for information and data that would support their daily work. Questions posed were whether or not staff were able to access what they needed in a timely and practical manner, how they typically accessed information and their suggestions for improvements in these areas. The focus groups, combined with the work of the R & E team, resulted in the identification of five key areas of need within MYD. These include:

The Uptake Gap. Staff identified that the gap between the existing knowledge base and the actual use in decision making is a significant problem for MYD. The youth development knowledge base has not been routinely linked to policy development, projects, external communications, youth engagement, or to the funding and delivery of services.

Staff Capacity. MYD has not had the capacity to contribute significantly with advice or expertise to research being done in New Zealand on, by or for young people and their development. Lacking staff with capabilities in the area of youth development *and* research or evaluation methods, MYD has not been in a position to contribute to important research efforts and ensure that the research generated is both *credible* and *policy relevant*. The lack of capacity to support decision makers within MYD, other

government agencies and across the youth sector in New Zealand was identified as a significant short-coming.

Accessibility. Credible information from national and international research has not, at times, been readily accessible to MYD staff in a time frame that matches the demands they face. The CSRE Information Centre is highly valuable and a well-used resource by MYD staff. Information Centre staff are able to scout out materials both nationally and internationally. However, these materials often take days to arrive in Wellington, while requests for policy advice typically have much shorter time frames--sometimes less than a day.

Leadership. The use of a research knowledge base to support the work of the Ministry has been dependent on the leadership of individuals, rather than organisation-wide leadership.

Organisational culture. The organisational culture of many, if not most, government organisations means that staff work under short timeframes and are expected to provide "rapid response" with the "best available" direction or policy advice. This way of working is in contrast with an "organisation of inquiry" or "learning organisation" that supports on-going learning and encourages staff to build their knowledge base (SSC, 2003).

In order to effectively link policy, practice and research, the R & E team determined that MYD must make the cultural shift to being an organisation of inquiry. This enables staff to take ownership of developing creative, practical and effective tools for routinely linking research, policy and practice--and of finding solutions to the needs identified above. As an organisation of inquiry, seeking and using of the knowledge base is an inherent part of the ongoing work of the Ministry. The project manager and staff went about identifying a vision, work programme and recommendations for the Ministry.

Vision

MYD will progress as an 'organisation of inquiry', supporting exploration, discovery and effective use of the youth development knowledge base. We will advance that knowledge base as credible, accessible, relevant and integrated into decision making that supports young New Zealanders.

In an effort to fulfill this vision, MYD is strengthening the use of research and evaluation in the on-going decision making and policy advice provided by the Ministry. The transfer of knowledge, both from within and outside the organisation, is a vital component of being an organisation of inquiry. This is more likely to happen in an environment of teamwork and cooperation where group problem-solving takes place and the development of innovative ideas is encouraged.

The Rubber Meets the Road

How will MYD go about making this vision a reality? Much information has been generated about being a learning organisation/organisation of inquiry, as well as about the importance of linking research, policy and practice (Cousins 2004, McDonald 2003, Senge 1990). But there is far less available about the practical day-to-day steps that a government organisation can take to actually change the organisational culture to one that has effective links between research, policy and practice. In other words, to "close the uptake gap" identified in the MYD scoping of needs. The R & E team came up with some ideas, are trying them out, and they seem to be moving MYD in a positive direction. These include leadership, staff capacity building, tools for developing, understanding and using the knowledge base, access to the knowledge base in a timely manner, and motivation for using the knowledge base. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

1. Leadership

Staff with leadership capabilities occupying key positions is known to be a critical component to making effective organisational changes (Cousins 2004, Senge 1990). The work that is being accomplished in MYD could not be done without the strong and active support of the general manager and the senior management team. Specific actions of the leadership by the MYD management team have included:

- Actively implementing the recommendations of the Research and Evaluation team, including making the shift to an organisation of inquiry
- Fully embracing the cultural shift, and conveying expectations and support to their individual teams. (An example of this is encouraging staff to take one day per month as a "resource day". These can be reading, site visits or other professional development endeavors that renew, rejuvenate and keep staff current in their areas of expertise).
- Endorsing and securing a senior level person to champion this work in a full time position within the Ministry
- Supporting interested staff to be a part of the research and evaluation work
- Providing an adequate budget and resources.

2. Capacity and Capabilities

Staff capacity and capabilities are necessary to guide the work around the use of the knowledge base. This includes people who champion this work, manage resources, build and contribute to the knowledge base, link with the broader youth sector across New Zealand, generate tools, link staff to resources and provide education and information about the knowledge base and its use, including:

- Internal 'conversations' within MYD on research and evaluation topics that are of interest to staff
- A mechanism for staff to voice their opinions and needs about linking research, policy and practice. Focus groups can be used for more formal input, but less formally and more routinely this can be part of internal 'Eval Chats'
- Journal Club as a segment of monthly staff meetings that highlight new resources

- and information that is of interest to staff
- "Resource Days" that link staff directly to resources and materials relevant to their current work programme.

3. Tools

Tools are needed to develop, understand and use the knowledge base. Part of capacity building is ensuring access to adequate and relevant tools. A number of activities and initiatives are underway or in development to enhance capacity to use and grow the knowledge base including:

- Formal and informal dialogue, networks and partnerships with advocates, stakeholders and other researchers
- A research forum that brings together researchers, young people, academics, government organisations and non-government organisations who have an interest in research and its development and use
- An Action Plan for youth development research across New Zealand based on the outcomes of the research forum
- Meaningful involvement of young people in research
- Links with other organisations and ministries relevant to youth, such as Education, Health, Justice and Labour regarding the knowledge base and sharing of data. Two key groups to support this work are SPEaR (Social Policy Evaluation and Research) and the Youth 2007 Steering Group. See below for more details
- Resources that support research within New Zealand, including advice, funding and advocacy
- A positive youth development outcomes framework with short, medium and long term outcomes that lead to positive youth development
- Information and evaluation results on methodologies that are effective for the collection of data with young people, such as PhotoVoices and the Most Significant Change Technique
- Policy briefs on relevant topics related to linking research, policy and practice such as <http://www.cyfc.umn.edu/policy/issues/briefings/savvyresearch.pdf>
- Involvement in the work of Youth 2000 and Youth 2007--a survey on the health and well-being of New Zealand students
- The Youth 2007 steering committee is a multi-sector resource with an investment in positive youth development
- Explore ways to explore and document the uptake of Youth 2000 and Youth 2007
- Regular participation with the SPEaR (Social Policy, Evaluation and Research) work group. Promote and use the resources on www.spear.govt.nz.

4. Access

Access to the knowledge base in a timely manner requires resources. Some of the tools that follow are available through MSD, CSRE and the Information Centre, while others will be or have been resourced and obtained:

- Up-to-date literature reviews on youth development
- Books and journals readily accessible onsite
- The Action Plan developed out of the work at the research forum
- A mapping of research and evaluation data relevant to young people within New Zealand with author, content and location of findings
- Electronic resources, including youth development "Fast Track" emails that highlight the latest youth development research in New Zealand and internationally. These are sent out regularly by the Information Centre
- Electronic reading list through the Information Centre on youth development materials that staff can access instantly from their desktops
- The research section of the MYD website with links to multiple resources

5. Motivation

Staff must see the need and have the motivation to use the knowledge base. This is more likely to happen in an organisation of inquiry when a culture of seeking out and using credible information exists, supported with the tools to make that possible. Some of those tools include:

- Involvement of young people
- A stronger partnership with CSRE so staff have people they can contact for information and resources
- "Resource days" as opportunities for rejuvenation and professional development of all staff
- Improved access to the data the policy team needs to provide credible policy advice and to be linked with other agencies
- The services team will have an Outcomes Framework to support and guide their work, including the contracts for provision of services
- A stronger multi-sector partnerships allowing staff the opportunities to interact and learn with colleagues in other sectors. Resources such as SPEaR [www.spear.govt.nz] and BRCSS (Building Research Capacity in the Social Sector) [www.brcss.net] are relevant here
- Professional development opportunities such as the New Zealand Evaluation Association annual conference and other training and development opportunities
- Partnerships with the academic sector, particularly Victoria University's School of Government and Massey University's new extramural qualification in evaluation
- The knowledge base must be understandable to staff, and when it is not, translated into clear language
- Research must be timely and policy-relevant to the needs of MYD staff.

Summary

MYD has made a commitment to becoming an organisation of inquiry whose work is linked to an evolving knowledge base. This is a work in progress that seems to be

moving in a positive and effective direction. The ideas and tools listed in this paper are a compilation of the resources to strengthen MYD's work to close the gap that exists between research, policy development and service delivery. In addition to these tools, however, those seeking policy advice must be realistic about the timing of their requests. "Quick and dirty" doesn't serve anyone's best interests.

This work is, and will continue to be challenging. However, the Ministry has made a commitment to carrying it forward to strengthen the work delivered on behalf of the young people of New Zealand.

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