We know what to do but we don’t always do it – aligning policy and practice

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Note: The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Social Inclusion Board nor is it a statement of South Australian Government policy.

Abstract

Improving the educational outcomes for young people has been a key social policy focus of state governments across Australia, evidenced for example: by moves to increase the school leaving age; reform of certificates of education; and expansion of vocational education and training in schools. In South Australia a major component of this activity has been the school retention focus of the Social Inclusion Initiative. Established as a whole of government endeavour, it has been driven by the independent Social Inclusion Board and an Inter Ministerial Committee. Over the past three years, a number of demonstration programs have resulted in an increased capacity to respond to the complexity of issues relating to early school leaving and an increased capacity to make a difference through benefit to young people who have remained engaged or re-engaged with learning in a range of different environments. Systems change has been more incremental in nature. The policy challenge now presents of how to effectively embed ‘school retention’ into mainstream policy and practice across the agencies. In an era of striving for evidence based policy, this paper will explore the implications for the development of policy that encapsulates learning from demonstration programs, both in relation to ongoing benefit for young people and for systems change.

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Every year, and maybe every month or even every week, somewhere in Australia a pilot or demonstration program will commence with time limited funding but certainly with the aspiration that if it can demonstrate good results then it will be continued once the initial funding period is over. Such programs often set ambitious outputs and outcomes about what will be achieved even though we know that setting up new programs can take considerable time, particularly if they are to involve multiple players, and that systems change including the policy development process can take many months and even years.

Older practitioners are often wary of becoming involved in such pilots or demonstrations. They know the potential cost to themselves in terms of personal investment and recount the times that it has happened before leading to nothing further than dashed expectations and resentment. Others have not given up hope that this time it may be different and that the pilot or demonstration program will lead to real ongoing change. While in a few instances programs may continue, the process of moving the demonstrations of what works from the ‘alternatives’ and margins to become mainstream policy and practice is a much more complex
and difficult task than simply being able to show good results or funding additional short term programs.

The implementation of the School Retention Action Plan in South Australia has been predicated on demonstrations programs with the intention that what could be learnt from these programs about the engagement and re-engagement of young people in learning would influence broader changes to practices, policies and systems. While a target for increasing apparent school retention rates was set, ‘school retention’ has been the short hand phrase coined to encompass a much more complex series of ideas and theories about the importance for all young people\(^1\) of their engagement with learning, whether at school or in a vocational education and training environment, and their achievement of identifiable learning outcomes prior to and during early adulthood. The Action Plan included an emphasis on identifying the key aspects necessary for learning environments to become more inclusive and better able to meet the learning needs of the diversity of young people’s circumstances and responsibilities; and the system changes needed across education and other sectors more generally that would enhance the quality of services delivered, including expanding formal recognition of learning options for young people.

To increase the capacity to make a difference to ‘school retention’, the demonstrations programs needed to have a focus in one or more of three intervention areas:

1. Contribute to increasing the number of young people staying at school and completing year 12. These interventions have the most impact on increasing apparent school retention rates.

2. Assist those who are currently ‘lost’ or at high risk or being ‘lost’ to schooling through disengagement well before the school leaving age. While this is a relatively small group of young people and so does not have much impact on school retention rates, interventions with these young people that lead to greater engagement with learning make an important difference to their individual life outcomes and society.

3. Assist young people who have left school early, often with little educational attainment, to re-engage with education and/or training. As these young people may not be returning to a school environment, interventions for these young people have a positive impact on the MCEETYA participation measure\(^2\) rather than apparent school retention rates.

The School Retention Action Plan though has not been an education only initiative, but rather a social inclusion initiative that required whole-of-government action and joined-up working. Other key government departments such as health, families and communities, justice, vocational education and training and employment and youth affairs were all called to the implementation table. Lead agencies were nominated with responsibility for implementing and reporting back on the progress of specific initiatives and progress has been closely monitored by both the independent South Australian Social Inclusion Board and the School Retention Inter Ministerial Committee.

Since the commencement of the Action Plan in 2004, over 12,000 young people and all public high schools, as well as some Catholic and Independent schools, most area schools and a

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\(^1\) The term young people is used as inclusive of children throughout this report.

\(^2\) This measure counts young people in the 15-19 year age group who are engaged in full time work, full time study or a combination of part-time work and part time study.
smaller number of primary schools have been involved in some way. A range of new programs have been introduced to demonstrate successful ways of working with specific priority groups of young people who were at risk of disengagement from learning or who had already disengaged. This included a specific focus on Aboriginal young people, young people in regional areas and young people under the Guardianship of the Minister. As well, a smaller number of existing programs that were working well were expanded in scope or adapted for new situations, for example a youth development program successful in the metropolitan area was further expanded into regional areas providing new learning opportunities for these students. A few of the initiatives were focussed primarily on staff development and training; and research and policy development such as training of teachers who have a career advisory role in schools.

The myriad of programs that were auspiced by and funded through the School Retention Action Plan have all been successful to some degree. They have made a difference for the young people involved in a number of ways. For some young people it has been help to improve their literacy and numeracy skills; for others it has been making a successful transition from primary school to high school; for others it has meant that they have stayed at school to complete their year 12; and young people who had dropped out of school have become interested and involved in learning again. As demonstration programs, based on research and practice evidence available at the time, they have received funding, support and ongoing scrutiny. There is ample indications from the accountability processes and evaluations that the programs have increased the capacity to respond to and make a difference to young people’s education, training and, to a lesser extent, employment outcomes.

Now into the fourth year (and final year of the funding specifically allocated for the Action Plan implementation) the policy challenge presents of how to effectively embed ‘school retention’ into mainstream policy and practice across agencies. This is not to ignore or discount the changes in policy and practice with state wide impacts that have already occurred. As outlined in the School Retention Action Plan Stage 2 Evaluation (2006) some of the programs have been a catalyst enabling the acceleration of the development of a number of initiatives. These have included:

- Clear direction that increasing school retention is a government priority and that it is the business of all schools and the education system;
- Greater consideration of young people’s development and needs in a holistic way in the delivery of learning and other programs rather than only through the narrow lens of the agency concerned, leading to the young person being placed at the centre of some service development;
- Increased recognition of the value of inviting young people to actively contribute to decision making processes, including in schools and government service provision;
- New policies and structures set in place for the formal recognition of community based learning;
- Improved availability and quality of career advice for young people that is better linked with labour market projections for South Australia;
- Greater attention given to more inclusive schooling practices including refocussing behaviour management, suspension and exclusion practices to incorporate a stronger restorative practices focus;
• Strengthened mechanisms for planning and developing education and training strategies from a whole of government perspective; and

• Increased development of government community partnerships in meeting young people’s learning and development needs and acknowledgement of the added value this can bring.

And while there has been a greater recognition of the importance of ‘school retention’ to young people’s future life outcomes, it is also fair to say that there have not been the significant shifts in policy and practice more generally to ensure that what has been learnt from the demonstration programs is sustained and spread throughout the system.

Some of the challenges

What then may be contributing to this seeming lack of policy action? The experience to date of translating the learning from the School Retention Action Plan into ongoing policy and practice mirrors some of the experiences that other reform programs have encountered. It would appear there is an interplay of different factors contributing to the inaction or the difficulty in taking action. I would like to highlight and discuss six of these contributing factors that from my observations have been particularly significant in the South Australian situation:

1. The notions of core business: not our responsibility and no incentive to change

It is clear that agencies have struggled with the idea that ‘school retention’ is whole of government business and not just the responsibility of education. In fact, education did not necessarily see it as their ‘issue’ either, as once a young person left school, particularly above the compulsory schooling age, they fell outside the school’s realm. Successful rates of completion of the SA Certificate of Education have often only measured those who are in the race to complete, rather than all young people. Pathways and transitions from school have not always been connected with a focus on encouraging young people to stay and successfully complete their schooling.

Although, the call to whole of government action was supported by cross agency structures including at the Ministerial level, agencies have still tended to see the work as in addition to their mainstream business.

The notion of ‘core’ business and what is perceived as the agency’s core functions are strongly entrenched within organisations, often narrowly dictating what policies and activities are supported. This is particularly so as a legacy from the preceding decade of years of downsizing and fiscal constraints across state government services. The issue of school retention has not yet been taken up as part of the primary core business of most agencies involved and therefore has diminished the importance of taking lasting action.

As Graycar (2006) points out “what is notable is that the things that work best are often by-products of another policy or practice domain. They are often not the core business of the agency that reaps the benefits” (Graycar, 2006 p8). A range of different agencies benefit from the ’protective factor' that better educational outcomes can offer but this requires an orientation that gives regard and weight to prevention strategies and investment over the longer term. However, there are also few real current financial or other incentives for agencies to make an such an investment.
2. Attitudes and beliefs about young people: those young people who are and are not deserving

Although primary and secondary education are seen as a fundamental public good to be supported by government, not all young people are able to make the most of this opportunity. Attitudes still prevail about the ‘deservedness’ or otherwise of some of the young people who are or have disengaged from learning, especially where it requires the use of additional resources.

In implementing the Action Plan programs, young people in difficulties have needed case management and intensive support to make a difference to their ability to stay engaged with learning, which has required additional or the reallocation of resources. This has not always been seen to be a good investment, particularly if the young people are seen to be ‘undeserving’ of further effort because of their challenging behaviour and attitudes.

Linked to deservedness, is the belief that in leaving school early, young people have rejected the value that education provides them and therefore they do not require further attention. However, young people have indicated through their participating in the Action Plan programs that they do understand the importance of education and what it can provide them with: “I didn’t want to stay at school anyway and I know they didn’t want me but stacking trolleys is a lousy job” (Innovative Community Action Network program participant 2007).

Similarly, in examining school reform in the US, it was found that

“Most dropouts persist in seeking educational opportunities. They have absorbed the message that the economy is sending: seek higher-level skills and credentials if you want a solid foothold in the job market. But the educational system has not responded in kind, with programs that put dropouts on the road to valued post secondary skills and credentials”. (Almeida, Cheryl et al 2006).

It is more difficult to gain the impetus and support for change while such negative attitudes and beliefs continue to persist about those young people who are disengaging or who have disengaged from schooling.

3. Time limited and a focus on short term program achievements: inhibiting learning and innovation

The tension between short-term achievements and longer term outcomes has been a real one for the School Retention Action Plan as a high profile initiative of government. As a four year plan there has been some scepticism about it being anything other than another time-limited series of activities. In considering innovation with organisation Mulgan (2007) states that “public organizations with short time-horizons are highly resistant to innovation”. (Mulgan, 2007, p13)

It has required significant effort on the part of a wide range of people at all levels of government and community organisations to develop and activate the Action Plan programs within the relatively short time frame, particularly given the bureaucratic constraints often encountered in this process. There has also been variable capacity across and within agencies to do this, leading to an uneven pace of development across some of the programs.
In the rush to achieve results, time to reflect on and learn from the implementation have been reduced, although the high accountability demands of the Action Plan were designed to encourage this to some degree. Other reform initiatives have also found that

“Political imperatives, such as the need to demonstrate success within tight timeframes, also tend to inhibit rather than encourage learning” (Coote, Anna et al, 2004 p4)

It is the reflection and learning that would seem crucial to driving policy and practice in new and different directions. However, the pressure remains for quick results and good news stories (which it must be noted are also important in quite different ways for ensuring ongoing support).

Lance Price in reflecting on his years as ‘No.2’ at the Downing St Press Office, cautions about the need to find this balance:

“So instead of concentrating on what we were doing and getting the policies right and getting them in place early enough, we spent far too much time (and all of us must take responsibility for that) worrying about each and every headline.” (Radio National Media Report 28th June 2007)

4. Questioning the evidence base: weak linkages between policy and practices

While some academics and researchers might think otherwise, those involved in the policy development process do use evidence. As Pope et al (2006) suggest

“Managers and policy makers do use evidence. What they don’t do so often is use the particularised kinds of evidence that some researchers recognise (eg systematic reviews)… They utilise intelligence from a variety of sources, including formal research evidence, albeit in an adapted form. One of the reasons for this is that researchers often do not provide evidence that is timely and accessible to policy makers and managers”. (Pope et al 2006, pp45-46)

Even though much of the Action Plan findings about what works have been consistent with research findings in similar areas in the educational literature, it has not been an easy process to convert this practitioner knowledge into an identifiable and acceptable evidence base, given the specific nature of a number of the programs. As well, there has been no ready mechanism available for channelling this knowledge into policy development.

Along with this, at times, there has been an apparent lack of connectedness between the capacity of people working at some distance from the locus of decision making about the programs and those who have the authority and/or delegation to make decisions, particularly in the early stage of implementation of the Action Plan. Local workers indicated that they were often at the end of an extended line of communication. Because of this, some workers felt that the complexities they were dealing with at the local level did not appear to be understood ‘by the system’ or responded to adequately.

It is important though that all stakeholders recognise that

“policy is ultimately a combination of evidence and values. Evidence helps to provide solutions for problems and it also suggests what impact those solutions may have. The reality with policy making is that there are always gaps between evidence based solution
for a problem and the impact policies have in solving that problem.” (Academy of the Social Sciences Australia Roundtable on Wellbeing, *Dialogue* 2006 p89.)

5. Competing agendas: other major policy initiatives

The introduction of the School Retention Action Plan has only been one of a number of major initiatives within government and as such it has had to ‘compete’ with other initiatives for priority and capacity within agencies.

Within education, for example, there has been a review of the SA Certificate of Education with a raft of recommendation leading to significant implementation work with implications for policy and practice. Education Works has similarly placed a high demand on policy development processes. In other agencies, initiatives such as “Keeping them safe”, introducing reform in child protection, and the commencement of SouthAustraliaWorks, with a focus of increasing skill development and employment opportunities, have required significant policy input and implementation planning.

The lack of policy capacity highlighted by Graycar (2006) can be evident in a lack of personnel with the necessary policy experience and/or the necessary skills to undertake the complex policy work required by these major initiatives so that

“Sometime innovations are limited by lack of policy capacity, even though there is great willingness to achieve them … limited capacity to gather and assess evidence, to look over the horizon and build the right links with other agencies to implement policies”. (Graycar, 2006, p9).

6. Accommodating individual need within universal services provision

There is a tension within the delivery of a universal system, such as the education system, in incorporating an individual approach and in responding to specific needs as questions of equity arise. However, there is also evidence that the current system does not result in equitable outcomes for all young people – “the social differences in achievement appear early in primary school and steadily widen” (Tesse 2006, p248)

The School Retention Action Plan programs have been able to develop responsive and flexible learning programs and intensive support programs for individuals. The capacity to be able to ‘scale up’ these responses so that more young people are able to benefit from them appears to be more fraught in a system that has been geared in a particular way to best suit those most able to aim for a university pathway.

Quint et al (2005) remind us it is not easy task

“balancing a need for more personalised learning environments with a comprehensive and intensive approach to improved instruction that emphasises alignment, rigor and student engagement”. (Quint et al 2005, ES p8)

Re-thinking the notion of universal service provision and what it might entail, including what policies might support this, will be necessary for the development of a more multi-focused system better able to accommodate individual learning needs and through this achieve greater equity in educational outcomes.
Potential ways forward

Even with these seemingly formidable challenges, I do believe there are some potential ways forward and in fact the challenges also assist in providing insights into where and how effort could be channelled. In relation to the Action Plan, in hindsight we could have used some of these better to align policy and practice and with others we still have the chance to pursue them.

1. Understanding the value of demonstration projects and using them better

Although the Action Plan programs were acknowledged as demonstration programs from commencement, how the demonstrations might be used to drive changes in policy, guide future directions and encourage further development was not generally fully understood. Putting the programs in place and then engaging the young people in the programs took significant effort and because of this became the primary focus, rather than the means for learning new ways of doing things.

While the Action Plan demonstrations of what could be done differently have given us a basis to argue for the need for change, it has been more difficult to develop the case for specific changes, particularly where there has been a lack of baseline data and where desired outcomes were stated too broadly. The value that a demonstration program can provide in contributing to extending knowledge and the evidence base has therefore not been as well utilised as it could have been. Simpson points out that even though “it is not a given that pilots will deliver reliable feedback”,

“piloting can be a powerful complement to evidence-based policy measurement if it helps to answer questions about whether the policy is working and how best to make it work”. (Simpson, 2003 p5)

Pittman (2002) in outlining tasks for policymakers and advocates in relation to youth development policy describes demonstration projects as part of the critical task to build capacity of people, programs and places. While this has occurred to some degree, particularly at the local level, this is another aspect of demonstrations that the Action Plan could have potentially better utilised overall.

I should point out that the Innovative Community Action Networks, which commenced a little later than many of the other Action Plan programs, have been able to capitalise on the initial learning and therefore have been able to better embed the understanding of the purpose of demonstrations across their programs. As Mulgan (2007) in his investigation of social innovation suggests the “use of processes such as pathfinders and trials that embody learning-by-doing allows iteration” (Mulgan 2007 p21). Mulgan also stresses the importance of “innovating appropriately – the right amount in the right place at the right time” (p13).

2. Increasing understanding of the issues through profiling different priority groups and listening to consumers

In first examining school retention, there were varying and often contradictory pictures presented about the nature and extent of the issue. Counts of all students on the one hand and anecdotes about the 'problem', often from those with vested interests in particular theories or
programs, on the other hand did not necessarily help with understanding what and how interventions might be most useful.

Profiling different groups of young people has been critical to building the full picture of school retention issues and to understanding the diversity of action that might need to be taken. The availability of robust data has been a major issue in being able to do this effectively. A good example has been gaining an understanding of students studying part-time in high post-compulsory secondary schooling and the educational outcomes that might result from this, which has been the subject of an ARC Linkage funded project, being lead by the University of South Australia. Notions about what constitutes full-time and part-time study has direct and significant policy implications for the provision of schooling.

On a smaller scale, the lack of educational and support programs linked with child care for young mothers and the lack of work experience opportunities for young people with disabilities, for example, has lead to not only innovative programs in meeting these needs but also to a greater understanding of the very different and diverse needs of particular student groups.

However, profiling specific groups of young people is not just about collecting statistical data; it must include the voice of the consumers, in this case students (and often their families). Without young people's voice and involvement in defining the picture or profile of themselves and their educational needs, a critical part of the picture is missing.

"engaging youth in improving educational opportunities – means giving young people clear opportunities to share responsibility for school and community reform and improvement processes aimed at increasing achievement for all students". (Forum for Youth Investment 2005, p2)

3. **Build policy through learning from the practice evidence**

"The effective learning environments on the margins of our one-size fits all high schools provide our best clues to the kinds of institutions and institutional arrangements that should be part of this redefined system of secondary education.” (From the Margins to the Mainstream 2002, Policy implications)

As I mentioned amongst the challenges the linkages between policy developers and practitioners have not been particularly strong. Those involved in policy development do not always look to the practitioners in their own or similar organisations for the evidence base on which to build policy and if they do, what practitioners may tell them may not be in a format or contain the information that can be effectively used.

The copious (and some practitioners would say onerous) reports we had built into the monitoring and accountability processes for the Action Plan have often had to be 'translated' into policy speak. A similar chasm to that which exists between policy and research can also exists between policy and practice. Establishing an open and effective dialogue between the areas as a matter of course and other mechanisms that engage practitioners in the policy development process at least to some degree, are needed. As well, developing the use of action research evaluative processes among practitioners (that draws on and combines the techniques of action research and evaluation) may help to bridge the information gap. In this way
“an evidence-based approach recognises policy making as a dynamic multi-layered exercise and places importance on interpretation and analysis grounded in both theory and experience”. (Simpson 2003, p4)

4. Connecting senior levels and the ‘coal face’

Related to the better linking of policy and practice is connecting those working at senior levels within agencies and those working at the 'coal face', that is in direct service delivery. The power of different levels within agencies to mediate and even change messages coming from workers on the ground or vice versa should not be underestimated.

Again it is how to do this in a way that does not become onerous for each, but instead provides useful intellegence to the other, that can also feed into policy development processes. As Coote et al (2004) suggests

“overall it seems helpful to focus on knowledge building, rather than merely on promoting evidence-based policy and practice. However this will require a synthesis of radically different cultures and philosophies about how people and organisations learn and change”. (Coote et al 2004, p4)

These connections are also important for more dissemination of information about new policies and practices, if they are to be translated into changing ongoing procedures and practices. A critical part of this is to ensure that there is sufficient supports in place to allow practitioners to take up new practices. In discussing high school reform in the US, Quint (2006) says

“much has been learned about what is needed – and what seems to work. What remains is to make sure that practitioners have the support they need to put that learning into practice”. (Quint 2006, p10)

This would also appear to be true in the Action Plan experience and policy that supports new practices is key.

5. Communicating realistic expectations and timeframes

It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of implementation of a new initative and in doing this over state what might be achieved. Added to this is the factor of time limited funding. Governments drive by election and budget cycles can create artificial timeframes that skew how programs might otherwise be planned and implemented. All can result in unrealistic expectations and timeframes. As Quint et al (2006) suggest “it is important to have high ambitions but also reasonable expectation about the kind of impacts that reforms can produce” (p9).

Getting the message across about realistic expectations and what can be achieved in the timeframe can be difficult. Because of this it would seem necessary to become more 'media savvy' about how to highlight the small achievements along the way to continue the interest, support and momentum while waiting for the longer term results and outcomes.

Another consideration in relation to realistic timeframes is that of working with others such as whole of government and joined up approaches require. Engaging partners and community members or working with specific groups in many ways cannot be hurried if there is to be real engagement. This also needs to be factored in and well communicated.
6. Being clear about outcomes, monitoring and evaluation that feeds into policy.

Quint et al (2006) state that

“it is important for policy makers and administrators to avoid jumping from one reform to the next; instead, they should stay the course until initiative have been put in place long enough and well enough for their effectiveness to receive a fair test.” (Quint et al 2006, p8)

To be able to assess effectiveness, from the Action Plans experience, requires clear objectives and expected outcomes, a process for ongoing monitoring and robust evaluation. However, if the findings are to have impact on policy processes, what is needed is 'real time' evaluation that is as much about pointing the way forward as it is about assessing how we have done. Evaluation needs to be build in from the planning stages and not just delegated as a job for external consultants, but to be seen as the responsibility of all involved through developing a culture of 'evaluative thinking'.

As I have suggested aligning policy and practice takes considerable effort to overcome the challenges that currently seem inherent within government systems. To use Graycar’s summation:

“Knowing what policies to pursue challenges governments continually, and it never seems to get any easier. Knowing what is the best course of action for practitioners is an equally important challenge. Linking it all together with evidence makes it plausible, but this is easier said than done”. (Graycar, 2006 p8).

However, we must not give up trying in relation to 'school retention' if we are to achieve more equitable outcomes for all young people.
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