



# Evidence-based policy and practice in early childhood education; challenges and opportunities

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**LECTURE 1 June 2015**

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Erziehungswissenschaft, Qualitätsentwicklung / Evaluierung**

It gives me great pleasure to make a contribution to the fascinating MA course module designed by Dr Nina Hogrebe: *The controversial discourse of evidence-based policy and practice in education*. In particular I welcome the fact that I am able to build on the foundations laid in the previous six sessions, at least for you, the students who are among my audience today.

This means that many of you have already become familiar with the concepts of evidence-based policy and practice and with the role systematic reviews of the research literature play in making a reality of these contested approaches. All the same, I should like to start this lecture by summarising my own understanding of these concepts.

The next step will be for me to explore with you some of challenges presented by systematic reviews and the process of systematic reviewing. Finally I examine the state of early childhood policymaking in the UK, including my own experience of being involved in this. Could this be called evidence-based policymaking? And if not, why not? Of course I would have liked to discuss evidence-based practice development in some detail today. But there will not be enough time left for a proper discussion of that topic. However, I reckon that much of what I am about to say about evidence-based policy, is relevant to evidence-based practice.

## The background

Academic research has long been used to inform both policymaking and practice development in early childhood education, just as it has been in other areas of policymaking. Over the last fifty years successive UK governments developed an impressive record of directly commissioned research which has informed early childhood policy development. Such studies were both longitudinal and cross-sectional. For example, four major birth cohort studies, including the Millennium Cohort Study, are now lodged with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies based at University College London's Institute of Education, University of London (<http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/>).

Other policy relevant education studies, including early childhood education studies, continue to be publicly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This is one of several grant-giving UK research councils which is itself directly funded by the Government.

One early childhood education study that you may well be familiar with is the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project. This was the first major longitudinal study exclusively focused on the impact of early childhood education and care provision on children's later development. To be precise, on the socio-emotional and cognitive development of 3000 English children aged 3 to 7 years (Sylva et al, 2004). Findings from this longitudinal study are now available up to age 16 (Sylva et al, 2014). They continue to exert a major influence on early childhood policy and practice decisions.

However, it is only relatively recently that the terms evidence-based policy and practice were adopted. These terms denote policies and practice which are informed by reviews of research meeting pre-determined quality criteria. Reviews employing this particular type of scrutiny and synthesis have come to be known as „systematic“ reviews. They have taken on a major role in evidence-based policy and practice development (Oakley, 2012).

So the terms evidence-based policy and practice refer to policymaking and practice development that is informed by what is considered by some to be „the best possible research evidence“ for their effectiveness. Of course this does not mean that such research is the only factor influencing such policies and practice. Educational and other policy, even so-called evidence-based policy is determined by a wide range of factors, of which research is only one. In the course of this lecture I shall elaborate on this point

Now let me explain how I use the phrase „best possible evidence“ and the term „effectiveness“ in this context. And let me also revisit the term „systematic review.“ The phrase „best possible evidence“ in this context refers in the first place to evidence from robust individual studies. That means studies employing appropriate

and rigorous methods and reporting clearly on the approach used. Factors that should be reported on include the population under study, sample and sampling frame, methods, analysis and findings.

The abbreviation PICOS is nowadays often used to remind us to check on these factors in studies that measure change. Is the study clearly described in terms of its P stands for Population, I stands for Interventions, C stands for Comparators, O stands for Outcomes and S stands for Study design (GSRS, 2013a). Within systematic reviews we pay attention to these factors in a distinctive way.

Now for the definition I use of policy and practice „effectiveness.“ It indicates that reliable evidence from methodologically sound evaluation studies exist indicating that the policies or services in question are capable of achieving their stated aims. This means that the policies and practice approaches in question have been shown to induce positive change as intended; this usually refers to behaviour change.

The term „Systematic review“ refers to reviews which are restricted to primary scientific studies and reviews of such primary studies. Here is another definition:

Systematic reviews are literature reviews that adhere closely to a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to limit systematic error (bias), mainly by attempting to identify, appraise and synthesise all relevant studies (of whatever design) in order to answer a particular question (or set of questions).

(Petticrew and Roberts, 2006, pp. 9/10)

As such systematic reviews form an especially rigorous and transparent way of synthesising research. The systematic reviewing approach which informs and underpins so-called evidence-based policy and practice emanated from the UK and USA. Systematic reviews often, but by no means always, favour studies whose research design is the Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT), common in medical research.

This fact alone may make them appear to some of you as exceptionally positivist. Indeed I am well aware that our European colleagues tend to take a more phenomenological approach in research design and interpretation, underpinned by the seminal work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1913). However, in the course of this lecture I intend to argue – and hopefully to demonstrate - that they can usefully complement more qualitative approaches.

### **Systematic reviews and evidence-based policy and practice in Britain: a brief history**

The emphasis on evidence-based policy and practice emerged as an official response to the burgeoning evidence-based medicine movement in the late

twentieth century. This movement had its roots in an important book by a clinical professor at the Welsh National School of Medicine, Archie Cochrane (1972).

Professor Cochrane questioned the evidence base of many of the medical interventions practised at the time in all areas of medicine. He highlighted the lack of quality and transparency characterising much of the research underpinning medical practice. This made it difficult to distinguish between real and assumed knowledge within this research.

Cochrane's observations prompted the development of a team-based approach to the systematic locating, assessing and synthesising of medical research evidence. As a result the Cochrane Collaboration was established in 1993. This was the first of several such research synthesis initiatives and was named after him.

This approach to research synthesis has since been broadened out across many academic and scientific domains, as illustrated in table 1 below. Do note when examining any review, that the format of different approaches to research synthesis continues to evolve.

**Table 1: major UK and USA research synthesis initiatives**

<i>Research collaboration</i>	<i>synthesis</i>	<i>Collaboration focus</i>	<i>Web address</i>
Cochrane Collaboration, 1993		International health research synthesis	<a href="http://www.cochrane.org/">http://www.cochrane.org/</a>
Campbell Collaboration, 2000		International educational, social and criminological policy research synthesis	<a href="http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/">http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/</a>
EPPI-Centre, 1993		UK based Education and social welfare research synthesis Funded by Department for Education	<a href="http://www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/">http://www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/</a>
What Works Clearing House, 2002		USA education and early childhood research synthesis	<a href="http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/aboutus.aspx">http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/aboutus.aspx</a>

This systematic approach to research synthesis is underpinned by three principles. They apply across the various research synthesis initiatives:

1. The desire to make optimal use of existing research, i.e. to build on the existing body of primary research and of research reviews, before embarking on new empirical research. Doing so reflects the view that knowledge should be cumulative.
2. The desire to bring a critical gaze to existing research studies, both regarding their methodological quality and their reporting quality before using them in three separate ways. That is including them in literature reviews, using them

to underpin further empirical research or using them to inform policymaking and practice development.

3. The desire, indeed the need, to distil into a manageable format the increasing volume of research that is available electronically; in other words, the need to deal with academic information overload.

Maybe you agree with me that these principles are relevant to any literature reviews?

How did evidence-informed policy and practice gain ground in Britain? This happened from the early nineties onwards. Back then both the Cochrane Collaboration and the EPPI-Centre had already been established under a Conservative British Government. So by then links between systematic research synthesis and health policy-making and clinical practice were already fairly firmly established. Next evidence-based policy and practice began to acquire an even higher profile under the 1997 - 2010 Labour Government (Cabinet Office, 2000).

From the late nineties onwards different central government departments directly commissioned educational and other social science studies to inform policymaking. This started happening more frequently than it had until then, and more public money was being spent on such research.

The use of systematic reviews, though, was only slowly extended to a wider range of policy areas. So in reality very little of the research informed policies did actually meet the very strict definition of evidence-based policy which I used earlier. That definition referred to policy informed by systematic reviews of the research literature.

The UK Government commissioned social science research not only from established academic researchers, but also from within Government via the Government Social Research Service which was established in around 2000 (<http://tinyurl.com/n23rgh2>). This membership organisation for social scientists working within or on behalf of central Government departments has a code of practice which states that: "Government Social Research is the application of social scientific knowledge with the aim of improving the impact and efficacy of government policy and delivery." (GSRS, 2013b)

This growing trend towards developing evidence-based policy and practice at central government level is probably most prominently represented by the operations of NICE. NICE is a major institution guiding practice within the National Health Service (NHS) in England and Wales. The abbreviation NICE stands for The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. NICE was established in 1999 and is operationally independent from government.

The remit of NICE is to provide guidance to reduce variability in availability and in quality of NHS treatments and care. Within the NHS medicines, medical treatments and care interventions are only paid for if they are approved by NICE. As part of its work NICE also develops public health guidance to help prevent ill health and

promote healthier lifestyles (<https://www.nice.org.uk/About/Who-we-are>). The area of public health forms a major and important part of the work of NICE.

Within the area of public health, much attention is paid to early childhood services and parenting support. For instance, in 2012 NICE published guidance on promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of vulnerable children aged nought to 5 years. The guidance focused on support for such children and their families through home visiting and by means of childcare and early education (NICE, 2012, p. 5). As is normal practice for NICE, its public health advisory committee commissioned several systematic reviews and systematic reviews of reviews to inform this Guidance.

For these commissioned reviews the review teams explored findings from studies which employed RCTs, including well known studies from the USA. No doubt you are familiar with this type of study, e.g. studies of the impact of the HighScope Perry Pre-School Project (Heckman et al, 2010), of the Abecedarian Early Intervention Project (Masse and Barnett, 2002) and of the Chicago Child-Parent Centre Early Education Programme (Reynolds et al, 2011).

But the review teams commissioned by the NICE Public Health Advisory Committee also reviewed quasi-experimental studies involving a control group. For example, findings from as the evaluation of the pilot of early education for targeted 2 year olds in England were included (Smith et al, 2009). This goes to show that even NICE does not restrict the reviews that inform its guidelines just to a synthesis of research employing RCTs.

### **Systematic reviews and early childhood education: opportunities and challenges**

In fact it remains a common misconception within social science that systematic reviews must always restrict the included studies to those employing RCTs. Yet within social science, including in early childhood education research, RCTs seldom feature in systematic reviews. The primary reason is that they are used less frequently. Moreover, UK and USA researchers, just like their European counterparts, tend to favour a combination of methods, both quantitative and qualitative. Such a combination, they agree, is more likely to provide the best possible evidence base for future policy and practice.

Indeed, the EPPI-Centre research synthesis initiative is one among several which have developed methods for qualitative synthesis and explored how these can be combined with quantitative synthesis (Thomas et al, 2004; Thomas and Harden, 2008).

This combination of research approaches is important in early childhood education research, in my view, and systematic reviews of such research should embrace both

of them. To illustrate the reasons why I quote here from a paper by two former colleagues:

Without qualitative studies, we would be hard pressed to understand the social worlds of those with whom we work, and without this understanding, we cannot begin to conceptualise interventions which will be acceptable, let alone effective. However, the development of effective services requires other kinds of evidence...The confidence we can have that a particular set of outcomes is attributable to our actions depends in large part on the research design, and its careful execution.

(Macdonald and Roberts, 1995, p. 7)

Macdonald and Roberts were highly influential in the adoption of evidence-based social welfare practice in the UK. During the nineties Roberts introduced the „what works“ approach in Barnardo’s, the UK’s largest child welfare agency. As I previously worked in policy and research for this NGO I had the opportunity to analyse this process in several publications (Lloyd, 1998; Lloyd, 2013).

There is another objection which is frequently made to systematic reviewing within the social science research community. That is that the resulting reviews are atheoretical. On the contrary, systematic reviews are built around conceptual frameworks, just like any form of good research. Reviews will incorporate epistemological frameworks about the nature of the world and how it can be understood. Additionally, reviews will be built around theoretical framework about the topic. These aspects of systematic reviewing are well explained by Christine Olivier and her colleagues at the EPPI Centre in a 2012 edited book (Oliver et al, 2012, p. 67).

Systematic reviews are anything but atheoretical, Oliver and her colleagues argue. On the contrary:”Reviews of effects are based on hypotheses constructed from theories and evidence about how interventions might work” (Oliver et al, 2012, p. 68). That means they are underpinned by hypotheses about why and how a particular intervention will produce the intended outcomes. Every term in the research questions underpinning the review has to be transparently defined and its boundaries explained. This has certainly been my own experience as a systematic reviewer.

My personal experience of systematic reviewing I gained as a member of the first, and so far only, EPPI-Centre Early Years Review Group. Between 2002 and 2006 this group, led by Professor Helen Penn at the University of East London, conducted three systematic reviews in the area of early childhood (Penn et al, 2004; Lloyd et al, 2005; Penn et al, 2006). Since such reviews should be updated from time to time, I updated the second one, of which I had been the lead author (Lloyd and Penn, 2010).

Each review focused on „what works“ in terms of outcome questions, which are favoured by policy makers and RCTs and experimental designs offer the most robust answers to this kind of question (Penn and Lloyd, 2006, p. 325). Evaluating process questions is more typical of qualitative research, but the EPPI system does not preclude them. Right from the outset the team was clear that it is more often a combination of methods – both quantitative and qualitative - that delivers the „best possible evidence“ which can and should inform both practice and policy development.

In the course of the process we identified multiple opportunities offered by systematic reviewing:

- Systematic reviewing reveals with detail and clarity the strengths and shortcomings of evidence on a topic
- the process values critical examination of experimental and other types of evidence
- it offers depth, rather than breadth, in terms of reviewing evidence
- the teamwork involved helps to avoid bias.

We also noted several challenges posed by systematic reviewing:

- the process is immensely labour intensive
- difficulties encountered in including case studies, exploratory, descriptive or comparative studies common in educational research as sources of evidence
- the temptation to generalise beyond the review“s findings when making policy recommendations
- the rather low reporting quality of much research in early childhood education hampers the production of useful research syntheses.

Incidentally, this final observation on the questionable quality of much early childhood research was later shared by the author of a more general review. Karl Burger (2010) reviewed research on how early childhood education impacts on the cognitive development on children from different socio-economic backgrounds. He concluded that researchers should pay much greater attention in design and reporting to the factors to which I referred earlier with the help of the abbreviation PICOS.

When the EPPE-Centre Early Years Review Group had finished work on its three systematic reviews, Helen Penn and I wrote two academic articles to describe and consider the introduction of this new method within early childhood research (Penn and Lloyd, 2006; Penn and Lloyd, 2007). Our conclusion was:

We think that whatever its limitations, the systematic review process has proved a useful exercise in scrutiny and clarification of studies in the field of early years.  
(Penn and Lloyd, 2006, p. 326)



The team acknowledged that the notion of „what works“ has proved controversial, especially among academics specialising in qualitative research. We also appreciated that the reviewing process in education studies continues to provoke vociferous and in some respects justifiable academic criticism (Biesta, 2007; Vandenbroeck et al, 2012). We did experience, but managed to resist, the lure to generalise which was well described by Boaz and Pawson in a paper for *The Journal of Social Policy* (2005, p. 184). That is the temptation to take liberties and generalise beyond the reviews findings in the recommendations to policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

As a review team we nevertheless took the view that in early childhood education research greater levels of certainty about the impact of policies and practice are needed. Especially in cases where these may have major consequences for the lives of young children and their families. Moreover, children and their parents and wider families themselves have a right to know about two kinds of evidence in particular. These are the evidence for the likely impact on them of early childhood policies and practices and the evidence for the effectiveness of such policies and practices.

As a team we remained hard pressed, though, to demonstrate evidence of a lasting impact of our work on policy and practice. Some of the causes for that situation may derive from the process of evidence-informed policymaking, as I shall try to illustrate now.

### **The realities of evidence-based policymaking**

Quite early on in this lecture I pointed out that policymaking is influenced by other factors besides research, whether or not that research takes the form of systematic reviews. Economic and fiscal considerations play their part, as do political ones. The relationship between research and policy-making is never linear or unambiguous.

A good list of such factors is provided by Philip Davies (Davies, 2005), who used to work for the Government. He describes how numerous factors interact in influencing policy decisions. Factors he lists are political expediency, costs and benefits, available resources, side effects, values and policy context, alongside research. That is, they influence policy as much as research evidence for effectiveness, or even more so.

My own direct experience of being involved in early childhood policymaking highlighted the effect of political pressures in determining quite major policy shifts (Lloyd, 2014; Lloyd, forthcoming). It provided me with deeper insights into the interface between policy and politics and the role research plays in this. Of course, I must leave out a detailed discussion of that experience, as it went beyond the topic of research informing policy.

During the first half the Coalition administration years, „co-production“, a form of participatory governance between civilians and civil servants, was implemented widely in the design and implementation of early years policies. Such a way of developing policy related to publicly funded services was considered important at that time. From 2010 onwards the UK Department for Education and Department of Health employed a co-production process for almost two years in respect of early childhood policy. At the invitation of the relevant government ministers, I became a member of a small group which steered this process. In fact I was the only academic member of this group. The mode of operation characterising this co-production process involved face-to-face working meetings of sector specialists, supported and informed by civil servants detailed to service this steering group.

It was emphasised by DFE and DOH officials from the start that membership would be on a personal basis, rather than as formal representatives of organisations or networks. It was also understood, however, that group members would take back issues under discussion to their respective constituencies for information sharing, debate and advice. In July 2011 this group produced the Coalition Government's first early childhood policy paper (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2011a and b) and then went on to be at the centre of a network of satellite groups advising on the implementation of the policy proposals.

In September 2012 a new minister was put in charge of this area of policy at DFE in what is known as the annual „reshuffle“ by the Prime Minister. For the co-production process the situation then changed swiftly and dramatically. No longer was its input required into policymaking, as the new minister had different ideas from her predecessor about the usefulness of the process and about the areas that early childhood education policy should focus on.

In January 2013, the first early years policy statement produced under the new political regime at the Department for Education was published (DFE, 2013). The document had not been co-produced and neither was its successor (HM Government, 2013), published in July of the same year. Clearly by this stage co-production was no longer considered a key concept in the development of public services. Within two years the term „foundation years“ had disappeared. Only the 2011 *Foundation Years* document aimed at professionals can still be easily traced on the DFE website (Lloyd, 2014, p. 134).

This experience of mine with the process of co-production highlighted the influence of politics and politicians in policymaking. As I already noted, there are many factors influencing the extent to which research ends up being used in policymaking, but the evidence for the importance of political expediency is extremely strong.

But trying to influence policy remains worthwhile all the same, in my view. Indeed, Philip Davies in a later paper (Davies, 2012) has argued that research evidence may be used in different and complementary ways at different stages of the policy cycle.

The lack of direct evidence of research findings having informed a certain policy does not mean that they failed to have any direct impact. This echoes the traditional aphorism derived from propositional logic that absence of evidence does not indicate evidence of absence.

The process by which civil servants further their understanding of research relevant to certain policy areas is very important. They after all directly influence politicians in their role as drafters of policy documents. This is an area that deserves more and more thorough investigation in the context of research-informed policy-making. Researchers who have explored this area include Ouimet and his colleagues in a 2009 paper for the journal *Evidence & Policy* and the sociologist Chris Brown in a recent book (2015) on evidence-informed policy and practice in education.

Brown (2015) emphasises the need for such policymakers to become experts in evidence use, if evidence-informed policymaking is to become more prevalent. Brown argues that in order to exploit this pathway to evidence-based policymaking, we need to understand the pressures civil servants are working under.

One vital reality of evidence use is that policymakers often need to reach for findings that support a pre-determined course of action rather than to improve optimal decision making – what drives this and how can this approach be challenged?

(Brown, 2015, p. 4)

The constraints on the use of research in policymaking have also been well summarised by Ray Pawson, emeritus professor of social research methodology at the University of Leeds. First of all, according to Pawson (2002, p. 158): “...in order to inform policy, the research must come before the policy.” This may seem obvious, but in reality it does not always happen.

The different timescale for the production of research as compared to that for policy development forms one of the more obvious obstacles to the incorporation of research findings. It is also one of the more substantial obstacles. If you add to these time pressures the pressure from political imperatives, such as the wish to pass legislation quickly and to favour certain policy solutions over others, then you can imagine that policy is often still based on less than the best evidence.

Even the findings of evaluation research commissioned by the Government may be overtaken by decision to roll-out the relevant policy. This can happen even if the evaluation was commissioned to inform the national roll-out of major initiatives and its findings were delivered at the specified time. The evaluation of the piloting of free education for disadvantaged 2-year old children (Smith et al, 2009) forms an example of an expensive study commissioned by the Department for Education where this happened. I was a member of the team producing this evaluation. Let me

illustrate this point with the timetable of events that took place between 2004 and 2013.

1. December 2004: a Labour Government policy and strategy paper (HM Treasury, 2004) announces two year old early education pilot
2. September 2006: pilot initiative for Early Education for Two Year Old (disadvantaged) children starts in 32 English local authorities
3. September 2006: a three year (2006/09) evaluation of the pilot scheme was commissioned from the National Centre for Social Research by DFE
4. September 2008: at the Labour Party Conference the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announces a universal roll-out of the initiative
5. March 2009: annual Budget announces national roll-out of the initiative restricted to disadvantaged two year olds as from 1 September 2009
6. July 2009: National Centre for Social Research pilot evaluation report published finding few positive impacts, except in high quality settings and recommending caution in further implementation (Smith et al, 2009)
7. September 2009: initiative implemented in all 134 English local authorities
8. Autumn 2010: Coalition Government Spending Review announcement of the extension of the early education entitlement to 20% of 2 year olds by 2013/14, i.e. to 130.000 disadvantaged English children.
9. Autumn 2011: Budget Statement: announcement of the extension of the early education entitlement to 40% of 2 year olds by 2014/15, i.e. to 260.000 disadvantaged English children.
10. December 2013: publication of follow-up evaluation at age 5 of the children who took part in the pilot (Maisey et al, 2013) which finds no evidence of positive impact

The conclusion is almost inevitable that political pressures were responsible for this train of events under two different British governments. And it may not come as a surprise to you that I have some sympathy for the position of researchers such as Professor Martin Hammersley (Hammersley, 2013), who seriously questions whether evidence-informed, that is research-based, policy does actually exist.

Indeed, I also have some sympathy for the arguments offered by Cartwright and Hardie (2012). Theirs are more theoretically than pragmatically based arguments for improving evidenced-based policy. These authors caution against an over-reliance on evidence from systematic reviews of RCTs and RCTs themselves. Instead they regard any RCT's positive findings of policy impact as „conditional evidence for effectiveness“ (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012, p. 58).

Cartwright and Hardie argue that a range of relevant „support“ factors needs to be taken into account when predicting whether a policy that has once proved effective will work elsewhere under different circumstances (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012: p. 57). Thus their book is largely about the transferability of evidence for policy effectiveness. Many researchers do agree that causality is multi-factorial and that

systematic reviews contribute only small pieces of the evidence jigsaw puzzle. It is for that very reason that the research questions for systematic reviews should be very clearly defined.

Let me make a final point about the impact of political ideology on policymaking. Brown (2015) addresses this factor head-on. He argues that the quality of researchers' arguments is of limited value in getting their findings taken account of in policymaking. To avoid being ignored (Brown, 2015, p. 24), researchers wishing to influence policy need to make their subject areas, approaches and narratives compatible with the dominant ideological discourse of the government of the day.

Is Brown being polemical here? He goes on to state that in such work "...researchers also have a responsibility to suggest values relating to knowledge use..." (Brown, 2015, p. 160). At least this is a position I can agree with. His book certainly illustrates that the realities of evidence-based policymaking are exceedingly complex. It also highlights the potentially disproportionate influence of politics on policymaking.

## Conclusions

So what sort of conclusions about systematic reviewing and about evidence-based policy am I inclined to draw from the evidence and arguments I gathered for this presentation? I want to emphasise six separate aspects of this evidence.

There is a definite place for systematic reviewing in extending the knowledge base around early childhood education research and it complements other types of research. The systematic review approach is one useful tool in a research team's toolbox. It is important to be clear about the epistemological viewpoint informing any such review and not to generalise beyond its findings.

There is a need for early childhood education researchers to strive for improved research designs and better reporting quality. Even at a time when public funding to conduct research employing complex designs is extremely limited, there can be no excuse for poor reporting quality.

It is important that academic researchers familiarise themselves with the many and often competing factors influencing policy-making. This will help them promote the use of research studies that meet predetermined quality criteria in policymaking.

Researchers should learn how to produce and present research that lends itself well to being used in policymaking and how to attract attention for their research findings in a crowded policy marketplace.

It is worth reminding ourselves that before the introduction of so-called evidence-based policy, the UK government already had a long and strong track record of commissioning policy oriented research relating to children and families. Of these the cohort studies are some of the most important. These provide evidence on causal

relationships which many researchers would consider equivalent in value to that provided by the most rigorous randomised controlled trials.

We must continue to value the contribution that different types of early childhood education and other research make to the body of knowledge available to inform policymaking.

Thank you for listening! I look forward to hearing your views in the discussion following this presentation.

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1 June 2015

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