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research

Understanding evidence use within education policy: a policy narrative perspective

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There are growing calls for improved understandings of the role of evidence within policy development. There is long-standing recognition of the role of narratives and narrative processes in public policy. The aim of this paper is to explore the potential of policy narratives as a way to make sense of evidence use in policy. Drawing on an exploratory study of evidence use by Australian education policymakers, we describe how policy narratives emerged as a recurring theme and repeated reference point. Building on these findings, we argue that policy narratives deserve greater attention and discussion within the field of evidence use.

key words policy narrative • evidence use • policy • education

key messages

- There is a need for improved understandings of evidence use in policy.
- This paper explores the potential of policy narratives as a way to make sense of evidence in the policy process.
- It shows how policy narratives emerged as a key theme in a study of Australian education policy-making.
- It argues that policy narratives have real methodological potential for the evidence use field.

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Introduction

There is a lot written about the use of evidence within the policy process. It has been the focus of conceptual exploration (for example, Weiss, 1979), political exhortation (for example, Nussle and Orszag, 2016), empirical study (for example, Stevens, 2011), research synthesis (for example, Oliver et al, 2014a), critical analysis (for example, Lingard, 2013), quality assessments (for example, Sense about Science, 2016) and improvement strategies (for example, UK Government, 2013). It has been written about by researchers across a wide array of disciplines (for example, Nutley et al, 2007; Boswell, 2009; Head, 2015; Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017), and by decision makers, analysts and intermediaries from varied policy contexts (for example, McDonough, 2000; Davies, 2004; Saunders, 2007; van der Hoeven, 2007; Nussle and Orszag, 2016).

Despite this rich and varied literature, it is becoming increasingly clear that understandings of evidence use in policy have been limited by the ways in which researchers have tended to approach the topic. One concern has been a tendency for researchers to focus on research impact rather than evidence use. A systematic review of evidence-based policy research in the health field, for example, has highlighted a tendency for researchers to focus on ‘how to increase the impact of their own outputs, rather than on understanding the processes behind policy change’ (Oliver et al, 2014b, 3). Connected with this focus on impact rather than use, has been a parallel preoccupation with the use of research as opposed to the use of evidence more broadly. To quote again from Oliver et al’s analysis of evidence-based policy research: ‘Most research in the area studies the use of research evidence by policymakers, not what knowledge or information policymakers use’ (2014b, 6).

Another issue, noted by Freeman et al (2011, 128), has been a tendency for researchers to approach policy as ‘an abstraction’ rather than ‘as a practice’. As Freeman et al point out: ‘We know surprisingly little of what those we call “policy makers” actually do when they are doing their job’ (2011, 128). Finally, a fourth area of concern has been around evidence use research being driven much more by the needs and interests of researchers, as opposed to the needs and interests of policymakers. So, as Lomas and Brown (2009, 914) argue, models of research use in policy are ‘largely written from the perspective of research rather than policy’. They therefore tend to ‘help researchers understand how to influence the policy process but not... civil servants [how to] use research better’ (Lomas and Brown, 2009, 922).

Taken together, these arguments suggest a need for improved research-based understandings of evidence use in policy. In particular, they suggest a need for studies and frameworks that: focus on the use of evidence; take a broader view of evidence; engage with the day-to-day practices of policymaking; and take seriously the needs and interest of policymakers. This paper discusses the findings of a small-scale Australian study of education policy development that sought to respond to these arguments (Rickinson et al, 2016; 2017). The study looked into the use of evidence within the development of three specific education policies in one Australian state education department (the Victorian Department of Education and Training or DET).¹ It involved interviews with 25 DET policymakers who were actively involved in the development of the three policies, along with documentary analysis and observation of relevant meetings/events. The aim was to build up a rich picture of the nature and dynamics of evidence use within DET policy processes – what evidence was being used, by whom, in what ways, for what purposes and at what stages in the policy process.

This paper focuses in on one aspect of the study's findings (that is, the ways in which evidence was used) and a specific concept that helped to frame these findings (that is, the policy narrative). Our aims, then, are two-fold: to shed light on the varied ways in which a specific group of Australian policymakers were using evidence within their work; and to explore the potential of policy narrative as a lens or frame with which to better understand the use of evidence in policy development. The former aligns well with calls for 'empirical description and analysis of how [evidence] and policy actually interact in vivo' (Oliver et al, 2014b, 1), while the latter responds to the argument that evidence use research needs 'frameworks... to help structure our knowledge and understanding' as part of creating 'a new social science of research use' (Gough and Boaz, 2015, 489).

This paper seeks to draw attention to the concept of 'policy narrative' as a framework for understanding and representing evidence use in policy. There is long-standing recognition for the role of narratives and narrative processes in public policy (for example, Kaplan, 1986; Roe, 1994; Fisher, 2003), and policy narratives have been described as 'the communication vehicles that are used for conveying and organizing policy information' (Shanahan et al, 2011, 540). The concept of policy narrative emerged strongly within the comments made by the interviewees in our study, and proved helpful in making sense of the different ways in which these policymakers were using evidence in their policy development work. In recognition of this finding, and those of others who have made similar observations (for example, Boswell et al, 2011; Stevens, 2011), this paper suggests that policy narrative is a perspective that deserves greater attention and discussion within the field of evidence use. We see it as a concept that has empirical validity, theoretical power and methodological potential.

Following this brief introduction, the paper is organised into five main sections. We begin by considering the concept of policy narrative, and the development of narrative approaches to policy research. This is followed by an outline of the aims and methods of the research study that provides the empirical basis of this paper, and then a discussion of what this study found in relation to how evidence is used in the policy process. This leads into a broader discussion of policy narrative as a framework with which to study, understand and represent the role and use of evidence within policy processes. We conclude by summarising the main themes of the paper.

Narrative approaches to policy research

The role of narratives and narrative processes in public policy is a well-established theme within policy studies. As Fisher (2003, 167) explains, 'Given that stories are the language of human action generally, it comes as no great surprise that policymakers... also convey their interpretations through the telling of stories'. Hence, policies can be understood in terms of a narrative sequence involving 'a problem situation to be solved' (the beginning), 'a policy intervention' (the middle) and 'a policy outcome' (the end) (Fischer, 2003, 168). Policy narratives, then, are 'the communication vehicles that are used for conveying and organizing policy information' (Shanahan et al, 2011, 540), and the development of policy can be understood as a 'narrative-making' process (Fischer, 2003, 168).

Narrative perspectives have been used in a wide range of studies across a number of different methodological traditions. Traditionally, much of the narrative-informed policy research has been qualitative in nature. Key examples include Roe's (1994) work on Narrative Policy Analysis, Fischer's (2003) analysis of 'Public policy as narrative', Hajer's (1993; 1995) studies of the 'story-lines' of discourse coalitions and

Stone's (2002) exploration of the ways in which policy problems are defined through narrative. Jones and McBeth (2010, 333) describe how 'it is from these core works that most narrative research in public policy has drawn its cues for both philosophical orientation and methodological design'.

More recently, however, there have been explicit attempts to develop more quantitative approaches to the study of policy narratives. Jones and McBeth (2010, 330), for example, put forward the Narrative Policy Framework as 'a quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach to the study of policy narratives'. This approach comes in response to the fact that 'positivists have generally failed to provide methodological alternatives to the study of narratives' (2010, 330). It seeks to move 'narrative research more broadly into the realm of theory building with statistical testing and falsification' (Shanahan et al, 2011, 537). The focus is on 'the empirical testing of the influence of policy narratives on individual opinion, groups, and elites, as well as the influence of policy narratives on policy formation and implementation' (2011, 537).

The detail of the developments connected with these various lines of work is beyond the scope of the current paper. What is important, though, is how they show that there is interest in the role and influence of policy narratives amongst researchers from varied methodological perspectives. This is important as context for later discussions of the potential of narrative approaches for the study of evidence use. So too is the fact that a small number of researchers have started to make links between the development of policy narratives and the use of evidence. Boswell et al's (2011) work on European migration policy, for example, has emphasised the role that expert knowledge can play in policy narratives. They argue that 'exploring the deployment of knowledge claims through narratives can help to map and explain the role of knowledge in politics and policymaking' (Boswell et al, 2011, 3). Another example is Stevens' (2011, 237) ethnographic study of policymaking practices in the UK, which talks specifically about 'narrative use of evidence'. He reported that 'narrative was a constant theme in the creation of new policies' (2011, 241).

The studies discussed within this section show how narrative perspectives represent a long-standing theme within policy research and a newly-emerging theme within evidence use research. This provides an important backdrop for the findings that emerged from the Australian-based study that is described in the next two sections.

Aims and methods

In early 2015, a small group of researchers from Monash University Faculty of Education initiated a pilot study with the Victorian State Government's Department of Education and Training (DET) on their use of evidence in policy development (Rickinson et al, 2016; 2017). Entitled 'The use of evidence in education policy: a pilot study in Victoria', this project sought to investigate the practical realities of how policymakers engage with evidence. The project was conceived as a collaborative venture between Monash and the Department. The nature and scope of the work was determined through a series of joint exploratory meetings, and the work was co-funded by DET and Monash as a first step towards a future larger study on the use of evidence in education policy and practice in Australia.

The study's overall aim was to better understand the challenges and complexities surrounding the use of evidence within DET's policy development. More specifically, the objectives were:

1. to explore in detail the nature and dynamics of evidence use and non-use within DET policy processes
2. to contribute to and inform future capacity-building efforts around evidence-based policymaking in Victoria and beyond
3. to trial methods, clarify concepts and build trust for further Monash-DET collaborative work in this area in the future.

It was guided by the following questions:

- *What* types of evidence are used?
- *How* is evidence used?
- *Why* does evidence use happen or not happen (drivers, barriers, influencing factors)?
- So *what* could be done to improve the use of evidence in the future?

This paper focuses in on the findings relating to the second of these questions concerning how evidence was used. This selective focus is for two reasons. Partly it reflects the limits of how many topics can be covered in depth within an individual journal article, and the need to leave other issues such as influencing factors and capacity building for future publications. More importantly, though, it reflects the fact that it was in the process of trying to make sense of the different ways in which evidence was being used by the policymakers in this study that the concept of policy narrative became important. In other words, we are honing in on the part of the study that relates most closely to this paper’s aim of exploring the potential of policy narratives as a way to make sense of evidence use in policy.

All of the above questions were investigated in the context of three DET policy initiatives, using a combination of documentary analysis, interviews and (where possible) observation with DET staff (Table 1). This work was undertaken between January 2015 and March 2016; the main data collection took place between January–August 2015 (Phase 1 data) and September 2015–March 2016 (Phase 2 data). The sequencing of the work into two phases was to allow for an initial period of data

Table 1: Overview of research questions, research contexts and research methods

Research questions	Research phase	Research contexts	Research methods (and number of participants)
<i>What</i> types of evidence are used?	Phase 1 (January–August 2015)	<i>Past</i> Policy Initiative – <i>Policy A</i>	Documentary analysis Interviews (with 8 staff)
<i>How</i> is evidence used?		<i>Recent</i> Policy Initiative – <i>Policy B</i>	Documentary analysis Interviews (with 7 staff) Interim verification workshop (involving 40 staff)
<i>Why</i> does it happen or not happen (drivers, barriers, influences)?	Phase 2 (September 2015–March 2016)		
<i>So what</i> could be done to improve the use of evidence in the future?		<i>Current</i> Policy Initiative – <i>Policy C</i>	Documentary analysis Interviews (with 10 staff) Observations

collection (focused on the past and recent policy initiatives) to be followed by a period of interim analysis and verification workshop (with 40 DET staff as part of the Department's Policy Community of Practice, PCOP),² all before a final period of data collection (focused on the current policy initiative), and overall analysis and final report writing.

The selection of policy initiatives was made through in-depth discussion with DET staff in order to cover different timescales (that is, a past initiative, a recent initiative, a current initiative); encompass different aspects of DET's work (that is, involve different policy teams); and to focus on significant initiatives that were researchable (that is, involve staff who are open to taking part as interviewees). The selection of interviewees was fairly straightforward in the sense that the research team sought to interview all current or former DET staff who had played an active role in the development of the selected policies. 'Active role' was taken to mean staff who had been, were or would be directly involved in drafting the final policy document and/or key documents connected to the final policy. Having gained ethics approval from both Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee and the DET, participation by interviewees was voluntary. Relevant DET staff were invited to participate in the study by email and almost all of those who were contacted were able to accept the invitation to be involved. In total, 25 policymaker interviews were undertaken across the three selected policies, comprising a mixture of lead policy writers, support policy writers, strategic advisors, and background researchers. All of the interview data and the selected policies were anonymised in order to ensure that no interview comments could be attributable to individual interviewees. Observation of relevant meetings was also confidential and only used for the purpose of enabling more specific questions to be asked in the interviews with DET staff.

The data collection processes were designed to generate in-depth accounts of evidence use in specific policy contexts. The main purpose of the documentary analysis and the observation was a stimulus to help ground the interviews in specific, concrete examples rather than general, abstract conversation. The documentary analysis involved close reading of key documents relating to the selected policies prior to the undertaking of the interviews. Through this process, we aimed both to build up a general understanding of the policies in terms of their background, scope, content, development and aims; and also to identify specific examples (for use in the interviews) where there was a reference to evidence of some kind within the final policy document. Observation was only possible for the current policy initiative (Policy C in Table 1). This process involved informal, unstructured observation of two meetings connected with the ongoing development of that policy. The aim was to be able to draw on specific aspects of these meetings, such as the slides presented and the issues discussed, as a stimulus for discussion within the later interviews.

Interviews were undertaken mainly face-to-face (in two cases, by telephone), individually (in two cases, in pairs) and were conducted by one or two members of the research team. Interviews typically lasted around 60 minutes. They were semi-structured and focused on building up an in-depth understanding of the interviewee's current role and professional background, their experiences of the development of the selected policy and the role (if any) that evidence and other factors played within this process. The specific topic of how evidence is used within policy development was explored with interviewees in two ways. One way involved asking interviewees to talk about 'a time when evidence of some kind was involved in your work on

Policy A/B/C', and then probing about the type of evidence involved, the way in which it was used, the role it was playing, and so on. The other approach was to present interviewees with a number of 'extracts from Policy A/B/C documents that make specific references to research evidence' and ask them to select one and talk about the types of evidence that are being used, why that evidence was used in that policy in that way, and so on. In both cases, then, the onus was on grounding the discussion as much as possible in specific experiences and/or concrete examples, and using open questions and follow-up probing to foster open, but focused discussion. These interviewing strategies were informed by similar kinds of approaches used with teachers and students to investigate classroom teaching and learning practices (for example, Cooper and McIntyre, 1993; 1996), as well as calls for evidence use studies that 'gather data on specific practices' (Levin and Cooper, 2012, 24–5) and provide 'empirical description and analysis of how research and policy actually interact in vivo' (Oliver et al, 2014b, 1).

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Then, using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2015), the interview transcripts were coded thematically by the research team using a coding frame structured around the main foci of the research. The top-level codes were four-fold (about the interviewee, about the policy, about current evidence use and about future capacity building) and within each of these categories further codes and sub-codes were developed inductively through careful reading and re-reading of each of the transcripts. For example, the 'About current evidence use' top-level code had four main sub-codes: 'What evidence is used', 'How evidence is used', 'Enablers to evidence use' and 'Barriers to evidence use'. The 'How evidence is used' sub-code was used to categorise all comments where interviewees were talking about the ways in which evidence was used. The coding process involved trying to group together examples where evidence was being used in a similar way and/or was playing a similar role. In the end, the different reported uses of evidence were categorised in terms of two groups of sub-codes. One group (12 sub-codes) was about the specific uses to which evidence was being put such as 'To define the problem', 'To flag a case for change', 'To keep things on the agenda' (full details in Figure 1 below). The other group (3 sub-codes) was about the role evidence was playing in relation to the policy narrative, namely 'Constructing the policy narrative', 'Testing the policy narrative' and 'Communicating the policy narrative'. More details about meaning of, and relationship between, these two categories is provided in the next section.

The coding was undertaken by two members of the research team. Consistency was ensured by the researchers jointly developing an initial coding frame and then working together to code all of the interview transcripts. This enabled decisions over the allocation of interview extracts to particular existing codes and/or the creation of new codes and sub-codes to be discussed and recorded as part of the process. This analysis process was helped by two other factors. These were: discussing interim findings with the Project Advisory Group (comprising senior policymakers from DET, researchers from Monash and other independent experts); and sharing early findings at the end of Phase 1 with 40 DET staff as part of a two-hour Interim Verification Workshop³ through the Department's PCOP. These processes enabled the team to discuss and test out the ways in which we were framing and making sense of the data, to gain feedback and comments on our emerging findings, and to take on board people's ideas and suggestions for next steps.

Findings

This section moves into a discussion of some of the findings from the study. As explained earlier, we focus deliberately on the insights that emerged about the ways in which evidence was being used because it was within these findings that the concept of policy narrative featured most strongly. The findings around how evidence was being used in the policy process can be summarised in terms of five main points.

First, it was clear that across the three selected policies, there were examples of evidence being used in a wide range of different ways. As the study progressed, it quickly became apparent that interviewees were not talking repeatedly about a small number of specific uses of evidence. Rather, as shown in Figure 1, their descriptions and reflections on the development of the three selected policies included examples where evidence had been used in twelve distinct ways. There were situations where evidence had been used, for example, ‘to define the problem’, or ‘to challenge assumptions’, or ‘to identify key drivers / levers’, or ‘to design interventions’, and so on. Each of the uses in Figure 1 represents a different way in which evidence had been used in the development of the three policies, and each of the quotes provides an example of an interview comment that illustrates that particular way of using evidence.

Secondly, it slowly became apparent that these different types of evidence use could be understood in terms of their role in the development of a policy narrative. Initially it was not easy to understand how these various ways of using evidence fitted together within the policy process. There did not seem to be either a conceptual framework from the literature (at this stage the research team were not aware of wider work on policy narratives) or an organising structure being articulated by interviewees that would easily help in making sense of how the many different uses in Figure 1 mapped on to the policy process. That was until we recognised the frequency with which the concept of ‘narrative’ came up in the interviews.

Time and again across both phases of the study, interviewees made reference to issues related to narratives. There were comments about: ‘the narrative within the Department’, ‘the Government’s narrative’, ‘the pre-existing narrative’, ‘that bit of the narrative’, ‘the narrative around teachers in Australia’, ‘the performance narrative’, ‘the next narrative piece’, ‘a coordinated narrative’, ‘the new narrative’, ‘a short narrative’, ‘the heart of the narrative’ and so on. Interviewees talked about how policy narratives were helpful in terms of providing clarity (‘The narrative just helps you get clarity.... It gives you your why and your purpose... why we need to do this’) and building shared understanding (‘The narrative is about defining what we’re talking about so that we’re all on the same page’). Policy narratives were also seen as important in terms of building coherence (‘To be able to pull it all together in some coherent narrative that will actually drive reform’) and ensuring public buy-in (‘How are politicians going to justify \$70 million if they haven’t got a good story to tell?’).

The idea of narratives, then, was a recurring theme, a common frame, a repeated reference point, and a shared concept within and across the interviews. Recognising this important point then allowed us to think about the different uses of evidence in terms of, and in relation to, the development of the policy narrative. Figure 2 provides a diagrammatic representation of the different uses of evidence outlined in Figure 1 in relation to the development of the policy narrative. It shows how evidence was involved, not only in constructing the narrative through defining the policy problem

and identifying policy interventions, but also in testing the narrative with key players, and communicating the narrative to key audiences.

The third main finding concerns the variety and extent of evidence use around different aspects of the policy narrative. While evidence use featured in all aspects of the policy narrative, it was also clear in Figure 2 that there were more types of use associated with constructing the narrative as compared with testing and communicating the narrative. So when the various types of evidence use reported by interviewees (Figure 1) were organised in relation to the development of the policy narrative (Figure 2), almost all of them clustered around defining the problem and identifying

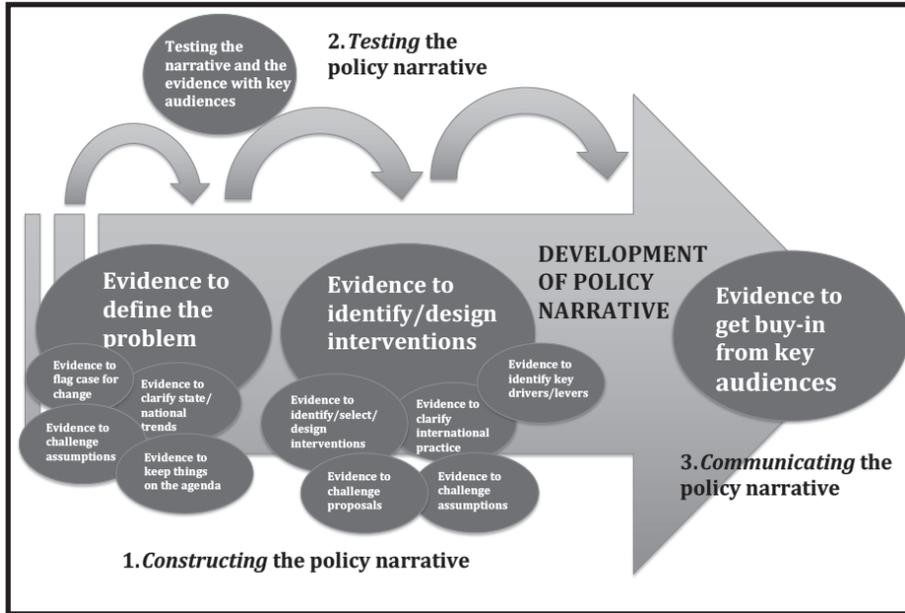
Figure 1: Examples of different uses of evidence within the policy process

<p>To define the problem 'The other side of it was also trying to get some more specificity on what the problem definition was.... So looking at system data [and] what that was telling us about what the issues were here.'</p>	<p>To flag a case for change 'So the PISA¹ piece, this is about building a case for change. Wake up. The system believes it's doing well and it's not. And why PISA? Well, because it's probably the best thing we've got that can say, "Here's a comparative number that you should pay attention to".'</p>	<p>To keep things on the agenda 'So it was also about trying to find a way to build in [references to certain ideas or areas of work] because it meant... you could come back to it at a later date and say "Well, we said we were going to do this".'</p>
<p>To clarify international practice 'You also look at research where, you know, the context is quite different but there might be just a nugget that sort of says, "Well, actually that issue is worth having a look at in terms of how that might work here".'</p>	<p>To clarify state/national trends 'So there was a bit of looking at Victorian system performance and putting together Victoria's performance story, and then say "Well actually, we can see that there are issues here and here".'</p>	<p>To identify key drivers/levers 'We spent quite a bit of time developing a research paper that was giving an outline of the key drivers that we saw in the research.'</p>
<p>To challenge proposals 'We came back to them with a set of evidence which explained why you wouldn't do that.... So there were situations like that where a specific piece [of evidence] helped to bring people around to something that was more sensible.'</p>	<p>To challenge assumptions 'And that's where again the evidence did come in to say that teachers and all professionals really need to be intentionally supported to build the skills and capabilities to do that work rather than just a broad assumption that there's an inherent skill set there.'</p>	<p>To get buy-in from key audiences 'This is really interesting – why is [this specific researcher named] in there? Because [that person] carries weight with teachers in Victoria.... That name means that teachers will buy in in Victoria.'</p>
<p>To design interventions 'So... the broad parameters were fairly well set by the government. So it then became a question of: Well how do you do that in a way that's going to maximise the likelihood of success? So the evidence was probably the thing that put in place a training programme for principals and school reviewers, for example.'</p>	<p>To identify possible interventions 'So to come up with something to do, you've got to look at what the data is actually saying about those specific areas and then think "Okay, well what does the research and evidence say actually works and makes a difference in teaching and learning which can impact on the data and improve our performance?".'</p>	<p>To select interventions 'Certainly the evidence has been a consideration in the deliberations about which strategies we'd prioritise or not.... So, which ones in terms of being able to be implemented and having an evidence base and being effective, should we keep on the list.'</p>

¹ The 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) is a triennial international survey aiming to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students.

interventions, which are part of constructing (as opposed to testing or communicating) the narrative. This suggests that evidence was playing a more significant and more varied role in the earlier stages of constructing the policy narrative, and a less significant and more restricted role in the later stages of communicating the policy narrative.

Figure 2: Different uses of evidence in relation to the development of the policy narrative



This pattern was backed up by specific comments from interviewees that highlighted both:

1. the importance of evidence in the early stages of narrative development – ‘At the outset when you’ve got the time and the space and you’ve got the blank page and then you’ve got the opportunity to actually think about: What’s the problem? What’s the evidence about that problem? What could be some ways that I could deal with that problem? I think that’s when the use of evidence is really critical’, and
2. a shift in focus away from evidence in the later stages of narrative communication – ‘I think [evidence] is less of a focus right now. Like our focus now is writing this paper that the Minister wants to release next month.... So we’ve had to shift our focus much more to how are we going to write this story in a way that works for the public and that sort of thing’.

Fourthly, it was clear that evidence was part of the negotiation between competing narratives. It is important to emphasise that while the ‘development of the policy narrative’ is portrayed in Figure 2 as one big arrow moving from left to right, the process it represents was far from straightforward or linear. It was clear from interviewees’ comments that the development of a new policy narrative did not happen in a vacuum but rather in the context of many existing and often competing

narratives. Evidence, then, is involved in an iterative process of negotiating, debating and re-working these different narratives.

In connection with the three policies in our study, for example, there were situations where evidence was used to:

- re-work a previous narrative – ‘So this was about recasting a narrative... a bit of a reconceptualisation of the issues and the evidence that supports that... There was definitely a sense that this was kind of a shot across the bow of previous Government and a lot of people currently in the system’
- elaborate a new narrative – ‘This policy was one of those ones where you were trying to make the Government’s narrative work... They said autonomy is our agenda, so we were trying to put that into context... what’s the evidence base on autonomy, how does that issue play out in other jurisdictions, and so on.’
- challenge assumptions within a new narrative – ‘The broad policy parameters around professional trust and autonomy came with a bit of a sense that principals are the experts in this work, just leave them alone to do it. And so I think that’s where we had an opportunity in the early conceptual stages to challenge that and say... There is some strong evidence that ... people need to be actively and intentionally supported.’

The final finding about evidence use in relation to the policy narrative is that evidence does play a role in the communication of the policy narrative. As shown by the three small arrows at the top of Figure 2, there are multiple cycles of testing the narrative and the associated evidence with key audiences, with careful thinking about how best to structure and present the narrative and its evidence for different audiences. The development of the policy narrative, then, is a highly audience-sensitive process.

In conclusion the picture that emerges from this study involves a complex range of different uses of evidence that were talked about by interviewees, and became understandable to the research team, in terms of their role in the development of a policy narrative. Many of the reported uses of evidence were closely connected with constructing the policy narrative. But evidence was also involved in negotiating between competing narratives, testing the narrative with key players and communicating the narrative to key audiences. Overall, evidence seemed to be playing a more significant and more varied role in the earlier stages of constructing the policy narrative, and a less significant and more restricted role in the later stages of communicating the policy narrative.

Discussion

The previous section provided insights into how a specific group of Australian policymakers were using evidence in varied ways within their work, and how these evidence use practices can be understood in terms of the development of policy narratives. Drawing on these findings, and remembering the need for improved understanding of evidence use outlined earlier, we now turn to the bigger picture question of the potential of policy narrative as a lens or frame with which to better understand the use of evidence in policy development. As will become clear, our view is that policy narrative is a perspective that deserves greater attention and discussion within the field of evidence use. We make this argument for two reasons. Firstly,

because our findings about policy narrative and evidence use connect with those of other studies in different contexts, we see policy narrative as a concept that has empirical validity. Secondly, because policy narrative is an established concept within policy research that has not been used widely within evidence use research, we see it as a perspective that has interesting theoretical and methodological possibilities.

Policy narrative and evidence use – empirical connections

It is important to reiterate that policy narrative arose in our study as a concept that was talked about by the policymakers we interviewed. In other words, it was a concept that came from the data, not an idea that was introduced by the research team. It was, therefore, only towards the end of the study that we began to explore whether policy narratives and evidence use had been examined or discussed by other researchers. What became apparent when we did this was that there is a small number of other researchers who have talked about policy narratives and evidence use in similar ways to us. These points of similarity provide an indication of the beginnings of an empirical argument for examining evidence use in connection with policy narratives.

There are points of connection, for example, with studies that have highlighted the role that expert knowledge can play in policy narratives. In their work on migration policy, Boswell et al (2011, 4) explain how the concept of a policy narrative necessarily includes ‘factual or cognitive content’ or ‘knowledge claims’. They highlight three aspects of policy narratives where knowledge claims can play a role: ‘claims about the policy problem that a policy intervention should address’; ‘claims about what causes the problem and to what extent the problem could be controlled’; and ‘claims about how policy interventions have affected, or are likely to affect, these policy problems’ (Boswell et al, 2011, 5). There are definite resonances here with our findings about the role of evidence in different aspects of constructing the policy narrative – in particular ‘evidence to define the problem’ and ‘evidence to identify / design interventions’ (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

There are also synergies with studies that have explored the role of evidence in the policy process and highlighted the importance of narratives. Stevens’ (2011, 237) ethnographic study of policymaking practices in the UK, for example, talks specifically about ‘narrative use of evidence’. Based on six months of participant observation and follow-up interviews, Stevens describes how civil servants ‘used evidence to create persuasive policy stories’ (2011, 237). As with our study, he found that ‘narrative was a constant theme in the creation of new policies’ (2011, 241). This was particularly in relation to the task of developing policy proposals that would be accepted by other stakeholders within government. There are echoes here of our study’s findings around ‘testing the narrative and the evidence with key audiences’, which (as in Stevens’ study) was often focused on other actors within government.

In addition, there are links with studies that have highlighted the way in which evidence use is shaped by the contested nature of policy narratives, and the need for such narratives to gain traction with key audiences. Fisher emphasises how a written policy is ‘the result of an intense narrative-making’, and the study of ‘a policy in the making shows the negotiations, the competition between narratives and counter-narratives’ (2003, 168). There are strong echoes here of our study’s findings in relation to the role of evidence in the working and re-working of different narratives. Along

similar lines, Stevens' study describes how evidence use was shaped by the need for policy proposals to 'fit with the existing narrative of government policy' (2011, 245).

Another point of connection is around the communication function of policy narratives. In their discussion of a particular approach to analysing policy narratives called the Narrative Policy Framework, for example, Shanahan et al talk about policy narratives as 'the communication vehicle for conveying and organizing policy information' (2011, 540). Meanwhile, Boswell et al describe how policy narratives 'must be persuasive', that is, 'understandable, compelling and sufficiently plausible for the actors in question' (2011, 6). These arguments align strongly with our study's findings around testing the narrative and the associated evidence with key audiences, and thinking carefully about how best to structure and present the narrative and its evidence for different audiences.

These various links between our work and previous studies suggest that there is some empirical basis for viewing evidence use in connection with policy narratives. Our study shows that there is a connection between policy narratives and evidence use not only within European migration policy (Boswell et al, 2011) and British social policy (Stevens, 2011), but also within Australian education policy. Our work builds on these earlier studies by providing rich examples of the specific and nuanced ways in which evidence can be used in the development, testing and communication of education policy narratives. It also highlights how policy narrative can be a common concept amongst education policymakers, in particular when they are talking about the use of evidence within their work. All of these points stemming from our work, and building on wider studies, suggest that policy narrative is a concept with a developing empirical validity in relation to evidence use.

Policy narrative and evidence use – methodological potential

Alongside this developing empirical validity, we also see policy narrative as a concept that has interesting theoretical and methodological potential in relation to evidence use. Based on the experience of our study, coupled with wider reading and reflection, we see a number of methodological benefits of a policy narrative perspective for understanding evidence use.

Firstly, a policy narrative perspective is one that connects with the language and practice of policymakers. Ours and other studies have shown that when policymakers talk about the role of evidence in their work, the idea of policy narratives comes through as a 'constant theme' (Stevens, 2011, 241) or 'repeated reference point' (this study). For researchers, then, a policy narrative perspective could well be helpful in challenging the tendency to 'privilege academics' research priorities over those of policymakers' and increasing the emphasis on 'empirical data analysing the processes or impacts of evidence use in policy'. (Oliver et al, 2014b, 1). It could also increase the chances of evidence use studies generating 'functional guidance to the evidence-orientated civil servant or politician' as opposed to all-too-frequent 'skills and tools that might be helpful for the researcher' (Lomas and Brown, 2009, 914, 920).

Secondly, a policy narrative perspective is one that connects strongly with and draws attention to the communication dimension of policymaking. In other words, viewing evidence use in terms of and in relation to the development of policy narratives helps to hold in focus the audience-specific nature of the work. As noted earlier, policy narratives are 'communication vehicles that are used for conveying and

organising policy information’ to particular audiences (Shanahan et al, 2011, 540). A policy narrative perspective therefore helps to locate the use of evidence within the complex dynamics of constructing policy initiatives and interventions that are ‘understandable, compelling and sufficiently plausible’ for their intended audiences (Boswell et al, 2011, 6).

Thirdly, a policy narrative perspective is one that allows for, or indeed encourages, the exploration of developments over time. A policy narrative is not decided in an instant. It always has a history and it evolves and develops over time. This means that a policy narrative perspective can help to draw attention to the dynamics of evidence use at different stages in the ‘policy trajectory’ (Castellani et al, 2016, 92). This is about being able to develop more dynamic appreciations of the ebbs and flows of evidence within policy processes by paying closer attention to the twists and turns in the developing policy narrative.

Fourthly, when viewed in connection with policy mobilities (for example, Rizvi, 2015; Ball, 2016), a policy narrative perspective can also open up the spatial dimensions of policy development and evidence use. Rizvi argues that ‘a focus on mobilities points to the importance of examining the ways in which policy ideas and information now circulate globally, and are interpreted and translated into local priorities and practices in a range of global contexts’ (2015, 177). Bansel (2015, 186), meanwhile, emphasises how ‘a narrative approach to policy analysis... foregrounds the ways in which particular “stories of influence”, or policy narratives, come to dominate the policy process... differently in different times and spaces’. In this way, we see that policy narrative, as a perspective, has the potential to open up not only the ‘whats’ of policymaking and evidence use but also the ‘wheres’ (Ball, 2016, 4). It could help, for example, to examine the use of evidence within the ‘new microspaces of global policymaking’ such as ‘events, meetings, conferences, and so on ... and the circulation of plots and stories that go on in these places’ (Ball et al, 2017, 116).

Fifthly, a policy narrative perspective also engages with the negotiated and contested nature of policy development. The potential for multiple narratives, competing narratives, counter narratives, meta narratives and so on, is well established in theorising about policy narratives (for example, Roe, 1994; Fisher, 2003; Bansel, 2015). This sensitivity to the interplay of different narratives and their associated power dynamics has the potential to locate evidence use within the very real political dimensions of policy work. As Fisher describes it: ‘the study of policy narrative-making permits us to see and better understand the way policies can comprise a sequence of ambiguous and conflicting claims that represent inconsistent responses to the interests of different groups’ (2003, 168–9). And so for the evidence use researcher, it is examining the role (if any) of evidence within those processes and sequences that is of interest.

Finally, a policy narrative perspective is one that has methodological flexibility. As noted earlier, there are examples of researchers working on policy narratives from a wide range of methodological positions and perspectives (see, for example, Fisher, 2003; Jones and McBeth, 2010; Bansel, 2015). This means that there is a rich array of theoretical constructs, conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches and empirical insights for evidence use researchers to work with and on. Policy narrative, therefore, represents one avenue not only for developing ‘more critically and theoretically-informed studies’ of evidence use (Oliver et al, 2014b, 1), but also for supporting ‘methodological pluralism’ within the field (Boaz et al, 2016, 7).

In summary, the methodological potential of policy narrative lies in its capacity to stimulate empirical studies that: place an emphasis on the language and practices of policymakers; engage with the communication / audience-specific nature of policy development; examine the dynamics and mobility of policy developments over time and space; embrace the political / contested nature of policymaking; and has methodological flexibility. This is not an exhaustive or complete list, but rather a reflection of our early ideas about the possibilities for policy narrative as a tool for better understanding the use of evidence in policy development. And the motivation for emphasising these points is that policy narratives to date have not received a great deal of attention within evidence use research, particularly in relation to education.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the challenge of understanding the role and use of evidence within the policy process. We have sought to highlight three main lines of thinking.

We have sought to draw attention to a developing sense of dissatisfaction within the evidence use field with the ways in which evidence and policy have typically been researched. Key concerns here have been the tendency to focus on: questions of impact rather than questions of use; the use of research rather than the use of evidence; policy as an abstraction rather than as a practice; and researchers' rather than policymakers' needs.

With these concerns in mind, we have sought to describe our own efforts to investigate and make sense of evidence and policy through an empirical study of education policymaking in Australia. This work highlighted a range of different and specific ways in which evidence was being used in the development of policy. It also showed how the concept of policy narrative helped the policymaker interviewees to talk about the role of evidence within their work, and the research team to make sense of how these various uses were connected to the policy process.

Finally, building on the emergence of policy narrative as a repeated reference point within our study, we have sought to explore the potential of policy narrative as a lens with which to better understand the use of evidence in policy. We have shown how thinking seriously about policy narratives is not only well developed within wider policy research, but also has some empirical credence and considerable methodological potential in the field of evidence use research. If evidence use research is about 'the rigorous application of social science theory and methods to the understanding of the interactions between evidence and policy and practice' (Boaz et al, 2016, 6), then our view is that policy narrative is one area of social science theory and method that deserves greater attention and discussion than it has to date.

Notes

¹ The Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) is located in Melbourne, the capital city of the Australian state of Victoria. The Department is responsible for implementing Victorian Government policy on early childhood services, school education and training and higher education services.

² The Department's Policy Community of Practice (PCOP) is 'an informal network that aims to lift the quality of our policy by strengthening collaboration across DET'. It describes itself as 'a community that shares information, advice and best practice to strengthen policy development'.

³ A verification workshop is one way for research projects to achieve what Edwards and Stamou (2016: 277) describe as ‘strong iteration between the research team and participants in the field of study’. This interactive workshop provided an opportunity for DET policy-makers to engage with and provide feedback on the project’s emerging findings and to suggest new examples, ideas and interpretations.

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