What is evidence?
The concise Oxford dictionary definition of Evidence is: “the available facts, circumstances etc supporting or otherwise a belief, proposition, or indicating whether or not a thing is true or valid.”

“In an age of accountability, the quest is for ‘evidence-based’ everything: medicine, health-care, social services, education etc. There is strong justification for requiring good evidence that scarce resources are being used to good effect.” Robson p116

Evaluation is now seen as a central strategy for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of public services and policies which have been developed in the era of New Public Management.

McNamara suggests a growing culture of evaluation – across the public sector but particularly in relation to health and education (2009). It is part of a shift towards ‘evidence-based policy making’ and with it, a move away from the alternative view that policy is the result of ‘ideas’ and ideology which are based on world views. O’Brien (2006) argues that policy is no longer driven by ideology or opinion but instead responds to ‘evidence of what works’ and goes on to argue that this has led to the ‘internationalisation of thinking on policy’.

Policy based on evidence, just as research based on evidence, sounds solid and ‘scientific’ but it begs the question – what sort of evidence? How valid is the evidence and what is the evidence telling us?

Evaluation tends to value numerical evidence over more qualitative – decision-makers increasingly find comfort in numbers – but this brings the observation – just because you can count it, doesn’t mean it’s worth counting… or doesn’t mean the numbers tell you anything meaningful.

Koenig argues that “…evaluation work has to reconcile contradictory demands.” He suggests that there is a balance to be struck between the needs of practitioners for quick feedback as to the effectiveness of their
practice, and the question of the validity of the information and knowledge that is generated in any evaluation process.

Hakim (1987) sees the differences more in terms of emphasis. For her, the main features that distinguish policy research from theoretical research are:

- An emphasis on the substantive or practical importance of research results rather than on merely ‘statistically significant’ findings, and
- second, a multi-disciplinary approach which in turn leads to the eclectic and catholic use of any and all research designs which might prove helpful in answering the questions posed. (Robson p10)

The need for sound evidence is further reinforced by government. Social science should be at the heart of policy making. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social science research community – we need social scientists to help to determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective. (Blunkett, 2000)

‘The rhetoric of the Labour government stresses the need for collaboration (to identify what matters) as well as evidence (to discover what works).’ (Davies et al: 2000)

**What counts as evidence for policy-making?**

There is a tendency to think of evidence as something that is only generated by major pieces of research. In any policy area there is a great deal of critical evidence held in the minds of both front-line staff in departments, agencies and local authorities and those to whom the policy is directed. (from Cabinet Office, 1999: paras 7.1 and 7.22)

**What is a community study?**

There are a number of ways of understanding the community study. On the one hand it can be understood as a study focused on a particular community, whether it be a geographical, interest, sectional or ethnic community. The term also implies certain methodological approaches, including a focus on mixed methods, and particularly the importance of qualitative and low-level or grassroots informant sources. A community study is a multidisciplinary approach which produces a ‘thick’ and ‘rich’ data set for a limited area. This in turn raises the question of how generalisable the findings are? Are they of benefit when considering the impact or effectiveness of policy in a more wide scale sense?

“…following up quantitative surveys and analysis of available official statistics with direct observation and open-ended (or in-depth) interviewing, to make sense of the ‘hard’ data. Particular care was taken to record informants’ commentaries in their own word…” (Dench 2008)
This method lends itself to the production of rich. It also lends itself to a community development approach, which is a largely political methodology – based on the values of social justice, inclusion and empowerment. This method allows local residents to find their voice in the research process. It also allows for the possibility that informants help to set the agenda, and the research questions.

Central to the ICS method is a polemical engagement in current social and political questions, and willingness to draw on a variety of disciplines to help throw light on selected issues. To do this with any chance of presenting a valid argument, and influencing people, researchers have to be very explicit about their own interests and political values, including their sympathies for groups studied. Readers are thereby alerted to possible biases, and can draw their own conclusions from the findings presented.

The community study also allows for a focus on ‘community’ – a term which some might consider to be ‘too hot to handle’ and which sparks a range of associated controversies. Community studies are often used as a way of recording the ‘present’ before it becomes history in the face of rapid change – change that is often outside the reach of the local residents involved.

As the British state has appropriated more private realm functions, local community has been turned into an arena for the organisation of public services. ‘Community studies’ are often now little more than evaluations of public service deliver…

That shift of emphasis has driven out interest in how communities are formed, and hold together, and replaced it with a mechanistic calculus for comparing the benefits accrued by different segments of the population. (Dench 2008)

Young’s study of Bethnal Green highlighted communities that shared values, offered support through networks and were characterised by reciprocity. An interesting question now would be ‘wither shared values, networks and reciprocity today’ in much more diverse and often divided communities. The multi-method research of the community study allows the researcher to listen and to record the evidence as it is told by the local informants and to aim to ‘see’ from that local perspective thus making it more likely that useful knowledge will be gathered.

*What community study achieves in relation to policy implementation*

I would argue community-based studies are not forms of policy evaluations. Both policy areas concerned – community relations activities in schools and neighbourhood renewal and educational disadvantage have been thoroughly evaluated. Instead I would argue that the community study approach offers a different kind of insight into the impact of policy. Because the sample is
primarily area-based rather than project-based, there is no prior knowledge of whether or to what extent informants have experience or knowledge of the policy or project in question. Their inability to answer questions because of a lack of experience or knowledge is a useful reminder that no matter how significant or successful a policy is, it is unlikely to be touching everyone and it is even unlikely to be touching everyone most in need of the support it might offer. By involving the ‘hard-to-reach’ accidently, their perspectives can be added to the overall picture and, with the statistical and evaluative data already gathered can provide for a fuller and more realistic perspective.

Case study 1: Community Relations in Schools: what do parents know and what does this say about school-parent partnerships?
In Northern Ireland there is considerable, historic, residential segregation and a largely segregated education system. A number of initiatives and projects have aimed to encourage schools to contribute positively to the situation rather than to negatively perpetuate segregation (as they are often accused of doing).

During a series of research reports conducted into religiously mixed areas the question was asked, ‘what maintains these areas as mixed and what is the contribution of public policy?’ One research focused was schools and specifically how schools serving a mixed area dealt with policy initiatives designed with ‘segregation’ in mind. Such policies may have been based on the assumption that schools where a venue that could facilitate mixing with various contact and curriculum projects and yet for these children their attendance at school was the segregating engine whilst home life was more mixed.

One aspect of the research was to interview parents regarding their knowledge or awareness of the projects their children were involved in. The interviews quickly ascertained that parents knew virtually nothing of the activities of schools and had never heard of the projects their children were involved in. When asked, head teachers reacted in largely defensive ways by saying that parents would object or try to block what was happening. However, even if this was the case (it is a widely held view within the education community but with little evidence to support it from parents) it negates the possibility of developing any school-parent partnership that could reinforce the learning.

One clear advantage of doing this research in the form of a community study was in not using a random sample. For example, the schools in the sample where purposively chosen because they served the community in question, which meant that the schools were all in the general vicinity, and had varying degrees of contact with each other already. What difference does this make?
In asking schools about the degree of sectarian incidents affecting pupils (a regular feature, for example, stone-throwing at school buses or school rules barring particular routes home) – each school was reluctant to tell me that they had any difficulties with their neighbouring schools or pupils. However, they were all happy to tell me, whilst sympathising, the experiences of their neighbours. Once all the local schools had been approached and principles interviewed, a clear picture of the level of low-level violence being experienced by young people in the area emerged.

Case study 2: Educational Disadvantage in a poor area of Belfast, the role of parents

More recent research was carried out in an area of severe social and economic disadvantage but which is surrounded by three districts which are all significantly more affluent. The area also has a long history of educational underachievement evidenced by the parents as well as their children. The focus was to explore the decision-making behaviour of parents in the area – in particular their reasons for choosing particular primary schools.

One reason for interest in this question is the position of the local primary school, located within the estate and with reasonably good facilities and very good ‘extras’ on offer – such as women’s group, adult education classes including parenting, homework clubs, after-school activities and summer schemes.

Despite having capacity for 550 pupils and possible enrolment per year group of nearly 80, the school has, for some years been accepting approximately 10 children each year. This has led to much reduced numbers of pupils which in turn may call into question the long-term future of the school. One of the issues to be tested by the research was the impact of rumours of the school’s possible closure on parents’ decision-making.

Whilst the school is the chief provider of primary education in the area, a majority of children living in the area are attending other schools. The second main provider is the next closest, situated on the edge of the estate but drawing mainly on a much more affluent neighbouring area. They have slightly fewer children drawn from the area but between them, these two schools provide primary education for the vast majority of children – a number of other schools provide places for small numbers of children and are further away. Of particular interest was the parents who picked the second school, based in an affluent area to discover whether they, in choosing that school, were opting for a more ‘middle class’, ‘achieving’, or ‘pushy’ education for their children. In other words was it an active choice for aspirant parents?

In addition parents were asked about their own experiences of education, including schools attended and outcomes to examine whether patterns of decision-making could be understood in relation to parents’ experiences.
What is the policy imperative of such a study? There are a number of reasons why this might prove to be useful information for policy-makers.

The area is a designated neighbourhood renewal area and as such is subject to special funding and policy arrangements focused on physical, economic and social regeneration. This multifaceted and multi-agency approach is supposed to involve local people and has an education thread.

Demographically Northern Ireland is experiencing reducing numbers of children as elsewhere. The Review of Public Administration, which aims to rationalise and modernise a long-neglected administrative model proposes a policy whereby urban schools would have minimum pupil enrolment in order to justify staying open. The local school falls well short of that minimum requirement and so there is, to a certain extent unspoken, concern about the future of the school.

Considerable amounts of funding are spent on interventions to enhance pupils’ educational outcomes as well as to address the educational disadvantage of parents, based on the thinking that addressing parental deficits would improve outcomes for the children.

Virtually all parents believed that it was important or very important that children should attend a ‘local school’. However, when asked what their most important reason for choosing the school they had applied for the parents of children at the local school stated the fact that it was local. On the other hand the most important reason for picking the second school (in the affluent area) was its reputation for good results.

Those parents involved in the various offerings based in the local school were more likely to pick that school for their children. This may reflect a number of factors. On the one hand parents going in and out of the school to another project may develop a sense of loyalty to the school and believe they ‘should’ support it in this way. On the other hand, being present in the school may allow parents to see the facilities and opportunities available, thus making it a positive choice.

Some parents also indicated that they sent their children to the school as a way of supporting the community.

Few parents aspired for their children to attend selective post-primary schools (the Northern Ireland education system at post-11 is characterised by ‘academic selection’ the outcome of which closely aligns to social and economic background). There was no observable difference in the aspirations or practices in relation to post-primary options between parents whose children were attending the local school and those whose children
were in the neighbouring affluent school. They may have been choosing that school because of its reputation for getting better results but there was little, if any, evidence that their children were the ones getting better results. This immediately takes the focus of interest out of the school environment and into the wider family and community environment.

The vast majority of parents surveyed had left school at 16 years, many of them without qualifications.

Approximately 10% had stayed on to start A Levels but half left after the first year – citing ‘chill factors’ which could be distilled down to issues of wealth and class - such as cliquiness, brand awareness, most friends leaving after GCSEs. The other half completed A Levels but none went on to higher education – all commented that they felt they were not pushed by teachers to reach their full potential.

The most common positive memory parents had of their own education was friends whilst the most negative was bullying. Few parents cited educational outcomes, and were more focused on social outcomes.

Conclusions
This leads to an interest in the role of social capital both its development in schools and its importance in communities experiencing social, economic and political marginalisation. In areas such as this, characterised as ‘pockets of deprivation’, it is easy to see a sense of isolation and alienation emerging. Added to this is the fact that the community has very high numbers of ex-prisoners (who suffer considerable job discrimination, though not as much as UK) and informal carers the importance of developing, at an early age, social networks and other informal support mechanisms becomes crucial.

Putnam argues that social capital (networks) are important for the people who belong to them – they are the links and networks that surround us and that provide informal support – be it from family, friends, neighbours or work colleagues. He also argues that better links and networks help to make us more successful. However if our networks are negative, they can trap us in destructive behaviour or expectations.

Putnam talks about these processes happening outside school, but also inside. He argues that having positive links and networks help us to achieve in school. This can happen through good friendship groups, good relationships between pupils and teachers and between school and the local community, and through ‘out-of-school’ activities. (Putnam 2004)

There are many policy initiatives which aim to address social and economic disadvantage and the various associated negative outcomes. A huge amount of money is spent and so an assessment of the outcomes, their effectiveness
measured against their costs is considered important. Evaluation of policies and projects will often provide good feedback regarding outworkings of whatever initiatives have been put in place. However, there tends to be less emphasis on structural, theoretical and ideological perspectives and more value placed in quantitative information – how many people participated, what did they learn/gain, what did they do next?

The community study approach allows for the examination of an initiative set in its wider societal and community context. This is particularly important when considering issues around who gets to benefit from the public goods of society directed at the most disadvantaged and why the ‘hard-to-reach’ are hard-to-reach. And if it is the most disadvantaged that don’t participate then the imperative of involving them in an assessment of the impact of particular policies becomes even more important. Such policies aimed at improving the educational outcomes of children, by addressing the educational disadvantage of their parents need to take on board the perspectives of people who are not in the room and for whom coming into the room may seem like a the biggest barrier – or even completely irrelevant to their everyday lives and concerns.

**Lifelong learning**

There has been a considerable amount of research conducted in Northern Ireland relating to lifelong education – both in terms of participation rates and impact. Participation rates may be easy to quantify and increasingly funders require such qualitative data. However, the question of what the impact has been has been more difficult to measure, and often people, including funders, shy away from such qualitative questions. Evaluating policy, particularly when the policy relates to interventions addressing educational disadvantage – over generations – is a difficult task. What is measured at the end of a project or programme of study may be only part of the story. As adults reflect on their experiences, the learning can continue and the impact, as measured, may look different in years compared to months or even hours after the fact.

The instinct of many adult educators is that the impact is real and long-term but perhaps slow-burning but often immediate feedback is the only source of evaluation available at the time.

This is one place where the perspectives of the community study can add, not replace, more traditional forms of evaluation. By studying members of a community about local initiatives it is possible to make contact with people engrossed by the project, as well as those who have recently passed through and those with no interest in being involved in the first place. All of these experiences represent the realistic experiences of the community in relation to the impact of the policy. The similar or different perspectives of the three groups mentioned above allow for a wide, ‘outside’ perspective to be gained.
which gives what might be described as a ‘real world’ consideration of the true impact of policy.

**Bibliography**


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