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The role of online knowledge hubs in developing practice and policy: Lessons from i-HOP for professionals working with children and families affected by parental offending

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Abstract

This paper reports on the role of an online knowledge hub in supporting the development of policy and practice relevant to children and families affected by parental offending. The authors use a case study of the i-HOP service, a national web-based collection of resources that supports professionals to work with children and families affected by parental offending. Delivered by the national children's charity Barnardo's, the knowledge hub provides a comprehensive collection of research and evidence, policy frameworks, practice examples, funding opportunities and training resources (<https://www.i-hop.org.uk>). The paper begins by considering the rationale behind the development hub, including an increase in the number of children and families affected by parental offending, unsystematic policy response and limited resources for practitioners working with children and families. Next, the paper discusses the development of the hub, including the challenges encountered and practical solutions employed. The implementation of a quality assessment system to support policy-makers and practitioners to make informed judgements about the suitability and quality of research and evidence deposited on the hub is also considered. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for organisations that are contemplating the development of a knowledge hub to bridge the gap between research and evidence and practice and policy.

Key words: i-HOP; online repository; policy and practice; children of offenders; children of prisoners; offenders' families

1. Introduction

This paper is likely to be of interest to public, private and third sector organisations seeking to bridge the gap between research and evidence and the development of policy and practice in a range of fields including, but not limited to, education, health and social care and criminal justice. The paper draws on i-HOP, an online knowledge hub that supports professionals to work with children and families affected by parental offending. Resources available on the knowledge hub are organised according to their relevance to professionals working in seven key sectors: education; health; early years; Troubled Families; police and courts; prisons; and probation. Commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in England, from 2013-2016, the service was delivered by the National Children's Charity Barnardo's in partnership with Partner of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS), and since April 2016, has been solely delivered by Barnardo's. Originally named the "Information Hub on Offenders' Families with Children for Professionals", the service provides a comprehensive collection of research and evidence, policy frameworks, practice examples, funding opportunities and training resources for professionals who come into contact with children and families affected by parental offending (<https://www.i-hop.org.uk>). In order to illustrate the benefits that an online knowledge hub can present to professional practice and policy-making, the paper begins by considering the context that drove the commissioning of i-HOP. This is followed by a discussion of the process of creating the hub, including the challenges and successes encountered, and the implementation of a quality assessment system for research and evidence.

2. Background Context

The prison population in England and Wales currently stands at 85,422 and has more than doubled in the last two decades (Ministry of Justice, 2013; 2016). The total number of people

involved in other stages of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), such as the judicial system and probation service, is inevitably much higher. While the progression of offenders through the CJS is systematically monitored, there is no comparable system for recording the “invisible group” of children and families who are affected by a parent’s involvement in criminal activity or the CJS (see Barnardo’s, 2014). Due to the stigma associated with offending, families are very likely to resist volunteering this information to statutory and community services for fear that it will attract additional scrutiny and unwanted intervention (Jones et al., 2013). Consequently, professionals working in schools, early years settings and community organisations are often unable to routinely identify Children Affected by Parental Offending (CAPO). This means that we do not have figures on the precise number of children affected by parental imprisonment, but more significantly, professionals do not have access to information on the support needs of these children which could mean that their individual needs remain unmet.

Available estimates indicate that in England and Wales, 200,000 children experienced the imprisonment of a parent or carer in 2009 (Ministry of Justice, 2012); twice the number of those affected by divorce (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Research evidence indicates that this group of children are significantly more likely to suffer mental health problems (Jones et al., 2013) and are also more vulnerable to poor physical health outcomes (Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo & Knapp, 2007). CAPO are also at increased risk of deprivation, insecure housing, negative school experiences and behavioural problems (Murray & Farrington, 2005; Jones et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2007). The evidence base on CAPO has grown in recent years but it still remains relatively narrow, and therefore professionals have few resources from which they can learn about the impacts of parental offending. This has the potential to hinder professionals’ ability to connect any social or behavioural issues to the family situation, and

also means it is more likely that professionals have a limited knowledge base on which to plan effective support strategies.

The implications of parental offending on children and families were first recognised in the National Reducing Reoffending Action Plan (Home Office, 2004) and more recently this group have been included in the Troubled Families programme and Working Together to Safeguard Children protocol (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2014; Department for Education, 2015). Although the national policy agenda surrounding CAPO is gradually expanding, the local response has been limited and unsystematic. For example, an audit of 208 Local Authorities and health boards revealed that only 20 mentioned CAPO in their Children and Young People's Plans (Barnardo's, 2009). This lack of widespread awareness means that professionals who come into contact with CAPO as part of their daily work might not be in a position to respond effectively.

In contrast, CAPO have become a priority for some charities and there are many pockets of good practice among local voluntary sector organisations (e.g. NEPACS, POPS, PFFS and Pact). However, these services are often connected to prison visitor centres and are not readily accessible to families who do not attend visits or are at different stages of the CJS. The absence of a coherent set of community-based interventions is likely to present an issue for professionals seeking services to refer into. Furthermore, since there is no standardised model of practice for CAPO, and agencies typically lack the resources and experience to provide training, it is likely that professionals will be left to their own devices in terms of designing support.

In summary, CAPO are a vulnerable group who can suffer a range of social, economic and health-related needs. Due to the large number of children estimated to be affected, it is likely that professionals across a wide range of agencies and organisations will come into contact with CAPO on a regular basis. However, the challenges facing professionals are numerous and include: difficulty in identifying the affected group; a narrow evidence base on CAPO; limited knowledge and awareness of support needs; few services to refer into; and a lack of resources and training for work with CAPO. Since identifying CAPO is such a challenge, raising awareness and understanding of families' situations and support needs is all the more important. The absence of services and resources for CAPO also requires that research and other sources of information are readily available to professionals to enable them to broaden their skills and provide effective support wherever necessary.

3. The i-HOP Knowledge Hub

If professionals are to learn about the effects of parental offending on children, this requires the production of good quality research and evidence, but also the facilities to easily and conveniently access such literature. Research is often published in subscription journals that are not widely accessible to professionals outside academic institutions. Although universities are increasingly making publications available through open-access repositories in accordance with new Research Excellence Framework requirements (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015), this is a recent development and whether 'older' publications will also be deposited is at the discretion of individual authors. Despite electronic search engines (e.g. Google Scholar) facilitating the rapid retrieval of items from an infinite number of publishers and repositories, some professionals still report difficulties locating relevant sources (Pravikoff, Tanner & Pierce, 2005). Insufficient time and skills to

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search for literature, and uncertainty about how to critically appraise the relevance of sources, are among the most commonly reported barriers (Pravikoff et al., 2005).

One solution to these difficulties is to establish a subject-specific online repository. These repositories enhance access to important documents and resources, encouraging the development of knowledge, and in doing so, have the potential to contribute to professional practice and policy making (Lin & Fan, 2011). The aim of the i-HOP knowledge hub is to provide a comprehensive collection of key research and evidence on CAPO (in addition to many other resources such as training materials, funding opportunities, policy frameworks and practice examples).

3.1 Setting up the i-HOP Knowledge Hub

In the four months prior to the launch of the website in August 2013, the team collated over 250 documents and web links to information. This involved extensive internet searches and also liaison with relevant organisations to seek permission to insert links to their resources for working with CAPO. In light of findings that professionals experience difficulties appraising the suitability of sources, if the website is going to be helpful in supporting the development of policy and practice, it was essential that the team adopted a focused approach to selecting materials for their direct relevance to CAPO. Literature, for example, that focused on the impact of offending on families but had very little relevance to children, was not selected for inclusion. The i-HOP team appraised the relevance of research and evidence by reviewing the title, key words, and abstract or executive summary, as applicable. This strategy was found to be particularly effective, and an online evaluation completed by 100 i-HOP members and site users revealed that 93% rated the information on the website as ‘4 quite useful or ‘5 very useful’ on a five-point likert scale (Perry & Wright, 2014).

Equally important to the relevance of materials, is the manner in which they are organised, so that time-short professionals can quickly and easily retrieve them. Due to timescales for launching the i-HOP knowledge hub, the process of collating resources and designing the website ran concurrently. This meant that categories for organising materials had to be decided before they had all been collected. Although it would have been more logical to wait until all items had been collated before attempting to impose a system of categorisation, the reality is that the re-organisation and different methods of displaying items has been an ongoing an important process for the team. This has occurred in response to increases in the variety of resources available and a better understanding of how professionals have utilised the website. At present, the contents of the i-HOP knowledge hub is organised into eight over-arching categories: Research and Evidence; Policy, Practice and Case Studies; Services and Interventions; Funding Opportunities; Training and Programmes; Events; and Resources. One of the most significant developments has been the creation of sector-specific links on the homepage to direct users to the literature and resources most relevant to them (e.g. for education, criminal justice and early years professionals). Findings from the same survey mentioned above would seem to suggest that the organisation of the website is conducive to supporting the integration of research and evidence into policy and practice (Perry & Wright, 2014). When asked *'Is the i-HOP website easy to use?'*, 57% of service users responded 'yes', 38% 'fairly easy' and 5% 'no' or 'not sure'. These figures were also supported by qualitative comments such as *'It's really accessible, it's really clear, it's easy to navigate around'* (Local Authority Learning Partnership Co-ordinator).

The website was built, and continues to be maintained by, an external digital services company. In the early stages of developing the website some challenges were encountered in

terms of translating ideas for the website into the technical language required by the company. These challenges were overcome by identifying a dedicated member of the i-HOP team to liaise with the web developers and support team. As much time and resource as possible was dedicated to carefully and patiently communicating the requirements of the service, whilst also developing an understanding of what was achievable within the technical limitations.

3.2. Promoting the i-HOP Knowledge Hub

After the initial stages of developing the hub, the next challenge was to encourage interest in and use of the hub. Since there was limited awareness of the support needs of CAPO, the demand for the hub was not widespread among agencies and organisations. With this in mind, it was important that the hub was substantiated by an engagement team who worked tirelessly with Local Authorities and organisations to raise awareness and help them to develop strategies for improving their work with CAPO. Attendance at multi-agency conferences and a rolling programme of workshops provided an invaluable opportunity to promote the benefits of the hub. This was believed to be the most successful route to encouraging engagement with the hub, and website ‘hits’ and membership were found to be highest in areas where the engagement team had been undertaking awareness raising work with agencies and groups of staff (Perry & Wright, 2014).

In addition, i-HOP adopted a proactive approach to promoting the knowledge hub on Twitter and also via external agencies’ websites and newsletters. i-HOP also distributes their own monthly e-newsletter and produces sector specific briefing documents that can be downloaded from the website (of which there are currently 19). These briefing documents not only provide a valuable summary of literature and resources for time-short professionals, but

are also an integral part of the awareness raising strategy and provide a helpful introduction to the knowledge hub. As the briefing notes are based on information that has already been collated for the hub, they represent a relatively resource-effective promotional tool for the hub. The benefits of word-of-mouth should also not be underestimated, and 82% of users reported that they had shared information from the hub with other professionals (Perry & Wright, 2014).

Due to the continuous and multi-faceted programme of awareness raising and engagement, membership has steadily increased to 2,666 and includes professionals from a range of relevant sectors including health, education, children and young people's services, and the voluntary sector. At the time of writing, the website has been accessed almost 76,000 times, with 65% of these being first time visitors.

3.3. Quality Assessment of Research and Evidence

The hub was successful in terms of providing a large and diverse group of professionals with easy-access to a wealth of literature and resources on CAPO, but it was recognised that more needed to be done to encourage professionals to integrate research and evidence into their daily work. Findings indicate that some professionals lack the confidence to apply empirical findings to their practice and policy-making, partly because they are unsure how to make judgements about the quality or usefulness of research and evidence (Pravikoff et al., 2005). This is particularly pertinent to professionals working with CAPO since appraising the quality of evidence from social work and the social sciences is less than straightforward: evidence is more likely to be based on 'experiential knowledge or 'expert consensus'; outcomes tend to be more abstract and less easily defined; and it is common for methodological limitations to arise as a result of practical or ethical considerations.

In order to support professionals to make more informed judgements, i-HOP implemented a quality assurance process to indicate the strength and usefulness of research and evidence on the hub. In partnership with the University of Huddersfield, i-HOP developed a Quality Assessment Tool (QAT; Christmann & Sharratt, 2015a) that enables the reviewer to appraise items in four key areas: ‘Methodological Quality’; ‘Child-centeredness’; ‘Relevance to Practice’; and ‘Relevance to Policy and Strategy’. Items that score highly in one or more areas are assigned a corresponding icon on the website so that professionals can quickly and easily identify research and evidence that best suits their needs. In order to enable professionals to independently replicate the process, or extend the process to research beyond the hub, the QAT and accompanying Guidebook (Christmann & Sharratt, 2015b) are freely available on the i-HOP website.

It was necessary that the QAT could be applied to all research and evidence currently on the knowledge hub, as well as items that might be added in the future. This was challenging since items on the hub span a number of different disciplines (e.g. psychology, criminology, social work) and come in a variety of different formats (e.g. primary research, secondary reviews, expert opinion pieces). It was evident that existing quality assessment tools had been designed with a very specific purpose in mind (e.g. the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale for primary research studies investigating the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions; Farrington, Gottfredson, Sherman & Welsh, 2002) and could not be easily adapted to suit i-HOP’s requirements.

Furthermore, it soon became apparent that ‘Methodological Quality’ in particular could not be assessed using an identical set of items since the factors indicative of a ‘good quality’

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piece of research differ dramatically depending on whether it is a qualitative study, quantitative study, meta-analysis, and so on. To overcome these difficulties, the team developed a bespoke QAT and Guidebook that are designed to support professionals to identify the type of research/evidence in question and then guide them to the sections that are most relevant to assessing the methodological quality of that particular piece of research or evidence. Since the QAT is designed to be applicable to as many different types of research and evidence as possible, the system for categorising items is fairly broad and flexible so that it can adequately encompass a variety of different types of research and evidence (e.g. primary qualitative and quantitative data collection, systematic and non-systematic secondary reviews, and theoretical/conceptual pieces) from a number of different disciplines.

In assessing methodological quality, reviewers are invited to assign a rating of ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ in response to a series of statements regarding internal and external validity, appropriateness of research design, sampling and diversity, coherence and clarity of reporting, transparency of reporting, and adherence to key ethical principles. It is acknowledged that there are many different interpretations of what is meant by ‘research quality’ and the rating of items is likely to entail a certain degree of subjective judgement. However, the purpose of the QAT is not to provide an exhaustive guide to research quality that could be applied universally to all fields of research. Instead, the QAT is designed to support professionals working with children and families of offenders to independently appraise the quality of research and evidence in the absence of extensive research methods training.

The assessment of methodological quality is also surrounded by ‘academic jargon’ that might not be familiar to professionals with limited research methods training. To ensure that the

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QAT was as user-friendly as possible, the team substituted such language wherever possible, but there were concepts that were assessment of quality but for which no familiar synonyms exist. In these instances, ‘key hints’ are provided on the QAT and the Guidebook offers further explanation.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have a right to participate in research so that their opinions on matters that affect them can be taken into consideration. Thus ‘child-centeredness’ refers to the extent to which the piece of research or evidence acknowledges the importance of the children’s perspective and values the original contribution that children can make to research. Using the same three-point scale as above, reviewers are invited to rate statements such as *‘children and young people were allowed to express themselves in an age-appropriate way’* and *‘the study (or article) carries tangible benefits for children and is not solely or largely concerned with furthering ideological or academic interests’*.

The final two sections ‘Relevance to Policy and Strategy’ and ‘Relevance to ‘Practice’ encourage the reviewer to consider whether the piece of research and evidence either makes direct recommendations, or alternatively provides information or knowledge that could usefully inform policy, strategy or practice (as applicable).

3.4. Maintaining the Currency of the i-HOP Hub

In order to promote the best possible outcomes for CAPO, it is important that professionals base practice and policy on the most relevant and robust evidence that is currently available. Given the regularity with which new research and evidence is published, and busy workloads within agencies and organisations, it is understandably difficult for professionals to keep

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abreast of the most recent developments. To support professionals in this endeavour, the i-HOP team regularly update the hub with new research and other sources of information. This involves continually conducting web-based searches, and maintaining communications with key organisations, agencies and academics to encourage them to submit materials for inclusion on the knowledge hub. There is also a simple online form that enables professionals to contact the i-HOP team to make them aware of new pieces of research and evidence, training resources, funding opportunities, and so on, that might be suitable for inclusion on the knowledge hub. At the time of writing, the number of items included on the hub has increased to 630, including 150 quality-assessed pieces of research and evidence. The aforementioned evaluation by Perry & Wright (2014) indicates that professionals have confidence that the website is frequently updated and that the research and evidence available is both relevant and contemporary: *'The material is frequently updated and is invariably relevant and pertinent'* (Voluntary Worker in Children and Families) and *'The articles and other information provided are comprehensive and most importantly current'* (Prison Worker).

An on-going challenge for the i-HOP team is ensuring the sustainability of the knowledge hub when working with short-term funding streams. As with any third sector organisation that relies heavily on external funding, there is a constant concern that the service will not be available to professionals in the future. The possibility of charging members for access was considered, but this would not have amounted to a sustainable model of service provision, and would also have reversed a key motivation behind the hub to provide open-access to research wherever feasible. Lobbying of commissioners and key organisations in the field to secure funding is ongoing task, but the i-HOP team are also exploring whether it might be

possible to future-proof the knowledge hub by partially hosting it on the main Barnardo's website.

4. Conclusion

The development of the i-HOP knowledge hub has not been without its challenges, but these have been far outweighed by the achievements of the service. In an evaluation of 100 i-HOP members and site users (Perry & Wright, 2014), qualitative comments revealed that the development of a comprehensive collection of quality-assessed research and evidence (among many other resources) has improved professionals' awareness and understanding of the support needs of CAPO. As reported by a professional from the voluntary sector, *[The i-HOP website] has good resources on how to work with children whose family members are in prison. And it helped me understand how I can support these young people'*. There is also evidence that professionals are directly using resources available on the knowledge hub to support their work with children and families. For example, a voluntary sector professional reported that they had used materials available on the knowledge hub to *'help explain what would happen when visiting their parent in prison'*. A prison worker also commented reported that *'The site has given me an insight in what innovations are being done and made me think how we can incorporate them in my area of work'*.

The i-HOP team have also worked in partnership with local government agencies in England to develop policy and strategy documents specifically relating to children and families affected by parental offending; their design heavily influenced by the wealth of research and evidence that the i-HOP team have collated for the knowledge hub. One such example is the Greater Manchester Safeguarding Partnership (2016) *'Guidance for working with Children*

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who have a Parent in Prison' protocol, which directly refers professional to the i-HOP website as a source of information and guidance.

Organisations seeking to create a similar knowledge hub are advised to take a flexible and pragmatic approach its development, and need to be prepared to continually revise its structure and appearance in response to developments in available resources and also the needs of service users. The extent of the engagement strategy required is likely to be influenced by the perceived demand for the hub, but in situations where awareness of an issue is limited, one the key lessons learned from i-HOP is the benefit of a continuous and varied engagement strategy. Organisations should not be deterred by limited resources as low-cost engagement strategies do exist, such as the use of social media and briefing documents as described above.

The development of the hub and promoting engagement are essential pre-requisites, but in order to ensure that research and evidence are actually integrated into policy and practice, organisations need to consider how they can support professionals to feel confident in their appraisals of suitability and quality. A research and evidence quality assessment tool might provide a solution, but the development and systematic implementation of this requires significant resources. The burden on resources can be somewhat reduced by ensuring that the tool is designed with the end-user in mind, as this minimises the need for the development of additional specialist research methods knowledge.

Last but not least, if practice and policy is to be based on the best evidence currently available, organisations need to be in a position to ensure that they can continually update the hub for the foreseeable future. Developing and maintaining lines of communication with key

organisations, agencies and academics can go some way to increasing the likelihood that new materials are deposited as a matter of course.

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