

When Bad Research Leads to Bad Policy: The Case of New Brunswick

Governments in Canada pay a lot for research and commission reports regularly to help develop public policy. Recently, policy makers have been placing more emphasis on experimental approaches to research for determining whether social programs are worth maintaining, or whether better alternatives to current policies exist.

These methods, sometimes collectively referred to as 'evidence based policy', involve setting up pilot projects or using historical events that allow the comparison of groups of individuals that are eligible or engaged in a particular program against other groups of individuals that are not eligible for the program, or enrolled instead in an alternative program. The experimental approach leads to strong conclusions about the overall impact of one policy compared to another.

Most often, however, governments rely on non-experimental research to draw policy conclusions. Non-experimental reports often use surveys or interviews, without a comparison group to draw policy conclusions. This approach requires working with data that was never intended to answer the questions at hand.

Often these reports draw strong conclusions when they really should not. We are inundated with research and reports drawing strong conclusions, and it is virtually impossible to tell from reading an executive summary or listening to a sound bite whether a study should be taken seriously or not.

Taking a report's conclusions or sound bites at face value, without initial skepticism about how the report came to these conclusions can sometimes lead to disastrous policy mistakes.

For example, take the case of French Immersion reform in New Brunswick, which I use in my Public Policy class as a case example of when bad research can lead to bad policy.

On February 17th, 2008, Dr. James Croll and Patricia Lee released their government-commissioned review of French second-language education in New Brunswick. They made 18 recommendations, by far the most controversial was to terminate the province's Early French immersion (EFI) program, which begins in Grade 1, and offer only a Late French Immersion (LFI) program, which begins in Grade 6.

Of the many mistakes in interpretation of the data they produced (for reviews see <http://hamlit2008.blogspot.com/>, <http://www.unbf.ca/L2/FSLReview.html>), perhaps the most serious was the conclusion that few students from the early French immersion program obtained the provincial target of advanced oral proficiency. The problem is that, in order to get a score at all, students must have taken French in grade 12 and elected to write the test. The authors assumed that anyone that didn't enroll in Grade 12 French or write the test was not orally proficient in French. Clearly, early French immersion students are more likely to end their French studies earlier than LFI students, whether having achieved proficiency or not. In fact, when looking at those that did take the test, 82% of EFI students attained a level of Intermediate Plus or Higher compared to only 44% among students that took Late French Immersion. And for advanced level attainment, which would qualify as bilingual, the contrast is starker; 33% for EFI and 9% for LFI.

Another argument used to support the termination of EFI is that it is elitist. Students from higher income families enroll in the program more often than those from lower income families. New Brunswick test scores are consistently lower than test scores by students in the rest of Canada. However, it's a leap of faith to attribute these differences to EFI. Test scores between New Brunswick and other maritime provinces with much lower EFI participation rates are similar, suggesting differences across other provinces are driven by other factors (e.g. demographic backgrounds and urban/rural settings).

An example how evidence based policy can be applied to this case is to consider how well immigrant children learn a second language depending on the age at which they arrive in their new resident country. While not directly related to New Brunswick's EFI or LFI programs, the question this approach addresses is clear: how well do some children learn a second language if they are immersed in it at a young age compared to an old age? A recent U.S. study showed that, while age of arrival makes no difference to English proficiency for immigrants from English speaking countries, proficiency drops substantially for immigrants from non-English speaking countries arriving after age 10, along with adult earnings too.

The term segregation has been used to describe the effect that EFI has on the NB Anglophone school system. This is a very strong term with very negative connotations. The reality is, the existence of a negative effect of EFI has not been credibly demonstrated, while the cost of removing EFI is more clear cut. Should the government switch programs and reduce French proficiency based the highly uncertain possibility that inclusion would improve overall outcomes?

Perhaps a better question is why don't students from lower income families enroll in EFI? The program is available to virtually everyone. An alternative policy reform to help solve this difference is to have an 'opt-out' policy rather than 'opt-in' one. If every Anglophone in New Brunswick was automatically enrolled in the French immersion program in grade 1, with the option of opting out if they don't want to be in it, I'll wager that EFI enrollment would rise substantially for all students, as would proficiency and overall achievement.

Kelly Lamrock, NB's Minister of Education, is set to decide on Tuesday whether to follow through with the province's plans for eliminating EFI. The decision will affect all NB Anglophone children and potentially the future for Francophone and Anglophone relations in the province. Does he take a 30 year step back to the past? Does he terminate Early French Immersion, the only program in NB that produces bilingual graduates or does he save it, improve it and make it more inclusive, something no Education Minister before him has done. Parenthetically, for me, is he going to continue to give me a great case study on how bad research leads to bad policy, or is he going to do the right thing and make this an interesting anecdote for me to tell my students in the future?

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