

Political dimensions of knowledge mobilization.

William Roberts, Editor

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In Donna Kotsopoulos (Panel Chair), *Knowledge mobilization in developmental psychology: Lost in translation or limited intent?* Panel discussion conducted at the Development 2014 Conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, May 2014.

I find it ironic that the Social Sciences and Humanities Council is urging us to disseminate research findings at a time when the Federal Government is preventing its scientists from doing so, closing down research centers and even whole libraries at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and Health Canada, with books and research materials often disposed of in local landfills, according to *The Globe and Mail*.

Scientifically important, but politically inconvenient, projects like the Environmental Lakes Area have been closed; and others, like the Polar Environmental Atmospheric Research Laboratory, have had their funding reduced.

These problems exist at the provincial level as well as the federal, and we have an example of that today at this symposium. Laurie McNelles, from the Ministry of Education, has been forbidden by the Government of Ontario to speak here today, on the grounds that there is an election. Evidently Laurie McNelles knows something that the Government of Ontario does not want you to know, and it does not want you to know because it might influence how you vote. I find this disturbing, very disturbing. I am worried for Canadian democracy. Those of you here in the audience who live in Ontario need to be asking some home questions of the candidates in your local riding. An election is when we have leverage, and we must use it.

But the issues are not limited to the gagging of scientists or assaults on accumulated knowledge and ongoing projects. The ability to generate new knowledge has also been reduced. From 2007/2008 to 2013/2014, funding has fallen at SSHRC by more than 10%, at NSERC by more than 6%, and at CIHR, by more than 7%. In 2006/2007, 40% of SSHRC applications were funded; six years later, only 27% -- although 65% of applications were judged worthy of funding (CAUT, 2013). Moreover, an increasing amount of these reduced funds are being directed towards applied and industrial partnerships, and away from basic research. For example, at NSERC between 2010/2011 and 2013/2014, applied grants saw a 22% increase, whereas basic grants saw a 16% decrease.

However ironic, I applaud the new emphasis on disseminating research findings, since I believe that knowledge accumulated over the last 50 years, if applied, could result in profound and important benefits for children, families, and society in general. For example, there is abundant longitudinal research showing that preschool intervention programs substantially increase school-related cognitive skills. Compared to control groups, fewer preschool-program children are later placed in special education classes or are retained in grade; more graduate from high school, and more graduate on time. Other important benefits have also been documented. Assessed at age 27, adults who had attended the High Scope/Perry Preschool program 23 years earlier were less likely than controls to have been arrested or incarcerated, or to have ever been on welfare. More of them held jobs, and more of them owned their own homes (Weikart, 1998). In short, they were much more likely to become responsible, productive, tax-paying citizens. It is estimated that for every dollar spent on early intervention and education for low-income children, more than

\$17 is saved over the long run. Even for high-income groups, ECE programs are cost effective, saving \$1.50 for every dollar spent. It is for these reasons that ECE programs are recommended by the OECD (2006, undated) and the World Bank (2014).

I find it disturbing that Canada ranks last among the 16 OECD nations in spending for early childhood education, measured as a proportion of GDP (Semeniuk, 10 February 2014). Only 48% of Canadian four-year-olds attend any preschool program, well below the OECD average of 84% (OECD, 2013). The failure of the Canadian government and of provincial governments outside Quebec to adequately fund early childhood education programs is a clear example of short-sighted government policies that damage children and families and increase long-term costs to society. This is a national disgrace. And it is entirely due to a lack of political will.

To take another example. There is abundant research evidence on the adverse impact of poverty on young children and families; yet 14% of children in Canada – nearly 1 in 7 – live in poverty. As a recent UNICEF report noted, “government action is a key driver to reduce child poverty. In countries that accept higher levels of child poverty, this is not just a function of chance or necessity, but of policy and priority” (UNICEF Canada, 2012, p.1).

Thus the application of knowledge in developmental psychology is basically a political issue, and a call to disseminate knowledge is a call to engage in the political process. We do have examples of success in our field. For example, the work of Robertson and Bowlby profoundly changed the way in which hospitals delivered services to mothers, infants and young children. PREVNet is having an impact on schools, children, and youth. These might serve as models; but it is perhaps easier to

influence doctors, teachers, administrators, and children than it is to influence politicians. Still, we must try. The issues are too important to too many people; and they are important for young children, who depend on us to do our best for them.

I wish that publishing in the *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, in itself, could work social change. It cannot. But I agree with the position that developmental psychology should be doing more to inform social and educational policy and practice. It rests with us, as psychologists, as scientists and citizens, to raise these issues: to raise them with our Members of Parliament and our representatives in our provincial legislatures; to raise them in letters to our local newspapers and by speaking out in our local communities.

The idea that government decisions should be evidence-based has been eroded in recent years, as has the idea that government should work for the good of the community as a whole, rather than simply to benefit the few. Something must be done. We must speak up. "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

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