

POLICY RESEARCH - THE INTERNATIONAL ACTIVE COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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PART I

For reasons of brevity this paper does not start from an analysis of existing published theory on policy research or comparative methodology. A familiarity is assumed with alternative traditional approaches and with the generally accepted alternative goal of policy research that it should be able to influence political decision making, and in a shorter time span than traditional empirical or longitudinal case study approaches. Attention is drawn however to the increasing ambivalence about the impact of policy research - is it effective? (Nisbet and Broadfoot, 1980). To what extent is this because of its methodological imperfections and how far a reflection of the disregard of politicians for any evidence which conflicts with their current predetermined priorities and ideologies?

The 1970's have seen a general focus at political level on two major educational themes within the EEC/UNESCO/OECD orbit, viz. transition from school to work and sex equity in education and training, and the methodological strengths and weakness of cross national studies which I want to highlight are drawn from those listed in the bibliography to this paper. (Supplementary annotated research bibliographies will be brought to the conference). In the context of this paper therefore I am defining active comparative policy research as having at least 8 characteristics relevant to this paper:-

- (a) It is commissioned to answer questions which politicians and policy makers regard as important.
- (b) It draws on evidence from a range of contrasting countries.
- (c) It must be completed within a short time span, usually a year or less in order to be fed into the political decision making cycle of high level meetings.
- (d) It will usually need to rely on secondary sources in the form of already published data, research reports, statistics and available case studies. It is rarely possible for the researchers to seek out and construct their own data.
- (e) Funds are usually (not always) limited to consultancy fees and some infrastructure subsidy with very limited travel possibilities. Fieldwork specifically for the study and firsthand verification of published evidence or stated policy is rarely possible.
- (f) The study will almost always need to address intersectoral relationships (e.g. educational and labour market goals and interests; regional policy and educational or training output in the regions; mismatch of economic and educational or human rights objectives and actual procedures or infrastructures); or interprofessional/interdisciplinary relationships (curriculum planning and careers or vocational guidance; central bureaucratic planning or decentralised participatory planning). Single discipline or single dimensional studies will not throw light on policy problems which are by nature intersectoral.
- (g) It is more likely to involve direct relationships with policymakers in different Ministries or government agencies, than with other academic researchers.
- (h) Researchers are as likely to be drawn from the practising field of policy and planning or from specific policy Research institutes, as from traditional higher education institutions.

It is not to say that all of these characteristics are universal, nor that research which differs from these is not properly classified as active, comparative, policy and international, but that these

characteristics are those which emerge as common to most studies of the EEC, UNESCO, Nordic Council, Council of Europe and OECD in the two subject areas chosen, and which raise questions in my view on methodology, validity of outcome and usefulness of investment. How effective/ineffective they are depend on what we want to achieve. I am here suggesting that the goals and ends are radically different and that therefore fundamental differences in methodology are not necessarily invalid. In part II, I outline the purpose, general method and what I see as the useful outcome of selected studies, against these factors and in the context of their different goals.

Focus of studies

Methodologically speaking, one major problem in wideranging policy analysis has been to find a method of focussing the available evidence (or reinterpreting it in the context of the policy goal of the new study) so as to exclude irrelevant findings but to include relevant relationships. Thus in looking at sex equity or transition in the early years of the decade, relatively little specialised material was available and this is also in the nature of new policy areas. By definition data and evidence will not necessarily be labelled in the research literature under the topic heading: we need to reassemble it.

I have used a matrix approach to limit the focus of analysis both in my own research and in analysing findings from other studies. Thus, in the context of sex equity, the subject can be broken down by subject, dimension and factor, to focus on different aspects for different policy contexts:-

Sex Equity in Schooling

Dimensions

access				
identical opportunity				
territorial equality				
class equality				
	curriculum	resources	guidance	<u>Factors</u>

Here the study would analyse the interface of dimensions and factors as shown by the available evidence. For example, is there equal access to curriculum? To resources? To vocational guidance? Is the access/opportunity to identical curriculum, identical resources, identical guidance? Are rural/urban or regional differences apparent between curricula, resources and guidance for girls and boys? Are there aggregated class/sex differences in curriculum, resources and guidance?

This approach has been used to look at the available studies. Transition education can be equally broken down by matrices to show the interface of, for example, resources or curricular equality etc against regional, rural/urban, sex or age or racial differentials. That is, only evidence illustrating those interfaces would be extracted from varied sources. Even if it is not standardised evidence it will be argued that it is valid to show policy problems, trends or differential approaches as possible future policy choices.

SECTION II

This section summarises a selection of policy studies in the two areas as a factual base for a brief analysis of their different focuses and their methods and outcomes.

Sex Equity in Education

In 1968 UNESCO published the results of a 48 country policy analysis on the access to girls and women to technical and vocational education⁽¹⁾ based on a questionnaire devised and sent out by UNESCO's central

research staff at the Paris Headquarters. The study was limited to skilled worker and technician level courses and covered all routes to learning (full time, part time etc.) and aimed to find the level and type of sex differentials in the access to vocational and technical education. Factors on which evidence was sought included legal/administrative access, access by provision, (was it available in rural areas?) access by finance, (were scholarships equally available?) and access to employment (were girls excluded by sex from "male" areas?), access to equal, or identical, programmes.

The policy-focus of the study was weak but its contribution to establishing the extent of disparity has made it a seminal study. At the data level, it illustrates three undisputed facts:-

- (a) Girls were very poorly represented in vocational and technical education in most countries, more so in Africa and Asia and more so in rural countries. Only 7 out of 43 countries had achieved even relative numerical equality.
- (b) Their enrolments were sextyped - services sector, domestic economy and "female" areas of employment training in most countries and in most areas of training.
- (c) Infrastructures such as scholarships and guidance commanded automatic male priority and were not equally available to or taken up by girls.

In policy terms, it was possible to draw out some areas for future research from the evidence despite incomplete questionnaires from many countries. For example, only as the level of training rose was there significant evidence of girls in nontraditional areas. Why? Formal equality (legally equal access) while necessary, had not resulted in actual equality. What were the barriers?

Methodologically the study could not address cause and effect relationships. One weakness is that it depended on the "official" view by country-questionnaire and could not be assessed independently. A second is that the definition of the type of education surveyed proved impossible to standardise. Thus comparative analysis is not possible between countries although relative overall takeup can be monitored. In policy terms however it became possible to assert the scale of considerable problem of underachievement and a mismatch between alleged equal opportunity and actual identity of opportunity. The sex segregation of expected roles came clearly through the questionnaires and raised curricular, teacher training and guidance policy issues for further debate.

In terms of political outcome, this and the followup studies commissioned in Argentina, Lebanon, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka over the next five years have been translated into sections of UNESCO's 1974 Recommendation on Technical and Vocational Education endorsed at international level and by member states, setting political standards of sex equality as a principle. But in terms of analytical outcome, we were left with a range of questions as to cause and effect. For this, one looks elsewhere.

Techniques have altered in some later studies to widen evidence used, to include nonstatistical and social/anthropological evidence. In 1980, as part of the mid-Decade programme on sex equality, UNESCO commissioned two policy studies on technical and vocational education for women to be used as working documents for a high level 35 country congress and 15 country seminar focussing on the causes of female underachievement and on the entry of women to "male" areas respectively. Unlike the 1968 survey, the research was commissioned out to a parttime consultant in the field with a total budget of \$6,000 American, and a space limit of 100 pages and 60 pages respectively for the final documents. The studies had to lead to policy recommendations, had to cover all regions of the world, both industrialised and Third World countries, and draw on evidence from correspondents in the countries represented at the Congress and Seminar. To arrive at a research methodology in traditional terms was impossible.

In terms of the matrix approach, the subjects were narrowed down as follows:-

		<u>Model A</u>				
<u>Main Dimensions</u>						
equal access		x	x	x	x	x
equal takeup		x	x	x	x	x
equal means the same		x	x	x	x	x
sex segregated	}					
educational goals		x	x	x	x	x
automatic male priority		x	x	x	x	x
		literacy	curricular programmes	rural & urban provision	guidance	social class
		<u>Main Factors</u>				

How far was there equal access to, takeup of, the aspects listed as factors? How far were they planned identically for both sexes or sexsegregated by goal as well as structure and content? These and others were questions which were taken as the interface issues illustrated on the matrix, for the first project⁽²⁾, the research purpose of which was to advise on the nature of the barriers which were hindering equal access to and achievement in vocational and technical education, and the likely areas for policy action.

Cross national statistical analysis was neither feasible nor likely to illuminate cause and effect relationships. A trawl was made of contacts in countries either in which UNESCO knew a relevant "expert" to be knowledgeable or for which bibliographical searches threw up relevant references. The networks of either comparativists or active feminists were trawled for contacts and reports published within the last five years. Ministry contacts for countries of special interest were approached for upto date national education statistics. Material was sought on three levels (1) statistics identifying the access/takeup interface of the factors shown, (2) policy reports on equal opportunity on women, education, training and employment, (3) details of legislation, affirmative action and proposals under review.

The requests were deliberately not standardised in questionnaire form but were opened and adjusted to the development level of the countries concerned. Material was received from almost all contacts ranging from Regional reports of the United Nations Social and Economic Committees through Ministry statistics to research journal extracts, publications of curricular programmes, industrial training policies and reports to previous conferences. Authorship varied from academics and educational planners to parttime consultants based in educational institutions or representing a professional sector. (Advisers, women's organisations).

Not all material was usable in context but when aggregated with a thorough search of published studies (for example Oppong, 1974, Boserup, 1970, Kapur, 1975, Little, 1973), certain common relationships emerged. Planning barriers to rural women were near universal in developing countries: basic schools and literacy programmes, still less vocational programmes, were an urban phenomenon - political priority and the concept of economic viability. Automatic male priority emerged from the anthropological literature as cultural, from the planning evidence as structural (only 2000 of 8000 new places in Ivory Coast were for women: agricultural education limited to males in almost all cultures) and from the statistics as factual rationing. That is, the causes of barriers, identified in such terms as of perceivedly separate sex roles, of male superiority or priority and the aggregation of inequalities of class, sex and rural status could be validated from statistics from a wide range of countries, from studies covering different disciplines,

and from policy reports coming from different levels of administrators or policy makers sending in material. Arguably the lack of standardisation and the commonality of evidence, strengthens and not weakens its validity.

Methodologically however this lacks the tools of "academic research" in strict terms and has weaknesses in overall analytical policy terms, and the conclusions were therefore cautious in those respects on which evidence was inadequate. As a policy study it achieved the limited objective of providing a focus for debate at highlevel on its main conclusions - for example that illiteracy was a major continuing barrier, that sex segregation of curricular programmes cannot be altered without altering the sex roles expectation in work and home, and that a legislative framework is an important first step towards redefining public policy, were acceptable by countries as diverse as Russia and Venezuela as areas for international focus and action and for national monitoring.

The study raised for the researcher, a series of questions on the relative return for research investment. For example

- (a) How far studies set with such a wide canvas and a restrictive remit (brevity with full regional input, a time span of five months, a requirement to address all the issues raised in evidence) can be manageably fed into a policy debate.
- (b) How far they can monitor or validate the evidence submitted qualitatively.
- (c) How far concentration on possible solutions to now familiar problems can be achieved without followup pilot studies to test hypothetical relationships (desegregation of curricular programmes, alternative guidance systems...).

The second UNESCO 1980 study was in this respect, a tighter exercise. The original matrix determined by its terms of reference was equally wide:-

Women in "male" areas

<u>Dimensions</u>					
Legislation	x	x	x	x	
Affirmative action }	x	x	x	x	
Resources	x	x	x	x	
Evaluation	x	x	x	x	
	School	Further	Guidance	Employment	<u>Sectors</u>
	Curricular	Education			
	Programmes				

The outcome of the second study confirmed some thematic findings of the first: where for example opportunity had improved for women, it was predominantly for urban or for middle-class or professional women. Because however the search for case studies, empirical research or data on policy initiatives was trawled with a sharper focus on action being taken, the "fugitive" or unpublished or undissemiated data was often more illuminating than official reports or macrostatistics.

Methodologically, the contextual setting of the two studies into an international forum at which the reports were to be debated, proved both a constraint and a benefit. Negatively, the time spans proved unrealistic for analysis of much rich data which threw light on cultural and political barriers and their solutions (the need for boarding provision for girls in Moslem states: the antithesis of Scandinavian

policies based on interchangeable sex roles and East European policies based on infrastructures to enable women but not men to fulfil the dual role). Negatively also, the requirement to cover either all regions or all sectors (East:West, North:South) restricted free choice of priorities for inclusion of issues and conclusions. On the merit side, the high level of dissemination of the evidence and findings because of high exposure has placed some new concepts and hypotheses, new questions and possible answers in the hands of policy makers in the different 50 countries involved.

Unless however three practical steps follow such an approach, its usefulness remains limited,

- (a) power to fund and evaluate pilot projects to follow up
 - (b) testing of the mismatch between declared policy and actual policy
 - (c) training programmes for policy makers and researchers in intersectoral analysis,
- for all three of which a degree of international funding, initiative and expertise is an important element.

Sex Equity and Transition

In contrast, the Commission of the European Communities works through a mechanism which both commands broader funding and concentrates on narrower, more immediate focuses of political educational advance. Since Education does not figure in the Treaty of Rome, research projects (or issues) stem from decisions of the Ministers of Education meeting in Council whose 1976 meeting⁽⁴⁾ is the origin of a range of EEC studies whose focus has been on education to working life and sex equality. Funds were allocated for fulltime consultants to research the problems facing young people in transition⁽⁵⁾, girls in the secondary years⁽⁶⁾, and young people in disadvantaged, rural, regions of the Community in transition⁽⁷⁾. It is the latter two studies to which I will refer. An important difference between the EEC and UNESCO is that the Community, when it decides on a policy, can enforce this by a binding Directive on member states (Equal Treatment for Men and Women Workers, 1975) except in the field of education which is not included in the Treaty of Rome. Nevertheless the outcome of an EEC policy study is likely to be a ministerial debate and a programme of funded action.

The nine country study on sex equality was based again on secondary sources, cross country analysis of educational programmes, educational planning and statistical data. It differed however in focussing on three questions in sequence.

- (1) What evidence is there of sex differences in:-
 - access, takeup, programme planning, guidance services, educational materials.
- (2) Where should the Ministers focus their future attention for research and action to remedy inequality?
- (3) Which priority would give the quickest and most effective return for investment at (1) Community and (2) national levels?

This was feasible to tackle at conceptual level given the researcher had experience of educational planning and the political context of forward programming. Nine country liaison officers were appointed from the Ministries of Education who supplied statistics, educational programmes and reports on issues identified by the researcher. Statistically harmonised data are available from Eurostat. These could not answer detailed questions on sex differences in subject takeup, regional differences or wastage rates and not all countries had sexsplit statistics, for all respects of the enquiry. The statistical trawl however revealed that again, it was in vocational education, that sex differences were acute. Planning differences emerged from Ministry data; teacher attitudes and social class differences from research studies. Four main recommended areas for action emerged as teacher inservice education on sex roles, guidance procedures, research into single sex/coeducational differences of motivation and

achievement and development of core studies for both sexes in technology and home management.

No conclusion was valid for all countries: no finding was universal. In validity terms however, the key findings (automatic male priority, sex differentiated roles, weakness in guidance procedures etc) are sufficiently widespread to be accepted by all member states as relevant and important. New hypotheses were the apparent vulnerability of rural girls and working class girls and the aggregation factor of inequality.

Hence the second study, following up Ministerial unease on the mismatch between school and work asked for advice on the aggregation factor in transition. Why is it, asked the Ministers, that young people from rural, peripheral regions are especially at risk? Is there a lack of intersectoral planning which contributes to this? The matrix for this study required an analysis which looked at the interface of regional, rural, sex and peripheral location factors in the transition process against an intersectoral model - a three dimensional approach. Funds were available for a Project Coordinator, a research analyst in each country but not for purpose designed research. Sources were again secondary. The design of issues to be analysed was worked out by the cross national team, country analyses completed and synthesised by the Coordinator. Did they answer the Minister's questions? Could a "long distance" study produce valid diagnoses of causes of social, educational and political underachievement of "areas" as well as individuals?

Balance of Goals and Results

The validity, and the return for research investment, depend on what is perceived to be the goal and how the results of the studies will be used. Whether the data produces "answers" depends on the degree of flexibility in the questions underlying the search for new knowledge or new relationships. The brevity of this paper has not given space to contrast the OECD, EEC and Nordic Council approaches to transition in terms of policy definition of focus or of methodology but certain factors are again common. Even the research teams in the countries in the "transition in the regions" study had neither the funding nor the resources to take on field research. We are in the context of reinterpreting existing data (school leaver patterns, examination achievements, migration/mobility patterns, levels of input such as levels of training places, school places, guidance services) to "answer" hypothetical questions. (Is rural underachievement caused by fewer or poorer resources or by cultural inheritance or by aggregated factors and if so, which?) That is, the focus remains essentially quantitative or hypothetical. We need to work towards a method of underpinning this with qualitative testing as a followup. Thus one outcome of the EEC sex equality study (Byrne, 1974) is the funding of an Irish longitudinal research project across a range of schools to test differences between single sex and coeducational patterns of boy and girl achievement and motivation, by the EEC. The transition in the regions study is a further conceptual analysis of an earlier finding from the 1976 study that rural young people appeared at risk and that bureaucratic segregation caused limitation of services. It will need further pilot research to experiment with the recommendations made for intersectoral regional planning. In both themes, the lack of finite field-based conclusions is of lesser concern if one accepts that the concluding recommendations remain generalised pressure for political shifts in broad resource-allocation. The outcome of the UNESCO studies is political consciousness-raising: of the EEC studies, an actual shift in Community policy its funding for regional aid, for pilot projects of teacher inservice training, for curriculum innovation or for future research priorities. The policy outcome is a matter of focus and trend in political priority. The lack of "academically transferable" results (because we found A) to be the case in one context, therefore A would result elsewhere given the

same variables) because the data, variables and provision or bureaucratic framework differ, would only invalidate the conclusions if they were (wrongly) used to assert a universality of application.

One further benefit of taking one set of interrelationships and attempting to improve the existing data relating to their interface (rural/female underachievement, regional/rural/sectoral inequality) is that we highlight how little we actually know of the scale and characteristics of a problem. Most policy studies produce more questions than they answer. Their aim is to define better the real and not the perceived problem by improving the questions.

By the end of the 1970's, the outcome of these and a range of other concurrent studies has been to improve our methods of reinterpreting data against new hypotheses and to improve the network exchange of expertise between active policymakers and academic researchers.

The principal question which I suggest faces us in recession and with escalating social and political problems, is how to create more interdisciplinary teams skilled in defining questions and relationships to be tested in the field by practitioners (the EEC approach). The assumption is that we will focus on questions the wider community needs answered and not on those we are interested to ask.

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