The Organization of Educational Research: Some European Issues Relevant to Canada

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Cette étude qui fut menée en 1974, s'appuie sur un examen des organismes de recherche en pédagogie en Grande-Bretagne et sur des entretiens avec les principaux responsables de l'éducation en Belgique, en Allemagne, en Suède et au Conseil de l'Europe.

L'auteur y discute des points suivants: le bien-fondé de la recherche en pédagogie, les divers moyens de la subventionner, les organismes qui font de la recherche et le personnel qui les compose, la création et l'élaboration de projet, la direction et l'évaluation de la recherche, les divers types de recherche et autres objets de litige dans le domaine de la recherche en pédagogie.

En conclusion, l'auteur nous fait part de huit points cruciaux concernant l'enseignement au Canada et fait des recommandations précises aux gouvernements fédéral et provinciaux ainsi qu'aux conseils scolaires régionaux et aux facultés de l'éducation.

Stated bluntly, the organization of educational research in Canada is haphazard. Put more kindly, it is in a state of flux, particularly as the functions of The Canada Council in supporting social science research may soon be altered. Provincial autonomy in administration of education, which was extended by the Council of Ministers of Education in 1974 to include educational research, produces difficulties in national co-ordination of research activities. However, some improvements can be made. In view of the pending federal changes, the increased activity in some provincial departments, and the thrust of the Canadian Education Association towards greater school district involvement in research, CSSE members should be aware of the issues involved.

In order to identify some of these organizational issues, I was able to examine in 1974 the organization of educational research in Great Britain with respect to both structure and function, and to discuss this field with some senior officials in Belgium, Germany and Sweden, as well as at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Verney and Verney (1) had recently surveyed the European organization of social science research councils, and found the experience very valuable in making recommendations for the future of social science research organization in Canada. Several European countries face jurisdictional problems over federal, regional, and local control, similar to those experienced in Canada. Consequently, the discussions and observations helped in identification of several relevant issues.

Many of the statements made in this article also apply to the organization of developmental activities in education. Although the primary focus of this project was the organization of research, examination of the activities of some bodies whose work could be classed mainly as "development" (e.g. the Schools Council in London) had to be included. Because many developmental projects have research and/or evaluation components, a rigid separation of activities into either "research" or "development" is frequently misleading.

Readers may be conversant with all or some of the issues listed below, but presentation of a summary of these issues as identified by researchers outside Canada may be useful when discussing reorganization of educational research within Canada. Obviously many other issues can be added to the list. This summary is presented under several major topic headings, which are not mutually exclusive. Based upon the opinions of those interviewed and personal assessment, several recommendations are included.

THE ISSUES

The Contribution of Educational Research to Improvement of Practice

Underlying this entire discussion lies the need to examine the contribution of research to educational practice. In very few cases can educators support a direct research–adoption link. The Swedish decision to adopt a national comprehensive school system was strongly influenced by research findings: this provides an uncommon example.

After reflection upon various statements, the following positions appear to have merit.

1. The findings of research constitute only one influence among many upon changes in practice in education.
2. The findings of educational research, particularly because of its long-term aims, are frequently cumulative and are often not observed until some time after publication.
3. The main contributions of educational research are (a) strengthening the information base, (b) influencing opinions, and (c) improving the rationality of decision-making.
4. Individual researchers require a long period of production in order to acquire a reputation sufficient to allow their views to have a profound effect upon practice. One person interviewed suggested that this period is commonly a minimum of 10 years.

What emerges is that research can produce a subtle, usually indirect, but important effect upon practice. Although this position is hard to demonstrate, we must encourage its acceptance by politicians and administrators.

Sources of Finance

Finance is needed for funding the following: (1) an adequate "research floor" in organizations conducting research – this includes qualified staff

(a percentage of their time), research assistants, computer time, materials, equipment, etc., and some discretionary funds; (2) research institutes; (3) research projects and programs; (4) preparation of researchers; (5) development and dissemination activities.

The following questions, which emerged during discussion, illustrate several related issues.

1. Which agencies should provide funds for these organizations and their activities?
2. To what extent should universities and teachers' colleges be granted discretionary funds by central funding agencies for small-scale research? Many useful projects can be conducted at little cost, with a high return on investment as compared with those having substantial funding.
3. Should the supporting organization (e.g. a university) be required to match funds (even in kind) for research projects?
4. How can large quasi-private research organizations maintain a desirable balance between basic financial support and additional support for special projects? One official suggested that 2:1 was a healthy ratio.
5. What problems result from private foundations limiting their support to pump-priming operations?

Some respondents were very forceful in their advocacy of continuing pluralism of funding sources. This was seen as essential if possible bias against some types of applications is to be avoided.

Types of Institutions Conducting Research

Research can be conducted by staff in any educational institution, but in most countries the university contribution overwhelms all others. In Britain concern was voiced over the relatively small contribution made to date by staff in other postsecondary institutions. The contributions made by semi-private research organizations, teachers' associations, school districts, groups of inspectors/advisors/specialists, departments of education, curriculum development organizations (e.g. the Schools Council in London) should be examined with respect to the types of research conducted. "Types" refers to variations in topics, national scope, time, size of research team, basic/applied orientations, etc.

In order to provide some integration among these various institutions, many senior researchers proposed the idea of a strong federal research body with regional research and development centres. This proposal has gained support in England, Scotland, Belgium, Germany, and the Council of Europe.

Underlying the establishment of different types of educational research and development institutions is the need to have support at political, administrative, and teacher levels for these institutions. One researcher expressed this need in this way: "You must have ground support for when the (financial) wind blows cold."

Research Proposals

The comments on the handling of research proposals are categorized under the headings of sources, priorities (identification of needs), assessment, modification, and approval. These comments are largely related to practical matters involving bodies which grant funds to researchers.

Sources of Proposals

Respondents agreed that proposals should be initiated both by staff of the funding bodies and by staff of institutions which conduct research. This joint approach, which was deemed necessary in order to ensure a wide coverage of topics, is linked to the next issue of priorities.

Priorities

A great deal of dispute occurs over the questions of whether research priorities can be established, and if so whether they should govern the allocation of funds from a funding body. "Priorities" can relate either to areas in which research activities should be concentrated, or to "gap-filling" in neglected areas. The latter approach was used by the Medical Research Council (U.K.) on genetics research in the 1950s: the MRC now feels that it "has filled its gaps" and annually reviews the state of projects in 33 designated research areas.

The setting of priorities in educational research appears to be a more political activity than it is in the medical and science fields. One respondent pointed out a dilemma: the basing of research priorities upon the needs of an educational system is difficult because the findings of research should help to shape the aims of a system and therefore its needs. However, some felt that a general statement of priorities can help to provide cohesion to the research effort while still allowing for individual initiatives. Conferences of persons having the same research interests have been useful in identification of research priorities within particular educational specialties. One difficulty mentioned several times occurred in "pushes by vocal minority groups" which may lead to faulty assumptions about the general needs of a system.

Assessment

The criteria used in assessing proposals can be classified under (a) topic, (b) methodology, and (c) other.

a) *Topic:* criteria used include relevance to practice and policy issues, general interest both within the country and internationally, timeliness, previous research in the topic, and the topic itself.

b) *Methodology:* overall quality and thoroughness as well as specific aspects of sampling, variables, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and staffing.

c) *Other:* past record of researcher, budget (total and spread), cost-effectiveness aspects (possible pay-off for the investment), time proposed, and

internal conditions at the institution employing the applicant. One official mentioned that his funding body had found that applicants commonly had difficulty with both over- and underestimations of time, budget, and staffing, as well as in thinking a proposed project through to completion.

Several matters relevant to the *assessors* also warrant attention. What functions are they expected to perform? How many are necessary? What balance is desirable between internal and external assessors? Who chooses them? What competences should they have? Should panels of assessors be named from research-oriented associations, and if so to what extent would the consequent partial lack of anonymity present difficulties? Should assessors be free to ask for confidential opinions of others? To what extent does self-interest affect assessment, both with respect to jealousy and promotion of one's image through writing a detailed analysis? Some British applicants freely admitted that they did lobby people whom they knew would be involved in assessment.

Modification

Following assessment, proposals are usually graded into "Acceptable" (with few or no changes), "Conditionally Acceptable" (if suggested changes, sometimes major, are incorporated) and "Rejected." Most funding bodies also rank proposals in order to allocate within budget constraints. Modifications suggested by assessors in the research design, whether accepted in whole or in part by the applicant, present few difficulties in making decisions at the funding-body level. More difficulties are experienced when assessors attack the choice of topic ("the research thrust"), as they frequently do. Doubts about this research thrust, and how it can be modified, commonly lead to rejection by the funding body.

These matters are intimately related to a central question — how are the opinions of assessors integrated into an overall response suitable for presentation either to a group of researchers employed by the funding body or to the council of the funding body? This becomes crucial when assessors present conflicting opinions on a proposal. Such conflict, which is more prevalent than is commonly assumed, can be partly resolved by extensive *dialogue*. Lack of careful attention to the dialogue between funding-body staff, assessors, and applicant was severely criticized by one respondent who felt that this area of neglect required far more attention than did the usual cry over the shortage of research funds. Dialogue can be conducted by correspondence, site visits, and telephone; of these, the site visit is obviously the most satisfactory. However, much preliminary discussion can be conducted by telephone, a practice commonly employed in Germany and Scandinavia at no direct cost to their government research bureaus. Attempting to modify by correspondence was deplored almost universally by the senior researchers visited. Effectiveness of a dialogue between a funding body and applicants does require relative permanency of employment of one or more senior researchers in the funding body. (Criticism was common

in the U.K. over the rapid turnovers in the senior research contact position in the Department of Educational Science.) The Council on Educational Technology (U.K.) involves some of its council members in modification of proposals: this practice reduces conflict and misunderstandings at the council level when funding decisions are made. Although CET differs from many other funding bodies in that it funds only proposals developed by its own staff, its type of extensive dialogue at all stages deserves serious consideration.

Approval

The funding bodies with small numbers of members try to reach consensus on approval of proposals. Those with large numbers usually vote: this practice indicates a lack of planning and analysis, and an unwillingness to accept the approach of receiving recommendations from a subcommittee which has interacted with the proposer. Funding bodies are also faced with other types of decision than approval of a particular project, namely, the reconciliation of total cost of tentatively approved projects with funds at their disposal, and allocation of funds to different areas. One official admitted that inferior proposals in "neglected" areas sometimes received priority over somewhat better proposals in commonly researched areas.

Whereas the government and semi-public funding bodies are often aware of political pressures in their approval decisions, the private foundations frequently are able to tackle politically sensitive research areas. They also seem to be able to make decisions more quickly.

Staffing

Most staffing issues mentioned were related to the staffing of research organizations and government departments, rather than of universities. Research careers and seconding practices received particular attention.

Research organizations experience continuing staffing problems, often generated by the short-term nature of most of their research contracts. Staff who are not permanently employed face problems associated with a lack of job security: these problems are partly responsible for the organizational difficulties associated with personnel drift and recruitment. This situation is difficult to resolve as long as research organizations are dependent upon receiving research contracts rather than having "complete" basic support provided. The contract-dependence approach coupled with considerable temporary employment allows for staffing flexibility, although at the expense of continuity. This may be necessary either when research needs change or when staff for various reasons become less productive. Two respondents also cited the development of cynicism in researchers over time as presenting difficulties which should be recognized and accommodated.

In attempting to resolve some of these problems, greater use of secondments among various types of research institutions was advocated. This

practice could reduce insecurity and increase research awareness among the educational community. But opponents state that many secondments provide the type of experience that leads to promotion upon completion, so that the peer group rarely receives the intended benefits of this experience. Similar problems can occur when a researcher seeks employment at a research institution solely for the experience that he/she can gain and quote on a résumé.

Team research is commonly used in the United Kingdom, engendering special issues as compared with individual efforts. These, which are well known in Canada, include problems of overall direction, co-ordination, and continuity. A tendency was observed to include an economist on research teams whenever possible.

At the British universities, employment of full-time educational research staff was with one exception (Bristol) dependent upon external research grants. Some graduate students were used as almost full-time researchers, and some staff would like to see this practice extended, with thesis investigations being built into an on-going staff research area. But staff had experienced resistance to involvement of graduate students in projects because of their "wanting to do an original thing." Such an approach was criticized as being wasteful of effort and as avoiding the need for replication of some research. An increasing reluctance to undertake graduate studies in educational research was reported in some countries, partly because of uncertainty over job prospects. When one senior academic was asked about the possibility of greater use of graduate students as a means of considerably improving the output of educational research he replied, "We didn't put men on the moon by using graduate students!"

Supervision and Evaluation

Some concern was expressed by members of funding bodies about the need for closer supervision, probably by means of steering or advisory committees, over the work of those who have received their grants. This was countered by those who felt that researchers should have freedom to explore. One suggestion was to use outside evaluations and "stepped funding," i.e. the funding for a total project is allocated in parts, with continued funding being dependent upon satisfactory evaluation. A major difficulty occurs in selection of the criteria for evaluation of a research project, and dispute over these criteria can be a major source of discontent for researchers.

Development and Dissemination

As so much has been written about development and dissemination, a brief summary of some of the issues raised is sufficient.

1. Which agencies should conduct which development and dissemination activities? How should government bodies, universities, foundations, school districts, and private organizations be involved?

2. Do royalties and publication rights belong jointly to the funding body and the researcher/developer?
3. Should sponsors providing considerable funds for a research project expect (as is common in Britain) that the researcher(s) prepare a report in book form, often in his/her own time?
4. If a researcher engages in developmental activities based upon his/her findings, will he/she be viewed as a "tool" of the funding body?
5. Should researchers become more active in trying to influence changes which are indicated by their findings as being desirable, i.e. should they deviate from their traditional neutral stance?
6. How can an improved level of educational journalism be attained?
7. How can we reduce the promotion of the interests of individual bodies in curriculum development? (In England, the dominance of the National Union of Teachers in decisions of the Schools Council was commonly mentioned.)
8. How can the results of research be incorporated into pre-service and in-service instruction of teachers? (Several felt that this incorporation provided the most productive type of dissemination.)
9. Do government departments have the right "mental framework" to respond to empirical findings?
10. What balance of full-time and part-time staff should constitute curriculum committees?
11. Assuming that a Research Register is needed within a nation/state/province, who should prepare it, what types of research should be entered, what information is desirable, and how can it be used? (The National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales – NFER – is preparing such a register for all educational research in the U.K., using a common European system.) Should completion of a Registry entry be a condition of receiving funding?

Projects and Programs

"Research projects" are commonly perceived to be activities lasting up to five years, and usually much less, on a fairly well-prescribed problem with predetermined methodology. "Research programs" are less specific, being concerned with a general area of investigation and often lasting for longer periods which may be, as in the case of science grants, the entire working life of a research director. (The science research centres established by funding bodies have much larger financial overheads than have universities, which also conduct research supported by the same funding bodies.) Education has commonly chosen the project route, whereas the sciences, medicine, and agriculture have chosen programs as the major targets of their research funds. But Mr. A. Yates, Director of NFER, stated at the 1974 Annual NFER Conference that support was growing in education for the program approach. Several issues emerge.

1. How can "centres of strength" be selected for program support?
2. What happens to such centres when staff relocate?
3. Does sufficient trust, let alone money, exist in education for funding bodies to guarantee finance for say 10 years in support of research programs in particular centres?
4. How can a balanced combination of projects and programs be ensured?

Contracted and Independent Research

Again the issues raised by researchers tending to undertake more contracted research (usually funded by central or local government) rather than independent research (funded by a body such as the Canada Council) have been well documented in North America (e.g. Verney & Verney [1]). This was a concern also in Britain, where one person commented that "educational research politicians" are taking on more and more contracted research. One fear is that such emphasis may lure researchers away from vital independent research activities. The need to maintain scholarly independence along with a flow of research funds was deemed to be important, especially as the voice of independence may stifle this flow.

Inter-organizational Relations

Although much can be written generally about relationships between organizations involved in funding and conducting research, most of the comments provided dealt with aspects pertinent specifically to each country. Some of the general issues raised were as follows.

1. The extent of co-operation in projects/programs between different organizations is heavily influenced by political and value considerations: for example, in Germany, *inter-laender* co-operation is readily obtained in research into the problems of education of migrant children, but not with respect to comprehensive schools.
2. The common practice of using standing committees for identification of research issues may be more effective if replaced by or used in conjunction with more ad hoc committees.
3. Research organizations need to have considerable freedom, or even complete operational autonomy, from the government departments which provide their funds.
4. Government departments other than education (e.g. health) will frequently support educational research to a considerable extent.

Government interference in research was also commonly mentioned. Obviously governments can shelve unfavorable results of projects they have sponsored, and can exhibit patronage in granting funds for research on topics which have political value, e.g. on comprehensive schools in Britain and Sweden. Less obvious is the effect upon researchers of the relatively short lives of successive parliaments — projects initiated under one government may be scrapped or become the objects of less interest and/or support

of the succeeding government. Nevertheless, one view was proposed that a "sensitive" researcher can still conduct specific funded research of his/her own interest within the general framework of overall government interests.

Research policy is similarly influenced, or even controlled, by the manner in which finance for research is distributed – governments are usually aware of this. They may be less aware of the effect upon research policy and practice of their preference for use of occasional investigatory and reporting commissions as compared with institutionalization of thorough continuous research activities involving government agencies and other institutions.

The extent of integration and co-ordination of educational research activity within a nation/state/province is obviously related to factors such as the size of that political unit (population and area), its political organization, the number and competencies of its researchers, prevailing attitudes, and especially to its type of educational organization. Britain and Sweden again illustrate these relationships.

Conflicting Demands

Several sets of conflicting demands, or matters requiring a balanced approach, were presented.

At the government or funding-body level, considerations of balance among the following are important: (1) longitudinal research and short-term research; (2) research funds and development funds; (3) funds among different institutions; (4) a neat administrative research structure and diversity; (5) central co-ordination of research and local creativity; (6) research of value to administrators/politicians and research of interest to a researcher.

At the practitioner level the following demands appear: (1) time pressures vs. careful procedures; (2) research activities vs. project management; (3) statistical analysis vs. humanist interpretation.

Time Demands

Three very time-consuming activities were frequently mentioned.

Writing of R & D proposals. A quality proposal always requires a considerable preparation period. The "waste" which occurs when proposals are rejected could be partially eliminated by the obtaining of earlier indications of the possibility/probability of financial support from a funding body. This relates to the dialogue issue raised earlier.

Waiting for an approval/rejection decision. The period involved between submission and final decision for a research project can be up to a year, as the following steps are required – office procedures, internal evaluation, external evaluation, synthesis of evaluations (not always performed), suggestion of modifications, reaction by proposer, reaction by office and external assessors, funding-body decision. Some reduction in time can be achieved by telescoping steps through site visits and telephone conferences.

Writing reports. Some researchers, particularly those in research institutions, experienced difficulties in "project-overlap," as they were required to write reports, often lengthy, on a recently completed project while initiating another, and possibly even simultaneously planning a submission for a third. Funding bodies and employers should perhaps be more sensitive to the time requirements of dissemination activities.

Greater use of the above-mentioned program approach, in which funds are provided for research within a broadly defined area for a considerable period, can do much to reduce these time difficulties.

Teacher/Researcher Relationships

As in North America, relationships between teachers and researchers were commonly referred to as a difficulty in producing effective research. Teachers were perceived to have a distrust of research and to display indifference towards researchers, perhaps partly because the findings of research can reduce the confidence of teachers in their teaching procedures. Also mutual reserve can lead to avoidance. To reduce these difficulties, greater genuine involvement of teachers in identifying research needs was frequently proposed, as well as in preparing the research design and in conducting the research.

International Co-operation

In view of the increasing numbers of international conferences, publications, and research activities, some discussion of their costs and benefits seems to be desirable.

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

Two basic premises applied to this study. First, that the organization of educational research in Canada is in need of improvement. Second, that an examination of practices in other countries could yield conclusions having potential applicability and benefits to Canada. Several major issues, relating especially to finance, types of organizations, proposals, staffing, supervision, evaluation, types of research, inter-organizational relationships, and dissemination, were identified during interviews in Europe.

The underlying purpose of the investigation was to obtain information which may help in development of more viable organization of Canadian educational research activities with respect to both structure and function. Any review of these activities could consider the following approaches, which have emerged from the above elaboration of issues and from the author's experience and understanding of the current Canadian situation.

1. A variety of federal, provincial, and local bodies should fund educational research in Canada, but there should be some overall coherence in their efforts.
2. Some major separation of various types of research conducted by differ-

ent types of organizations is desirable, but the freedom and initiative of individual researchers must be preserved.
3. Considerable care needs to be exercised in initiation, assessment, and modification of research proposals. More specialized manpower is needed for these tasks.
4. The staffing of educational research activities requires re-examination, particularly with respect to secondments and the constraints placed by reliance upon short-term grants.
5. Greater use should be made of steering and advisory committees, while maintaining considerable freedom for the researchers.
6. More attention should be paid to the dissemination throughout Canada of useful information about completed or current educational research activities. The possibility of linking related activities should be continually kept in mind.
7. The possibility of establishing some large-scale educational research programs should be investigated.
8. Trends in the relative proportions of "independent" and "contracted" research should be reviewed continually, and the influence of governments in this area should be monitored.

As a guide for future discussion, attention could be given to an identification of the main research functions to be conducted by different organizations, such as is suggested by the following brief outline.

Federal level. The educational subcommittee of the proposed Human Studies Research Council (HSRC) could (1) fund educational research proposed by individuals, groups, or the HSRC, (2) survey the field of educational research in Canada (in conjunction with CSSE and CEA), and produce a Research Register and other publications, (3) encourage inter-organizational co-operation, and (4) establish international contacts. The involvement of federal departments would probably be mainly with contracted and in-house research. At present the Canadian Education Association is publicizing the research efforts of local school districts and conducting related seminars. The contribution of CSSE at the federal level requires detailed discussion. (Other bodies such as the Canadian Teachers Federation also conduct educational research at the federal level.)

Provincial level. The establishment of provincial Educational Research Councils, having multi-organizational representation, employed and/or seconded staff, and funds provided by the Department of Education, seems desirable. Such councils could (1) identify major research problems of interest within the province and then initiate appropriate activities, (2) fund educational research proposed by individuals and groups, (3) collaborate with the federal Human Studies Research Council, and (4) monitor research conducted elsewhere. Provincial departments of education need to conduct policy-related research as well as statistical surveys related to both resource allocation and needs of school systems. Depending upon

factors such as the population size and traditions, some combination of the Educational Research Council and the Department of Education may be preferred. As mentioned above, the establishment of joint committees of politicians (including trustees), administrators, and researchers could have benefit. The research roles of teachers' associations, trustees' associations, and research institutes appear to need clarification.

School district level. The research divisions of the larger local school districts should (1) co-ordinate all educational research involving their personnel, (2) conduct policy-related research as well as statistical surveys related to both resource allocation and needs of schools, (3) fund research related to problems of the school district, (4) fund "action research" conducted by teachers, (5) encourage the interaction of teachers and researchers, and (6) ascertain the relevance of research findings to their district and initiate appropriate developmental activity.

Faculties of education. A balanced mixture of "independent" and "contracted" research should be conducted by university staff. In order to enable some research projects to be initiated, faculties of education should have discretionary research funds at their disposal, possibly of the order of $500 per staff member.

Several of the ideas presented above were prompted by the writing of and discussions with Professor W. Taylor, Director of the Institute of Education, University of London. A closing quotation from one of his recent articles (2) is appropriate: "If research, development, dissemination, implementation, administration and policy making are mutually to benefit one another, the links between them have to be thought out and organized with greater care than has been the case in the past."

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