

## Chapter 14

### Research-based Policy-Making: The Need for a Long-term Perspective

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*Policy makers often hunt for evidence-based educational research that can prove which educational practices are superior to others. In this chapter, Johnny Nilsson from Sweden gives a few examples which show that this process is possible and profitable, but difficult, and usually needs to be carried out over the long term.*

In Sweden the use of empirical research in relation to policy-making has a long history. In several parts of that history empirical research has had the character of evidence-based research with an impact on the process of policy-making. There seem to be at least six different ways in which evidence-based policy research may have an impact. It can:

- create more clear illustrations of the policy in use;
- question and challenge the dominant policy;
- act as a catalyst;
- control how well the policy is implemented;
- legitimate the policy;
- construct policy.

The Swedish way to use research as a basis of policy-making processes for education has changed over the years. During the period between 1940s and the early years of the 1990s empirical research was used as an integrated part of the work of state commissions. For instance within the experimentation with a new comprehensive school system carried out during the 1950s municipalities were invited to shape new solutions on the organisation of schools and empirical research followed the effects of the different ways to organise schools and classes. Municipalities were invited again during the mid 1980s to create solutions on the way upper secondary schools could be arranged to have larger effects. Researchers followed the new solutions, reported the findings and new policies for the upper secondary schools were created. In earlier years state commissions worked through the problems of the educational system in depth, taking years to study the problems and to deliver solution proposals.

## Imbalance between the tempo of policy-making and of research

As the tempo of the political processes have risen during the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the old model of slow working state commissions has been left. Today state commissions seldom work for periods longer than a year. Although work in these commissions usually is based on a solid research ground, the commissions nowadays seldom initiate research. More efforts within the education system are spent on evaluations where the experiences of new solutions gradually are followed leading to step-by-step policy changes. This has been the aspiration of the social democratic governments of Sweden that I worked for. But to use empirical findings produced as evaluations of policies that have already been practiced may face many difficulties. An example from the last years may illuminate this.

In the mid-1990s the social democratic government which had replaced a coalition government in 1994 took an adult education initiative. Originally it was not very much based on empirical research. The overarching goal of the incoming social-democratic government was to reduce unemployment by half. Unemployment was at unprecedentedly high levels at the time. And the adult education initiative was a cornerstone of the government's programme to reduce unemployment.

The process started in October 1995 with the so-called Growth Bill where an education initiative was announced. At the same time the Commission for the Promotion of Adult Education working at the time was asked to come up with suggestions for the contents of an initiative to be more fully presented in Spring 1996. In the meantime two government bills specified more clearly the training and the number of training slots that were to be financed. To start with 100 000 training slots were to be provided. In the Budget Bill for 1997 the accompanying study grant system was introduced and the Economic Spring Bill of 1997 opened up for even more study seats to be provided (up to 140 000).

There were no clear evaluations underpinning these decisions. There were no evaluations of the effects of municipal adult education made at that time. There were, however, some indications that municipal adult education was inefficient and had to be renewed. Labour market training at the high levels now operated was thought not possible to expand further. To the general arguments in favour of an education initiative belonged: that Sweden should compete with high skill levels not low wages; that education would increase the productivity and wages of low skilled individuals; and that forecasts showed an increasing demand for more highly skilled labour.

However, even before the programme started to be implemented, in July 1997, the idea came up that the adult education initiative was to be accompanied by evaluations. The first traces of these evaluations appear first in the Bills presented in 1999. This may not be surprising given that it was decided to ask the sitting Commission for the Promotion of Adult Education to initiate independent evaluations. In May 1997 the Commission received the instructions and the budget for the independent evaluations. A tender process was concluded in 1997. Therefore in March 1998, the Commission could only report to the Government about the planning of evaluation. A second report was produced in March 1999 and the Commission's final report in March 2000. They contained evaluations results but, of course, the labour market effects for the participants were still rudimentary. This was due among other things to the fact that many individuals continued to higher education after the adult education initiative. The evaluation programme was therefore not of much use even when the political conclusions were to be drawn from the adult education initiative. The programme was a five-year programme

and ended in 2002. Well in advance the stakeholders had to be informed as to what would happen after the programme. That was communicated in February 2001 (Bill 2000/01:72).

However, the up-coming evaluations are mentioned innumerable times in the Bills during the period. There was a genuine interest to learn from the evaluations and some disappointment that results were so slow to show up. There was some frustration as to the many aspects to the evaluation of this huge programme – its implementation and macro- and microeconomic effects for the individuals, the schools, the teachers, the local employment offices and labour markets, the municipalities, etc. The interest in evaluations could also have been motivated by an expectation that they would provide justifications for the programme and by this time evaluations had more or less become a political must. The example shows that there are many obstacles to using empirical policy research in such a way that it can feed back important findings that can be used in new adjustments of policy. Although you might have high ambitions to use empirical research as a basis for the policy making process, the tempo of policy-making and the tempo of empirical research are not adjusted to each other. Policy work needs long term empirical research that is ongoing along with all the quick moves that modern politics require.

## The long-term perspective

Today comparative research is part of the policy landscape. The OECD-driven PISA countries face challenges that are new, as the quality of the internal education is seen in the light of the quality in other countries. The political debate on what development steps need to be taken in the federal state of Germany, with demands on shared standards for the schools in some subjects, might be the most obvious contemporary example. The time that it takes to move from the catalytic moment to a new and stable practice that may come out of such a political process is usually rather stretched out, as the example given above on the adult education initiative shows.

The long term engagement that needs to be a basic feature of the political system can be found in another Swedish example of evidence-based policy research. In the 1970s a state committee reviewed the Swedish system. Among other activities the committee made experiments where a dozen schools were trusted to use their resources on basis of local decisions instead of centrally taken decisions, which were the common pattern at that time. A scientific study (Kilborn and Lundgren, 1974) was linked to this experiment in which the experiences of the schools were described and interpreted. One of the main proposals of the committee argued for more autonomy in decision-making of the local school and an overall decentralisation of the whole educational system in Sweden. The study that followed the experiment pointed at the importance of school plans linked to local evaluation as important conditions if the decentralisation strategy were to be put into practice. When the government later on worked out proposals based on the committee work in the end of the 1970s it proposed that each school had to produce a local working plan and to evaluate its own efforts once a year. As was shown by a follow-up study (Ekholm (1987) of these decisions carried out during 1980-1985, they were only partially implemented in local schools during the first five years after the political decision.

Since 1991 the National Agency for Education of Sweden (NAE) carries out national evaluations of the school system, used by policy makers at the national level. During the 1990s this agency showed that the responsible bodies – the Swedish *kommuns* and their schools – still did not succeed very well in linking local school plans with local

evaluation work. The government used this information and to require the schools to make local evaluation based on local working plans in 1997. When new investigations were made in 2001 by the NAE (2003), the policy was found to be almost fully implemented among the schools. The experience of the Swedish system shows that it may take as long as a quarter of a century to go from an evidence-based policy initiative to an institutionalised stage in schools.

Some of the politically initiated changes that occur in a society are accompanied by strong streams of argumentation. At the moment when decisions are to be taken sometimes veritable volcanic eruptions of arguments break out. Ideas are confronted with counter ideas as well as with threatening future visions from different participants. Sometimes evidence-based research enters the eruptive situation using a calmer and sober tune by reminding the fighting parties about what really is known and about what is not known. In Sweden there have been recent examples of this use of evidence-based research in the political debate about “free standing schools”, as charter schools are called in the Swedish context. Evidence has been presented that these schools cause some social segregation, achieve a little better results in school subjects, and reach equal results in social development variables compared to ordinary schools driven by the Swedish *kommuns* (Myrberg, 2006). In the inflamed debate, the “free standing” schools seem to cause a catastrophic rise in social segregation as seen by the opponents of this idea. Many of the “free standing” schools themselves have argued that they achieve much better results than other schools both in school subjects and on social development variables. Empirical studies produce evidence that shows that these sayings are false and that the actual picture indicates no change in the policy of “free standing” schools. The existence of this kind of schools is authorised by the actual research.

### **Interpretations of research findings are important**

The dream of the use of evidence-based policy research is that the research will present solutions to problems that exist. Examples of when this kind of dream has been used as a ground for actions can be found. The political efforts to use research as the true basis for policy recommendations in the United States (*What Works* published in the 1980s) is such an example. Another example is the strong belief of some educational policy makers in several countries on the findings of the early research on effective schools and how these findings could be copied in less effective schools. Neither the use of selected theses taken from educational research nor the use of findings from studies of specific effective schools have been a success. The use of the evidence that research presents usually needs to be transformed several times before the research results can be transformed into policy. Policy makers seem to hunt for evidence-based educational research that can prove educational practices that are superior to others. Educational research shows that there are many successful practices and that the success to a large extent depends on the context in which different methods are used, and as such turning these context dependent findings into policy demands interpretation. Some of the examples given in this paper show that this process is possible and profitable, but difficult, and usually needs to be carried out over the long term.

To summarise, I think that we can gain a lot from creating a good cooperative climate between systematic research and politics. I see that we can develop the relations between researchers and politicians in many productive ways. Of course politicians cannot rely too much on research, at least not in the short term, as I have seen many research reports that have had little value for politicians. The reports may have been interesting, but they have

been presented at the wrong time. To a large extent, politics is a question of timing. Proposals need to be presented when the time is ripe for them and many research products are presented much too late to fit into the needs of modern politics. They are more slow afterthoughts than vital challenges.

In the field of education I see many areas where research work could be of help to the political process. In Sweden, the numerous multicultural schools that we have would be such an example. Why is it that school results are lower for all categories of students in Malmö schools with more than 50% of the school population coming from another country, while students of all categories succeed much better in schools in Lund 25km away where the proportion of migrants is less than 20%? Why are students coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds less successful in some cities compared to other cities? When we get researchers to illuminate questions like these, they will feed politicians with important material.

Under some circumstances, it would be better for researchers that are interested in the educational field to behave more like researchers in the field of national economics. Educational researchers are often too occupied with pedagogical and didactical questions that mainly are of interest to the professions working at school. Few of them concentrate on problems that deal with the management and steering of education. Relevant questions would be, for example: how is the governing process practiced? Who is really influencing decisions that are taken? In what way do national and local political decisions about education cooperate or conflict? In what way do political decisions reach the every day life of teachers and students? Educational researchers need to show an interest in structures and government in the same way that researchers of national economics do. If they do not, someone else will play this role. Moreover, I have seen too many examples of national economic researchers that have acted as amateurs within the field of education. The result does not raise the faith in the kind of research that these researchers do, and does a disservice to education.

One way to create a climate where we can get more educational researchers to contribute politically useful research would be to support more frequent interaction between researchers and politicians. As a politician I look forward to analysing questions that jump up on the political agenda together with researchers in a regular way. To get a state-of-the-art report from researchers about actualities that we as politicians wrestle with, could probably help the researchers to find new blind spots that could lead to more research. In the Swedish context, we have chances to create such regular exchanges between politicians and researchers when we start to use our council for educational research in a more active way. I look forward to doing so in the future.

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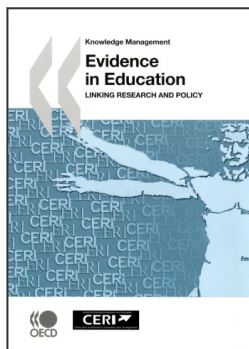
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