

Perspectives on Policy Formation*

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ABSTRACT

Most of the rhetoric about the relationship between policy formation and research is rooted in the familiar rational model.¹ But as is so often the case in human affairs, our deeds deny our discourse.² At best, the decision process can lay claim to only limited rationality.

This paper seeks to offer at least a partial explanation for this phenomenon and to suggest some ways of improving the linkage between research and policy formation. To achieve this two-fold purpose three theories accounting for the non-utilization of research will be noted and followed by a brief description of certain ways in which administrators seem to use research. Then two major situational factors which influence our use pattern will be elaborated. Finally, some implications will be derived for future action within an increasingly political framework. Throughout, the usual litany about the short-comings of educational research will be avoided.³

The perspective for these observations is that of an administrator. Thus, their source is primarily experience and intuition, buttressed wherever possible by the wisdom to be found in the professional literature.

RESUME

Perspectives sur la formation de politique: un point de vue d'administrateur

La rhétorique à l'égard des rapports entre la formation de politique et les recherches trouve ses origines dans le modèle familier du rationnel. Toutefois, comme il est souvent le cas dans les affaires humaines, nos gestes contredisent notre discours. Au mieux, le processus de prise de décision ne peut s'avérer que d'une rationalité restreinte.

C'est l'objectif de cette étude de proposer au moins une explication partielle de ce phénomène et de suggérer quelques moyens pour resserrer les liens entre les recherches et la formation de politique. Pour atteindre ce double objectif, trois théories, rendant

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compte de la "non-utilisation" de recherches, seront signalées et suivies d'une brève description de la mise en valeur des recherches chez certains administrateurs. Par la suite, s'élaboreront deux facteurs clés de situation qui influent sur notre modèle. Finalement, nous tirons certaines implications qui indiquent des démarches futures à l'intérieur d'un cadre politique toujours plus poussé. Nous évitons systématiquement la récitation de la même litanie critiquant les défauts des recherches pédagogiques.

La perspective pour ces observations est celle d'un administrateur. La source de cette étude est alors principalement l'expérience et l'intuition soutenues, où cela s'avère possible, par la sagesse puisée dans la littérature professionnelle.

Three Theories of Non-Utilization

Prevailing theories or viewpoints accounting for the non-utilization of research in policy formation may be classified as follows: the *Knowledge-Specific*, the *Two-Communities* and the *Policy Maker-Constraint*.⁴

The *Knowledge-Specific* theories contend that the non-utilization of research is a consequence of the narrowness or limitations of the kind of information provided by the research itself, the research techniques employed and the personal characteristics of the researchers. The proposed solutions call for a multi-disciplinary approach to research, with a diversity of methodologies and findings interpreted in the light of practical considerations.⁵

By contrast, the *Two-Communities* theories perceive non-utilization as a function of the different and often conflicting values, reward systems and languages of the researcher and the policy maker. The proposed solutions lie in making research and researchers an integral part of the policy making process, building mutual trust, confidence and empathy, and generally improving the linking mechanism.⁶

Whereas, the *Policy Maker-Constraint* theories explain the non-utilization of research in terms of the conditions or constraints under which policy is formulated. Information is frequently required faster than researchers can respond,⁷ and policy makers usually have to consider variables outside the traditional realm of research, including political feasibility. The proposed solutions stress greater recognition of social and political variables by researchers,⁸ and the production of more timely research.

We have all likely had occasion to explain the *policy-research disparity* in terms of each of these three so-called theories or their variants. Insofar as such explanations give rise to subsequent changes in process they are quite valuable. For they direct us toward greater accommodation of important situational and political considerations in policy research as well as policy formation.

Use of Research

The need for this accommodation or adjustment in strategy becomes even more apparent when one looks at how research seems to be used by administrators. Consider, for example, the findings of a recent study which asked educational administrators in government to indicate the value or impact of social science research on their work.⁹ The rank order of the uses cited, on a high to low basis, was: (1) sensitizing policy makers to social needs,

(2) evaluating existing programs, (3) structuring alternative policies, (4) implementing programs, (5) justifying policy decisions, and (6) choosing among policy alternatives. Note that providing a basis for choosing among policy alternatives, central to the rational model, falls at the bottom of the list, even below that of research which serves to justify policy decisions which have already been made.

Consider also the increasing tendency for research to be used as a means of *containment* on the implementation of further change, especially in a political context of mixed commitment and fiscal restraint. The many studies of day-care and educational services for young children are illustrative. Observe too the widespread use of research as *an instrument of power and political positioning* – by administrators as well as politicians. For example, research may serve as nothing more than a symbolic gesture that something is being done or as a means of buying time.¹⁰ A number of the activities spawned in response to the back-to-basics controversy probably fall in this category.

Obviously, research is being used in policy formation. But it is often being used in ways which fall outside what might be called the traditional *problem-solving image* – the process in which a problem is defined, alternative courses of action are identified, and goals are set; with research serving to clarify the problem, provide information on alternatives and evaluate outcomes.¹¹

Factors Influencing Use

What factors and conditions account for the prevalent existence of uses of research in policy formation which lie outside the traditional image and conventional model? Let me suggest two which we seem to overlook although they may be pervasive.

1. *Time in Office.* I believe your own introspection will corroborate that the manner in which research is sought and used is partly a function of timing in the life of an administration.¹² The utilization of research by a newly-elected government or board, or by a newly-appointed minister, deputy minister, superintendent or president, differs considerably from the utilization by policy makers who have held office for some time. The potential for change is frequently the greatest at the beginning of a term when interests and powers are being realigned, the nature of the mandate is undergoing refinement and articulation, and there are expectations for change. Communication processes and operational procedures are relatively free and open, and under review. It is at that time that I see research sought and used more in accordance with the traditional image and conventional model. For there is a reliance by the newly-elected or appointed individual on the experienced administrator and researcher to identify and clarify the nature of the issues and of the available options.¹³ And the new leader's need for information is readily acknowledged, and his desire to do something different or memorable virtually uncontrollable. Thus, the oft-referred to *honeymoon* period can be applied to both the administrator and the researcher. The actions taken in the early years of the Progressive Conservative government in Alberta on the Report of the Commission on Educational Planning leading to the establishment of ACCESS, the abolition of the Universities Commission and the Colleges Commission, and the extension of opportunities in further education attest to this.¹⁴

Contrast this situation with that later in the life of an administration when there has

been a freezing of interests and powers, and perhaps a splintering of support. The mandate may no longer be as clear. Conditions of uncertainty give rise to the use of research for containment of policy thrusts. The requirements of political feasibility become more acute and the use of research for maintaining power and position becomes more apparent. It is at this time that I see research used increasingly for purposes which do not coincide with our professional rhetoric. It is at this time too that I see a lowering of the reliance by the policy maker on research findings with a corresponding willingness to depend upon his own understanding, intuition and taking of the public pulse. This condition is evident, for example, in some of more recent activities by the Alberta government on foreign student fees.

For purposes of generalization, the *time-based* distinction I have drawn should be viewed as being subject to the overriding influence of the prevailing and broader political climate, and the specific mandate and orientation of the policy makers concerned.¹⁵ For example, the extent to which a rational mode for research utilization is manifested may be suppressed if a government or board is elected — or indeed an administrator appointed — on a mandate for containment.

One further qualification and suggestion seems warranted. While these observations are made on the basis of my experience, with some support in the literature, a promising avenue for study might be an examination, in a variety of settings, of the manner in which research is sought and used during the life of an administration.

2. *Orientation to Research.* While situational factors of the kind just described seem to affect the purpose or end-use of research, there is evidence that each administrator has a personal orientation to research. By *orientation to research* I mean the specific ways in which an administrator regards research — his point of view, perspective or outlook concerning its value and use.¹⁶ It is the foundation of a very critical administrative skill — the analysis of expertise or the management of knowledge.¹⁷

A recent investigation discerned that the manner in which policy makers process information appears to have different consequences in determining the way in which knowledge is used in policy formation.¹⁸ A distinction was drawn between the gathering, processing and analysis of information in the diagnosis of a problem — the *internal* logic of the problem — and information concerned with the political, value-based, ideological, administrative and economic considerations — the *external* logic of the problem. It was found that most administrators had one of three basic orientations: (1) a *clinical* orientation in which there was an appreciation of both internal and external logic, (2) an *academic* orientation in which the administrator gives primary attention to the diagnosis or internal logic of the problem, or (3) an *advocacy* orientation wherein the external logic or information concerning political and social ramifications was emphasized. It was found that those with a clinical orientation were the most frequent users of research information — that is, utilization was most likely to occur when the decision-making orientation of the administrator is characterized by a concern for diagnosis *and* for political and social factors. The study also found that the most frequent users of research tended to have a sensitivity to contemporary social events and a desire for social reform. Indeed, they tended to treat social science information very much like the daily news with a heavier reliance on soft or non-research based knowledge than on hard or research-based information.

In addition to different orientations among administrators, there is the different

orientation between researchers and administrators noted in the *Two-Communities* theories referred to earlier. This same investigation observed that the *Two-Communities* theories, rather than the *Knowledge-Specific* or *Policy Maker-Constraint* theories, provided the major explanation for the non-utilization of policy research.¹⁹

Some Implications

Let me now turn to a few of the implications for future action arising from the point-of-view that I have attempted to express.

1. *Increased Use of a Political Model.* As research begins to mix with policy the limitations of the rational model become apparent. Policies often stem from ill-defined goals, alternatives are frequently ignored, superior choices tend to give way to the acceptable, and careful data analyses are displaced by expedient interpretations. In other words, the neat logic of rationality may rarely surface in policy-making in the *real* world. Instead policy is apt to emerge from the interaction of groups and interests in a power relationship — the give-and-take that is politics. Within this political model,²⁰ policy formation is a process of conflict management and consensus building. In these circumstances the degree of impact of the researcher is dependent, in large measure, upon his willingness to bargain and to compromise as well as his tolerance for the ambiguity — the *muddling through* — which typically characterizes the political process. He has to learn the rules of the *bargaining game* and seek to work with them.²¹ But he should never lose sight of the primary reason for his work which is to aid the cause of rationality in the educational enterprise.

2. *Expanded View of the Role of Research.* It is evident that we must expand and refine our view of the role of research in policy formation. We must start with the recognition that the problem-solving image of policy formation is probably a myth²² in that one seldom begins with an articulated and self-evident problem, and discrete decisions at a fixed point in time are rarely made by policy makers working together to solve that problem. Our concept of the role of research must embrace both the frequently ill-defined period in which the problem is identified and the recognition that decisions are made over time²³ by policy makers located in different parts of the bureaucratic organization whose view of the problem may differ.²⁴ Hence, the functions of policy research ought to include the identification of problems as well as the analysis of possible solutions and the evaluation of outcomes. An additional inclusion should be its use as a means by which a common view of the nature of the problem can be communicated to members of the organization.

Against this background, it is easy to understand why the administrators in the study on the uses of research described earlier considered that the most highly valued purpose of research was that of *sensitizing policy makers to social needs*, and that the most frequent users of research tended to treat information very much as they do the daily news. Indeed it may not be stretching it to suggest — as some writers have — that policy research may, in fact, be simply one means of contributing to a *general discourse* on the nature of society and its current and potential problems.²⁵ In any event, it is apparent that we should have heightened expectations for research which serves to identify and illuminate problems, particularly those which may lie ahead.²⁶

3. *Improved Understanding of Environment.* A situational-political perspective has

certain direct implications for the administrator. He should be aware of his own particular orientation to research and that of others with whom he works. Also, the administrator must be sensitive to the political climate and know when traditional research approaches and findings alone do not provide a sufficient guide for policy decisions. Other interesting and related questions arise. For example: To what extent can an orientation to research be changed? What are the implications for the deployment of administrators and researchers if the nature and purpose of research utilization changes during the life of an administration? However, these must be explored at another time.

A Summary Observation

The key message that I have tried to convey is that situational factors and personal orientations are often decisive in determining the relationship between policy formation and research. To the extent that we are able to accommodate them and work within a political framework, we shall be instrumental in helping to influence the shape of things to come in Canadian education.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. An outline of the rational model is given by Crowson, Robert L. "Educational Planning and Models of Decision-making" ERIC ED 131 584; and its linkage with change is described by Paul, Douglas A. "Change Processes at the Elementary, Secondary and Post-Secondary Levels of Education" in Nash, Nicholas and Jack Culbertson (eds.) *Linking Processes in Educational Improvement*. Columbus. UCEA. 1977. pp. 1-36. The large growth industry developed in several countries based on this model is noted by K.B. Stark. "Mirror, Mirror . . . Reality for the Researcher" *American Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 12, No. 3, Summer 1975. p. 325.
2. That research is "one of the weakest areas of the Canadian educational system" was asserted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Review of National Policies for Education: Canada*. Paris. OECD. 1976 p. 101. It was observed by Wholey, Joseph S. et al. *Federal Educational Policy: Analyzing the Effects of Public Programs*. Washington, D.C. The Urban Institute. 1970. that "the recent literature is unanimous in announcing the general failure of evaluation to affect decision-making in a significant way" (p. 46); and Cohen, David K. and Michael S. Garet. "Reforming Educational Policy with Applied Social Research" *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1, February 1975. Note that "there is little evidence to indicate that government planning offices have succeeded in linking social research and decision-making" (p. 19).
3. Others have already documented the shortcomings of research. See Cohen and Garet. *op. cit.*, and Start. *op. cit.*, for a general review of policy research in education; Duke, W.R. "Developmental Research in Education: Retrospect and Prospect" *Education Canada*. Vol. 17, Spring 1977. pp. 12-16, for an analysis of nine defects of developmental research in education; Kaagan, Stephen S. and Janice J. Weinman. "Managing Policy Development in Public Service Organizations" *Educational Planning*. Vol. 3, No. 1, May 1976. pp. 58-68, for a review of inadequacies of policy research in public service organizations; Weiss, Carol. "Policy Research in the University: Practical Aid or Academic Exercise?" *Policy Sciences Journal*. Vol. 4, No. 3, Spring 1976. pp. 224-228, for deficiencies of research in universities; Dye, Thomas R. *Policy Analysis*. The University of Alabama Press. 1976. pp. 97-98, for a discussion of the weaknesses of policy research by government agencies; and Dror, Yehezkel. *Public Policy-Making Reexamined*. San Francisco. Chandler Publishing Company. pp. 225-240.
4. The "theories" of nonutilization have been classified in this manner by Caplan, Nathan, Andrea Morrison, and Russell Stambaugh. *The Use of Social Science Knowledge in Policy Decisions at the National Level*. Ann Arbor, Michigan. The University of Michigan. 1975. pp. x - xi.
5. Kaagan and Weinman. *op. cit.* pp. 64-67.

7 Perspectives on Policy Formulation

6. *Ibid.* p. 68.
7. Duke. *op. cit.* p. 14, and Start. *op. cit.* pp. 326-327.
8. Kaagan and Weinman. *op. cit.* pp. 64-67.
9. Caplan *et al. op. cit.* Caplan and his colleagues at the Center for Research on Utilization of Scientific Knowledge interviewed 204 persons at the upper levels of the executive branch, including administrators concerned with preschool, primary, secondary and higher education.
10. For an elaboration of these uses see Rein, Martin and Sheldon H. White. "Policy Research: Belief and Doubt" *Policy Analysis*. Vol. 3. No. 2. Spring 1977. pp. 239-271.
11. *Ibid.* p. 249
12. A "life-cycle" phenomenon in institutions and organizations has been observed by Heron, Peter R. "The Development of Educational Bureaucracies" *Canadian Administrator*. Vol. 12. No. 4. January, 1973, pp. 17-20. Similarly, a "natural history" of organizations is postulated by Stewart, James H. "Factors Accounting for Goal Effectiveness: A Longitudinal Study" in Spray, Lee S. (ed.) *Organizational Effectiveness*. Kent. Comparative Administration Research Institute, Kent State University. 1976. pp. 109-121.
13. Caplan, Nathan. "Factors Associated with Knowledge Use Among Federal Executives" *Policy Sciences Journal*. Vol. 4, No. 3, Spring 1976. p. 231.
14. Alberta Government, *A Choice of Futures*. (Report of the Commission on Educational Planning) Edmonton. Queen's Printer, 1972.
15. An account of the various environmental impacts on educational policy is given by Ratsoy, Eugene W. "Policy Making in Educational Organizations" *The Canadian Administrator*. Vol. XVI, No. 3, December 1976. Ratsoy employed a framework of political, legal, economic, demographic, ecological, cultural, social, and technological conditions suggested by Hall, Richard H. *Organizations: Structure and Process*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1972. Chapter 10.
16. A conceptualization of "orientation" is provided by Van Manen, Max. "Linking Ways of Knowing with Way of Being Practical" *Curriculum Inquiry*. Vol. 6, No. 3, 1977. p. 211.
17. Mareh, James G. "Analytical Skills and the University Training of Educational Administrators" *Journal of Educational Administration*. Vol. 12, No. 1, March, 1974. pp. 28-31.
18. Caplan. *op. cit.* pp. 229-230.
19. Caplan *et al. op. cit.* pp. 26-34.
20. See Crowson. *op. cit.* pp. 13-16 for further elaboration.
21. A practical illustration is provided by McDonald, Frederick, J. "Designing Research for Policy Making" Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Sixtieth. San Francisco. April 19-23, 1976. ERIC ED 128 370. McDonald argued that the failure to understand the political nature of policy making leads to irrelevant research. He illustrated with the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study.
22. A cogent argument for this position is presented by Rein and White. *op. cit.* pp. 261-266.
23. Cohen and Garet. *op. cit.* pp. 20-21 challenge the view that policy consists of discrete decisions. They contend that a policy "might be described as a grand story: a large and loose set of ideas about how society works, why it goes wrong and how it can be set right." (p. 21).
24. The impact of internal negotiations within an organization is illustrated by Stapleton, John J. "The Department of Education as a Policy-Maker: The Case of the Credit System in Ontario" in Wallin, J.H.A. (ed.) *The Politics of Canadian Education*. Fourth Yearbook 1977, CSSE, pp. 39-45.
25. Cohen and Garet. *op. cit.* pp. 42-43.
26. Henshel, R.L. (ed.). "The Lamontagne Survey of Futures Studies" *Futures Canada*. (Bulletin of the Canadian Association for Futures Studies) Vol. 1. No. 4. 1977. pp. 1-10.

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