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**EDUCATIONNAL
DOCUMENTATION AND ITS
CONTRIBUTION TO
EDUCATIONAL POLICY**

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Section for Educational Research and Documentation
of the Council of Europe



Índice

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1. The starting point

Educational documentation has been collected ever since the 19th century. At first it concerned mainly information about the schools, colleges and universities in the country as well as statistical data about the number of teachers in the different fields, the number of pupils and students, the size of classes, the curricula and study courses offered, the subjects taken, the rate of success at examinations, etc. Educational authorities of all kinds, at local, regional or national level, needed this type of information to plan and monitor their policy and activities. Collection and updating of the data usually was a matter of some unit within the educational authorities in question. Separate regional or national documentation centres emerged only in the 20th century.

Only with growing European and international co-operation the educational authorities began to take an interest also in similar data from other countries.

In addition teacher training institutions and their staff and students as well as educational research workers have always needed information about different aspects of educational science, for instance new teaching and learning methods, interesting new approaches and theories, reform proposals, results of the evaluation of a given situation or reform, etc. This type of information was to be found in national or university or college libraries and also in the libraries of certain institutes.

In the case of comparative educational research documentation about the situation in other countries or about the theories and opinions of colleagues abroad had always been of interest and had therefore been collected.

2. Developments after the 1920s

Since the 1920s educational research and in particular comparative research developed rapidly as a result of mass general and – after 1945 – also mass higher education. Researchers and – to a growing extent – also politicians needed reliable information of good quality which was not always available. In the second half of the 20th century many new documentation centres emerged at regional and national level. Gradually they were all forced to extend the type and scope of the data to be collected.

Many issues of educational policy were highly controversial and Ministries of Education and other educational institutions were under strong pressure, also from the public and the media, to proceed to educational reforms. Therefore they urgently requested policy-relevant information about experience in their own as well as in other countries, concerning for instance

- the type and extent of preschool education;
- the age of schooling (with 5 or 6 or 7 years);
- the length of primary school education (4, 5 or 6 years);
- measures against functional illiteracy;

- the moment when best to start with foreign language teaching or even bilingual schooling;
- patterns of school organisation (comprehensive schools versus different types of schools to be offered in parallel);
- the usefulness of maintaining classical language teaching such as Latin;
- curriculum reform in various subjects (e.g. the new mathematics);
- success in using the new information technologies in teaching and learning;
- sex stereotyping in school education and measures to promote girls' interest in science and technology (co-education versus separate schools or extra support for girls);
- education of children from immigrant families not yet mastering the country language;
- measures taken against high drop-out rates;
- selection criteria for university entrance;
- measures to cope with mass higher education (e.g. diversification);
- the usefulness of vocationally-oriented short-cycle higher education;
- possibilities of student or teacher exchange and study abroad;
- professional and academic recognition of qualifications (diplomas and degrees) abroad;
- methods of teacher education and in-service training of teachers, etc. etc.

Their own services as well as specialised documentation centres in the country did their best to collect this information but found it extremely difficult in view of the enormous variety of educational systems in Europe. At present there are 49 countries in Europe but only a person from a highly centralised country such as France might naively believe that this means 49 school systems. In reality, considering for example the Spanish autonomous regions, the 16 German Länder or the 24 Swiss Cantons, there exist approximately 120 different school systems.

3. Educational documentation at European level

As soon as international and/or European organisations took an interest in the development of education for the sake of economic prosperity and mobility of manpower information needs were felt also at European and international level. The rapid development of educational research, sometimes inspired by the student revolution of May 1968, also contributed to this phenomenon. Educational research institutions emerged like mushrooms after a period of warm rain. In 1965 the Council of Europe was the first organisation to set up a highly appreciated Documentation Centre for Education in Europe under the competent responsibility of Bernhard von Mutius and thereafter of Wilson Barrett. The Centre was to serve three types of customers :

- staff members of the Council of Europe involved in discussing and shaping European educational policy;
- Ministries of Education in the member states as well as other educational authorities, for instance at regional or local level;
- All groups interested in educational reforms : trade unions, employers, associations of teachers, parents, students and pupils, educational research centres and individual research workers, comparative educationalists, and teachers or students.

After considerable efforts the Council of Europe managed to set up a European Documentation and Information System for Education (EUDISED) as a computerised database of abstracts of educational research projects with titles in English and French and indexed with keywords of a multilingual thesaurus of descriptors in 18 languages.

Unfortunately the Documentation Centre was closed and EUDISED came to an end in 1998 as a result of budgetary cuts.

The European Community (now called the European Union, EU) started building up educational documentation in 1975 by creating Eurydice, a highly professional documentation and information system and network for educational policy in the member states. In co-operation with the Council of Europe the EUDISED Thesaurus now called European Education Thesaurus (Thésaurus Européen de l'Éducation, TEE) became a joint venture. After the Council of Europe had to give up its activities in educational research Eurydice turned the Thesaurus into a Thesaurus for Education Systems in Europe (TESE) – as far as I am informed - , filtering out those descriptors which they needed to inform policy-makers in the member states. I have been told that the English version is available on the website of Eurydice. I also heard that it is planned to make TESE available in 14 languages. According to my information Eurydice is in the process of developing the necessary software for members of its Working Group on Linguistic Equivalents. The TEE was still used for indexing the EURYBASE database of Eurydice but will now be replaced by TESE. TEE is also still used for indexing the Perine Database (short descriptions of national homepages concerning educational research organisations).

UNESCO and OECD in Paris followed the trend and also expanded their activities in the field of educational documentation. Under the auspices of UNESCO an Information Centre for the Further Education of Teachers was set up at the Charles University in Prague for instance. OECD produced kilos of substantial educational documentation – but sometimes slightly biased because often compiled with an US American or Nordic point of view in mind.

Numerous international nongovernmental organisations (e.g. of trade unions, teachers, parents, etc.) and even the Churches followed these examples and built up educational documentation services meant to support their claims for certain innovations in education.

4. Problems to overcome

In order to provide politicians and decision-makers of all kind as well as the research community and the interested public with reliable information on educational developments enormous problems had to be overcome.

4.1 Linguistic diversity

The original sources of information are written in a variety of languages, sometimes in languages not widely spoken such as Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Estonian, Finnish, Icelandic, Hungarian, Latvian or Lithuanian. In many cases it is almost impossible to have texts in these languages translated into English, French, Spanish, German or Italian either because no funds or no qualified translators are available for this purpose.

Those in policy or interested circles needing information do not always sufficiently master foreign languages, sometimes not even English or French, the two official languages of the Council of Europe.

4.2 Terminology

There was also an enormous problem of terminology. One and the same term might mean different things in different countries. For instance primary education covered the age group 6 – 10/12 in Western Europe and 6 – 14/15 in Eastern Europe. Democratisation of education was understood in some countries to mean open access to education for all groups of society

Whereas in other countries it meant greater participation of teachers, parents, students and pupils in decision-making. In the Anglosaxon context a Bachelor's degree is the first university qualification while in France the "Baccalauréat" means the final upper secondary school leaving certificate and in Spain "Bachillerato" also refers to school education. In Austria and Germany in every day language any school or university teacher, even a young sports teacher of 25, is called professor, whereas in other countries this term is restricted to chair holders at the university. Even the denominations of certain types of schools or colleges may be misleading. The German Realschule for instance is a kind of secondary modern or middle school and not to be interpreted as a real school as opposed to a utopian school. And the Italian scuola media is an upper secondary school comparable to the Austrian or German Gymnasium which is a kind of grammar school and by no means a sports facility.

4.3 Language and style of texts

Another difficulty is the language of certain texts written in administrative or scientific jargon not understood outside the country and often full of abbreviations only known to insiders. It seems that in particular research workers at university level find it extremely difficult to write down their findings in a language understood by everybody. They tend to write a kind of professorial Chinese which only fellow research workers understand.

4.4 Access to information

One of the most important problems is access to information, whether computerised (e.g. available on Internet) or not. The information needed is often available but it may take days and days to find out where, on which website, etc. There are thousands of sources of information of interest to policy-makers : Ministries of Education and Research, educational authorities of all kind, public and private libraries and documentation centres, universities, colleges, and institutions of adult education, teacher training colleges, specialised institutions, teacher associations and trade unions, associations of parents or students and pupils, etc. Often these centres or services holding information of interest to policy-makers and European organisations do not have sufficient funds and lack time and staff to reply to requests for information.

4.5 Lack of longitudinal studies

When it comes to rely on research data in shaping reform policy there is often a great lack of longitudinal studies, because policy-makers tend to give priority to short-term research when it comes to research funding. This is a natural consequence of the democratic system : people in government focus on the next election and therefore prefer research data covering the period during which they are in office.

4.6 Educational information found in the media

This type of information may be among the most unreliable sources, because the media (press and television) tend to focus on spectacular events and results such as for instance the results of the recent Pisa study on the performance of school children in different countries. In addition most journalists seem to have strong ideas of their own about what is right and wrong in education and are tempted to print in capital letters whatever corresponds to their own personal conviction.

5. The relationship between research and policy-making

Ministers of Education and other educational decision-makers are usually members of a given political party. Most political parties follow a certain ideology and also have clear ideas on what is right or wrong in education. It is extremely difficult to prove that they are wrong and

to make them change their mind and their policy or to persuade them to proceed to certain reforms the outcome of which may not be certain.

When urging policy-makers to take note of research findings in their own country or abroad one has to bear in mind that research findings may differ from research team to research team or they may lend themselves to different interpretations. Educational policy-makers tend to base themselves on those findings of interpretations which seem to confirm their present policy or their planned reforms. Research results supplied by educational documentation which do not fit into their concept are often neglected. The opposition in parliament follows the same pattern and only draws attention to research findings confirming their views on educational policy.

Experience has shown that even in cases where research findings are relatively clear it may take up to ten years for research results to filter through to the political level. This has also something to do with the above-mentioned fact that many research workers find it difficult to present their findings in a language understandable to politicians. Length of research reports also plays a role. People in policy seem to be always under time pressure and do not like to read texts of more than one or two pages. The consequence is that very often only spectacular research abstracts, press articles or television messages are taken note of – without checking whether the findings mentioned are reliable ones and indeed of relevance to the given situation in one's own country or region. The recent Pisa study, given wide publicity in the media, is an illustration of this phenomenon.

On the other hand there is a problem of cost-effectiveness. Educational research of quality has got to be financed by the tax payer's money. No country can afford the luxury of paying for prestigious research centres without taking much notice of the results of their work.

Educational documentalists not only have to find the information and data policy-makers are interested in. In addition they may have to act as interpreters or translators, i.e. to present the information collected in such a way and such a language that the decision-makers can understand and use the findings. Journalists in the media and in particular the specialised journals may also help with this provided educational documentalists supply them – and any other interested groups – with reliable and understandable information.

Cases have been reported where Ministers of Education rather than trusting the research community based their policy on personal experience (e.g. their own time at school years ago or the reports and comments of their children or grandchildren) or on occasional talks with their driver, their hairdresser, their charwoman or people in the street.

Of course the increasing frequency of international meetings among educational policy-makers also has an influence on their policy back home. It may indeed happen that ideas picked up at a meeting abroad are then tried out at home – often again without much checking whether such ideas are based on solid research findings.

5. Present trends

At the moment, unfortunately a trend opposite to that of the years after May 1968 may be observed. The economic situation and the budgetary constraints resulting from it have in many countries led to a drastic reduction of funds available for educational research and documentation. Existing centres were merged or even closed and almost everywhere the number of staff was reduced and acquisition budgets cut down. In spite of lip service still

being paid by politicians to the importance of educational research and documentation in practice decision-makers seem to have lost confidence in the reliability of research results and documentary evidence. The fact that – at European level – the Council of Europe had to give up all its activities in educational research and documentation in favour of allocating the money to other priorities such as the fight against terrorism, organised crime, corruption, trafficking in human beings, etc. clearly illustrates this situation. Often again educational policy decisions are now taken on the basis of intuition, vague feelings, claims of lobby groups, views expressed in the media or by the general public.

6. Prospects

Economic prosperity, employment and social welfare in Europe will to a very large extent depend on the education of its citizens. In many European countries the number of immigrants has been growing in these last few years and every month hundreds of boat people from Africa are trying to reach European coasts. In addition numerous asylum seekers from Eastern European or Asian countries are trying to find a job in Western or Central Europe. The majority of these immigrants will increase the unqualified labour force, therefore likely to remain unemployed. There is also the problem of functional illiteracy and high drop-out rates at school and university. All this means that educational systems will have to introduce new approaches and substantial reforms in order to raise the level of education of these groups and the population as a whole.

To remain competitive in a globalised world Europe needs creative and innovative people with broad general education and the necessary skills and abilities. It is therefore vital for the future of Europe to oppose the present trend of reducing resources for educational research and documentation. To survive we shall have to continue to collect information and research findings trying to find out why so many educational systems failed so far and what education should look like in future years. **Educational documentalists must not give up !**

In this sense best wishes for the success of the present Symposium !