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Regional Perspectives and Cooperation in Educational Research

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The topic that has been given to me is vast in scope and my response in this address is to clip its wings to make the topic more manageable. I intend not to proceed directly to the issues of regionalism and cooperation but to look first at the nature of educational research, its relations to policy and practice and its track record in improving educational outcomes. It is understandable that as members of educational research associations, we believe in the ability to bring about positive educational change; we should be as Professor Goodson reminded us effective progressives. We also have to acknowledge, I think that educational research has not impacted upon policy and practice as much as we would like.

A simple definition of educational research would be that it is a process of systematic and disciplined generation of knowledge about educational processes and problems. What this definition lacks, however, is any indication about the purpose of such activity; I believe that if educational research is not to be like some scholarly activity, undertaken because funds are available and necessary for our CVs to look impressive, educational researchers must commit their efforts to improving educational activity at large. To do that will mean making linkages to both the practice and the policy environments. The definition would also benefit from incorporating

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contexts since the undertaking of educational research is profoundly affected by socio-political circumstances and the fact that the field is riddled with paradigm and turf wars. Features of educational research both as process and as product look very different in Asean countries when compared with say, Australia and the United States.

In a recent survey of the history of educational research in the United States Lagemann (1997) draws attention, in understanding the nature and fortunes of educational research, to the socio-political context and claims by competing groups on who should have authority to prescribe solutions to educational ills. Educational research, in the United States at least, is about a century old and sprang from the era's increasingly common faith in the value of deriving generalizations from empirical data as opposed to reliance on philosophic formulations *e.g.* about human nature from which educational principles were derived. The earliest forms of educational research in this context were the use of surveys to collect data on a wide range of pedagogical and school activities. Thus very early on educational research developed as a measurement, not as a policy science.

Other features of the early origins of educational research are equally noteworthy. Educational science did not gain rapidly in status and influence in the early decades of the twentieth century and was not considered equal to any art or science in academia. Sounds familiar? Things haven't changed much, have they? If education faculty were isolated from other university faculty, they were also isolated from the schools which were to be beneficiaries of their efforts; if there was contact, it was with school principals and superintendents rather than with teachers.

Other tensions, between subject specialists and educationists, emerged over curriculum, with the former claiming that the latter sacrificed rigour in pursuit of broad aims of individual and social development. At Harvard, for

instance, in the mid-1940s faculty appointments were made to promote a social-relations rather than an education focus, and to make research, rather than teacher preparation, a major focus of attention. Given Harvard's reputation in the United States, this was to have profound influence on the status of educational research and teacher preparation within the academy. Finally, we need to note a major change, this time in relations between funding, policy making and educational research. The emergence, in the post war years, of massive grants to education by the United States' federal government led not only to the development of large scale investment in education but also evaluation studies of programme effectiveness. However, while it gave educational researchers a higher profile and more access to and influence on policy makers, some findings, notably Coleman's Equality of Educational Opportunity raised serious doubts about the ability of education to redress social ills like poverty; inevitably educational research's ability to improve the quality of schooling was also called into question.

This description of educational research is not complete because it refers primarily to the type of research conducted within university faculties. In developed countries, several other types flourish. In Australia, Canada and the United States, the last two decades have seen the growth of practitioner — researchers, those who undertake research, often action research, to improve practice rather than to influence policy. Some countries like the United States, Japan, the UK have created federally — funded centres to undertake research; the Northwestern Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL) in the United States provides one example. Yet other examples are those of contract researchers who undertake assignments on behalf of clients like state governments. Australia's ACER is an example of a federally funded centre which, in part, survives by selling test and other materials.

Educational research within nation states in the Asean region has much shorter histories and is far less elaborated. It was only when there was

educational expansion following decolonisation that educational infrastructures like teacher training colleges and schools of education emerged. Many of us will recognise that in those years teacher education was not a research-led undertaking; the knowledge base was rudimentary. When I underwent training in the mid-sixties, I was taught by experienced principals and teachers and we were expected to master texts like Brubarcher's Philosophies of Education, Peel on Psychology and some descriptive accounts of educational history, quite ancient educational history. Research journals and books were in short supply in the libraries. What really captured our imagination was works by Rev. Chelliah, Ho Seng On and the number of policy directed reports like The Razak Report, the All Party Report on Chinese Education (in Singapore) which represented the contentious disputes over the future of educational development in the two countries. Even though we have come a long way from the mid-sixties in terms of the knowledge base in that we have now much greater understanding about teaching and learning issues and about our own educational histories, this has largely been generated by university-based researchers — very little practitioner knowledge informs these insights.

The key question to be asked in the context of our countries is whether our education and educational research infrastructures are sufficiently strong to respond to the many challenges that face them. The answer I suggest is mixed. In the core Asean countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, the educational, especially tertiary educational infrastructure has strengthened, many more faculty have earned doctoral degrees in education and our networks with major universities abroad and centres like the OECD, Unesco, the World Bank exist to mutual advantage. Also, many of our key tertiary institutions have creditable post-graduate programmes to train educational researchers. And indeed, there is some measure of collaboration between researchers and policy makers — this conference and the launching of MERA attest to this. This is a creditable

achievement for the two decades or so of investment in developing an educational research infrastructure.

Other aspects of the national research environment should be noted. Several research journals are published in the region. In Singapore, we sustained the Singapore Journal of Education (now re-launched as the Asia Pacific Journal of Education) for over two decades but were never able to have more than 150 subscribers. We graduated over a hundred well-trained researchers with Masters degrees but few joined the Educational Research Association or attended our conferences; I hope MERA will do better. Our efforts at dissemination of research have met with better success — REACT modelled on the successful Australian SET sells at schools and there are plans to put it on-line from this month. And our annual conferences attract a steady following of national and regional researchers. I have puzzled over the lack of a strong research orientation among those pursuing post-graduate degrees. Perhaps, we concentrated too much on methodology but did little to excite them about research; perhaps we failed to understand their motives.

Even as we acknowledge growth, we must, however, recognise the very strong intellectual dependence we still exhibit with regard to paradigms and perspectives. In the early post-colonial decades such borrowings constituted a necessary transfer of knowledge. What is the position today? Whether it is the implicit functional perspective that our policy makers are fond of, conflict or neo-Marxist perspectives that campus-based faculty flirt with, or efforts to promote action research amongst teachers or the recent interest in qualitative research methodologies we are still borrowers; it should be a matter of regret that given the significantly different development experiences of Asean countries, the nature of our cultural diversities, the reasonably effective nature of our formal education systems we have not been able to challenge dominant Western concepts and paradigms or even effectively indigenize them. My point is that policy makers, through eclectic

borrowing and transplanting, have created national systems but as researchers we study them through Western conceptual frameworks. If we do not indigenize effectively, how can our research have sufficient explanatory power?

In a book, Educational Research Environments in Asean published in 1988 by SEARRAG, itself a unique example of regional cooperation in educational research, it was noted that

- much of the research was done to meet thesis and dissertation requirements,
- that there was not yet a critical mass of researchers,
- that research had little impact on policy and decision making,
- that most of the research was fragmentary, redundant and uncoordinated, and
- that there was a heavy reliance on survey — statistical research.

Many of us here today can add other features. As noted above much of the research that has been done has been undertaken in the context of earning postgraduate qualifications; true, some have been original, especially at the doctoral level, but most have been replicative. Quite of a bit of the research has examined aspects of pupil development and learning, curriculum and instruction. Very little of this research has been published and disseminated. Very little has been used or incorporated in the teaching of future generations of researchers or even teacher trainees. Thus, while a research infrastructure is in place we have not been able to optimise its potential.

As if to confirm this assessment, the Minister of Education of Brunei Darussalam at the opening of the 1998 RELC Conference on 20 April 1998 — just last week, addressed the issue of research and policy. He said ... ‘few if any research studies have seriously addressed the needs of policy makers [in

language education, for instance]. There is also a tendency to espouse exclusively one approach to language teaching, whether it be the communicative, critical literacy, language experience or phonics approach, without attempting to identify the conditions when their approach would be most effective.' He strongly urged researchers' to specify the contexts and conditions under which their findings could be implemented and to remember that resources and manpower were often limited. A final point, and one I think is significant, is that researchers should familiarise themselves with related research studies and existing programmes and attempt in their to complement rather than supplant existing initiatives. As Martin Trow (1984) has pointed out policy dilemmas do not respect academic discipline boundaries; there are political, social, economic, legal and organizational implications. I have seldom heard a senior Asean policy maker deal with the issues in such a cogent manner.

This must not be taken to mean that no rapprochement between researcher and policy maker is possible. Our mid-eighties review showed interesting examples of such collaboration. Thailand, for instance, has developed a pattern of joint problem formulation for research planning involving both researchers and policy makers. It also pioneered the concept of the policy-review which involved the establishment of an adhoc inter-agency committee to review and extract policy recommendations from significant pieces of research. Thai education researchers also have opportunities to present and review research in a context where there is a significant presence of policy makers. In Malaysia, Zainal's own work on the New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) and Project Inspire are good examples of fruitful researcher — policy maker collaboration. Zainal himself served on the Ministry's key curriculum policy making committee; that has eluded us in Singapore. In Singapore, in the eighties, Ng Seok Moi's REAP project is an example of research-based curriculum development that significantly changed classroom processes.

Martin Trow in analysing the work and specialisations of the 'policy analyst' points out features that educational researchers would do well to bear in mind. First, that the policy analyst is able to see problems in an interdisciplinary way, that he is able to formulate problems from the perspective of the decision maker, that he accepts the values and constraints of the policy maker, and that he is sensitive to the costs and benefits of programmes (p.265). Trow goes on to detail the problems and limitations of the methodology that policy analysts use but I think he makes some valuable points. You will note that many governments use think tanks like Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies for advice and suggestions on crucial policy issues.

What about the relationship between educational research(ers) and practice, practitioners? Here too, the relationship is troubled. Essentially, researchers have expected both policy makers and practitioners to take up theory-based insights and generate policy and improve practice, respectively. If one examines dominant in-service models, it will be clear that even when sustained interactions and learnings with practitioners are possible, the dominance of the university-based teacher is apparent. Researchers are often asked to summarize, to simplify research to make it both accessible and useful to teachers. Perhaps what is needed is to find out what teachers need and to engage in a collaborative process to assemble the knowledge needed.

I believe the new emphasis on teachers as researchers, action research enthusiasts are responses to the perceived failure of the theory into practice model. But building researcher — practitioner collaboration will not be easy (Bickel and Hatrup, 1995). This is because, as with policy makers, the values, organizational structure and reward systems between the university and the school are very different. And in Asian school systems where there is a greater emphasis on hierarchy, respect for expertise and status, I wonder if it will be possible to nurture a culture for practitioner research. What will persuade some teachers to take on this new role? We need to think seriously

about who will learn these new roles best, what dispositions are needed, what training, what rewards. Not impossible but very difficult.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Education, the Singapore Teachers Union, the ERA all offered funds — and a few workshops — to promote action research. It has not worked. At the end of this month, a new initiative, a Teachers Network will be established with essentially the same goals. It remains to be seen how successful it will be.

In spite of the present economic circumstances we can be optimistic about the region. Countries in the region represent a wide spectrum of political models, linkages of varying intensity with metropolitan centres, good records of economic growth and investment in education. Most importantly, Asean, as a political-economic grouping has been an invaluable source of consensus building and stability. Paralleling economic and political linkages have been educational ones — an earlier established SEAMEO network of centres such as the Mathematics and Science Centre in Malaysia, Regional Language Centre in Singapore still does good work, members of Unesco network effectively on educational matters, there is an Asean education secretariat and links with developed countries through the Asia Pacific Economic Council — the only problem with these institutions is that they are at the national level bureaucrat-led and their programmes and activities do not always reach out effectively, even to university-based researchers.

It was to address some of these issues at the regional level that the Southeast Asia Research Review and Advisory Group (SEARRAG) was set up in 1982. It is the regionalisation in SEAsia of the Northern Research Review and Advisory Group (NORRAG), an initiative of the Canadian International Development Research Centre. It's principal task was not to generate yet more research but instead to collate, synthesize and draw out policy

implications of research already done, first on a national then on a regional basis. It was hoped that the group might become a major information source for aid groups investing in education projects in the region; indeed, it was the hope that expertise would prevent the launching of irrelevant and redundant projects. Once a core group of researchers had been identified by IDRC to launch the group, others were invited to join. Members were selected to represent the researcher, policy maker and administrator in the research enterprise; later, an associate membership category was established to include regional institutions such as INNOTECH and RECSAM. Though three members were selected from each Asean country, they were appointed in their personal capacities and not as official government — sanctioned representatives. It was hoped that this would enable the group to be more collegial and frank and lead to a more sustainable network. The first, and perhaps most visible product, of the group is the Educational Research Environments in Asean book. The group also sought to develop state-of-the-art reviews of research and of practice; the latter was attempted since we were aware that while there was much innovative practice in our schools and educational institutions, few of them had been researched. Research designs were collaboratively agreed upon. Topics attempted included language education, technical and vocational education, educational administration, values education and efforts to improve student achievement levels. The bulk of the funding came from the IDRC, Canada.

After a decade of annual meetings, the publication of the Educational Research Environments book, the compilation of several state of the art and of practice reviews of research the SEARRAG experiment has fizzled out. There is probably no one single reason for this; rather, a multitude of factors, some individual in nature, some institutional, some cultural. We over-estimated the value of autonomy; lack of close government involvement meant no access to funds from it; having one policy maker made little difference to the impact of our efforts since the national policy agenda was only in a few

instances, the driving force in the selection of review topics. While the research effort required the assistance of numerous others, there was always the problem of insufficient funds. Most of the key actors in SEARRAG had important responsibilities on their own and we failed to set up an independent secretariat soon enough. Even our cultural norms failed us — when one country or the other failed to produce the country report or a promised synthesis, we politely accepted the reasons; in many instances, despite repeated follow-up no report emerged putting the whole project at risk. We failed to insist on accountability; persuasion and attempts at consensus building failed repeatedly. One tangible benefit of the collaboration, one in which Zainal played a large part in conceptualising and operationalizing is SEABAS, a computer-based regional educational bibliographic system which was housed in USM with national centres in the region. I hope at the national level, at least, there will be attempts to sustain this database.

I don't want to sound overly pessimistic about regional cooperation in educational research. Educators need to forge more collegial links; businesses, the military, even librarians do a better job at networking than educators. May I suggest a few key strategies for us to consider?

- 1) We cannot build strong regional links without first building up strong national educational research infrastructures.
- 2) We need to work with national policy makers to understand better their needs; this is unavoidable as there is no independent source of funding for educational research.
- 3) We should have much more realistic views of the research-policy relationship. The best we can hope for is to create, through our research and its dissemination, an environment in which evidence and rational choice making become the norms. Exceptional individuals like Zainal will bridge the gap. In periods of major educational reform and curriculum change, research expertise and wisdom will be needed and utilised.

- 4) There is still a great deal to do to bring our own methodological skills up to date. There is a global market in consultants and researchers out there and our governments will avail themselves of this expertise. It does not mean that if we are methodologically sophisticated governments will love us but at least we can take the consultants on.
- 5) Since most educational researchers are located within the university we need to make better use of such regional bodies as RIHED and ASAIHL to network. Presently, very few are involved in these networks.
- 6) If the research-policy relationship in the national setting is fraught with so many difficulties, it is unlikely that we will have regional research to solve regional educational problems. I suggest more modest ambitions. What we can do is better inform ourselves about each other's research. That means participation in each other's conferences, publishing in each other's journals, presenting joint papers at conferences like the CIES and AERA and using Internet technology to share information on educational developments.
- 7) We need better documentation of educational research done in the region; language poses a problem here but it is not insurmountable. SEABAS should be continued.
- 8) We could teach courses on Asean education in our postgraduate programmes using available research and persuade / help our students to research each other's educational systems.

Let me return to point two. One of the major issues that will face public intellectuals as we end the century is relations between the market and the state. Such relations will have implications for both the processes and utilisation of educational research; the emergence of contract research is but one example. Those of us who live in East Asia, live within strong states even as globalisation proceeds; states control the agendas in education. We cannot afford to see the state as our enemy. This does not mean opting for collusive research but neither does it mean that oppositional research activity is the only choice. We need to find a third way. In both the UK and in Australia, for instance, relations between the state and the academy have deteriorated and one consequence is that much policy related research is unremittingly

confrontational. I believe that in our societies we need to avoid going down that road, to build up trust as only that we give us access. A failure to do that will only result in our governments opting either to use no research in policy formulation or to use contract researchers.

In conclusion, as will be clear from my remarks I am not optimistic about regional cooperation or regional collaborative research — perhaps bilateral efforts are more feasible. In May we will launch the first Singapore — Brunei educational research collaboration. We have regional organizations — Unesco, SEAMEO, APEC, ADB, even a Comparative Education Society of Asia — for now the burdens of collaboration must rest on them. What we can do and must do well is strengthen national institutions; we must develop a new generation of committed researchers who will build on Zainal's and the efforts of others, and who will have learnt valuable lessons from the successes and failures of the first generation of researchers. The establishment of MERA and this conference gives me hope that the process has started. We wish you success.

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