

Between Evidence Based Policy Research and a Policy Based Research Programme

A case (or two) within
the Flemish Community

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the political/juridical context (1)

Freedom of education is a constitutional right: every natural person or legal person has the right to organise education and establish institutions for this purpose.

The 'governing bodies' (organised in 'networks') have a wide-ranging autonomy: curriculum and pedagogical methods

However: government recognition or financial support means 'meeting the attainment targets'

the political/juridical context (2)

Attainment targets:

- indicate the minimum expectations of the Flemish Government; the minimum goals that schools should foster and achieve for most pupils at the end of the educational level
- knowledge, insight, attitudes and skills; subject-related and cross-curricular
- a tool to ensure high quality education to Flemish citizens
- examined by the Inspectorate in a school audit
- **BUT: NOT A NATIONAL CURRICULUM / NO CENTRAL EXAMS**

the political/juridical context (3)

EbPR – ISSUE

as a commissioner of educational research,
the Flemish Government has to deal with the
limited 'radius of action' of her own
educational policy

The 'scale' of Flanders

- ca. 6.000.000 inhabitants
- Budget for education: 8 mld EUR = ca. 43% of the Flemish Budget

	Pupils	teachers	schools
Nursery-primary	655.000	50.000	2.300
Secondary	450.000	60.000	1.000
Higher	160.000	7.500	29

Flemish education anno 2006

PISA 2000, 2003:

we are doing (very) well but ...

we have a serious problem with equity

‘Equity is an omnipresent concern’ >
implications for policy research

Educational research in Flanders

Short presentation of two cases funded and organized by the Flemish Government

Case A: a 'traditional' *programme* of educational policy research

Case B: 'plans in progress' for a *programme* of periodic assessment of pupils/student's performances

in contrast and in addition to other sources of knowledge production

- a long term project of longitudinal research (pupil cohort)
- *ad hoc* research projects (series of projects)
- research on the initiative of the universities/researchers (basic research / fundamental research)
- Inspectorate's audits
- consultancy
- ...

Case A: 'Educational scientific research directed at policy and practice' (OBPWO)

- Budget: 1.600.000 EUR / year
- A research programme > Formal procedure for:
 - definition of research themes
 - open call for research proposals to all Flemish universities
 - assessment/selection of research projects
 - (for each project) a contract between Minister and university and promotor
 - supervision by a steering committee
 - publication, dissemination, valorisation ...

Case A – Definition of research themes (1)

- Detection of the needs/lacks of information and knowledge for policy making
 - Process not limited to the identification of the ‘domain’ of knowledge (knowledge about this or that)
 - Stimulating a strong awareness of ‘kinds’ of knowledge/information (what do we need to know about it?)
 - representative or in depth? Measuring the ‘effects’ or understanding the process of implementation? Need of longitudinal data? Evaluation of a specific reform/pilot project
 - ...

Case A – Definition of research themes (2)

- Different sources
 - Policy note of the Minister with strategic and operational objectives and projects (for the duration of a legislature = 4 years)
 - Policy questions with a ‘recurrent’ character
 - Sociological trends, challenges ... with implications/opportunities for educational policy
 - International context (OECD e.a.)

Case A – Definition of research themes (3)

- Who is in charge:
 - senior policy advisors: (ongoing) preparation of draft document
 - Educational Council (incl. different stakeholders) presents an advise
 - final decision by Cabinet/Minister
- Role of researchers?
 - Feedback on a draft document with policy themes: ‘feasability’ with regard to research
 - Recommendations for follow-up research in previous reports

Case A – Definition of research themes (4)

Two levels

- identification of ‘clusters’ for the long term (legislature) 2006-2009:
 - School autonomy & Policy capacity’
 - Transition education – labour market
 - Teachers’ careers (cf. OECD review!)
 - Development/diversity talents (pupils)
 - Financing educationEquity as an ‘horizontal’ theme
- Annual call within the long term clusters

Case A – Definition of research themes (5)

- Policy makers (Ministry): identification of the *policy questions* + the corresponding *knowledge questions* (types of k.!))
- That is NOT: formulating the *research questions* and the *research design* (cf. infra)

EbPR - ISSUE:

Definition of research themes is DRIVEN BY POLICY

How can we guarantee that the questions policy-makers have, can adequately be translated into research questions?

Case A – Assessment and selection of research projects

- Two separate committees
 - Policy relevance: senior management (officers)
 - Scientific value (theoretical foundation, research design, feasibility, qualifications and experience): an international and multidisciplinary jury
- Double score leads to a ‘classification’ (AA-AB-...-EE)
- Every year: ca. 20 proposals > ca. 6 projects selected (duration: 12 – 24 months, 1-2 FTE)

Case A – What kind of research?

- Multiple disciplines
 - Educational sciences, sociology, economics, psychology, linguistics ...
- Multiple methods
 - Large scale surveys
 - Secondary analysis (administrative databases, existing research data)
 - Case studies
 - Cross-sectional / longitudinal
 - Review studies
 - International comparisons
 - Developing and testing of instruments
 - ...
- mixed method-design is most frequent design

Case A – Contract and supervision

- For each project a ‘Steering committee’
 - Policy-makers, experts, practitioners, researchers
 - close monitoring; with substantial impact (...)
 - Adjustments possible
 - Assessment of interim and final report
- Contract includes obligation to
 - formulate policy recommendations with an explicit link to the empirical basis
 - deliver an executive summary
 - Wait for the minister’s ‘fiat’ for publication of the results
 - cooperate with Ministry in function of valorisation and communication (...)

Case A – (How) do policy makers use the knowledge produced?

- (1) 'Rational policy model' vs. (2) 'Policy as problem solving'
- (1) one dimensional chain: policy problem > lack of knowledge > research question > research design > research results > policy measure
 - = naive picture of relation research/policy
 - = naive epistemology: knowledge as true and neutral + instrumental

Case A – (How) do policy makers use the knowledge produced?

- (2) policy as a process of trial and error

Using knowledge/research results needs mediation, interpretation, negotiation

Policy makers have to deal with ‘external conditions’: budget, willingness of stakeholders, public opinion ...

The (policy) context of interpretation is modified not only by knowledge but other factors determine decision making: values, beliefs, ideologies, convictions, aspirations, experience ...

Case A – (How) do policy makers use the knowledge produced?

- BUT: knowledge is a very important factor in the ‘shaping’ of minds;

Knowledge workers at policy level have to ‘strive’ for the impact of knowledge in policy making >

education department (government) has to invest in that process (staff/means)

- (Formal) publications (full report, summaries, website), press conference, interviews, new media (dvd), seminars, colloquia ...
- (Informal) knowledge networks: ‘live’ interaction between policy makers (incl. the Minister) and researchers; stimulating discussion within the steering committee (researcher+policy makers)

Case A – (How) do policy makers use the knowledge produced?

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does this 'strife' belong to the tasks of brokerage agencies?

how can we guarantee that policy makers use the knowledge without 'disturbing' the process of knowledge production (f.i. respecting time schemes)

Case A as a 'Programme' – Strengths

- Reflection on relation policy question - knowledge question - research question – research design
- Structural / formal dialogue between policy makers and researchers in every phase of the process ('internal brokerage'?)
- Policy priorities are leading principle
- Multidisciplinarity – multi-method design
- Policy recommendations are part of the 'delivery'
- Valorisation, dissemination (incl. large public)
- Accumulation (former research) – recommendations for follow-up research

Case A as a 'Programme' – Weaknesses

- Small scale:
 - budget
 - 'internal' brokerage (ca. 1 FTE)
 - researchers
- Tension between (relevance for) policy and (relevance for) practice (cf. educational freedom)
- Short term contracts (12-24 months)

Case A as a 'Programme' – Opportunities

- Launching research themes as an instrument of capacity-building: with regard to specific themes (f.i. financing) + stimulating capacity in doing 'policy research' as such (a specific 'mode' of doing research)
- Investing in the brokerage function within the ministry
- Engaging teachers as researchers (f.i. action research, development of instruments)

Case A as a 'Programme' – Threats

- Contract research + driven by policy: mind the 'blind spots'!
- Researchers losing independence?
- Policy makers disturbing the research process (not respecting time schemes)
- A problem with quantitative skills? (large scale survey+analysis, multilevel, IRT ...)
- Penalization due to insufficient 'academic gains' (international publications)

Case B – Periodic Assessment of pupils'/students' performances

- What?
 - Large scale data collection of learning performances (standardized testing) and analysis on system level
 - In a representative sample of schools/pupils
 - At the end of an educational level; focused on a specific educational aspect (attainment targets)
 - Anonymous BUT with attention for schoolfeedback + explanatory analysis on macro level

Case B – Periodic Assessment of pupils'/students' performances

- Why?
 - Monitor the realization of the attainment targets
 - Map out differences in educational quality
 - Try to explain differences between schools and pupils
 - Provide an empirical basis for discussion

Case B – Periodic Assessment of pupils'/students' performances

Remember: 'no central exams'

- No implications for certification or orientation
- Ranking of schools is made impossible
- Avoiding 'teaching to the test'
- Not only the cognitive skills are tested; f.i. practical exercises biology

Case B – Periodic Assessment of pupils'/students' performances

- Until 2002: NO periodic assessments of pupils' performances with regard to Flemish attainment targets – only participation in PISA, TIMSS
- Since 2002: ad hoc (not systematic nor programmatic) periodic assessments (using instruments developed via the case A – programme, maths/reading)
- Since 2005: concrete plans for a long term programme (2006-2011) of periodic assessment

Case B – Periodic Assessment of pupils'/students' performances

- Characteristics of the 'Programme'
 - Calendar 2007-2018
 - Open call for proposals for a long term contract (2006-2011)
 - Selection: end of July 2006
 - Contract defines domains to be tested, analyses, organization of schoolfeedback ... + themes for fundamental research in IRT, testing etc
 - Steering committee

Case B as a 'Programme' – strengths

- Systematic choice for the outcomes to be tested (calendar)
- A strong empirical basis on the long term
- Organization of feedback on the macro- and school level

Case B as a 'Programme' – Weaknesses

- Only the measurable

Case B as a 'Programme' – Opportunities

- Variety in measured domains (including attitudes, practical tests...)
- Investing in capacity building / expertise (test development, IRT)
- Schoolfeedback: information rich environment for schools
- Consensus conferences with stakeholders: incl. the governing bodies and the networks

Case B as a 'Programme' – Threats

- Everlasting frustration: how do we open the 'black box' of the educational process (not more than 15-20% of variance in learning results explained on class/school level?)