
Educational Research on the Third World or with the Third World: a view from the South

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The purpose of this article is to present the reaction of a researcher from a developing country to the general discussion on cross-national research. The comments offered here are based upon concrete experience in Morocco in the field of educational research. Although they might not necessarily apply to all Third World countries, it is hoped that some useful insights can be gained from a comparison of the viewpoints of foreign and local researchers interested in education in developing countries.

The discussion is organised in three parts. It begins with a critique of undesirable types of research *on* developing countries. It then examines the conditions under which the need for collaborative research may arise. Finally, proposals concerning the forms which collaborative research on education could take are sketched out.

It often happens that foreign researchers undertake work on education in developing countries which is of little relevance or which has almost no impact in the country studied. It is therefore important to present a critique of those educational research projects which have proved to be of limited value. Three examples can be presented for the purpose of illustration: the 'turn-key' approach, the 'laboratory' approach, and the 'ivory tower' approach.

The 'turn-key' project corresponds to a situation whereby a team of foreign experts is invited to work for a local agency or administration, such as the Ministry of Education. The mandate may be very general or very specific, but the main point is that the team is working on its own, in total isolation, without interaction with the local researchers and specialists. After a few months or a few years, they produce reports which may or may not be acted upon by the government officials who had commissioned them. Then they leave and one realises that during the total exercise, nobody has really benefited from this research. No local competences have been built up so

that, if similar research had to be undertaken again, one would need another foreign team.

The 'laboratory' concept refers to the growing tendency to view the Third World as a vast laboratory, as a reservoir of facts. Developing countries are interesting, exotic, unusual and present therefore a challenge to the many researchers from industrialised countries who elect to study some aspects of the mysterious world of underdevelopment. The range of motivations is quite large, from mere climatic or touristic considerations to more serious commitments and preoccupations. This 'laboratory' approach usually applies to the so called loner, the individual researcher based in a northern institution, who, by personal interest and/or for the purpose of a degree, goes to do fieldwork in the Third World. Very often, he/she does valuable research, sometimes under difficult material or moral conditions, but then he/she goes back home to write up a report on a thesis and no trace of this research can be found in the developing country where it took place. Thus there are dozens of works on each Third World country which are available in various northern institutions, but which are not known in the country where the data was actually collected.

The 'ivory tower' approach means that the research subject is chosen by a researcher in an industrialised country, that the research methodology and design are prepared within the framework of 'northern' preoccupations, and that they are then applied to a Third World country without any change, without adapting the project to the specificity of the region studied. The case of the econometric model used by a Chicago research team to study the Moroccan labour market in 1972-73 can be put forward as an example of this type of research 'transfer'. Instead of conceiving a model designed to reflect and analyse the specificity of the Moroccan labour market, this team of foreign researchers tried to force the data collected into their model. And when the results pointed at conclusions which were not satisfactory in terms of the theory

underlying the model (human capital theory), it was not the model which was challenged but the data themselves. Very often, the same research design is applied indiscriminately to several countries regardless of major economic and social differences likely to affect the issues researched.

It is important to underline at this stage that the developing countries often share the responsibility for improper research projects. It is not uncommon to observe that the government officials of a Third World country still suffer from a sort of inferiority complex which leads them to favour the help of an outsider rather than the expertise of local specialists. The Moroccan Ministry of Planning is presently financing a large scale project designed to examine the links between the educational and training system and the labour market. The research is financed by the World Bank, subcontracted to a Moroccan and a French consultant firm, who both use French experts who seek advice from Moroccan university researchers, because they are not familiar with the local context!

In other cases, the foreign researcher can serve as a legitimising agent insofar as he/she investigates only those issues which are compatible with the reinforcement of the power base or which further the interests of the government officials who have commissioned him/her. It is then not surprising when this foreign 'intellectual mercenary' comes up with precisely the kind of results and recommendations which were expected of him/her.

The main point to be made in this respect is that questions need to be asked about the *relevance* and the *purpose* of the research and the questions ought to be asked jointly by the foreign and the local educational researchers. Where is the research going to take place? What kind of research? With whom? For what purpose? Whose interests will it serve? The research environment has to be taken into consideration at this point, both in the industrialised country where the foreign researcher comes from and in the developing country where the research is to be done.

The great majority of educational research projects dealing with the Third World are the result of a 'northern' initiative, as a review of projects in Germany, Holland and Great Britain shows. Now, in view of the budgetary cuts which have recently affected research funding in the developed countries and which are likely to become even more threatening, there is a growing tendency to design research projects according to the availability of funds. The question then is to know whether the research priorities of the bilateral and multilateral donor agencies are necessarily the most relevant in terms of the needs of people in the Third World. Does the fact that the World Bank

Education Department produces more studies on efficiency and vocational training than on equity issues mean that educational disparities are less important?

Even more basic questions require an answer before research is started in a Third World environment. How is the researcher going to fit? Whose side is he/she going to be on? For, whether one likes it or not, one has to acknowledge that the vast majority of ldc's are dictatorships. The developing world is not a world of harmony, unity or consensus. Although the researchers very often prefer to consider themselves as social scientists, who are not concerned with politics but with science, they have to face the fact that research does not take place in a political vacuum, but that there is a power structure, there are pressure groups and conflicting interests which create a specific research environment. Most educational systems operate in a very unfair way and discriminate against the majority of the population. It is therefore important to examine to what extent the research planned — even if it has no direct or immediate policy implications — is likely to reinforce or legitimate the prevailing pattern of educational development. It should not be forgotten that, in most cases, the persons from the Third World who have readier access to multilateral or bilateral aid are generally those whose interests are the most remote from the neediest groups in society. Educational researchers should therefore define clearly their priorities.

This is not to imply that collaborative research ought to be avoided wherever possible. There is a strong need for joint research projects because of the prevailing research conditions under which local researchers have to operate. In Morocco for example, educational researchers encounter a certain number of difficulties at various levels. First, the choice of the research subject must be in agreement with the existing political criteria which determine which themes can or cannot be discussed (for example, the language situation or the socio-economic origin of students). Second, researchers cannot have access to all educational institutions in the country. Official authorisations are required and the political or personal status of each researcher bears heavily on whether they will be granted. Third, the material working conditions represent a serious constraint. Basic things which are taken for granted in industrialised countries are lacking in many instances: the availability of a competent typist, of photocopying and reproduction equipment, of books and periodicals, not to mention research budgets which have hardly even been heard of. The main consequence of this sort of problem is the absence of a real research environment, which implies that the individual researchers live in total intellectual isolation. This is why the opportunity to share

concerns and to carry out joint research endeavours with foreign educational specialists can be very meaningful in providing not so much a material but rather a moral support.

Beyond this 'tactical' reason, a case could be made for collaborative research by pointing to the fact that outsiders are sometimes in a better position to question aspects of the local social and educational set up than the people who are directly involved. Complementarily, foreign researchers may have trouble noticing important but hidden aspects of the Third World society which they intend to investigate.

What forms of desirable cooperation in educational research could be envisaged then? The first proposal concerns the exchange of information and research results. A code should develop among educational researchers with a view to sharing systematically

findings and reports with the groups or the people who have been the subjects of the research. In the case of doctoral students, joint supervision schemes could be organised in order to help foreign students doing research in ldc's, as well as Third World researchers studying in northern institutions, to make more fruitful and relevant contributions. Generally speaking, the existing networks of educational researchers should be extended so as also to include researchers from developing countries who share similar interests. Information about research projects, seminars, funding channels and procedures should be disseminated in a more equal way, so as to go beyond the traditional North-South one-way type of transfer of knowledge and to create a real community of researchers from all over the world. Their common denominator would be their strong commitment to educational development and research in the developing areas.