

The Uses of Policy Research

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Summary

If effective communication and education are the key responses to global climate change, then comparative knowledge of the intended and implemented policies in this area is critical. This article argues that comparative policy research, which draws on diverse approaches, conceptualisations and methods, constitutes an important leverage point for fostering change in climate education policy and practice.

Keywords

Comparative Policy Research
Global Studies
Theory of Change
Climate Change Education
Climate Change Communication

Introduction

The growing immediacy of the effects of climate change can lead to questions of whether one is doing enough or enough of the right kind of work, especially as educational researchers who are committed to furthering climate action. A touchstone in our own decision making on where we, the authors, put our time and attention, has been to use the tools and approaches best suited to the leverage points where we hope to contribute to advancing change. As a simple example, if we want to focus on work with and for youth, we could engage in participatory research with them. If we want to improve our understanding of and strengthen educational practice, we might undertake interviews and observations with educators and NGOs in the field. When we hope to better understand and inform policy and policy making, we carry out comparative and collaborative policy research.

Leverage Points and How to Mobilise Change and Societal Transformation

[Meadows' \(1999\)](#) classic typology of 12 places to intervene in a system to effect change is ordered by the level of effectiveness: informing policy change as a way of shifting the rules or goals of a system is listed close to the top, in the third to fifth places.¹ These leverage points for system change are only topped by those at the level of the mindset out of which the system arises or transcending such mindsets or paradigms altogether; arguably the key aims of transformative teaching and learning.

Another typology or theory of change that is common in climate action is the three spheres of the transformation model ([O'Brien, 2018](#)). This frames societal transformation as requiring shifts in each of the interacting areas of *political* systems and structures, *practical* technical responses and *personal* values and beliefs. Each of these are considered to be essential areas of focus, with a greater proportion of work to date focusing on the sphere of practice and with political systems often remaining underexplored.

We are not evaluating which of these heuristics or frameworks of change might be the best. However, they can each

be helpful for thinking about *where* and *how* and *with whom* we are undertaking research to further climate and broader environmental action. Additionally, each underscores how there are always multiple possible points of intervention and action, thus showing the importance of bringing in a range of skills, perspectives and approaches, whether by the researchers within a given research project or across the range of projects in which different researchers will engage.

Strategic Methodology as Touchstone

A “strategic methodology” is one way we have previously described this consistent touchstone of centring how our research might best “be of use” in critical social change (Fine & Berraras, 2001; [Tuck & McKenzie, 2015](#)). This means emphasising broader modes of engagement, including criticality in the public sphere and using imagination, rather than specifying particular methods of research. These can be selected according to their efficacy for achieving the desired impact at the intended leverage point or sphere of action (McKenzie, 2009; Rickinson & McKenzie, 2021).

With these considerations in mind, in recent years, we have undertaken a collective programme of comparative policy research on climate and other environmental issues in education. This includes several studies on climate change and environmental education that we have completed for UNESCO (2019a, 2019b, 2021) and, most recently, through the Monitoring and Evaluating Climate Communication and Education Project (Sustainability and Education Policy Network, 2022), which we lead with Heila Lotz-Sisitka in collaboration with over 100 other organisations and researchers around the globe. The intended sphere of action for these research activities is mainly “political,” with the aim of informing and impacting governmental and intergovernmental action on climate change communication and education (CCE). The focus also includes informing “practical technical responses” such as national education policy, and practices of climate change communication and education across a range of sectors ([O’Brien, 2018](#)).

In the above UNESCO studies, we have undertaken comparative analyses of official education policies in terms of the extent and type of inclusion of climate, biodiversity and broader environmental focus. This has involved either manual content analysis, namely, the full reading of policy texts or curricular documents and coding them to capture the extent and type of content; or in cases where the amount of material is prohibitive, using “text queries” to find the content of interest. In both types of analyses, there are also additional qualitative examples that show how the issues are addressed; in some cases, other methods have also been used, such as interviews, surveys and desk reviews, which span beyond policy to teaching, extra-curricular activities or peer and parental support.

“Head, heart and hand” or other heuristics ([Reid et al., 2021](#)) are sometimes used in analysis, in alignment with the extensive literature indicating the importance of the psychosocial and participatory dimensions of climate and environmental learning, for example, going beyond understanding the science or other facts about climate change and engaging learners emotionally, socially and culturally in taking up and calling for climate action (cf. [UNESCO, 2019a](#)).

National governments are the main audience for these international reports, which offer an otherwise unavailable bird’s eye view of the extent and type of inclusion of environmental issues in education policy, both within and across countries. These reports are undertaken with the aim of helping inform and propel future policy making and redefining the aims and substance of practice.

Scale of Data Analysis and a Comparative Lens

The [Monitoring and Evaluating Climate Communication and Education](#) (MECCE) Project also collects and compiles comparative data and policy information, along with other data sources, in order to provide a previously unavailable scale of data analysis on CCE and inform policy decision making. This involves making data accessible for countries and for organisations working within and across countries regarding how climate change is being approached in communication and education sectors—see, for example, our COP26 research brief ([The Monitoring and Evaluating Climate Communication and Education Project, 2021](#)).

These comparative collections of data, indicators and profiles offer new opportunities for developing or advocating for subnational, national and international benchmarking and target-setting in CCE in ways that suit the regional and cultural characteristics of a country or sector. With relatively few national and cross-national policy studies completed thus far and limited resources for within-country monitoring by national governments, there has been little information on whether climate change is currently included in communication and education policy ([Cheeseman et al., 2019](#); [McKenzie, 2021](#)). As a result, in many cases, there has also been little incentive or pressure for governments to prioritise the development of policy to fill the gaps in this area.

While recognising that there is no simple flow-through from inclusion in policy to enactment in practice, there is also ample evidence that other policy supports (such as curricular plans, targeted funding, professional development and administrative support) are critical in furthering climate change inclusion in practice ([McKenzie & Aikens, 2021](#)). Working together across researcher, policy maker and NGO boundaries can help ensure that research processes and tools are best suited to the targeted sectors and points of intervention ([Pizmony-Levy et al., 2021](#)).

Policy as Leverage Point

Although policy is only one “leverage point” in advancing CCE and CCE is only one domain of advancing climate action, for us, it is worth pursuing through collaborative research. We are convinced, as also shown across the papers in this Special Issue, that other colleagues and research communities are furthering additional points of impact through a range of other methods, conceptual dynamics and contextual starting points and that together, we are contributing to a much-needed shift towards sustaining life on the planet.

Endnotes

1. Items informing or influencing policy change include items 3 to 5:
 - The goals of the system.
 - The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organise system structure.
 - The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints) (Meadows, 1999).

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