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Understanding the Role, Expectations, and Challenges That Policy-Makers Face in Using Educational Research

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Abstract: This study provides an insight into the challenges faced in establishing a closer collaboration between educational research and its use in the policy-making process. It aims to identify the factors influencing transfer from research to policy-making and the policy-makers' needs, expectations, and perception on the use of educational research. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of Romanian national and local institutions. Specific software was used to facilitate data management and coding. The results indicate that there is a disconnect between policy-makers' expectations and the input they receive from the research community, as well as a lack of an institutional framework to facilitate communication and interaction between them. There are systemic blockages on both sides: politics and the cost of opportunity for decision-making, a high level of bureaucracy, limited resources and accessibility of results, a lack of financing and of institutionalized communication, as well as a lack of consultation and cooperation between the two parties. The results indicate a willingness on the policy-makers' side to acknowledge the importance of using research to inform decisions and their role in facilitating this process. This implies that researchers have limited control over the subsequent stages and could indicate the early point in the research process when other actors should be involved in order to ensure the potential or actual impact of research on policy.

Keywords: educational research; policy-making; research-informed policy-making

1. Introduction

The present research takes as its reference point the transfer and use of research in policy-making and attempts to advance the debate on research utilization and evidence-based policy in education. The paper brings new insights into the characteristics of the policy-making process, policy-makers' perceptions, and their expectations regarding the use of educational research.

The literature in the field of research mobilization tends to focus on challenges in the transfer process from research production to research use [1,2], which leads to a rather low impact of research on policy, rather than on opportunities or areas of improvement. The overall image depicted in the literature mostly reflects the researchers' perspective on knowledge transfer [3,4]. Our research intends to fill this gap and advance the debate on the topic of research utilization by highlighting the perceptions of policy-makers. We do not make causal implications among the identified characteristics, nor do we consider the influence of factors upon research and policy-making connectivity. The Romanian landscape of transfer and use of scientific results, research, or data in education is under-represented in

terms of practices, implementation, procedures, and of the overall phenomenon. Therefore, we found it difficult to connect concepts with concrete examples to sustain some of the arguments, since the two processes are rarely faced with opportunities for collaboration.

In addressing these issues, the paper begins with a literature review operationalizing the concept of research utilization and research-based policymaking, the policy-makers' needs and expectations, and the barriers and opportunities they perceive in research-based decision-making in education. Second, it presents the research methodology used to collect data from policy-makers involved in the decision-making process in the educational field. Third, the results focus on such topics as policy-makers' needs and expectations regarding research production and transfer, opinions on their role in the process of research production and transfer, and on presenting both barriers and opportunities that influence transfer from research to policy. Finally, the article discusses the results in an attempt to shape a wider understanding of the concept of research production and transfer from the policy-makers' perspective.

1.1. Educational Research Production and Utilization in Policy-Making

The process of research utilization in policy-making implies a variety of factors, agents, and contexts [5]. In order to be used, research should be produced, transferred, and finally implemented by policy-makers. We acknowledge that the responsibility of production or transfer is distributed among different actors, but it is also important to consider the interconnections between these actors and concepts. With a primary focus on production, mediation, or use of research, Cain [6] found important links between research and knowledge transfer, research use, putting research into practice, research impact, research-informed teaching, and research-led teaching. In addition to Cain's review, our paper also takes into consideration research utilization in association with such concepts as 'research-informed policy-making' and 'evidence-based policy-making'. We will use the concept of 'research-informed policy-making' referring to the use of research by decision-makers.

As for research production, the concept could be considered to be self-explanatory. Generally, the context of research production is dominated by the role of universities and research institutions in generating knowledge based on evidence [1]. Thus, the literature on research production focuses more on research funding, research management, and the strategies used by academics to enhance research transfer and utilization [7–9] than on the research transfer to the users' context [2]. Educational research is generally seen as 'too small, not well-organized, and the results are not effectively communicated or shared' [5] (p. 15). Many policy-makers perceive that educational research has little impact on society and often fails to meet the decision-makers' needs [10–12]. Locke [13] also refers to research from the policy-makers' perspective as inapplicable, untimely, and poorly presented or promoted, as well as lacking in quality. It should also be acknowledged that different interpretations of research production, research utilization, and the cultural and professional gap between stakeholders can lead to tensions in their collaboration [2].

The process of research policy-making and the relationship with practice is not straightforward but is mediated by several factors that can facilitate or even hinder it. This relationship, despite being crucial for both researchers and educational practitioners, has been the subject of in-depth analysis and criticism (see [14–16]), being considered as a complex process affected by ideologies and professional preferences as much as by evidence [16]. The criticism is directed not only towards the educational research and researchers' agenda in terms of research interests and findings, methods, or transference paths, but also at the practitioners. Regarding the practice context, 'evidence-based education seems to limit severely the opportunities for educational practitioners to make such judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualized settings' [17] (p. 5). The complexity of the educational context leads to researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers adapting their roles and searching for expanded connections with each other's professional territories. Researchers, for instance, seek to establish closer collaboration with policy-makers to avoid maintaining the generally acknowledged communication gap. The literature suggests that research outcomes could be more comprehensible for policy-makers,

stakeholders, and practitioners or other types of audiences [18–21] to facilitate communication at least from one perspective. This measure would imply that researchers would take on a more active role in making research accessible beyond academia and its specialized audiences. Moreover, scholars and policy-makers may have different perspectives on what 'good' research means or what process would be most appropriate to follow in order to transfer research findings in policy-making. From the scholars' point of view, we mention here the characteristics that Conrad and Serlin [18] attributed to the quality of research, such as a clear design, solid data, and conclusions based on data evidence, while policy-makers tend to place more value on the simplicity of findings and a clear implication for future actions that may be implemented: two visions that could nurture a causal effect if reconciled.

Regarding the process, Conrad and Serlin [18] also underline the importance of making research results accessible to a wider audience, but do so in terms of return on investment, bringing an interesting nuance to the debate and implicitly making both researchers' and policy-makers' involvement not only desirable but also a requirement of public accountability.

1.2. Role of the Actors Involved in Research Utilization in Policy-Making

Research utilization is seen as multidirectional, involving both 'academic and professional knowledge between multiple partners and sites' [7] (p. 18). Establishing a closer collaboration between researchers and policy-makers involves what Treadway [22] calls 'boundary crossing': researchers working, directly or indirectly, with policy-makers, practitioners, and other stakeholders, including the mass media. This involves new ways of working, in which researchers must learn the priorities of other stakeholders and utilize the 'ideas in common currency' among them. There are costs to doing 'impact work', and research suggests that few institutions are as yet committing substantial support for such activity. Withal [23] speaks about the partnerships between researchers and policy-makers as key for knowledge utilization, which could be attained by minimizing the gap between researchers and policy-makers.

To bridge these gaps, we documented from the literature a series of solutions that could enhance transfer and use of research. Whitty [19] sees active communities of educational researchers with organizational substance to integrate dialogue, cooperation, and discussion at the national and international level. As the author suggests, some important aspects that could be debated and agreed upon within communities are the quality, purpose, content, and methodologies of educational research. Moreover, an independent research culture committed to open inquiry could help improve educational practices and enhance the professional service it provides for its members through communication, training, and representation of all involved actors.

However practical these actions might be, one cannot ignore the challenges faced by researchers in implementing them. These range from engaging in activities outside their research desk [2] to finding common ground with actors outside the research environment, all in an attempt to adapt communication and the overall discourse to accommodate different priorities and perceptions, such as what constitutes useful and valid research, the role of theory, data quality, and research methods, project outcomes, brevity of results, and the practicality of research recommendations [2]. It becomes even more obvious that the responsibility of research utilization cannot and should not be placed solely on researchers and that the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the process should be clarified and better defined [24].

In an attempt to do so, and assuming that the degree of research transfer could provide a measure of the research impact, we examine the five interdependent stages in the process of research impact proposed by Amo [24]: Conducting the research, Sharing the findings, Disseminating the knowledge, Short-term impact, and Long-term impact. Each of these stages clarifies the role of the researcher and moves beyond research production alone, through an expectation that the researcher will take a more prominent role in the dissemination of knowledge. However, Amo [24] also states that researchers typically have a high level of control in the early stages of the process, but much less control over the later stages, where other influences will determine the nature and scope of research impact. The later

stage is described to include influencing practice, policy, curriculum development, and having an impact on society. Therefore, the role of other stakeholders in the process, such as practitioners, policy-makers, end-users, media, and other interested parties, could be understood better in relation to this stage. These stakeholders are identified in the literature as being directly interested in using scientific results [21,25,26] and contribute, directly or indirectly, to disseminating knowledge and to ensuring the short- or long-term impact, thus ensuring, in fact, the completion of the research process as described above.

1.3. The Romanian Educational Research Context

Knowledge utilization has become one of the main priorities at the European level, and national governments have made efforts to sustain the development of research and innovation. Since 2005, the Romanian central administration has introduced regulation concerning research use and dialogue with researchers in policy proposals that are submitted by government and different external actors to the legislative apparatus [27]. Still, more needs to be done so that these regulations produce the intended effect; in the last few years, regulations on this aspect have been adapted and strengthened.

Overall, the particular context of educational research utilization in Romania faces general challenges, as well as country-specific ones. There is some evidence that research production in the educational field in Romania is influencing the research utilization in policy-making, although more studies are necessary to question the degree to which this influence is happening. Still, the visibility, quality, funding, and relevance of educational research are key elements to consider [28].

Particular mention should be made of the financing and financial sustainability of educational research. Many questions have arisen in the literature on the subject of financing research and whether it is considered an element that contributes to increasing research production (see, e.g., [26] on this subject). The Romanian case indicates that there is an important relationship between the two, as efforts have been made in this area to align with European trends. However, data show that investment in these areas is still below the E.U. average [29], with only 0.38% of GDP allocated to research and innovation in 2014. Moreover, the budget allocated to research each year is not fully spent. Data extracted from Ministry of Research and Innovation website [30] shows us that, in 2016, the allocated budget via State budget law was 2.17 billion lei, out of which 1.77 billion were spent. In 2018, research amounted to 1.64 billion lei, 25% of the allocations in 2016, and even less than that was allocated in 2017. Of the 1.64 billion lei allotted, only 1.4 billion lei were spent in 2018. Mainly for this reason, a connection was also found with fragmented and underfunded institutional settings (with frequent changes in the structure of the advisory councils of the Ministry of Education and other national bodies, or unreliable funding) [31]. It is worth mentioning that the System of research, development, and innovation (RDI) comprises 263 public RDI organizations and some 600 enterprises. Of the public organizations, 56 are publicly authorized universities, 46 are national research and development institutes (of which 43 are coordinated by the Ministry of Research and Innovation), and 65 are research institutions and centers of the Romanian Academy. The National Innovation and Technology Transfer Network (ReNITT) comprises 50 specific organizations: Technology Transfer Centers, Technology Information Centers, Technology and Business Incubators, and four Science and Technology Parks [30].

A more specific challenge for Romanian research is underlined by Popa [31], who argues that the highly bureaucratic system might play a significant role in the way that knowledge transfer and utilization are enacted, while Ion and Iucu [28] identify the significant role of bureaucracy, but also bring into discussion individual factors that limit practitioners' ability to engage in genuine and sustainable research-based practices.

Kappel and Ignat [32] also draw attention to some aspects that require further analysis for the specific national context. In their view, there is no dialogue between fundamental and applied research but a flux of communication based on information transfer, different both in nuance and practice from knowledge transfer and utilization. In addition, the quality of applied research is affected by

an interference with the design stage and micro-production, especially when compared to other EU countries, where applied research is not government-funded, as is usually the case in Romania.

These challenges appear to have a great influence on the Romanian research context. For example, Singer's analysis on Romania [33], which takes into account 6 years of scientific publications (between 1996 and 2012), indicates that, at the international level, Romania ranks among the last countries in terms of the H-index and the number of published scientific articles, with the mean number of citations from 2008 to 2012 rounding up to 62. Romanian educational research, as Singer [33] observes, has a relatively small percentage of citations and a small H-index (6) compared with other countries worldwide (such as Venezuela, with a H-index of 12, or Lebanon, with a H-index of 14). In 2015, as Web of Science statistics [34] show via Analyse results/Source titles, there were 26,709 articles written by Romanian researchers, mostly in journals with specificity, such as chemistry, arts, morphology and embryology, management, and economic engineering. The number of articles written is larger in countries such as Hungary, Serbia, or Croatia. Further investigations on data concerning productivity of researchers or number of articles in the Journal of Nature and Science, for example, could clear the perception of quality of the current state of research in Romania.

Given the above descriptors, our interest through this paper is to identify where educational research stands and to identify other potential factors influencing its development from policy-makers' perspective.

2. Materials and Methods

We used a qualitative methodological approach to investigate policy-makers' perceptions regarding the use of educational research in the process of decision-making. We were also interested in identifying the factors that influence the transfer from research to policy and the role of policy-makers in this process. In this respect, 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews with policy-makers and representatives of Romanian national and local institutions were conducted.

The interview guide was developed according to categories established a priori and based on the literature on research utilization in policy-making. The interview guide sought to evaluate policy-makers' perspectives regarding:

(1) the process of research production and utilization;
(2) the importance given to research results;
(3) the factors that may influence research production and transfer;
(4) building a partnership that will support the process of research utilization; and
(5) priorities in the field of research utilization.

The interviews ranged from 25 to 92 minutes and were later transcribed and validated with the participants. All transcripts were coded using line-by-line coding in accordance with Charmaz's [35] guidelines on coding for grounded theory, a process which generated over 20 codes. Maxqda 11 software for qualitative data analysis was used to facilitate coding and data management and to provide transparency. The codes generated were ultimately grouped under five broader core categories relating to the specific research questions.

Participants

The interviews were conducted with representatives of national institutions in the field of education and policy-makers from educational bodies at the national and local levels, including the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research; the Public Policy Department within Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research; The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education; The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; The Institute of Educational Sciences; The Romanian Presidential Administration (Education and Research Department); The National Agency for Community Programs in the Field of Education and Vocational Training; The National Authority for Qualifications; The Bucharest Centre for Educational Resources; The National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas; The Centre for

Educational Resources; and the World Bank Country Office in Romania. The codes used to identify interviews in this article were assigned from I1 to I13, as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. The study sample.

Institutions	Interview Code
Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education	I1
Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education	I2
Institute of Educational Sciences	I3
Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research	I4
Centre for Educational Resources	I5
Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research	I6
Romanian Presidential Administration (Education and Research Department)	I7
National Agency for Community Programs in the Field of Education and Vocational Training	I8
Bucharest Centre for Educational Resources	I9
National Authority for Qualifications	I10
Public Policy Department (Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research)	I11
National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas	I12
World Bank (Romanian Country Office)	I13

Internal validity was secured by the selection of respondents using the following criteria: length of professional experience in their current position; type of institutional body (national or local); and training and academic background. This ensured that there was sufficient variety in our respondents' profiles.

3. Results

The findings from the interviews are presented below, organized into two main areas: firstly, the perceived needs and expectations of educational policy-makers; and secondly, the factors facilitating or inhibiting the use of research in their practice.

3.1. Policy-Makers' Perspective: Needs and Expectations

Following the analysis, one of the main aspects that could be inferred regarding policy-makers' perceptions of educational research is that research production in Romania is neither representative nor visible:

> *Neither the research conducted by the Institute of Educational Sciences nor research like yours, doctoral or with national or international public funding, has a representative dimension and is not taken into consideration, used, or even known for the elaboration of public policies (I2).*

However, policy-makers acknowledge its importance, as research results are increasingly perceived as a necessity. This perception is just beginning to be internalized, even though policy-makers admit that it is not yet a priority in the decision-making process. The need to transfer research results into public policies to develop evidence-based policies was also acknowledged in the interviews:

> *The decisions made at the national level, at least in public institutions—and when I say decisions, I'm referring to those that can be operationalized in laws—those decisions need to be evidence-based (I5).*

However, this desideratum appears to remain only at the declarative level, as it is not actually reflected in practice.

This mixed perception about research: invisible and unrepresentative on the one hand, and important and relevant on the other, runs throughout the data. One cause of this could be found in the specificities and differences between the two fields of research and policy work, particularly given the influence exerted by political factors. Policy-makers state that rarely does a research project overlap with the political mandates of decision-makers: *'research projects rarely coincide with the electoral cycle' (I7).* At the same time, there is a misalignment between the research agenda and the political agenda:

'What we consider of major interest for research is not always the same [for policy-makers]' (I3), and it is also relevant to note that *'there is no connection between research interests/themes and the real problems of the system' (I5),* underlining the disconnect between researchers' interests and priorities and what public or political agenda prioritizes.

However, one instance could be identified as an outlier, even though its implications cast doubt over the relevance of this particular type of knowledge transfer. It appears that there is a tendency for policy-makers to make use of scientific results in order to justify a decision that was already made: *'unfortunately, the starting point is the decision that needs a sound support and not the problem itself in order to see what the best solution is' (I5).* This approach also puts pressure on mid-level policy-makers, practitioners, and those whose role could be to facilitate the transfer from research to policy: *'several times one is asked [by policy-makers] post-factum to support a public policy, decision, or change already made' (I2),* a practice which deters an authentic knowledge transfer process.

In addition to the politicization of knowledge utilization, another potential explanation for such an approach to scientific research could be related to a problem of institutional leadership and its lack of expertise in working with research results: *'we have a leadership problem in public institutions, which are not used to working with research, data, and analysis, but have a more political approach' (I5).*

Another cause could be attributed to research institutions (universities or research centers), which are not considered visible enough from the policy-makers' perspective. They are expected to engage more fully in public discourse and bring relevant arguments based on their findings in order to promote their research agenda, according to one of the participants:

> *With one hundred, two hundred higher education institutions and almost the same impressive number of research institutions, to me, it would seem normal, first of all, to learn more about them and, secondly, to have public statements by the academic community of a respective discipline or research community (I7).*

This perspective stresses the importance of reconsidering and recalibrating the role of the researcher in a context marked by stakeholders' increased expectations. Adding to this argument, the respondents reiterate the position of universities and research institutions as drivers and promoters of scientific arguments in contexts where a publicly stated position is not followed by evidence, emphasizing the educational role that the research community should assume in relation to the wider society, as one of the interviewees stated:

> *We see in the public sphere many statements or articles, many of them are just speculations, incomplete data, misleading statements, in my opinion, on different domains, and I see very few professors or researchers being active in the public sphere one way or another, supporting these affirmations or just initiating, when they notice there is disinformation, a separate debate within the academic framework, a serious one, coherent, evidence-based, which could, eventually, rebalance the situation, from which the mass media can gather the right information (I7).*

Therefore, the policy-makers' perception on research production, knowledge transfer, and utilization, even inferred from a small-scale study, points towards low concern for scientific results and for how these results can be used to develop evidence-based policies in education. Policy-makers appear to have little experience in connecting the two fields, and even though they are willing to use research results in informing their decisions, the political factors weigh significantly more in the formulation of public policies. This could indicate a certain instability in an institutional system where policy-making is still highly personalized and dependent on individuals, rather than part of a well-functioning public policy system.

3.2. Policy-Makers' Perception on Factors Influencing Research Transfer

In an attempt to understand the disconnection perceived by policy-makers, our research identifies a series of factors that influence the transfer of research results to policy, namely barriers identified at

the political level and within the research community, financing, administrative hurdles, and a lack of communication between the parties involved in the process.

With regard to barriers at the political level, it appears that policy-makers underestimate the importance of research and face difficulties grasping highly specialized research products. Additionally, there appears to be a lack of clarity in defining institutional roles, as there is no specific institutional structure in charge of using research in informing policy (apart from a dedicated Policy Unit within the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research and the Institute for Educational Sciences, subordinated to the Ministry, which have a range of other institutional responsibilities). However, at the decision-making level, there seems to be a lack of a culture of 'evidence-based policy-making', as this is not yet an institutionalized practice. Furthermore, there also seems to be a lack of coherence in decision-making, as the high turnover rate in government institutions and highly personalized public office appointments lead to disruptions in the policy-cycle. This status quo is acknowledged and does not remain unchallenged, according to one of the interviewees:

> *Firstly, the policy-makers have to be engaged in research and to stay connected with researchers by permanently asking for research results from the main research centers such as national institutes of research or the universities and when there is no evidence on a certain topic, to be among those who initiate a request (establish a call for proposals) so that researchers can invest their time and effort in doing such research (I2).*

Thus, policy-makers recognize the importance of their role in promoting evidence-based policy and of their direct interest in finding the latest and most relevant research results for their domain.

As for the academic and research community, barriers perceived by policy-makers could be caused by a lack of expertise generated by low numbers of specialized human resources, limited financial resources, a lack of an adequate infrastructure for research, or time constraints due to the unequal distribution of teaching and research activities for research carried out by the academic community, leading to what one interviewee considers to be

> *A great deficit of researchers and of research competencies, not necessarily in terms of the number of people hired for a research position, but a deficit of research competencies in academia, as well as in policy-making, at different levels, and not necessarily for producing research, but rather for understanding it and being able to use the data (I2).*

Given all these reasons, some public institutions in the educational field prefer to develop their own in-house research on topics of immediate interest to them, creating ad hoc teams instead of reaching out to specialized research. In this way, they shorten the time-span needed to generate results, allocating internal resources (personnel, time, and funding), and avoiding altogether any collaboration with the research community. Apart from developing their own research projects, policy-makers resort to other information sources, mostly reports and research produced by European or national institutions (mainly European Commission's reports or local nongovernmental organization (NGO) studies). *There are some interesting and relevant reports produced by universities but maybe there are not so much known by us*, said one of the participants. These sources are selected based on the relevance of the topic, the trustworthiness of the source, and the methodological consistency of the research.

Policy-makers also acknowledge financing, or lack thereof, as an important barrier in research production and research transfer, while there is also a concern about the influence that financing bodies have on setting the research agenda. A hypothesis launched by policy-makers is that educational research transfer could be enabled better by a higher focus on fundamental and applied research, while funding bodies could open calls for competitive grants dedicated exclusively to this domain.

However, financing is seen and perceived as a reciprocal responsibility: of both policy-makers and funding bodies, as well as of researchers. From the interviews, it came out that policy-makers make the case for research centers' responsibility to create the context for bridging the gap between interested parties, given that funding is usually provided by the state budget. Therefore, policy-makers

declare that it is imperative for them to explain to local or national authorities how the money has been spent and what was the impact generated by a specific project at the societal level:

> *Research institutions and universities must show more interest in connecting with policy-makers; they are obliged to present how the public money was spent, how they managed to contribute to the innovation of the education field, what their solutions to the identified problems were and what are their future interests regarding the development of a certain domain (I7).*

Additionally, policy-makers, as public servants and elected or appointed officials, admit that they should be able to account for public spending on research and consider it necessary for their role to also monitor how funding is used. More specifically, one of the participants underlines the importance of tracking the impact of funding on a particular research area:

> *We have to be able to know exactly how much money was spent on financing the research activities and, more importantly, we must know what impact those projects have generated in term of how much money has returned to the state budget in form of investments (I10).*

Other important aspect noted by policy-makers refers to the communication process between themselves and researchers. The respondents perceive that there is a lack of communication on the researchers' part, as well as little proactivity with regard to promoting research results: researchers must learn how to become *'more actively involved in the research dissemination process, by becoming more proactive and creating meeting [contexts], where researchers present their research results and their future research intentions' (I7).*

From the policy-makers' perspective, one important enabler of research transfer would be for the research community to take on greater responsibility in transferring results from research to practice. Policy-makers recommend that researchers work within interdisciplinary teams, comprising people specialized in different areas, including communication. To improve this latter aspect, while they admit there could be a higher involvement at the institutional level to facilitate the transfer, policy-makers require more transparency in communicating research results and increased proactivity from the researchers' side. Policy-makers also agree that it is their obligation to maintain a close interaction with the actors involved in the research process and, as one of the policy-makers highlighted, this is because

> *The position that I have, as a policy-maker, obliges me to get out in the public eye and explain the decisions that I have made; it is my obligation to interact with those who have an interest in how decisions are being made (I12).*

Even so, as demonstrated in practice, policy-makers tend to see a hierarchical relationship between themselves and researchers, rather than having equal roles or shared responsibility in regard to research transfer.

Policy-makers also identified several opportunities that could contribute to better collaboration with researchers. One of these opportunities could be to develop public–private partnerships, which could improve financing on one hand and, on the other, make research more relevant for policy, industry, or practice. Extending the area of cooperation from the research community towards other stakeholders could also be achieved by developing a more formal partnership between policy-makers and researchers, as one of the participants stated:

> *Between national body institutions involved in a research area and researchers there must be a strong collaboration, and this collaboration must have as a main specific feature an organized plan to disseminate the knowledge generated by research (I9).*

Nevertheless, policy-makers suggest that there could also be a stronger partnership within the academic and research community itself, so that different research teams would not use their resources for small, separate projects on the same topic, but rather pull together resources and have a greater impact together, and even create active research networks to use complementary expertise

and gain more leverage in promoting their results and recommendations. Another policy-maker's suggestion refers to identifying or creating a mediating body or entity that could bridge the gap between researchers, practitioners, and different stakeholders:

> *The brief in itself is not always enough to make a decision; that is why it is important to have someone who knows how to synthesize the data available, and this person or institution must have proper training and must be subordinated either to some educational national body, such the Ministry of Education, or to academic institutions (I10).*

This would help to reduce the dissatisfaction felt by researchers who consider that their work is not valued, and policy-makers would have access to an increased number of valuable and relevant research reports. Another opportunity refers to creating institutional structures able to facilitate research transfer or to increasing institutional capacity in order to accommodate such initiatives, doubled by coherent financing strategies for research.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Our paper focused on the perception that a selection of policy-makers involved in the educational field has on research production and its utilization in policy-making. In the field of education, the need for policy-makers to engage more closely with researchers in the process of research production, transfer, and utilization has been widely debated. The results of this study provide an insight into policy-makers' perspective on research utilization and attempts to understand the challenges faced in establishing closer collaboration between the two parties.

Taking into account the results, there are several aspects that stand out in understanding the disconnection between researchers and policy-makers and the factors influencing research utilization. It appears that there are systemic blockages on both sides: politics and the opportunity cost for decision-making, a lack of stable and efficient procedures to institutionalize their relationship, a high level of bureaucracy, limited resources and a lack of financing, a lack of institutionalized communication, limited accessibility of results, and a lack of consultation and cooperation between the two parties, attributed to their belonging to different professional areas, defined by different cultures, values, and rewards [20,21,35,36]. Given these challenges (time-constraints, a lack of expertise, or institutionalized procedures), our research shows on one hand that some public institutions prefer to develop in-house research based on specific needs, thus moving even further away from the research community. On the other hand, suggestions for an intermediary organization to mediate the research transfer could burden the linkage between researchers and policy-makers and could increase the bureaucratic stress that was mentioned as a barrier. It is interesting to question if policy-makers make use of bureaucracy motives to explain an unknown or a faulty relationship. The opposite of this suggestion would be training on research use for policy-makers and on research transfer and visibility for researchers that could ensure a more linear liaison. In reality, the relationship between researchers and policy-makers is not institutionalized, so that bureaucracy could be an impediment in the organization and initiation of dialogue. Researchers perform in some sets of institutional arrangements outside universities, such as Ad Astra (for research visibility and researchers' cooperation), or the Romanian Academy with research institutions on different topics. What could be a barrier of bureaucracy, although the authors did not mention examples, appears to be the issue of public spending: the justification of specific needs of a department in purchasing data or access to different sources of research results involves administrative procedures that do not guarantee the expected finality.

In addition to these systemic blockages or barriers reflected by the policy-makers' perspective, the results of our study note a willingness on the policy-makers' side to acknowledge the importance of using research to inform decisions and their potential role in facilitating this process. Although policy-makers stress the researchers' responsibility in communicating and promoting research results, supported by arguments ranging from social responsibility to financial accountability, they also understand the current contextual limitations and assume, even if only at a declarative level, their

role in the process (also as Amo [24] argues, among others). This shows that there is an interested audience for research, even though it needs to be activated and pursued in a more proactive manner to reach practitioners: teachers, policy-makers, and a wider audience. This could require researchers to assume more responsibility for closing the gap, focusing on one of the four approaches to close the gap drawn by Heinsch et.al [36], namely 'fixing the researchers': an approach under which 'researchers are held more accountable for serving the needs of the profession'. In what concerns the mutual financial accountably of policy-makers and researchers that was mentioned as an identified perception, we could elaborate on institutional practices. The funding bodies have internal procedures that they apply during research projects they funded and ask research teams to provide information and reports on the state of their activities. Also, reports on research findings and budget execution are also asked for, mostly by funding bodies. Institutions decide how this information is used further, but tracking of funded research is considered legitimate to justify public spending. This principle is acknowledged by all parties.

Reflecting on the stages in the process of research impact as proposed by Amo [24], it appears that educational research in Romania only responds to the first stage of conducting research, and partly to the second one (sharing findings). Thus, even though research production occurs, research transfer is mostly done through informal networks and lacks institutionalization, which could make it more prone to bias, untrustworthy, and unreliable.

This could imply that researchers have limited control over the subsequent stages and could indicate the early point at which other actors should intervene in the process to ensure long-term research impact, described as potential or actual impact on policy.

Educational research in Romania currently finds itself at an incipient stage, where we cannot yet discuss actual research utilization, but rather speak about an unstructured and unsupported process of information-sharing, based on contextual opportunities and individual access to policy-makers. While educational research and its relationship with policy finds common ground with similar contexts described by previous studies and subsequent literature across a range of different fields [37–41], educational research in Romania appears to be at the stage of formulating questions and focusing on challenges, not yet having crossed towards finding solutions and providing the answer needed for bridging the gap between the two sides.

First, some of these solutions could contribute to connecting the current state of research as framed by both the national context and policy-makers' perceptions and factors that hinder research use. Therefore, making research more visible, developing research on a larger scale, nuancing quantitative data with qualitative research, focusing on developing partnerships with policy-makers or building formal communication channels that would ensure a timely and more efficient transfer of research results to practice and policy are suggested outcomes of the current research. Second, with regard to the utilization mechanisms, all parties involved should focus on developing institutional structures that would facilitate utilization of research into practice and help avoid the diffusion of responsibility by ensuring a formalized context for this process to occur. Finally, our research underlines the fact that policy-makers' role should not be neglected. There should be a push from their side for alignment of both policy and research agendas along common priorities, and for an increased engagement with the field of research, by creating or supporting more formal communication and partnership contexts. Furthermore, one essential area benefitting from policy-makers' involvement would be research financing, both by advocating and supporting an increase of the GDP percentage allotted to research, and by opening lines of financing linked to strategic policy objectives.

Further research could look into identifying the specific stage of educational research in Romania and attempt to measure its current impact. Moreover, the particular solutions provided by policy-makers for bridging the gap between research and policy could also be further explored, namely the creation of research networks and of an intermediary entity comprising interdisciplinary teams. In addition to expanding focus into these directions, further research could also take into account the policy and decision-making processes from an institutional perspective, in relationship with research

production, transfer, and usage, thus creating causality among context factors, actors' perceptions, and concrete actions.

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