

# How Do You Think It Feels? On Being the Epitome of Pseudoscience<sup>1</sup>

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**I** imagine you have just written a dissertation into which you have invested the lion's share of the last five or so years.<sup>2</sup> After many late nights and a great deal of self-doubt, you have finally put an end to it. It turns out the newspapers are interested, since your theme obviously has some news-value. You have chosen a subject which stirs emotions, it seems. To the best of your knowledge you have tried to make the journalists not distort what you say. But at "The University Leak" (Högskoleläckan), a Facebook site where academics and others discuss, if that be the term, academic issues, you have been bashed for various reasons by people who have, at best, read your abstract. You are said to make too much of the empirical material, or – well, just imagine – someone claims you do not have any empirical material. Your research is described as the worst kind of postmodern pseudoscience.

But now it is summer. You have stopped reading "The University Leak" – why wouldn't you? – and, after a time of doubting whether or not you want to take part in the rather infantile war between the sciences, you have decided to try to make it a go in the insecure and (in your opinion) somewhat deceitful academic world. The interest for what you have achieved has waned, and,

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Katarina Blennow and Ingrid Bosseldal for valuable feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Malmström, 2017.

quite frankly, you are rather pleased. Just as for William Stoner, being in the limelight was never a goal for you. Spurred by curiosity, you just wanted to investigate a phenomenon you found strange and rather disturbing.

Then, in the middle of your vacation, you get to know that in one of the nationwide morning papers your dissertation has been used as a typical example of unnecessary, expensive educational research, which is of no significance whatsoever, since it is not an intervention study in which the effects of a specific teaching method is analysed.<sup>3</sup> The article is the start of a debate of the needlessness of educational sciences. Could you see it coming?

I, for sure, could not. But this is what happened, more or less (to paraphrase Vonnegut). It has been emotional. I suppose I was not prepared for being questioned for the design of the study and its theoretical underpinnings rather than the results. I was astonished by the ferociousness and contempt of some of the comments. I was uncomfortable with being accused of doing useless research. Anyway, writing this piece has been cathartic. That said, it is a personal text.

Be that as it may, after analysing and describing the incident I try to come up with an interpretation of the reception of the dissertation. In this essay, I will therefore also make an effort to bring some understanding to some burning issues: How did we end up here? Why all this talk about effects and evidence? What is the origin of the evidence movement? What effects do talk about effectiveness in education have?

In the next part, I use the demeaning article mentioned above as a springboard to discuss what was brought up in the debate. But first I will dwell on some of the results of my dissertation, since it pretty much captures the script of media debates about education. And, I would claim, the article itself illustrates the phenomenon pretty well. In the final part, I discuss some reasons for educational

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<sup>3</sup> Enkvist, 2017.

sciences being continuously bashed and what might happen if we listen too readily to the siren calls of the evidence movement.

## **Educational Sciences at Risk**

To give an idea of what the article mentioned above criticised, it might be a good idea to give an account of some of the major findings in my dissertation. The dissertation consists of two major empirical sections, both of which related to the view of writing. One is devoted to media debates and one to Swedish curricula for upper secondary school. In this essay, I will focus on the media debates. I analysed what has been said about student writing in media debates in the seventies, the nineties and the present.

I would assert that it was probably the contents in the dissertation as well as what was actually criticised that really mattered in the debate that followed. As a background to the debate, in the next section I discuss media debates on student writing, which is the part of the dissertation that received the most public interest. This was to be expected, since analyses of curricula normally do not trigger media coverage. Subsequently, the article is scrutinised. Among other things, it blamed educational science for not dealing with matters of real importance, such as what works in the classroom.

## **Perpetual Writing Crisis**

In 2013, nine historians wrote an article about their students' lacking writing abilities.<sup>4</sup> The article went viral. It was mentioned in media of all sorts: broadsheets (well, what used to be broadsheets), tabloids, radio documentaries and morning TV shows. The original article was rather sober in tone, but the authors also made presuppositions about students' knowledge and skills based on emotions: "Most students not having any basic

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<sup>4</sup> Enefalk, Andersson, Aronsson, Englund, Novaky, Svensson, Thisner, Ågren and Ågren, 2013.

knowledge in our own field, history, is a fact we have accepted”.<sup>5</sup> Many of the assertions realise a categorical modality: “Among the students who come to us directly after upper secondary school, a majority have language problems”.<sup>6</sup> Media texts habitually make interpretations of complex events into ‘facts’, for instance by using categorical modalities.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the articles are true to the genre, but the effects of modality should not be underestimated; categorical modality gives an impression of certainty.

In the intertextual chain, the propositions about students were treated as truth. Students cannot write... or read... or think. In an interview, one of the authors of the original article claimed that the students were not able to understand the argumentative article the historians had written: “They simply do not understand what it says”.<sup>8</sup> This statement made an editorial writer exclaim: “We are talking about a newspaper article of a few hundred words. It is deeply depressing”.<sup>9</sup> In another article, a scholar compared the cognitive abilities of the students with those of 13-year-olds.<sup>10</sup> The students were ascribed a collective identity and their voices were only heard in a small number of the articles. The debaters often used anecdotes, which functioned as local legends, to create consternation and reaction. In quite a few of the articles, the decay was said to be worse than ever, and it was claimed to have become perceptible just a few years earlier.<sup>11</sup>

Little did the historians nor the other authors of crisis articles know this was old news. (Paradoxically enough, as the quote above illustrates, the historians stressed they had to put up with their students not having any historical knowledge.) Lamenting the

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<sup>5</sup> Enefalk et al, 2013 (my translation). In Swedish, the sentence has an initial that-clause, which expresses presupposed content. According to Fairclough (1992, p. 121), [p]resuppositions are effective ways to manipulate people, because they are often difficult to challenge”.

<sup>6</sup> Enefalk et al, 2013 (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Fairclough, 1992, p. 160f.

<sup>8</sup> Hagberg, 2013 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Linder, 2013 (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> Samuelsson, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Hagberg, 2013; Samuelsson, 2013.

writing abilities of the young is at least an almost century-old custom.<sup>12</sup> Mike Rose even has a name for the attitude that it is worse than ever and that the decay started just a while ago: *the myth of transience*.<sup>13</sup> If only we do this or that (most often going back-to-basics), the problems will be solved in one year, or five, or possibly a generation. Neither did the historians know they were writing in a good old genre – the writing crisis genre.

One of the findings in my dissertation is that there is actually a specific writing crisis genre with some particular characteristics. According to Ledin, there are four criteria for a genre.<sup>14</sup> First, it is a social activity, which means patterns of production and consumption are important. The producers as well as consumers of writing crisis articles seem to belong to a discourse community whose members have approximately the same middle-class background. Second, the genre needs to be named. To my knowledge, the writing crisis genre has not been identified previously. This does not mean it did not exist before, only that it was not recognised as such. Third, the genre is dynamic, which would imply that it changes over time. In my material, it became obvious that there was a change in the genre in the nineties. At that time, many debaters started using surveys of different kinds to support their ideas, either small-scale studies of one school that were generalised to represent all of Sweden or large-scale studies such as IEA or TIMSS. When I analysed the studies, I could show that the debaters interpreted the studies wilfully, though. They did not give the whole picture or came up with ill-founded solutions.<sup>15</sup> My interpretation of the surveys being used in the nineties is that New Public Management ideas of measurement had reached

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<sup>12</sup> Andersson, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> Rose, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Ledin, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> A telling example is when a politician stated that the results of a writing study showed that schools were too kind to students who lacked the basic skills. They needed, he asserted, to be kept an extra year to “rub in” the basics (Jällhage, 1999, my translation). In an essay attached to the study, the scholar who constructed it, though, envisions a Swedish subject where “today’s mechanic skill practice is excluded”, i.e. the opposite of the cure suggested by the politician (Allard, 1999, p. 94, my translation).

debates about school by then. In the 2013 debate, it was back to normal again, i.e. taken for granted ideas about a writing crisis without the slightest support; the school crisis had been pronounced so eagerly for the last decade, not least due to mediocre PISA results, that no evidence for a writing crisis was needed. Everyone just knew. Global rankings are telling, after all. Fourth, the genre consists of some specific traits. In the writing crisis genre, the *paratexts* are often drastic and exaggerated. Genette describes the paratexts as the threshold to a text. The paratexts are for instance images, headlines, introduction and words in bold type, which draw attention to the reader as he or she flips through the paper (or web page).<sup>16</sup> A headline from 1976 read “The Fall of Language”.<sup>17</sup> Another article, from 2013, was titled “The Wordless Generation”.<sup>18</sup> Another trait, obvious from the headlines given as examples, is a prophecy of doom. Increased time for the subject Swedish in school is a prerequisite for the welfare state to live on, as one author proclaims.<sup>19</sup> Another is worried that there will be scribes in the street corners in the future unless we start teaching the basics again.<sup>20</sup> As if we ever stopped.<sup>21</sup> Closely linked with the sense of doom is seeing the past in a nostalgic light. When the golden era occurred is either obscured or, appropriately, at around the time the author went to school him/herself. Often these ideas are woven into anecdotes about days long gone or contrasted with anarchic life in present day classrooms. Articles written in the writing crisis genre often have quotes or mock-quotes, authentic or made up examples of poor language use, most often surface errors, taken out of context, which makes it hard for the reader to know whether they are actually telling or cherry picked.<sup>22</sup> The writing crisis genre is probably universal. It is for instance evident in the material I

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<sup>16</sup> Genette, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Johnsson, 1976 (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> Hagberg, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Nettervik, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Johnsson, 1976.

<sup>21</sup> Evidence to the contrary can be found, for instance in Bergman, 2007; Bergöö, 2005; Brodow, 1976; Dahl, 1999, Malmgren, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> For examples, see Malmström, 2017.

analyse from the U.S. One example is the widely spread article “Why Johnny Can’t Write”, published in *Newsweek* in 1975, read by millions of people and spread to numerous countries. In the article, we get to know that “[w]illy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates”.<sup>23</sup> The crisis rhetoric was even more demagogic and stormy in the report *A Nation at Risk* from 1983, authored by a consortium appointed by the government, which cautioned about “a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people”.<sup>24</sup> In Britain, the *Black Papers*, published from 1969 to 1975, were “a series of right-wing populist pamphlets which mounted a trenchant critique of all aspects of progressive and comprehensive education”.<sup>25</sup> One of the major themes – the two others being indiscipline and unruly left-wing teachers – was the idea that academic standards were in decline, particularly standards of literacy and numeracy. According to many commentators, the decline of basic skills could explain Britain’s economic decline – despite the fact that there was no clear evidence of decline in standards and even some counter evidence of no decline.<sup>26</sup> But this *discourse of derision*, as Ball would have it, was massive and effectively silenced other possible voices.

How, then, can the perpetual writing crisis be interpreted? One point that can be made is that there are constantly new and higher demands of literacy in society.<sup>27</sup> Rising societal demands suggests the myth of deterioration can prevail. Another important fact is that there has been a massive student expansion in Sweden and the western world during this period. Groups that used to be marginalised have got access to higher education.<sup>28</sup> There is also

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<sup>23</sup> Sheils, 1975.

<sup>24</sup> Gardner, 1983, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ball, 2006, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Ball, 2006, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> According to Graff (1979), the demands are however exaggerated. His concept the literacy myth implies that “literacy is [in contemporary popular discourse] represented as an unqualified good” leading to “progress and happiness” (2010, p. 640).

<sup>28</sup> Askling, 2012.

the loss of status and prestige of the new class of intellectuals, the professional-managerial class that appears first and foremost in the 20th century.<sup>29</sup> It gets its authority by the language, the culture of critical discourse, as Gouldner refers to it. For that reason, education is important, but as more and more people get access to higher education, some of the status and power of the intellectual class is decreased.<sup>30</sup> According to Williams, the cultural capital is the only way for the intellectuals to distinguish themselves from the masses. This is why the alleged crises so often concern linguistic etiquette; what angers the most seems to be surface errors in student texts.<sup>31</sup> In line with this thought is the fact that the university professor, due to NPM principles and marketisation of higher education, has been deskilled and is more or less an exchangeable labourer who has to fight hard for authenticity.<sup>32</sup> Ball describes a kind of value schizophrenia that may arise if engagement and experience have to be sacrificed to pressures of performance.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the crisis outbursts could be seen as anxiety of the passing time, thus the myths of the fall of civilisation and the golden era. In liquid times, language may appear as the only thing constant to hold on to. But since languages indeed develop, it becomes the task of mother tongue education to keep language (and social) change at bay.<sup>34</sup> A thankless task, no doubt.

The crisis rhetoric is massive in all the different time periods I analyse. There is a popular discourse of writing constructed of a number of myths about writing. A myth empties a text of its historical context and fills it with timeless ideological content.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, it affects emotions and perceptions of the addressee, rather than inform. The myth is manipulative, since it makes subjective notions become naturalised and taken for granted. Those taken-for-granted facts are pronounced over and over, to

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<sup>29</sup> Gouldner, 1979; Ehrenreich, and Ehrenreich, 1979, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Gouldner, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Ball, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Ball, 2004, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> This interpretation is more elaborated in Malmström, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, 1972.

the effect that ideas about the constant failure of school are created. There is a risk that the crisis rhetoric becomes almost hegemonic. Even though it might be *possible* to voice alternative ideas, those who do run the risk of being derided and belittled.

## Educational Research as the Reason for Educational Shortcomings

My dissertation and its reception illustrate that, on the one hand, it is possible to voice alternative ideas, but, on the other hand, that doing so might cause ridicule. The dissertation was brought up in a guest editorial by a professor emerita in the humanities in *Svenska Dagbladet*, one of the major morning papers in Sweden. In the professor's editorials, the Swedish school is constantly criticised. In countless articles and a number of books she has assiduously proclaimed the mantra that Swedish education is at a loss. According to her, its downfall is an effect of the education reforms in the sixties, whose aim, among others, was to level out social injustices.<sup>36</sup>

This time the idea was to accuse educational research for being (partly) responsible for the problems in education. My, by then, recently published dissertation was used to illustrate the shortcomings of educational research to improve teaching. The professor starts on a general(ising) note, though. By referring to three studies of educational science, she states that educational research in Sweden is not about how to improve teaching. The reason is that it does not study effects of this or that teaching method. It is not evidence-based. However, effect studies are hardly the only way of improving teaching. In one of the studies she refers to, it turns out that even though the number of effect studies are sparse, a vast number of projects about individuals' learning and didactics have received external funding between 2005 and 2010.<sup>37</sup> One would assume that in quite a few of them one of the aims is to improve teaching. The professor continues by

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<sup>36</sup> See for instance Enkvist, 2016a, 2016b.

<sup>37</sup> Broady, Börjesson, Dalberg and Krih, 2011.

asserting that educational science is expensive – there are presently 175 professors and numerous Ph.D. students, but despite all the money that is spent, educational science, she claims, does not live up to the expectations of the public. Thus, state funding of educational science is an abuse of the taxpayers’ money. To prove her point, she then turns to my dissertation:

What is important about this dissertation is that it is typical. It does not study effects. It does not show how students can become better writers or how teachers can become more efficient in teaching writing. It is not about what the public think is at the core of pedagogy, which means the subject pedagogy is in danger.<sup>38</sup>

The professor also asserts that the dissertation does not give evidence that the critics are wrong (to an extent, it actually does) and, additionally, that it does not investigate whether student writing has improved or deteriorated. Therefore, it is useless and expensive, and since the researchers, well, me in this case, are not experts in improving teaching – I did not study effects of a specific method – they should not be appointed as teacher educators. They are a waste of the teacher candidates’ time, as is the discipline pedagogy as such. Why should society pay for this activity? she rhetorically asks.

Reading the article was somewhat confusing; in previous research, I have done some practice-oriented research, i.e. tried to improve teaching, just like the professor proposes and I would have thought my more than decade-long experience of teaching in upper secondary school would count for something. At the time, I was therefore rather perplexed, both by the discussions in “The University Leak” and by the editorial. I had expected to become criticised for what I came up with in my analyses. This did not happen, though. I cannot help thinking that one of the reasons is that instead of actually scrutinising my results some of the commentators took the easy way out and saw an opportunity to criticise the scientific discipline, the design of the study and the theories (for instance critical discourse analysis) used. Thus, they might have had a set opinion *beforehand*. Whether they read the

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<sup>38</sup> Enkvist, 2017 (my translation).

text or not did not really matter. The problem is that many of the statements are sweeping and oversimplifying. At hindsight, though, I realise I should have seen it coming.

To paraphrase the professor, her article is interesting because it is typical. In my material, there are a great number of articles, from the seventies onwards, that scorn educational sciences. This is a good example of Ball's concept *discourse of derision*.<sup>39</sup> Analogous with the writing crisis genre I identified, there is probably a "bashing of educational sciences and teacher education" genre with specific traits. But on what grounds is the discipline ridiculed? The professor implies that the research me and others devote our time to is not beneficial to society. I suppose that could be questioned. However, I would suspect there was an even more pressing issue at hand. The professor's critique over the years of school failure had been part of my empirical material. Perhaps this could explain why she used a dissertation in the discipline educational science as proof of the flaws of the discipline pedagogy?<sup>40</sup> True, educational science is a construction created to cure the supposed ills of the discipline pedagogy. One of the aims was to bridge the gap between educationalists and the classroom, supposedly by endorsing clinical evidence-based research. But, as Biesta points out, educational research can have different practical roles. My research would be an example of the *cultural role* of research, in that it provides "a different way of understanding and imagining social reality".<sup>41</sup> When this alternative perspective problematises presuppositions and taken-for-granted ideas, emotions will be aroused.

Let us turn back to the question of research value. I question whether it is within the limits of reason that a professor in one

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<sup>39</sup> Ball, 2006, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> To an international reader, the concepts might be somewhat puzzling. In Sweden, educational sciences and the discipline pedagogy are sometimes separated. In Lund, for instance, pedagogy belongs to the Faculty of Social Sciences while educational science belongs to The Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology.

<sup>41</sup> Biesta, 2007, p. 19.

field evaluates the social benefits of another (in a morning paper).<sup>42</sup> Even more questionable is the idea that public opinion, or, rather, what said professor guesses is the public opinion, should judge research value. Furthermore, are effect studies really the one and only way forward? In the last part of this essay, I will discuss the evidence-based methods in educational research that the professor and other critics demand.

## **The Elusive Effects of Effect Studies and Evidence-based Education**

The bashing of educational sciences has a long history. In my material, dating back to the seventies, articles where educational science gets the blame for school failure can be found throughout the time period. The history probably goes further back in time. In the seventies, educational research took a turn towards curriculum studies and sociology of education and, thus, in the view of some critics (not least government officials in Britain and the U.S.), distanced itself from what goes on in the classrooms.<sup>43</sup> Researchers became more interested in things such as ideologies behind policy documents and prerequisites and injustices of schooling.<sup>44</sup> Theories of feminism and antiracism came into the fore in the eighties, and to some extent, displaced class analysis.<sup>45</sup> In Sweden, phenomenography, developed by Ference Marton in the seventies, became a popular methodology.<sup>46</sup> A counter-movement,

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<sup>42</sup> As a guest editor the professor presents herself like this: “I want to show the readers that many of the propositions that circulate about school are ideological statements and not facts. The area is extremely ideologised and I want to contribute to tearing down the pedagogical ‘Berlin wall’. There are endless things that need to be said about educational issues”. So true. It appears, though, as if the professor believes she, in contrast with the educationalists, is able to be fully neutral. As Fairclough (1992, p. 90) puts it, “[i]t should not be assumed that people are aware of the ideological dimensions of their own practice”.

<sup>43</sup> Broadfoot and Nisbet, p. 115.

<sup>44</sup> Englund, 2006, p. 385f.

<sup>45</sup> Ball, 1995, p. 258.

<sup>46</sup> Englund, 2006, p. 387.

demanding less interpretative methods, was bound to come. At this time, some educationalists identified themselves as “school effectiveness researchers”.<sup>47</sup>

The evidence movement is, thus, not a new phenomenon. Rømer, however, claims that it was not until the beginning of the new millennium that the concept *evidence* came to be used extensively in discussions about education. Before that it was used here and there as a helping word, but, says Rømer, it has “no tradition, no anchoring, and no sound philosophy”.<sup>48</sup> Contrary to the notion of evidence in a general sense, when used in education the concept has a more specific meaning, most often denoting evidence of *what works*.<sup>49</sup> The concept is slippery, though. As Biesta points out, who would be against the idea that education is based on, or at least informed by, the best available evidence? But, he continues, if the question of for or against evidence comes to the forefront, the question of what kind of evidence we are talking about and the normative question of what kind of education we want, tend to be forgotten.<sup>50</sup> The object of education is not just to learn, but to learn something, he concludes.

As stated above, it may be hard to discern exactly when the evidence movement came into being. However, the notion of evidence-based practices took hold in a context of new school reforms in the late eighties and the nineties making schools, colleges and universities more accountable to local stakeholders.<sup>51</sup> In Britain, some reports in the late nineties questioned the quality and relevance of educational research; it was said to be “fragmented, noncumulative, and methodologically flawed”.<sup>52</sup> In the United States, the same concerns were voiced and in the late nineties legislation and federal research funding were formed by ideas of educational research as being able to tell us what works

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<sup>47</sup> Ball, 1995, p. 258.

<sup>48</sup> Rømer, 2014, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> Biesta, 2014, p. 20f.

<sup>50</sup> Biesta, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Hammersley, 2007, p. x.

<sup>52</sup> Biesta, 2007, p. 1f.

in the classroom.<sup>53</sup> The same critique has been raised even from within the field, however. In a lecture in 1996, David Hargreaves accused educational research for not being worth the money spent. His remedy was for educational science to learn more from medicine to become relevant to practice. The ills of educational research is, according to Hargreaves, that it is not cumulative – it does not build on earlier research. It is not evidence-based. This argument leads into the confident statement that the research is not useful to teachers.<sup>54</sup> As Hammersley affirms in a reply, this is a “narrowly instrumental view of practical relevance”, one which could be referred to as *the engineering model* of “the relationship between research and practice”.<sup>55</sup> In his lecture, Hargreaves also asked for a national strategy for educational research to “shape the agenda of educational research and its policy implications and applications”.<sup>56</sup> His prayers were heard. In many countries, for instance United States, Britain, Denmark and Sweden, “What Works Clearinghouses” or the like have been instigated, whose purpose is to increase the efficiency of education using evidence-based methods. The clearinghouses were originally based on ideas from the medical field but the ideas were eventually introduced in educational research and practice.<sup>57</sup> Evidently, the evidence movement has gained some ground. It has taken the role as a key player in policy making and research funding in many countries. Some educational researchers have applauded the idea that education should be based on evidence, even though some have felt a need to reduce the instrumentality and therefore talk about evidence-*informed* education.<sup>58</sup> The evidence-informed practices do not necessarily relate to specific methods, but rather a general

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<sup>53</sup> Biesta, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Hargreaves, 2007. Slavin, 2002, has argued along the same lines.

<sup>55</sup> Hammersley, 2007, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Hargreaves, 2007, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Bjerg Petersen, Reimer and Qvortrup, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Bjerg Petersen et al., 2014, p. 9.

set of pedagogical guidelines.<sup>59</sup> To some extent, this more nuanced view is the effect of the criticism against the concept.<sup>60</sup>

The critique from the educational community of evidence-based practices has at times been harsh.<sup>61</sup> Some have criticised the fact that quantitative studies are favoured and more qualitative efforts are given low priority.<sup>62</sup> This is certainly true, but a more pressing issue than which methods are privileged is that educational content and aims are not given much attention.<sup>63</sup> Others have questioned the similarity between medicine and education on the grounds that evidence in these fields have different meanings.<sup>64</sup> Opponents have also cautioned against epistemological insularity made possible by “the omission of other theories including queer, feminist, race, postcolonial, critical, and poststructural theories”.<sup>65</sup> Concerns have been raised about a future of education being technical and instrumental where the primary purpose is to make students ready for a “globalised competition society”.<sup>66</sup> The managerial agenda of evidence-based education has been criticised, and, finally, the fact that values in educational research and practice become absent.<sup>67</sup>

One of the fiercest critics is Thomas Aastrup Rømer.<sup>68</sup> To him the concepts evidence and education are contradictory, which implies that the more evidence-based a practice, the less education, as we know it, can take place. As practice is “reduced to the simple application of evidence-based rules, or as structural passages for enhancing test scores”, the teacher’s judgement is out of the

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<sup>59</sup> According to Rømer, 2014, p. 108, Hattie and Helmke could be said to share this view, as does, I would claim, von Oettingen, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Biesta, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> Biesta, 2007, and Bjerg Petersen et al., 2014, describe the debates and those taking part in them.

<sup>62</sup> Bjerg Petersen et al., 2014, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Rømer, 2014, p. 107.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance Hammersley, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre, 2002.

<sup>66</sup> Bjerg Petersen et al., 2014, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Biesta, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Rømer, 2014.

picture. The cultural purposes of education lose significance. In evidence-based research the method has to be detached from the content, the context and the purpose of education if the method is to be isolated and its effect measured. Thus, educational research becomes “a neutral, second-order theory, quite different from science proper”. If the classical scientific question “What is going on?” is replaced by the instrumental question “What works?”, educational sciences are marginalised, Rømer claims.<sup>69</sup> The method acts in relation to national and global rankings, which means evidence becomes part of an international hegemony providing information to a global marketplace. Education, then, “is not about giving schools a knowledge base, and it is not about preparation for life, or for businesses and crafts, for that matter. It is about serving the global economy”.<sup>70</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Notwithstanding the criticism, this is where we are now. This is what we have to live by. The calls for evidence-based research, I would suppose, will be even stronger in the future. My take on the plead for evidence-based research is that it tends to get too overwhelming, too overshadowing, too all-encompassing. Its inherent ostensible logic that all education and educational research should be based on evidence might at first glance make sense, but the consequence could be that all other kinds of educational research may appear unfounded, speculative and, if you will, unscientific. One of the effects is that in the media scientists in other fields, for instance brain researchers, philosophers, historians, physicists and economists, without being overly well-read in educational sciences, make claims to defining what kind of educational research is of any use.<sup>71</sup> The scientists are welcome to debate the future of schooling, but it would be becoming if they realised that their knowledge about education is perhaps a wee bit limited. Instead, educational science is looked

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<sup>69</sup> Rømer, 2014, p. 113, 111.

<sup>70</sup> Rømer, 2014, p. 114.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance Danielsson, Moberg, Sturmark, and Wikforss, 2016.

upon with contempt, and there is a plead for objective and evidence-based practices. However, apart from the *technical role* of research – “a producer of means, strategies, and techniques to achieve given ends” – educational research could also, as stated before, have a *cultural role*. The two roles could inform each other, but, as Biesta points out, a “key problem with the idea of evidence-based practice is that it simply overlooks the cultural option” and reduces research to what is effective, i.e. to what works.<sup>72</sup> If dominant discourses are allowed to define what education and educational sciences are and set the educational agenda, it would come as no surprise if activities of scholars in education are ridiculed and scoffed at, should they not meet the narrowly demarcated ideals of the apostles of the evidence movement, especially if the educational research problematises taken-for-granted ideas and presuppositions about the doings of schools and students. The research becomes an easy target for those claiming to be in the know about the state of education – without knowing.

The problem is that the discourses of derision are hard to combat, not least since they are spread with the help of the media, and, thus, at least to an extent, shape public opinion. The more the discourses are vented, the greater the risk that “truths” are created and educational researchers derided. A possible effect is that this might make scholars anxious and even silenced. After all, who would want to be a mock-scientist? Then again, who is to counter the negative discourses if not educational researchers. I think we need to stand up against the adversaries.<sup>73</sup> We should not refrain from “going public and being political”. Additionally, we should continue doing research that we believe in, research that asks *what is going on* rather than *what works*, research that “transcends the immediate agenda of [educational research] aimed at improving practice” and instead advocate for “educational change in a broad sense”, as self-study researchers Berry and Forgasz proclaim (a research methodology that would probably be frowned upon by the advocates of the evidence movement).<sup>74</sup> When, in twenty or

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<sup>72</sup> Biesta, 2007, p. 18f.

<sup>73</sup> A good example is Westberg and Prytz, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Berry and Forgasz, 2018, p. 48.

thirty years, we, in awe, look back upon a time desperately enmeshed with international rankings, measurement, and accountability, I would like to be able to look myself in the mirror and feel that at least I tried.

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