

## The historicity of pedagogical research

### *La storicità della ricerca pedagogica*

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abstract

*There seems to be a growing interest among policy-makers and academics in facts and figures from the field of pedagogy. This is partly fuelled by the search for evidence-based practice, and partly inherent to the econometric argument of returns on investment. In this paper, we argue that this trend coincides with a democratic deficit in the research on early childhood education and may also signal the end of pedagogy. We take a genealogical approach to the question of how truth is constructed in educational research and how this relates to social, economic and political contexts. We do so in order to highlight the responsibility of the researcher. After all, researchers in education are not only influenced by dominant discourse, they themselves are dominant discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Evidence-based practice, Quality, Educational research, Pedagogy, Genealogical approach.*

Sembra esserci un crescente interesse tra i responsabili politici e accademici sui fatti e cifre dal campo della pedagogia. Ciò è in parte alimentato dalla ricerca di pratiche basate sull'evidenza e in parte inerente all'argomento econometrico del rendimento degli investimenti. In questo articolo, sosteniamo che questa tendenza consente un deficit democratico nella ricerca sull'educazione della prima infanzia e potrebbe anche segnalare la fine della pedagogia. Adottiamo un approccio genealogico alla questione su come la verità sia costruita nella ricerca educativa e in che modo si relaziona con i contesti sociali, economici e politici per sottolineare la responsabilità del ricercatore. Dopotutto, i ricercatori nell'educazione non sono influenzati solo dal discorso dominante, essi stessi sono il discorso dominante.

**Parole chiave:** *Pratiche basate sull'evidenza, Qualità, Ricerca educativa, Pedagogia, Approccio genealogico.*

## Introduction: on the pitfalls of evidence-based practice

Over the last years, there has been an increasing attention for pedagogical research in relation to evidence-based practice in education. It may seem obvious that in times of economic crisis and budgetary austerity, governments favour those programs that have proven to be effective (does it work) and efficient (does it work better and cheaper than other programs)? It seems, however, that in so doing, the educational field may forget the history of “evidence-based practice” in other fields that have preceded its implementation in the educational field. The term comes from David Sackett and colleagues and was first introduced in medicine, where it was defined as the integration of individual expertise, research evidence and the clients’ preferences. Sackett and colleagues explicitly warned against looking at randomized trials as the unique form of evidence, as well as against “cookbook medicine”, in order to “help smart doctors stop prescribing dumb treatments” (Sackett et al., 1996a, b). This was later confirmed by a Presidential Task Force of the American Psychological Association in the field of clinical psychology, when confronted with the aberrations of evidence-based practice, including the narrowing down of patients’ choices due to the sanctification of randomized controlled trials as the golden standard of research (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006). The criticisms about RCT and evidence-based practice include methodological critiques, such as the fact that randomized controlled trials are population-based studies that have weak predictive value for the individual; that RCT may document the average effect of a program but not explain why it works for some individuals and not for others; that the use of control groups exclude comorbidity and therefore reduce the complexity of real life situations;

etc. More importantly, there is the critique that evidence-based programs lead to standardisation and protocolisation and therefore limit the discretionary space of practitioners (Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Roose, 2012). But what is of concern for us here, is the more fundamental critique of the democratic deficit of pedagogical research in this vein. When the main question for researchers is “what works”, this may mean the end of the debates on what working is. Or whom “it” is supposed to work for. Indeed, evidence-based practice supposes a diachronic relation between research and practice. Research then either precedes or follows practice. Preceding practice means that it elaborates a pedagogical theory, that is then “proven” to be correct and practice is supposed to implement the research findings. Example of this approach are the many programs that are designed to increase early learning and the achievement of pre-academic skills since the compensation programs of Head Start and High Scope in the 1970’s. Research following upon practice means that its mission is to evaluate practice. Examples are the many impact studies of educational programs and the increasing attention for children’s outcomes as a measure of pedagogical quality of early childhood education (Moss et al., 2016; Moss & Urban, 2017). In both cases (research preceding or following upon practice) research is believed to fundamentally differ from practice, detached from it, as if it was a-historical, a-political and above the mundane debates on what is good for children. In this article, we argue that research *is* practice and is always synchronic with practice, rather than diachronic, as research is an intervention that is always embedded in its historicity and is therefore also a political and an ethical act. Research cannot but include a choice. A choice of what is to be studied. About what constitutes the problem that is to be prioritised. And thus, it also includes a decision on who is entitled to participate in the debates on these questions and who is excluded from them. We briefly elaborate on two interrelated tendencies in the field of early childhood educational research: the measurement of quality and the dominance of neuroscience and econometrics. We then come back to the historicity and the political dimensions of pedagogical research to conclude about the ethical responsibilities of researchers in this field.

## 1. Quality: what counts is what can be counted

The International Early Learning and Child Well Being Study (IELS) of the OECD is but the most recent international initiative to measure, quantify and monitor early childhood education's quality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). Its ambition is to measure the skills of 5 year olds in four domains of development in all OECD countries, just as PISA does for 15 year olds. It wishes to do so in order to "help countries improve the performance of their systems, to provide better outcomes for citizens and better value for money". In time, OECD claims, the study can also provide information on the trajectory between early learning outcomes and those at age 15, as measured by PISA. In this way, countries can have an earlier and more specific indication of how to lift the skills and other capabilities of its young people, OECD claims. Previously, the OECD produced a literature review on the monitoring of quality in which some caution was expressed regarding the testing of children, for child test results were found to be insufficiently valid and reliable in making fair conclusions about staff quality as child outcomes are not a direct result of activities of staff (Litjens, 2014). In the subsequent Starting Strong report on monitoring (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015), the caution disappeared and it was accepted that testing children is an interesting way to evaluate quality of provision. What is most worrying, is not the question to what extent testing children at age 5 to "help countries improve the performance of their systems" makes any sense and can or cannot produce any valid figures. What is most worrying, is the total absence of any democratic debates on the very meaning of early childhood education (Moss et al., 2016; Moss & Urban, 2017). It is implicitly assumed that there is a global consensus that the meaning of pedagogy resides in gains in four domains of development of individual children, and thus that the meaning of early childhood education resides in a preparation for primary school and that the meaning of education in general is about preparing future productive individuals to thrive in a meritocratic society. Objectives that do not fall under these developmental outcomes seem to have become obsolete. To give but a few examples: how early childhood education goes about

cultural and socio-economic diversities; how multilingualism is fostered; how solidarity is cherished; how cultural production is conceived of; how social inclusion in local communities is thought of; how early childhood education relates to ecological concerns; these are all very important, value laden aspects of early childhood education and its quality, that remain out of sight, despite their prominent place in some curricula, including the famous Te Wariki in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996), despite the prominent place that the value of democracy has in the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2010), despite the room for social support and social cohesion in the Flemish curriculum (Vandenbroeck et al., 2017), despite all these value laden choices and many more cultural diversities worldwide. The IELTS program reduces the act of education to a technical procedure, i.e. the application of some general and universal rules (e.g. serve and return) and in doing so, the pedagogue him- or herself becomes a technical professional. It is hopeful, however, that so many European countries (e.g. Norway, France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Scotland, Northern Ireland) have refused to be part of its pilot.

## 2. The proliferating prefix

Neuro is the proliferating prefix, Rose and Abi-Rached (2013) wrote. Indeed, one can hardly read a policy document or any other advocacy document on early childhood education without the omnipresent references to brain research, synaptogenesis, critical periods, toxic stress and other metaphors of the brain. That is of course not a coincidence, as these metaphors were deliberately designed by The Framing Institute (a business that looks at how to design influential communication) to influence policy makers (Shonkoff and Bales, 2011). The neurodiscourse seems to go hand in hand with its twin brother, the return on investment (ROI) discourse, promising “massive savings”, when investing in early childhood education (e.g. Allen, 2011; Field, 2010). The rationale is that there is no other period in life when the brain develops at such an impressive speed, thus early childhood is a more profitable period to invest in education than any other (later) period in life. This is most eloquently illustrated by what has been commonly

known as “The Heckman Equation” (with its own dotcom). Investing in early childhood is presented as the best shot for equal opportunities, combating intergenerational transmission of poverty, later delinquency, teenage pregnancy and many other societal flaws (Allan, 2011) and thus it can be calculated how much the welfare state may save by investing in the early years (Barnett, 2011; Barnett & Masse, 2007). What is most worrying, is not that the neurodiscourse and its twin brother the return on investment discourse are prevalent in neoliberal policy documents, be it from the political left as well as from the political right. It has also invaded the language of many international NGO’s. Eurochild (2015: p. 5) for example speaks about a “child centred investment strategy”. They claim that if a child misses out on a stimulating and nurturing environment in the early years, it can be difficult to catch up and that can negatively affect life-time chances. Save the Children (Finnegan & Lawton, 2016) also tell the story about synaptogenesis and critical periods. They use colourful images to depict how language circuits in the brain change during childhood and they give “Top tips for parents” on how “You can help build your child’s brain by talking to them right from the start”. The critical period narrative is ultimately used as a plea for investing more public funds in nurseries. This is also the case of UNICEF (e.g. 2014) and UNESCO (2012) who write about “the child’s brain *architecture*” that is “*wired* in the first five years of life”, “chronic unrelenting stress in early childhood, caused by extreme poverty” and the concept of sensitive, if not critical, periods of brain development.

In many of these publications by NGO’s the neuroscience is used as an argument to claim considerable “returns on investment”, either directly (you will save money later on) or indirectly (it will cost you a lot if you repair rather than prevent). The use of neuroscience along with an economic investment rationale in early childhood education is also to be noticed in local interventions, evenings for parents, and discussions between private day care organisers and local authorities.

It is of course quite understandable that early childhood activists use the neuro-story and the narrative of ROI, as they believe this will be more convincing to policy makers and the general public, when advocating for investing in early childhood education. It is even more understandable, considering that the field of early childhood educa-

tion has always been (and continues to be) the Cinderella of the educational system with less funds, lower qualifications, worse working conditions, lower salaries, scarcer provision, etc. It is then hoped that the neuro- and ROI discourses will finally gain the charitable ear of funders and policy makers in times of austerity and budget cuts in the welfare states, where only the economic argument seems to be valid. However, in so doing, the NGO's and other actors in the social field reinforce the idea that only the economic argument is valid, as if all agree that there is but one rational for publicly funding early childhood care and education: the alleged economic benefits. And in so doing, NGO's and local activists risk making their crucial place in the democratic public debate – as crucial part of the civil society – redundant, as they contribute to dismiss all other arguments: arguments of culture, of democracy, of solidarity, of equality, that were once so dear to the civil society (for a more elaborated discussion on this topic, see Vandenbroeck, 2017).

Mutatis mutandis, the same reasoning goes for researchers. Scholars who work in the early childhood field, may see their status (and the impact of their publications) on the rise when embracing the econometric and the neuroscientific argument. They may be even more tempted to present their choice of paradigm as a given, rather than as a choice and argue that it is facts that matter to the real scientific, not opinions and that science needs to be neutral and objective. The issue here is not to contest the possibility of a choice for an econometric paradigm in pedagogy. Or for the use of neuroscience in educational matters (even though many leading neuroscientists claim that it is much too soon to draw any pedagogical conclusions from brain research). The issue is precisely that it needs to be clear that it is a choice. One possible choice among many. And this that other paradigms and other choices are possible. And where choice *is* possible, appear responsibility and accountability. And the need to legitimise the choices one makes. We first briefly elaborate on the historicity of pedagogical research (and it's necessary embedding in the political) and then come back to these notions of responsibility and accountability.

### 3. There is no a-political pedagogy

Pierre Bourdieu (2001) asked this rhetorical question: how would it be possible that an historical action, embedded in history, such as research, would produce truths that are transhistorical, independent from history, entirely disconnected from the place and the time and therefore universally and eternally valid?

As Paulo Freire (1970) explained problem-posing theory takes man's historicity as the starting point. He explains the fundamental narrative character of education, meaning that in matters of education, it is important to look at what is defined as the problem, what is posed as an educational problem. And that, he claims, is always reflecting "the objective cultural conditions of the surrounding social structure" (p. 152). In that sense, pure pedagogical problems do not exist, as they are always related to broader social and societal problems. And that becomes particularly clear when taking a historical hindsight. Historical research about parenting, for instance, shows how a focus on parental responsibility has always been contingent with a deficit approach of the same parents (Hendrick, 1997) and that the present-day view of one particular parenting style, labelled as authoritative parenting, does share some of the characteristics of a political belief system in how it combines behaviourism and neoliberalism (Hendrick, 2016).

What is constructed as a problem and particularly, as an educational problem, is always related to a specific time and a specific social, economic and political context. And science is always entangled in a reciprocal relation with that problem construction. A salient example is child mortality in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Child mortality among the labour class was high – almost 20% – in a context of very low wages, poor housing, bad hygienic conditions and endemic poverty. Moreover, European nation states were predominantly liberal welfare states in which the state was not supposed to intervene in private matters, meaning welfare issues (no maternity leave, no sickness leave, no child allowances, etc.) as well as in the relations between employers and employees (i.e. no minimal wages, hardly any labour regulations). In official texts (e.g. Velge, 1919), however, child mortality was presented as the result of either the ignorance or the



culpable neglect of labour class mothers. In advise books for the bourgeois on how to organise charity (e.g. De Gérardot, 1826-1989; Marbeau, 1845), the labour class mothers were presented as deficient and in need of civilisation, and not to be trusted. The problem of child mortality, was coined by science. By statistical science, framing the problem as a labour class problem, situated in specific neighbourhoods. By eugenic science, child mortality was explained as a treat to the construction of a healthy race and therefore to the nation states. It is no coincidence that this occurred during the first industrial revolution, when physical health was a commodity. Finally, the prophylactic sciences presented solutions to the problem, that were, however, ill adapted to the harsh living conditions of the labour class families (such as cooking and sterilising the teats and bottles). As a result, the solution to the problem was presented as educating the labour masses and in so doing, the social problem was transformed into an educational problem, and the educational intervention (in the shape of consultation schemes and children's homes), in turn, reinforced the construction of the problem as inherently educational in nature (for a more elaborated analysis of this issue, see for instance Vandebroek, Coussee & Bradt, 2010).

Another example is the political and scientific focus on so called "compensation" programs for families at risk in the late 1960's and even more so in the 1970's. After World War 2, poverty among the labour class decreased dramatically and with it, child mortality and physical health disappeared as public problems, making place for the concept of mental health (WHO, 1946) and the science of developmental psychology. It is probably not a coincidence that the earlier versions of attachment theory – urging mothers to take care of their child in the home – gained momentum after the wars, when women were no longer needed in the industry and they were expected to return to their traditional domestic roles. Neither is it probably a coincidence that the attention for cognitive development increased in the period of the Cold War. Indeed, after the Sputnik shock (Martens & Niemann, 2010) the West was afraid to lose the race to space and increasingly became aware that nation states could hardly afford themselves not to exploit the full intellectual potential of the population. According to developmental psychology, each phase in the child's de-

velopment builds on the former and ultimately, the meaning of each stage is in the following one, until productive (and reproductive) adulthood is reached. Together with the powerful metaphor of developmental stages as steps of a ladder, measurable norms appeared about what a child should be able to do at what age, accompanied by an implicit understanding that the sooner was also the better in a kind of Olympic Games – *citius, altius, fortius* – of development. Consequently, this new knowledge led to a renewed focus on the early years. The Sputnik shock, as well as the pressure from the civil rights movements, gave rise to new educational programs in the U.S. (and later in Europe) for what were then called “disadvantaged children” and education was perceived as the solution to “the negro problem” (Beatty, 2012; Beatty & Zigler, 2012). There was a growing consensus in the scientific community as well as among policy makers that a stronger focus on the role of the “disadvantaged” parents was needed. Parents (or better: mothers) were supposed to become the lay teachers of their children, which has been labelled as the pedagogicalisation of parents (Popkewitz, 2003). Again, the focus was rather on maternal responsibility than on the shared responsibility between the public and the private domains. Again, the educational gap was not framed as a societal problem of inequality, and thus as a social problem, but rather as a “socio-cultural handicap” of individual families (De Landsheere, 1973). The solution to the problem was to educate the mothers and the implementation of that solution through parent support programs, in turn, contributed to the dominant framing of the educational gap as a parental responsibility. Contingently, it also contributed to framing the meaning of early childhood education as a preparation for later “real” learning, leaving only little place for childhood as having meaning in itself.

These examples clearly illustrate the statement of Bourdieu at the beginning of this paragraph. What science produces, the scientific knowledge, is always embedded in its historical, social, political context. That does not mean that it is not objective. Or methodologically rigorous. Or less true. But it illustrates that in pedagogy, objectivism and subjectivism cannot be separated, as Freire (1970: 35-36) already observed:

The separation of objectivity from subjectivity, the denial of the latter when analyzing reality or acting upon it, is objectivism. On the other hand, the denial of objectivity in analysis or action, resulting in subjectivism which leads to solipsistic positions, denies action itself by denying objective reality. [...] To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without men. This objectivist position is as ingenuous as that of subjectivism, which postulates men without a world. World and men do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction.

#### 4. Facts matter and so do opinions

*We are surrounded by a pragmatic discourse that would have us adapt to the facts of reality. Dreams, and utopia, are called not only useless, but positively impeding (Freire, 1992)*

What Freire wrote in 1992 is probably even more valid today than it was at that time. We are now submerged with facts and figures. PISA, PIRLS and other international benchmarkings give rise to hundreds of league tables, correlations, statistics, trends, figures, and, consequently, newspaper articles and political debates. They present the educational field as an objective, ahistorical field, in which science can and should inform politics, as many scholars also claim (e.g. Gormley, 2011; Shonkoff & Leavitt, 2010). Yet, they tend to forget that between science and policy are opinions. Opinions on what education is for. Opinions on what the good life is. Opinions on what children are (or on what they are expected to be). Opinions on the division of responsibilities between the private and the public domains. These are eminently political discussions on how to organise societies. And the disagreement that is inherent in such opinions, forms the basis of democracy. Without such antagonisms in opinions about how to organise societies, we face the end of the political, and that would mean to give room to either the dictatorship of no alternative, or to extremisms, or both (Mouffe, 2005). We simply cannot discuss education without discussing what education is for. And this we cannot discuss

without discussing the horizon: ideas about what kind of society we would envisage for the children of today.

PISA, to stay with that example, shows that in Belgium inequality in one of the largest in Europe and that in no other country the educational inequality is related to that extent to the socio-economic background of the family. In other words, the Belgian educational system reproduces societal inequalities to a larger extent than is the case in any other European country. PISA also shows that the elite, the top 10% of students rank lower than they did five years ago. PISA shows that study results at age 15 are related with home language. And that they are related to income. And many more relations and correlations. Data do not speak for themselves, they need to be spoken for. Which of these problems matters more? Or do we think none of these merit our attention, as it is PISA that is the problem? Do we look at school failure as a problem of specific children, as a problem of specific families, or as a problem of schools? As a didactical problem, or as a societal problem? Which problem construction is prioritised? How issues are framed and taken as an object of study or as an object of intervention, is obviously not just as scientific choice, it is always also a political choice. How could it be otherwise? Pedagogy is necessarily always a reflection on what a better world may look like. And that is not a neutral reflection. To quote Bourdieu (2001) again, one cannot escape the work that it takes to construct the object of research and thus the responsibility that goes with it. There is no object that does not imply a standpoint. The research as an act itself, compels us to make explicit and to formalise the implicit criteria of the ordinary experiences. And that makes it possible that a logical control of the assumptions can be made.

What Bourdieu pleads for, is that implicit assumptions (such as the assumption that what counts as a valid argument should be economic and measurable) are made explicit and therefore contestable. That is the responsibility of the researcher. And in so doing, the researcher can also be accountable to the wider society about the choices made. Researchers, after all, cannot but complain about the dominant discourse that is imposed upon them. Ulrich Beck (1997) once wrote

about traffic jam: you are not in a traffic jam, you are the traffic jam. In the same vein, we should say to researchers: you are not compelled by a dominant discourse. You are the dominant discourse.

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