

The ‘Bashing’ of Educational Research

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For this special issue on *the Bashing of Educational Research*, we invited contributions from scholars with various disciplinary background to debate contemporary and historical issues in relation to contemporary public critique of education, educational research, knowledge production, pedagogy, didactics, philosophy and politics.

The term ‘bashing’ commonly refers to a verbal attack of something, often conducted in a violent way. It may also signify “the concept of saying rude things about a certain subject over the Internet”, as a user on the website *Urban Dictionary* put it. This is not to be confused with criticism. Criticism of research is necessary; something immanent and ubiquitous in the system of research and science. But the bashing of *educational research* is perhaps something new—at least as it is expressed on various media platforms, in new contexts, by different people.

One reason behind this surge in the ‘bashing of educational research’ might be that educational research is a discipline that is expected to offer solutions to all problems associated with schooling. In Sweden, for example, education should, according to the Education Act (2010:800 5 §), be founded on a scientific basis and proven experience. As such, the alleged “school crises” (for

example, students not performing as desired in international tests and comparisons, or the complaint that education is failing to solve contemporary societal problems etc.) have in turn raised questions about the relevance and value of the academic field of education. As evidence, reference is often made to the fact that educational research (again, allegedly) fail to produce usable knowledge on the “best ways to teach” or, for that matter, on any issue of practical importance to teachers and students.

Further, the research field is also accused, at least in the Swedish media, as well as by other scientific disciplines, of distorting “real knowledge” and “real facts” in favour of schooling programs oriented around “political equality”, which puts certain *methods* ahead of knowledge. Consequently, researchers in education are described as uninterested in studying how schools and education *should* be organized on a scientifically proven basis, and precisely because of this, scholars in education are also described as the ones poorest equipped to provide the education of teachers. At times, the field of education science is even accused of being harmful for education in practice.

With this in mind, this special issue of *Confero* encouraged contributions that approached and analysed contemporary and historical criticism of educational research. The result is six essays with different aims and scope, but which together form a dialogue on the underpinning perspectives on science and learning, not only in the field on education but academia at large. To clarify, the intention of this issue is not to constrain the critics, but an ambition to deepen the conversation and open up for different perspectives and voices.

In the lead essay to this issue, Martin Malmström explores both the personal and political consequences of the ubiquitous mass media criticism of the field of education. In the essay “How Do You Think It Feels? On Being the Epitome of Pseudoscience” a unique and rare perspective is presented. Malmström share his important, personal, and interesting story from the inside of being bashed on. In the essay he tells his story of how he finished his dissertation, which then came to be discussed in Swedish

newspapers as an example of low quality and useless educational science. One of the main issues that the debate of Malmström's dissertation brought up is about in what way educational science is of any use. Malmström's antagonists claim that educational science should focus on how students can become better learners or how teachers can become more competent. From this perspective it is important that research is evidence-based and that the results can show significant effects. Now, since a lot of educational research do not fulfil these criteria, the conclusion, from this point of view, is that educational research is in danger. This raises questions of how we value research. What is good research and what is bad research? To what extent should educational research benefit the discipline of pedagogy? In what way can, on the other hand, research gain from a cultural perspective and problematize ideas that are taken for granted?

”There is snobbery in higher education research and everyone knows it”¹. This quote is taken from Eric Blair's essay “Rebundling higher educational research, teaching and service”. Blair suggests that teaching and service has become separated from research. Traditionally, lecturers in higher education have had both the role of teachers and of researchers, but today it is more common that some teach and others do research. This separation has also isolated these two practices from each other and consequently research in educational science has become an easier target for bashing. Moreover, Blair concludes that there is also a difference in status between researching and teaching, where teaching has lower status. This is deplorable not only for those who teach, it is also a loss for all the students at universities who may never get access to all the research and knowledge that may exist within their own department, but where, unfortunately, researchers are aloof or uninterested to teach and share what they know. But Blair has a cure:

¹ Blair, 2018, p. 44

Instead, it is proposed that rebundling the three core aspects of higher education - research, teaching and service – would allow for a more holistic conception of academic identity where the various components work together to offer a more robust, and less ‘bashable’, academic identity.²

In the next essay, Ansgar Allen and Emile Bojesen provide an account of an original and somewhat provoking perspective on education in their essay “The Economic Problem of Masochism in Education.”. The authors state “Educational researchers are not above nor insulated from what they critique”. Using a theoretical framework emanating from an essay by Sigmund Freud, they examine the masochistic tendency in education and gives a thorough example—a new reading—via the film *Dead Poets Society*. Seeing how most of us in the editorial board have a teaching background and teach regularly at universities, as well as having some of our projects concerning education per se, the questions raised by Allen & Bojesen becomes challenging. A lot of educational research confirms a picture of education and schooling that is deeply problematic. Why is that? As the authors state: “In addition to providing lengthy disquisitions explaining what all educators already feel, and have long felt more acutely—namely, transposing into writing a sense of the ‘shitiness’ of things—educational research helps sustain what it bemoans”³. As such the text illustrates how bashing can take many forms. Thus, the authors pinpoint a mechanism in educational research, and education as a whole, that calls for attention and reflection.

In the next essay, entitled: ”Slow Science: research and teaching for sustainable praxis”, Petri Salo and Hannu L.T. Heikkinen examine the slow science movement as an alternative way forward for academia. A route that firmly steers away from the ‘McDonaldization’ of the academic lifestyle. Salo and Heikkinen link the current paradigms of fast policy in education to academic and cognitive capitalism in the ‘corporatisation’ of universities, where “The pressure of effective production, combined with the

² Blair, 2018, p. 35

³ Allan & Bojesen, 2018, p. 56

fragmentation of academic work processes, results in temporal alienation and superficiality, both in terms of academic handicraft and the social interactions included in it”⁴. *Slow science* on the other hand calls on researchers to reflect and problematize the foundation for research in current times, and the effect it produces. As such, the essay presents an urgent alternative, not only to toxic forms of academic management, research and teaching, but also as a defence of a sustainable life world.

Returning to the academic practises: why is there such a striking discrepancy between flexibility, democracy and empowerment (that the Bologna process aims for) and the superficial educational activities that it actually results in? This question is the point of departure in an essay by Sverker Lundin, Susanne Dodillet and Ditte Storck Christensen, entitled: “Ritual, reform and resistance in the schoolified university. On the dangers of faith in education and the pleasures of pretending to taking it seriously”. The authors present an analysis of *schoolified* education as a normalized ritual. Focusing on the teacher education programme, the authors show how the implementation of the Bologna protocol can lead to its direct opposite: an inflexible body of education which students and teachers have very little influence over. By applying the concept of *rituals* to education, the authors show how the fixed ‘message’ of education can be made visible and thereby subjected to further scrutiny. The promise of this message is a promise of ‘sanctified’ knowledge. But what the schoolified education as a ritual in turn produce is rather the ‘acting’ out of certain (desired) knowledge, performed at different levels in education. External measures such as curricula and regulations, as well as students and teachers, thus “create a machine-like ‘show’ of something taking place, which is teaching and learning.”⁵ This contribution clearly illustrates how schoolified education is self-referential as well as concurrently, and rather effectively, hiding the gap between reality and appearance.

⁴ Salo and Heikkinen, 2018, p. 100-101

⁵ Lundin, Dodillet and Christensen, 2018, p. 124

The closing essay in this special issue is “Resentment, disappointment and the ceaseless vitality of teachers and pedagogy – An essay” by Moira von Wright⁶. In this essay, the topic of this issue, “The ‘Bashing’ of Educational Research”, is presented through the personal and intriguing narration of being confronted by critical attitudes towards teaching, education and educational research. From the story of being a teacher confronted by a hairdresser on the topic of education, to the story of being a researcher ‘condemned’ by a Swedish Newspaper as ‘anti-intellectual’. Through these narrations, von Wright discusses the link between scientific critique and public frustration, which could be both understandable and healthy but which could also run the risk of neglecting ‘the ground-breaking potential of education’ (in favour of more stringent traditions, e.g. scientism). By describing the potential of education, this essay argues for the value of educational research, which is put in contrast to more authoritarian and totalitarian - also making teaching and learning more ‘effective’ - prospects on education.

Having summarized the essays for this issue we would also like to provide the reader with a brief background of the journal *Confero* as such.

Confero started as a cooperative attempt by a group of Swedish doctoral students to form a critique against the emerging regime of the scientific economy of publications and citations, as well as the templates of mass article-production.⁷ With this in mind, we can conclude, five years later, that our most downloaded article is an essay from the first issue, entitled: *Managing your Assets in the Publication Economy*, written by the bibliometrician, Ulf Kronman. As such, ambition and result does not always coincide.

⁶ von Wright, 2018, p. 145

⁷ See *Confero* Volume 1, Issue 1, 2013:

<http://www.confero.ep.liu.se/contents.asp?doi=10.3384/confero.2001-4562.13VII>

However, *Confero* will keep on keeping on being a critical friend in the contemporary ‘publication economy’. A scientific journal that aims to provide essays that do not stay faithful to the hegemonic format of a ‘scientific article’. And as a peer-reviewed open access journal, available for free to people engaged in social science research as well as a wider intellectual public.

Essays can be written from a wide range of theoretical perspectives and academic traditions. We particularly welcome a broad range of empirical sources, used to explore an issue or phenomenon at hand: unconventional sources such as art works, pictures, movies as well as conventional empirical material like interviews, ethnographies or statistics.

Dear authors of this special issue and dear reader, we hope you will enjoy this issue as much as we have, and we look forward to your forthcoming contributions.

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