

Educational Research in America Today: Relentless Instrumentalism and Scholarly Backlash

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The task of characterizing US educational research is simplified by the fact that it is represented by a single body: The American Educational Research Association (AERA), which has about 25 thousand members (of which I am one) and holds a conference that brings roughly half of these members together every year. The AERA is comprised of 12 „divisions“ (subjects or subdisciplines such as „Learning and Instruction“ or „Curriculum Studies“), and 155 „special interest groups“ (SIGs). As these numbers and examples suggest, the scale and the diversity of the American field appear greater than its counterpart in Germany. At the same time, they also suggest an important restriction in the scope of the American field – specifically that its focus is almost entirely on formal instruction occurring in schools or on the K-12 level.

Illustrating the scope and nature of this vast American field with any accuracy or depth is a difficult if not impossible task. Even the most active researcher can be conversant with, perhaps, only three or four areas in research – to say nothing of their correlative configuration in German-speaking *Erziehungswissenschaft*. Thus, even this briefest of overviews is bound by a limited, and at times, personal horizon.¹ I address these limitations by making use of number of specific examples, beginning with ones defined by AERA’s divisions and SIGs, and then by focusing on examples of terms and definitions that separate English- and German-speaking educational research on what might be called a „macro-theoretical“ level.

Although certain topics and concerns may dominate American educational research as a whole – especially federal funding programs for public schools – there are few „*wissenschaftliche*“ commission reports or governmental directives that give explicit direction to this research. As a result, research funding is a primary way research is shaped and directed. Different areas and subdisciplines, however, draw from and are influenced by different funding sources. Research in the AERA division of „Learning and Instruction“, for example, has been shaped by the National Science Foundation granting programs, above all its ongoing emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education. Other areas of research are similarly influenced by funding from other governmental and also charitable institutions, ranging from the National Endowment for the Humanities to the Gates Foundation.

1 For example, I do not consider the purely quantitative sub-domains of American education research (e. g., „Measurement & Research Methodologies“ or „Structural Equation Modeling“), of which there are many.

A second major influence on American educational research is provided not by federal research policy – or its relative absence – but indirectly by government funding for and regulation of public schools themselves. This is not the type of influence one might initially expect, however. In recent decades, funding and regulation – which, for example, have supported school privatization and tied teacher salaries to high stakes student test outcomes² – have been widely regarded as deeply detrimental to education as a public good. The result has been a broad scholarly backlash, with researchers being increasingly drawn to forms of activism, critique and critical paradigms. One particularly conspicuous example is represented by research occurring in the AERA division „Curriculum Studies“. Although this area traditionally focused on practical curriculum design and implementation (e. g. as represented by the work of Robinsohn in the '70s in Germany), a radical political and „inward turn“ (Pinar 1975) took place in the 1970s. Traditional curricular research was seen as only relentlessly instrumentalizing, and „curriculum“ itself was redefined as a metaphor for one's own personal, experiential path as a student and scholar. The subsequent rise of what is sometimes called „identity politics“ in American popular and academic cultures³ has allowed this „inward turn“ to proceed unabated. And although there is comparatively little funding provided to support such work, it has left its mark on scholarship in many areas of educational research.

To see what such developments mean in greater detail, it is helpful to look at a few of AERA's more than 150 SIGs. I focus on three areas with which I have some familiarity, and which I believe are representative, in various ways, of the field as a whole: 1) „Action research“, 2) what are called the „learning sciences“, and 3) „hip hop theories, practice and pedagogies“. Although participants in various SIGs are eager to describe their collective activity as constituting whole „fields“ of scholarship or even new „sciences“, this work is perhaps best described more generically as representing areas of (scholarly) activity.

Action research, first, refers to research undertaken by teachers themselves, typically into their own teaching methods, relying on the teacher's own observations, data gathering and reflections. It has its origin in the research of Kurt Lewin at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) into democratic communities in the 1940s, where it took the form, as Lewin himself describes, of „a

2 The most well-known of these policies is the „No Child Left Behind“ legislation signed into law by George W. Bush in 2002. It was maintained by Barack Obama until a year before Trump's presidency. While Donald Trump has not introduced any new legislation, his Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has attempted to privatize public education. However, these and other efforts on her part are generally regarded to have failed.

3 This „politics“ can be said to have as its focus the intersection of an inwardly turned subjectivity (e. g. as called for by Pinar) together with collectively established categories such as race, gender and ethnicity. What is paramount in this intersection of subjectivity and social stratification is individual identity – hence *identity* politics. This refers to personal and professional identities viewed particularly in terms of its subjective affectivity, expressed through a vocabulary that includes words like „oppression“, „stress“, „trauma“ and „safety“.

spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action“ (Lewin 1946, p. 35). In educational settings, action research is seen as allowing „teachers to study their own classrooms – for example, their own instructional methods, their own students and their own assessments – in order to better understand them and be able to improve their own quality and effectiveness“ (Mertler 2008, p. 4). In recent scholarship, the term „action research“ has increasingly been referenced as „critical participatory action research“ to give emphasis to possibilities of more general involvement, specifically with broader social and political movements and interests (Kemmis/McTaggart 1988, p. 560, 562).

The „learning sciences“, for their part, define themselves as „an interdisciplinary field that studies teaching and learning [and works, NF] to better understand the cognitive and social processes that result in the most effective learning“ (Sawyer 2014 p. 1). „The sciences of learning“, this source continues, „include cognitive science, educational psychology, computer science, anthropology, sociology, information sciences, neurosciences, education, design studies, instructional design, and [„other sciences“, NF]“ (p. 1). A number of these disciplines, especially sociology, psychology and increasingly, neurosciences, are widely seen in both the „learning sciences“ and elsewhere in education as „foundational“ disciplines for the educational field as a whole. Despite the range of foundational and other disciplines included in its self-defined remit, however, the learning sciences – like a number of other areas in educational research – privilege findings based on fully randomized experimental research designs, describing them as the „gold standard of scientific methodology“ (Sawyer 2014, p. 13). The learning sciences are also described as constituting „a powerful approach to reforming education and schools“ – one seeking to replace so-called „unscientific [...] traditional [...] instructionist“ approaches with „deep“ and „effective“ learning (p. 2, emphasis added). Like action research, in other words, the learning sciences are clearly structured by normative, ameliorative interests. But unlike action research, the internal constitution and epistemology of the learning sciences was formed in close coordination with the development of federal funding policies – specifically of the National Science Foundation. Together with a number of other international factors including approving references to the „learning sciences“ by the OECD (e. g. see: OECD 2007), this has led to the recent establishment of the Munich Center of the Learning Sciences at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, and the creation of a „Lernwissenschaftlerinnen und Lernwissenschaftler“ professional position at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich. Speaking more broadly of the rise of *Empirische Bildungswissenschaft(en)* as a new disciplinary rubric, some scholars have concluded that in the German context, at least the phrase „Learning Science wird einfach mit Bildungswissenschaft übersetzt“ (Casale et al. 2010, p. 50).

Like both the learning sciences and action research, „hip hop theories, practice and pedagogies“ evinces a similar ameliorative and reformist interest. Hip

hop theories on the one hand are said to involve „contemporary scholars across the cultural spectrum [who, NF] frequently employ many of hip-hop’s inherent strategies that include appropriating and reincorporating academic theories and elucidating the contemporary cultural condition... [thus, NF] inhabit[ing a] liminal zone where the hood and university converge“ (Foreman 2004, p. 3). Hip hop practices and above all *pedagogies*, on the other hand, refer to „an approach to teaching and learning anchored in the creative elements of Hip-Hop culture [...] that transcend the traditional monolithic approaches to teaching“ (Adjapong 2017, p. 4). This same source, a 2017 dissertation from Columbia University, lists the specific elements of Hip-Hop culture as „deejaying, emceeing, dancing, graffiti art, and [particular kinds of, NF] knowledge of self“ (Adjapong 2017, p. 4). The result, as Adjapong goes on to explain, can be a kind of „co-teaching“ in which the teacher and one student both deliver content to the class like „two MC’s deliver musical content to an audience“. It can also include „call-and-response sessions“ that are used to review content covered in previous sessions.⁴ Adjapong’s dissertation, which looks specifically at the use of these didactical methods in STEM education, reports its findings as follows: „as [a, NF] result of utilizing Hip-Hop pedagogical practices, students reported that they developed a deeper understanding of science content, students were more likely to identify as scientists, and students were provided a space and opportunities to deconstruct traditional classroom spaces and structures“ (2017 abstract).⁵

The colloquial and simultaneously very pragmatic nature of these and other accounts of research and its specific sub-domains are representative of a vast range of American educational research: It is frequently defined by the exigencies of the teaching profession – especially in times and places where it is most under pressure – by processes of (funding) policy development and also by conditions of vernacular and community culture and political organization. These characteristics certainly afford education as a field of research a considerable proximity and responsiveness to ongoing political, cultural and policy changes and developments, and a kind of ready accessibility for graduate students and practitioner-researchers alike. In these specific senses, this research has been relatively well-positioned to deal (in its own ways) with the slowly unfolding cultural and in this sense, also educational catastrophe that has been the

4 Adjapong provides the following example of a call-and-response session, in which the performative dimension is clearly of paramount importance: Teacher: „Kinetic energy is the energy that an object has.“ Students (in unison): „When it’s in motion.“ Teacher: „Potential energy is the energy that an object has.“ Students (in unison): „When it’s in the position to do work.“

5 Hip hop pedagogies are an example of what are called „culturally responsive“ or „culturally appropriate“ pedagogies. These are ways of teaching that adjust or speak to students’ cultural conditions and values, whether this be an urban black culture or a particular immigrant culture. As such, these pedagogies might be of contemporary relevance to some German-language researchers and practitioners. See: <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=culturally+responsive+pedagogy&ffl=subCulturally+Relevant+Education>.

Trump presidency: Namely, through the assertion of local cultures and forms of activism, by linking research with broader movements of local and progressive reform and resistance. Others have also responded to these conditions, meanwhile, by simply maintaining their claims to „gold standard results“ and by continuing to benefit from funding available for research claiming to discover „what works“ in the school classroom.

The commonalities shared by American educational research, significantly, also compellingly indicate how both this research and English-language conceptions of education itself are constituted epistemologically, even ontologically. To quote from UK scholar J. W. Tibble (1966, as cited by G. Biesta 2015), education can be said to be constituted as a vast „field subject“ rather than as „a basic discipline“ on its own (Biesta 2015, p. 183). This „field subject“, furthermore, can be said to consist of processes (above all „learning“ and advocacy for change in pedagogical practice), which in turn, can be known through empirical study. „Education“, correspondingly, is simply understood as a collection of principally (or entirely) empirical matters to which a range of research methods and disciplinary perspectives – whether interpretive, design-based or natural-scientific – can be „applied“. Such methods and perspectives, furthermore, are generally seen as generating data or knowledge that itself has immediate application back to the empirical realm. Any mediation in the relationship between theory and practice in this context is not only undertheorized (there is no equivalent to pedagogical *Praxis*theorie in English) but positively short-circuited insofar as research is fundamentally undifferentiated from reform. Moreover, it is worth noting that there are no English equivalents to terms like „*Erkenntnisinteressen*“ in the full sense of the word,⁶ or to those terms referencing discipline-specific „*Wissenschaftstheorie*“ or „*Begründungstheorien*“. Something similar is also the case for „*Grundlagen*–“ or „*Gegenstandstheorien*“ in both qualitative and quantitative research in English. All of this can be said to be exacerbated by the fact that there is also no English-language equivalent to the subdiscipline of „*Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft*“ or „*Allgemeine Pädagogik*“ – one which might claim to speak to discipline-wide issues in methodology or to the overall constitution of the field.⁷

Both education and pedagogy – as well as their „knowability“ –, in other words, are left only implicitly defined in American discourse. They remain matters only for the collective imagination or for vague association. It is worth noting that both „education“ and „pedagogy“ are left undefined in even the

6 Habermas' canonical introduction of *Erkenntnisinteressen* is certainly known in English; however, in American qualitative research, such concerns tend to be relegated to the subjects being researched, rather than seen as inhering in the research itself.

7 „Philosophy of Education“, which has its own SIG in AERA, can be said to be the closest approximation of „*Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft*“ in the American (and UK) context. However, philosophy of education generally sees its task as the application of intrinsically philosophical methods and approaches to education as an applied field, rather than as „working within“ education itself as an independently theoretical and philosophical domain.

most comprehensive of educational reference works. These include, for example, Salkind's 2008 *Encyclopedia of Education*, M. A. Peters' new *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, and the voluminous Gale *Encyclopedia of Education*. Quoting British educationist P. H. Hirst, Johannes Bellmann describes these disciplinary circumstances as follows: „Beyond the reasons and standards of foundational disciplines,“ English-speaking „educational theory has ‚nothing *educational*‘ [...] to appeal to“ (2014, p. 217). There is little to no acknowledgement, for example, of any constitutive characteristics or conditions that might specifically affect educational research as a whole — as opposed to research in other fields — or of particular educational or pedagogical interests around which such educational research might be organized (for example, to „help“ a child „shape him/herself as an independent person“, Böhm/Seichter 2018, pp. 146-147). In everyday English, education is defined simply as the „systematic instruction [...] received by a child, typically at a *school*“ (Oxford English Dictionary 1989, emphasis added). School, in turn, is defined by this same source as the „institution for the formal *education* of children or young people“ (2003, emphasis added). Education, in other words, is what happens at school; and school, in turn, is defined as the place where education happens.

A similar circularity, I argue, affects American educational research as a whole – entrapping critical, ameliorative as well as positivistic efforts in this vast „field subject“. While academic critique or scholarly backlash is generally unable to effect policy change, the relentless instrumentalism represented by efforts at experimentally derived determinations of „what works“ are always undermined by the complexities and singularities of concrete pedagogical practice. The result is either „proven“ claims about impacts and techniques that are already widely acknowledged and implemented as „common sense“, or isolated attempts at amelioration, limited by the very cultural particularity that initially defines them. However one might wish to characterize such research efforts, though, they are sure to supply researchers with myriad findings and accounts that can be retold and reaffirmed at the next gathering of AERA's multitudinous membership.

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