

## Education and Educational Research: Blind Men, Elephant, Crisis of Identity

Hasan ŞİMŞEK\*

**Abstract:** Educational research is found to be problematic by some prominent education scholars. Major weaknesses of the field are supposed to be stemming from seven primary sources: The scientific, academic and disciplinary standing of education as a field of study; being somewhat an extension of other more established disciplines leading to mixed identities in the field; easy infiltration to the field by other disciplines and researchers; ambiguous standing of school as an institution in the society that creates a rather elusive context for solid theory and research; the field's oversensitivity to larger external forces such as economic and political transformations; the concept of science in the eyes of policy-makers and funders that dictate certain forms of knowledge production, that is usually positivist; profile of practitioners and prestige of profession in education that is gender, pay and socio-economic structure of the profession. At the end, major proposals are presented to get the educational research out of this problematic status.

**Keywords:** educational research, crisis of identity in education, theory-building in education, crisis of education

### Eğitim ve Eğitim Araştırmaları: Kör Adamlar, Fil, Kimlik Krizi

**Öz:** Eğitim araştırmaları bazı önemli eğitim araştırmacıları tarafından sorunlu bir alan olarak görülmektedir. Bu sorunlu duruşun nedeni olarak sıralanabilecek yedi temel kaynak sayılabilir: Eğitimin bir çalışma alanı olarak bilimsel, akademik ve disiplinler duruşu; daha köklü disiplinlerin (örn. Psikoloji ve Sosyoloji) uzantısıymış izlenimi veren konumu ve bunun karmaşık kimlik oluşumuna neden olması; başka disiplinlerin ve araştırmacıların alan kolayca nüfuz edebilmesi; alanın ekonomik ve siyasal dış dönüşümlere aşırı duyarlı olması; toplumda okul kurumuna ilişkin muğlak algı ve bunun güçlü bir kuram oluşturma ve araştırma potansiyeli üzerindeki olumsuz etkisi; politika yapıcılarının ve araştırmacıların fonlayanların kafalarında oluşmuş ve çoğunlukla pozitivist bilgi üretimi formlarını öne çıkaran bilim kavramı; cinsiyet, ücret yapısı ve sosyo-ekonomik statü gibi göstergeler sonucu oluşmuş meslek profili ve mesleğin prestiji. Makalenin sonunda eğitim alanını bu sorunlu duruşun dışına çıkarabileceği düşünülen temel bazı öneriler sunulmuştur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** eğitim araştırmaları, eğitimde kimlik krizi, eğitimde kuram oluşturma, eğitimin krizi

A well-known educator and colleague David Berliner of Arizona State University wrote a comment in 2002 about the US National Research Council's (NRC) controversial report on the nature of educational research. What Berliner states there is quite contrary to even what

\* Dean, Prof.Dr., İstanbul Kültür University, Faculty of Education,, İstanbul, Turkey, e-posta: h.simsek@iku.edu.tr

the novice educational researchers feel and believe in, that “education is the hardest science of all!”

“...Easy-to-do science is what those in physics, chemistry, geology, and some other fields do. Hard-to-do science is what the social scientists do and, in particular, it is what we educational researchers do...” (Berliner, 2002, p. 18).

This is a quite radical diversion from the mainstream line of thought, as David Labaree quotes from Becher, that “knowledge (is) ranging from hard to soft and pure to applied, educational knowledge is both very soft and very applied (Labaree, 2003, p. 14). Berliner gets into the disciplinary contexts of academic fields in order to exemplify what he means by “education is the hardest science of all”:

“Doing science and implementing scientific findings are so difficult in education because humans in schools are embedded in complex and changing networks of social interaction. The participants in those networks have variable power to affect each other from day to day, and the ordinary events of life (a sick child, a messy divorce, a passionate love affair, migraine headaches, hot flashes, a birthday party, alcohol abuse, a new principal, a new child in the classroom, rain that keeps the children from recess outside the school building) all affect doing science in school settings by limiting the generalizability of educational research findings. Compared to designing bridges and circuits or splitting either atoms or genes, the science to help change schools and classrooms is harder to do because context cannot be controlled... It may be stretching a little, but imagine that Newton’s third law worked well in both the northern and southern hemispheres-except of course in Italy and New Zealand-and that explanatory basis for that law was different in the two hemispheres. Such complexity would drive a physicist crazy, but it is part of the day-to-day world of educational researcher... (Berliner, 2002, p. 19).

Berliner’s claims run contrary to traditional conception of the state of education field and of educational research within the context of modern university. The statement of “education is the least respected field of study among others in the modern university” is what we hear quite often in academic circles. For example, Rosemary Deem finds that educational researchers are not very skillful on theoretical analysis and engaging in research outside the boundaries of education (Deem, 1996, p. 152). David Labaree reports that profile of education faculties is found to be quite low that is also negatively reflected on prestige of teaching profession in the society. Similarly, the socio-economic background of recruited man and women to the profession has traditionally been low corresponding the lower segments of society (Labaree, 2003, p. 13). Caroline Gipps believes that prestige of academic status of education profession has plummeted in the eyes of the politicians and the populace in the UK resulting in declining autonomy of educational institutions, fallen salaries, decreased chances of promotion, loss of tenure, loss of status and esteem (Gipps, 1993, p.10). Similarly, Miller (1999) asserts that “all disciplines produce lax or ineffective research, but some academics say that education scholarship is especially lacking in rigor and practical focus on achievement... Research on the effectiveness of (education) reforms is often weak, inconclusive, or missing altogether.” There is an ongoing discussion on whether or not education is a “typical science” in terms of its methodology, theory building, and ability to

address practical problems of society and schools. These general accounts of the state of the field of education and educational research spanning over the last twenty years have been reconfirmed in 2006 by Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, that “educational research (is) historically and presently broken in multiple ways and in need of repair” (St. Pierre, 2006, p. 240).

Why is there so much talk, usually with a negative tone, on education as a field of study in universities, and education research as a way of producing field-specific knowledge? For example, David Hargreaves’ highly cited speech at the 1996 annual meeting of British Teacher Training Agency approaches education with three main criticisms, that, first educational research does not make a serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge, second educational research is irrelevant to practice, and, third, educational research is uncoordinated with any preceding or follow-up research (Hargreaves, 1996). A thorough analysis of the relevant literature gives us a rather complex picture on why education is characterized this way. It is possible to make a list of at least 7 primary reasons that make education and educational research questionable:

1. The scientific, academic and disciplinary standing of education as a field of study,
2. Being somewhat an extension of other more established disciplines leading to mixed identities in the field,
3. Easy infiltration to the field by other disciplines and researchers,
4. Ambiguous standing of school as an institution in the society that creates a rather elusive context for solid theory and research,
5. The field of education being deeply influenced by larger external forces such as economic and political transformations,
6. The concept of science in the eyes of policy-makers and funders that dictate certain forms of knowledge production, that is usually positivist,
7. Profile of practitioners and prestige of profession in education that is gender, pay and socio-economic structure of the profession.

I would like to further elaborate on these in order.

### **1. The Scientific, Academic and Disciplinary Standing of Education as a Field of Study.**

Feuer, Towne and Shavelson list some qualities that any activity to be called scientific:

- Pose significant questions that can be investigated empirically,
- Link research to relevant theory,
- Use methods that permit direct investigation of the questions,
- Provide a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning
- Yield findings that replicate and generalize across studies, and,
- Disclose research data and methods to enable and encourage professional scrutiny and critique (2002, p. 7).

Although the definition has clear positivistic tones, Feuer, Towne and Shavelson are not in favor of uniform use of these principles across disciplines. They admit that economics is not the same as cell biology, or educational research is not the same as astronomy (p. 7). Indeed, if “empirical investigation” means observation and experiment under controlled conditions, if “chain of reasoning” means exploring the step-by-step causal relationships among “variables,” then we definitely talk about a positivist science that suit quite well to the nature of natural sciences. “Replication and generalization” explicitly refer to the positivist notion of science. These qualities have little relevance to social sciences including the educational research.

This situation calls for a careful conceptualization of what we mean by “science.” The definition itself has an explanatory power on whether or not a field of study would be called a “science.” Perhaps because of this, there is a range of definitions of education as science: Some call it a soft science, some an applied science, some do not use the term “science” at all and call it a “field of study. For example, governmental funding organizations particularly in the UK and the US which somewhat has authority over educational institutions favor more positivistic approach to science and expect or impose positivistic standards on proper educational research (Lagemann, 1997; Goodyear, et.al. 2009; Hammersley, 1997; Paul and Marfo, 2001). This variety of approaches to the disciplinary standing of education creates somewhat an ambiguous image about the field. This blurred image leads to vague identities on the part of academics in universities and practitioners and professionals in schools.

## **2. Being an Extension of other more Established Disciplines and Mixed Identities**

The field of education is like an extension of other more established disciplines as exemplified by classical areas of educational studies such as sociology of education, psychology of education, economics of education, management of education, philosophy of education, etc. These subfields usually use the language and jargon of the mother disciplines. Theories, models, concepts, commonly employed methodologies of the mother discipline are quickly adapted to the field of extension. Although educators seem to share a common language and discourse within the field of education, in reality they seem to be closer to the mother discipline of their area than the other areas of education. According to Peter Mortimore (2000):

“Educational researchers worry that we do not have a distinctive discipline; that we rely on—and play second fiddle to—a range of mother disciplines—philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, and the curriculum subjects... It means educational research does not have its own language, exclusive theories or separate methodologies. It means that researchers cannot assume that colleagues have all read the same research papers” (p. 18).

Similarly, Feuer, Towne and Shavelson (2002) report that:

“...because numerous fields (such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, neuroscience) focus on different parts of the (educational) system, seemingly contradictory conclusions may be offered, adding fuel to the debates about both the specific topic and the value of the research to aid decision making” (p. 7).

Academics studying educational psychology usually prefer quantitative methodology and positivistic theory in their research and writings. Academics in the area of educational management or educational administration generate a closer alliance with the field of management in terms of literature, emerging concepts, theories and methodologies. A similar case would easily be extended to other fields of study such as sociology of education and economics of education. This is another source of vague-mixed identities in the field of education.

### **3. Easy infiltration to the field from outside**

The reasons I have just stated above indicate another unique character of education. Classical established academic disciplines have very peculiar paradigmatic strength that makes infiltration from outside quite difficult. One must spend a long time to get used to the disciplinary tradition and culture, knowledge structure, and dominant methodologies in hard sciences. This creates a strong character for the field that resists frequent change and thickening the boundaries in relation to others. This is a strength as well as a weakness. More established disciplines of academe, both hard and soft such as chemistry, mathematics, physics, biology, sociology, psychology, economics have such qualities. Being a somewhat extension of other established academic disciplines, such as education, lacks this strong tradition, culture, knowledge structure and methodology. Consequently, education field may easily become a field where “others” as individuals or as disciplines may claim right to speak about the “proper knowledge base and methodology.” Elizabeth Adam St. Pierre’s two quotes from American Psychological Association and from the Director of Institute of Education Research under the Department of Education are instructive on this:

“The American Psychological Association... is practically ecstatic at the prospect of an increased role for psychology in establishing the scientific basis for educational interventions in testing, motivation, classroom management, reading instruction, math instruction, preschool curriculum, and character development and socialization of school children.”

Grover J. ‘Russ’ Whitehurst, the director of the Institute of Educational Research, is a psychologist quite capable of making the following statement—based on what evidence, I’m not sure... Psychologists are more likely than any other professional group working in the schools to have scientific training—and respect and understanding the role of research and evidence in practice—they should be prepared to play an important role in moving the culture of education toward reliance on evidence” (St. Pierre, 2006, p. 242)

Lagemann reports that the field of education became an interest of people from other disciplines, what he calls that “discipline based scholars” especially in the 1950 and 1960s especially Harvard paving the way to make education more “scientific” (Lagemann, 1997, p. 10-12).

Being open to boundary spanning is not something undesirable for education. This creates conditions for opportunity of interaction of education scholars with the others in

other disciplines, benchmarking theoretical and methodological innovations to the field of education. The problem here is that this advantage turns itself into a potential weakness of developing strong disciplinary tradition and solid discipline identity. This may be the primary reason why there are not many names in education that are identified with original theories unique to the field (Suppes, 1974; Ball, 1995; Mortimore, 2000).

#### **4. Ambiguous Standing of School as an Institution in the Society**

Primary social institution that the academics and researchers in education train professionals do research and produce services is the school organization. Organizationally speaking, school organization has ambiguous goals. Different stakeholders have different expectations from the school. Parents expect their children being educated as “whole persons,” enjoying art, sports, reading, music; living a healthy, happy and economically good life. Business people expect schools train productive individuals who have cooperative skills, good command of language, and employees who are creative and professionally skilled. Politicians expect schools train good citizens who show responsibility to their society. Students, children themselves expect schools to make days meaningful and enjoyable and help them grow emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively. All these diverse, somewhat conflicting expectations from the schools seem to reflect themselves on the academic and professional domains of education. Hammersley (1997, p. 148) argues that “one of the features of much practical activity, and particularly of teaching, is that goals are multiple, and their meaning is open to debate and difficult to operationalise.”

#### **5. Education Field within the Context of Larger Forces (Influence of Larger Exogenous Factors such as Major Econo-Political Transformations)**

The value of knowledge produced by disciplines is somewhat influenced by the utilitarian value of that knowledge. To what extent a set of produced knowledge addresses the practical problems of life is something that gives power to certain disciplines such as medicine and engineering. According to Stephen Ball, the field of education in the UK had such an epoch following the Second World War. During the social justice years of the “Great Society” of the 1950s and 1960s, “the state policies focused upon the achievement of equality and prosperity—the better educated we are the better off we are, individually and collectively” (Ball, 1995, p. 257). To Ball, this was a moment where the field had impact on the social policies through generated knowledge that is resulted in a dual optimism of being attached to the welfare state and of practices and discourses of the discipline itself (p. 257).

Particularly after the new liberal revolution of the 1980s, education as a field fell under the “hegemony of instrumental rationalism” where “rationalist empiricism” became the blueprint for valued research (Ball, 1995, p. 259). Tools such as school effectiveness, total quality management, strategic planning, self-evaluation, site-based management, introduction of quasi-market have become in fashion that resulted in an apolitical-technical approach to schools and educational processes. This managerial, instrumental-utilitarian trend has eliminated conditions where a serious scholarship can flourish in education

through a different cadre of scholars funded and supported for their increased efforts in theory construction and methods.

#### **6. The Concept of Science in the Eyes of Policy-Makers and Funders that Dictate Certain Forms of Knowledge Production that is Usually Positivist**

Ideas I have outlined just above are also relevant to the fields' relationships with funding agencies and policy makers. Traditionally, internal funding mechanisms in universities favor research in the form of quantitative and positivistic. Since the 1980s, governmental funding agencies around the world largely promote quantitative-positivistic research methods. For example, St. Pierre (2006) explains that the US Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences favors "a science that reinstalls some kind of positivism and elevates randomized experimental trials as the gold standard" (p. 242). This consequently leads to "educational policy and practice only on evidence produced by experimental methods" (p. 246). This attitude on the part of funding agencies pushing experimental and quantitative methods as the proper research and scholarship is a reflection of deeply embedded positivistic tradition in Social Sciences. James Paul and Kofi Marfo argue that "the hegemony of quantitative science and the narrow preoccupation with methodological rigor as the singular yardstick for judging good science are serious problems requiring immediate attention" (2001, p. 525). Berliner is critical of government's and funding agencies' bias towards the single methodology in the form of experimental-quantitative, which obstructs epistemological richness in the field:

"... if we accept that we have unique complexities to deal with, then the orthodox view of science now being put forward by the government is a limited and faulty one. Our science forces us to deal with particular problems, where local knowledge is needed. Therefore, ethnographic research is crucial, as are case studies, survey research, time series, design experiments, action research, and other means to collect reliable evidence for engaging in unfettered argument about education issues. A single method is not what the government should be promoting for educational researchers..." (Berliner, 2002, p. 20).

#### **7. Profile of Practitioners and Prestige of Profession in Education, that is Gender, Pay and Socio-Economic Structure of the Profession**

There seems to be a positive relationship between the prestige of a profession in the society and life standards, future earnings, work conditions and career opportunities associated with the same profession. High prestige professions are the ones usually associated with positive expectations on these criteria. This case is well communicated with various media and channels to society and young people in particular who are in the process of making career plans for their future. Unfortunately, education generally and around the world is not one of those professions that are highly valued. Labaree states that higher professions and the schools where these professional are trained usually draw "middle class, male recruits and continue to enjoy the lingering status benefit of their association with this privileged group" (2003, p. 13). Education schools within the universities are found to be low status by people from other disciplines and by educators themselves. One of the reasons

of this low profile is the direct linkage of education schools to the profession of teaching, “the largest and the least esteemed of the professions” (Labaree, 2003, p. 13):

“The work of public school teachers is highly visible and the subjects they teach appear elementary, in comparison to the obscured work settings and arcane expertise of the higher professions... teaching, more than other professions, draws recruits from groups that are traditionally disadvantaged socially, women and the working class” (Labaree, 2003, p. 13).

Indeed, the teaching profession is heavily a feminine profession around the world. On the other hand, teaching is one of the most populated professions in the world. The number of teachers in many countries easily outperforms the number of architects, lawyers, engineers, psychologists, and medical doctors. When we put all these together, that is SES of the recruits, gender profile of the profession, number of people as practicing members of the profession, the low status of teaching profession seems to reflect itself on to the research quality and scholarship in education.

### **Proposals to Get the Field of Educational Scholarship and Research out of Its Sorry State!**

Within the last twenty years, there has been an intense debate on the state of educational research and scholarship. While some of these criticism have good, solid foundations in terms of pointing the areas where educational research and scholarship can improve itself, some type of criticism was not fair at all since either major arguments were built on false analogies or basic departing point was to make education more amenable to the managerial-technical expectations of funding agencies. For example, transforming the nature of educational research and scholarship into a kind of medical and engineering profession, that is “*evidence based research*” as proposed by Hargreaves (1996); Feuer, Towne and Shavelson (2002); Burkhardt and Schoenfeld (2003), has faced with serious objections from the field (Hammersley, 1997; Berliner, 2002). Still some others put forward remedies to make the researchers in the field more theoretically well-equipped. To do this, Paul and Marfo (2001) suggest that:

“(a) course work on philosophical issues in inquiry, which doctoral students should be required to take in preparation for –or as a supplement to– technical courses on statistical methods and research design; and (b) an atmosphere of interdisciplinary and multiparadigmatic collaborative research that provides an informal context for students to experience and practice the values fostered by such course work” (p. 525).

To enhance the field’s outlook, there are other proposals that are more aligned with certain field factors. Peter Mortimore suggests that the scholars and researchers in education need to work within the profession to solidify collaboration, to revise professional and ethical codes of the profession, to enhance the quality of research and publications, to expand the repertoire of empirical methodologies such as experiments, case studies, surveys, action research, and to fight for values of respect for evidence, respect for persons, respect for democracy (2000, p. 19).



To sum up, today I have tried to highlight major aspects on why educational research and scholarship is seen as low quality. It is true that there must be some times to be really harsh on ourselves to make our profession better. However, we also need to be nice and fair to our field since what we see at the outset is a reflection of much complicated factors and facts at the bottom that are stemming from the unique realities and character of the profession. Education is not like medicine or engineering or chemistry or economics.

We need to honestly and openly admit these peculiarities and continue working on making our field better in all respects, as we have done so far.

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