Book Review/Compte rendu

Pamela B. Walters, Annette Lareau, and **Sheri Ranis, eds.,** *Education Research on Trial: Policy Reform and the Call for Scientific Rigor*. New York: Routledge, 2008, 248 pp. $US 39.95 paper (978-0-015-98989-3), $US 125.00 hardcover (978-0-415-98988-6)

Education research has never had an easy position in the academy. Schools of education have rarely commanded high prestige in the university; their research has even been reputed to be "awful," scientifically soft and overly sentimental. Further, in the aftermath of the recent "paradigm wars," educational research has been charged with being overly politicized and overly jargoned. As the editors of *Education Research on Trial* note, most knowledgeable observers would see these accusations to be quite exaggerated. All fields have research strands of varying quality, and education also has its share of high-quality scholars. But as co-editor Pam Walters notes, education also suffers from some deep internal divisions. Like many fields, it diversified as it expanded over the twentieth century, embracing an assortment of methods and theories. But disputes between mainstream empirical researchers and critical scholars, who vocally reject most notions of "science," have deepened its lack of consensus over basic theories and methods. In addition, educational research is dispersed across many disciplines, including psychology, economics, and sociology, as well as schools of education. Walters contends that these factors have combined to weaken the organizational unity of educational research, and have left it vulnerable to attacks from the outside.

And sure enough, in 2001–02, the American educational research community was rocked by an invasion. The raiders were a coalition of academics, federal government funders, and bureaucratic allies. They used *The No Child Left Behind Act* and the *Education Science Reform Act* to impose a new regime, which I'll dub the "education science movement" (ESM). The ESM did not merely rehearse the usual complaints about bad research designs, shoddy data, and untrustworthy conclusions. It also declared most educational research to be useless and in need of replacement. It declared the purpose of education research to be its use in government agendas to improve schools, the latter as understood by federal bureaucrats. It upheld medicine as the new role model. It urged researchers to search for evidence-based best practices, to identify "what

works." It hailed the randomized controlled trial (RCT) as the new "gold standard" method. And, it vowed to direct funds to RCT-based evaluations of school interventions, and let other styles of research whither in obscurity.

This book is a reaction to the ESM. It came together at the invitation of the Social Science Research Council and the National Academy of Education. Several notable scholars in American educational research met regularly over four years to discuss the state of their field. Its chapters take stock of their conversations, which range across several topics, but which all address the central claims of the ESM. As a whole, the book serves as an effective rebuttal to ESM's central conception of research, persuasively criticizing its underlying premises. Several authors take issue with the notion that policy and research are simply technical and neutral enterprises without any overt political dimensions. Some are sharply critical of the ESM, such as Pam Walters, Annette Lareau, Sheri Ranis, and D.C. Phillips. Others are more sympathetic, such as Larry Hedges and Jennifer Hanis-Martin, Barbara Schneider, and Maris Vinovskis. None of the latter fully buy the ESM argument, but they seem to agree that the field could benefit from more rigour and consensus.

For instance, Schneider notes that the top educational journals do indeed meet basic scholarly standards, and hence concludes that charges of low quality are probably overstated. Yet, she worries that many lower-ranked journals may not share those standards. Vinovskis notes that historically, educational research has not been a high priority among policy makers, but he generally appears to support efforts to ensure higher quality research. Hedges and Hanis-Martin note that RCT's are often implausible for many research questions in the field, but rather than dismissing the ESM, they tout regression discontinuity designs as an alternative method for inferring causation in school research.

Other authors are more sceptical. Ranis contends that the ESM, by conflating "good" research with "useful" research, narrows the conception of good research to the point of eliminating many worthwhile studies. Walters takes this analysis further, portraying this entire episode as essentially a battle among intellectual social movements, with the curious feature that the ESM was a coalition comprised mainly of outsiders to the field. By allying with lawmakers and bureaucrats, and taking advantage of the above-noted organizational disunity in educational research, a few experts in experimental psychology and evaluation science were able to successfully impose their world view over other established scholars, Walters argues.

Lareau focuses on the notion of RCT's as a "gold standard" method and lays bare the hazards of applying a medical model to educational

settings. Schools are "noisier" than health settings for research purposes, she argues, since their complicated processes are affected by multiple institutions, only one of which is schools themselves. All this noise frustrates most attempts at inferring the causal impact of school-based policies. For instance, ethical and practical considerations often hinder researchers' ability to randomly assign students, families, or teachers to "treatment" and "control" groups. Parents, families, peers and friendship networks are vitally important determinants of school achievement, and yet they cannot be randomly assigned by any experimenter. Once assigned in school experiments, many research subjects do not comply with study protocols and thereby contaminate effects. They move or drop out of studies, and treatments can be dropped at the whim of changing district politics and priorities. As a result, treatment groups are rarely given interventions that are consistent and standardized, and control groups seldom receive anything analogous to a medical placebo. And, since RCT's are used to evaluate the outcomes of interventions, they gloss over the specific mechanisms that link school inputs to outcomes, particularly the interplay between actor's meanings, motives, and local contexts.

Walters and Lareau conclude the book with a thorough accounting of the lines of research that have been highly influential in the field. Interestingly, citation counts and lists of scholarly award winners show that broadly-framed research agendas on intelligence, qualitative research, and child development, as well as state policy declarations, have impacted the field far more than have narrowly-conceived program evaluations, as touted by the ESM. As the authors note, acclaimed scholars gain prominence in the research field by tying their empirical specific case to broader, far-reaching stories that make sense of the world at large. In contrast, more empirically focused and less theoretically developed studies can have greater impacts on policy, such as studies of class size effects or vouchers. But crucially, the authors argue that any policy impact of these kinds of studies is likely determined more by their resonance with surrounding (and ever-shifting) political conditions than by their essential "quality," however defined. As exemplars of rigorous qualitative and historical research respectively, Lareau and Walters are persuasive in their call for a healthy methodological pluralism. This chapter, along with several others, thoroughly exposes the overly rigid and narrow conception of research that was advocated by the ESM.

As a whole, this book is insightful, thorough, and occasionally feisty. It chronicles a recent chapter in American educational research: a battle between advocates of ESM on one side, and a more pluralistic mainstream on the other, with a smaller, antiscience hardcore on the sidelines.

In some respects, it is a creature of peculiarities of the US context, most notably a federal government that increasingly directs education policy. It is hard to imagine a comparable incursion by Canada's federal government. Nonetheless, some re-evaluation of educational research may be in the cards north of the border, given today's movement for accountability in schooling, along with recent calls for evidence-based policy-making. How far might this re-evaluation go? It is difficult to see what lies ahead in Canada or the United States. Future historians may portray the ESM as a watershed moment in education that decisively re-booted research in the name of rigour and utility. Or they may dismiss it as a curious and short-lived episode, an unwelcomed intrusion, or even a misguided affront to academic freedom. As they say, the winners get to write the history.

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