

RITA FOSS LINDBLAD, SVERKER LINDBLAD, AND THOMAS S.
POPKEWITZ

NARRATIVES ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH EVALUATIONS IN SWEDEN

INTRODUCTION

In this contribution we present the Swedish case regarding the assessment of quality of educational research. This is done from a historical perspective. By doing so we can present and discuss distinct characteristics in research evaluation related to different ways of organising educational research within the changed landscapes of higher education. Here, boundary work (e.g. Gieryn, 1993) of creating and maintaining the scientific status and internal differentiations of educational research is of special interest and will be read as an important focus for understanding different cultures of assessment, their history and the specific problems they give rise to within the field of educational research in Sweden.

We put forward three theses that we consider being of principal interest when changes in cultures of assessment are to be understood in Sweden. These theses will be elaborated in specific sections below, but at a more principle level they can be summarized as follows:

– First thesis: Evaluation of educational research in terms of procedures and assessments are coloured by disciplinary procedures and boundary work.

Educational research in Sweden was established at the turn of the last century as an autonomous scientific discipline – as in other Scandinavian countries as well as in Germany, Switzerland and France – and the academic identity of education as a science came to be built on ideals which evidently were more in congruence with those of ‘basic’ than with ‘applied’ forms of research and educational cultures. The complex constituencies and tensions of the basic/applied dichotomies have served as a basis for boundary work which has long fuelled the questions of disciplinary identity, academic quality and the procedures of its assessments. In fact, even though the institutional embeddings of educational scholarly work are dramatically transformed, these distinctions continue to operate in current discussions of the ‘quality’ of education research, e.g. in university research organisation and in research council work. However, new systems of categorisation of “educational research” have emerged and, consequently, transformed the meanings of previous tensions, but in terms of assessment cultures they have somewhat paradoxically kept the model and identity of a “discipline” with the aid of its navigations.

– Second thesis: The assessment and evaluation of educational research are increasingly impregnated by generalised criteria of research quality in a restructuring higher education system.

During the last twenty years we have been witnessing changes in the organisation and evaluation of educational research in Sweden (as elsewhere). This is part of general policy changes in higher education, which for the scholarly field of education can be summarised in terms of decentralization and as transitions from a Continental to an Anglo-Saxon model — from disciplines to a field of study. Such transitions are having implications for assessing qualities of educational research in higher education. Today, we note strong tendencies towards organising a quality system based on transparency and outcomes of research, models which are translating educational research into a language of numbers with the ambitions to tell tax-payers how the public funded research are distributed among disciplines and research topics. But in these tributes paid to the value of intensified and widened publication patterns, as well as the tributes paid to “competition” and “marketing”, questions of the quality of research seems trapped within a discourse of “old” versus “new” systems of peers, undermining the trickier questions of quality generally.

– Third thesis: There is, and has been, a general neglect of more developed assessments of “relevance” that directs attention to “relevance” as a mark of more intricate meanings, associations and connections than merely that of making a difference in evaluation practises.

In the expansion and remaking of educational research in Sweden notions of social and political relevance have been important in shifting ways – not least as important points of reference for political and administrative decisions in welfare state reforms, as well as for the professional development of teachers and teaching. However, within the debates of relevance, educationalists within schools (as teachers and school leaders) have been put up against those within universities and the researchers are expected to “serve” the educationalists within the schools and bring forward research with relevance for the school practices. However, as it is seldom clear how this relevance is supposed to be checked or tested, the concept of “relevance” itself has largely been ignored, or, simplified. By this, the increased pressures of relevance put on educational research seems to operate less as an indicator of “quality” and more as an indicator of “research interest”.

We argue that these characteristics in combination are having major implications for educational research assessment today as well as for future tendencies for educational research in Sweden.

We are dealing with a fairly broad definition of quality assessment in relation to disciplinary boundary work, to assessments in research qualities when obtaining academic positions, as well as to peer-to-peer evaluation in different forms and of different scales and functions in academia. When writing this history we emphasize that notions about *what* these evaluations are about, as well as *how* they are carried out, change over time – from a system based on disciplines and professorial chairs via a system of inviting international scholars to evaluate educational research to the creation of a quality/quantity indicator system based on peer reviews, publications and citation impact. This is part of a general trend to govern higher education and research by means of accountability and performance indicators in the distribution of resources in relation to funding faculties as well as universities.