

Getting It Wrong from the Beginning, But Maybe (Just Maybe) It's a Start

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The first portion of my title is a reference to the fact that throughout their essay, Emery Hyslop-Margison and Ayaz Naseem express deep admiration for Keiran Egan's book bearing the same title. What a pity they have adopted it as a piece of normative advice! My major theme shall be that, from the very beginning — at several points on their very first page, and in numerous places throughout — Hyslop-Margison and Naseem get it wrong, and seriously misrepresent the theme of my recent essay in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, “The Contested Nature of Empirical Research,” (which also was my keynote address delivered to the meeting of Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain at Oxford in 2005).¹ The essay is depicted as a *defense of* or *apology for* the dominant empirical educational research paradigm (EER). Hot on this false trail, the accusations come thick and fast, reaching a climax in the suggestion that in some way my arguments serve to reinforce researchers' neglecting the stark realities of discrimination and economic deprivation and, even worse, that I am a lackey of the Bush administration and their educational policies. My reaction to these comical suggestions (not justified by my words in this essay or anywhere else) is the same as Donald Rumsfeld's when he was under pressure, “Henny Penny! The sky is falling!”

There is time for just four truncated comments, and I will not address at all the over-the-top crescendo; I refer those who are interested in a correct account of the efforts of the National Research Council committee to the discussion in my article, “A Guide for the Perplexed: Scientific Educational Research, Methodolatry, and the Gold Versus Platinum Standards.”²

First, there is the matter of getting me wrong from the beginning. I am not going to play the game of constantly crying out, “I've been wronged! I've been wronged!” but *I have been wronged!* Compare the following two collections of brief quotations. The first set is from Hyslop-Margison and Naseem's essay (key accusatory terms are emphasized): “Phillips makes a valiant if ultimately unsuccessful attempt to *rescue empirical research in education from a range of terminal defects*....Phillips's wittily crafted *apology* for the dominant research paradigm....We challenge Phillips's *defense* of empirical research.” These three snippets all come from the opening paragraph. I shall jump over other examples and go to the start of the sixth paragraph and leave it there: “Phillips's repeated central claim *in defense of empirical research*.”

Contrast this characterization with what is stated straightforwardly in my paper (again I emphasize key language). The first paragraph begins, “The discussion that follows is intended to *goad* philosophers of education *into paying more detailed attention* to empirical educational research — not just to its *purported findings* but also to the ‘*nitty-gritty*’ details of its inner workings.” Note there is no hint of a

defense here, quite the opposite. In the next sentence I say that “both communities — philosophical and empirical — stand to gain from this increased attention.” A few paragraphs later I foreshadowed my major charge, in goading language: “But — I hear you cry — most philosophers of education have almost no interest in the arcane, technical and semi-technical details of empirical educational research,” a charge that I illustrated with reference to works produced by a dozen or so individuals whom I strongly suspected would be in my audience at Oxford. I pointed out that many of these colleagues make extremely serious charges about research without examining detailed examples, or without providing examples at all, although sometimes they provide a few “sound-bites” in which a research tradition is named but not discussed beyond one or two sentences.

Here is an excerpt from my discussion of Wilfred Carr’s book *For Education* that makes the theme of my essay clear:

[Carr’s book] has three chapters discussing the nature of empirical educational research, chapters in which important claims are made... However, the volume has the defect that again there are no examples of mainstream empirical research at all. *This is a problem, for without examples it is hard to evaluate or even to fully comprehend some of his key points — his critique of empirical research goes ungrounded...* We, as readers (and as a community of inquirers), are not well-served by this lack of examples, *but just as importantly Carr’s overall case also is less strong than perhaps it could have been.*³

Suggesting a way to make a feisty critique of empirical educational research clearer and more effective is hardly an “apology for the dominant research paradigm.”

My second comment poses a question. Why did Hyslop-Margison and Naseem go so wrong? Why do they construe me as providing an apology? About midway through my essay, after the goading subsides, I raise four issues concerning empirical research. Here is part of my introduction to this discussion: “I shall focus on three issues about which philosophers of education have spoken, *but in my judgment not well*, and one on which I hope more will join me in speaking.”⁴ Apparently Hyslop-Margison and Naseem misconstrue my discussions of these three issues as constituting a defense of EER, but they are not — they are criticisms of a number of philosophical discussions.

Another way to put this is that my essay was *not* about the nitty-gritty details of EER, which is why I did not provide detailed examples of such research. My paper *was* about defects in *philosophical discussions* of EER, and the regrettable absence of any nitty-gritty discussion whatsoever, and I *do* provide many examples to illustrate those points! Elsewhere I have indeed conducted nitty-gritty examinations, filling several books and scores of essays, in most of which EER is not “defended” but comes off rather badly.⁵

This leads to my third comment. Hyslop-Margison and Naseem *might* have pointed out — and explicitly discussed — an important *assumption* underlying my work, one I do not acknowledge or argue for or defend in the referenced essay, although elsewhere I have mounted arguments in its defense.⁶ This is the assumption that *EER (and social science research more generally) is a meaningful rather than a chimerical enterprise*. Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, together with Egan, Robin

Barrow, David Carr, and others, believe that most (or in some cases, all) EER is a pointless charade, so *why should* philosophers be concerned about its nitty-gritty! In contrast, I do not hold the view that EER is *a priori* a charade nor the view that philosophy can establish that it must *necessarily* be a charade. Furthermore I regard the arguments that it is so as dismal failures. In this sense I *do* defend the research *enterprise*, without defending particular sloppy instances of research. Given the limitations on space, my essay “Contested Nature of Empirical Research” focused on arguing that philosophers who accuse EER of vacuousness in general need to do a whole lot better and demonstrate that they are conversant with relevant details.

Surprisingly, after their strong condemnation of EER, Hyslop-Margison and Naseem eventually follow Egan’s lead and soften a tad, granting research a small, insignificant role, namely, that of making “limited claims” — such as whether whole language or phonics is a more effective way of teaching reading. (If only we had more well-established limited claims like this!)

My final comment is to note that in my essay I provided examples of how poorly argued the philosophical cases against EER actually have been. An argument of Egan’s is offered by Hyslop-Margison and Naseem as worthy of more serious consideration than I gave it in my Oxford essay — where, to be candid, I merely added an exclamation mark. Here is Hyslop-Margison and Naseem’s exposition:

Research claims emerging from empirical observations represent the logical outcome of antecedent cultural and educational experiences. The outcome of pedagogical practice is analytically embedded in the form and content of the applied instructional model. Dewey understood this point very well.

Dewey might have, but I doubt many others do! It is not clear, for example, how the claim “massed mathematical practice is more effective than distributed practice” is either analytically true or an outcome of antecedent cultural and educational experiences.

Egan’s points emerge a bit more clearly in the chapter of his book cited by Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, where he put forward several criticisms of EER — some of which he later softened. The first was that many findings of EER were actually true by definition and thus do not need to be researched (I myself have argued that *some*, not necessarily many, findings are truisms). However, in my Oxford essay I advocated caution, for some things philosophers regard as true by definition actually are not. It is not, as Egan asserts at some length, true by definition that meaningful material is easier to memorize than non-meaningful, and in fact in earlier centuries it was rare for teachers and parents to be overly concerned with making material meaningful when getting children to learn it.

Second, Egan characterizes EER as seeking universal causal laws or theories (such as Jean Piaget’s) that can be translated straightforwardly into classroom practice. He rightfully attacks this position, but in doing so he gives an extremely narrow characterization of EER. He ignores many of the purposes research can have and gives short or no shrift to either the search for social and psychological mechanisms or to the study of macro-level educational and social phenomena.⁷

Third, Egan offers an extremely murky argument that since education shapes culture by passing it on, and because researchers and students are part of that culture, research is fated only to discover regularities that are the educator's job to shape. Hence research based on psychological theory has no educational implications.⁸ *Why fate has to work this way remains clouded in mystery!* And why it is impossible for one form of life in a culture to have as its point the monitoring or assessment of another form of life is another mystery that would baffle even Ludwig Wittgenstein! Oh dear — I have reacted to this noncompelling position the way I did in Oxford — I've just added several exclamation marks!

1. D.C. Phillips, "The Contested Nature of Empirical Research," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, no. 4 (2005): 577–97.

2. D.C. Phillips, "A Guide for the Perplexed: Scientific Educational Research, Methodolatry, and the Gold Versus Platinum Standards," *Educational Research Review* 1, no. 1 (2006): 15–26.

3. Phillips, "Contested Nature of Empirical Research," 581 (emphasis added).

4. *Ibid.*, 585 (emphasis added).

5. See, as an example, D.C. Phillips, *Philosophy, Science, and Social Inquiry* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987).

6. D.C. Phillips, *The Expanded Social Scientist's Bestiary* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

7. *Ibid.*; Phillips, "Guide for the Perplexed."

8. Phillips, "Contested Nature of Empirical Research," 589.