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“Fail Fast”

The Discourse of Quality Research Perpetuated by Leadership at The Institute of Education Sciences

Jacob Bennett

Vanderbilt University

Vonna Hemmler

Amherst College

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Abstract

Epistemologies are understood as ways of knowing that stem from an individual's ontological orientation. Such orientations are intimately tied to personal experiences that educational scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (2001) argued create “systems of knowing” based on majority-normative epistemological stances. In this manuscript, we were interested in analyzing how institutional knowledge is transformed into a system of knowing based on a norming of beliefs through educational research funding. Specifically, we analyse the ways leadership within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) conceptualizes ideas of “quality” research based on public blog posts by the institute's former director. Our results show a tilted appreciation for replicable studies based on an epistemology that understands educational research to be similar to scientific research in all fields – one centered on “rigorous reasoning” aimed at generating testable theories to expand outcomes at scale. As such, we argue such a discourse of quality research is contributing to the perpetuation, rather than amelioration, of inequities within educational settings. To end, we provide possible new directions for centering context-based epistemological understandings of quality within educational research. Such epistemologies are better suited to inform researchers who seek to close opportunity gaps in educational settings as well as increase the impact of educational research across multiple contexts.



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... this will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, rests on institutional support: it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies in the past, and laboratories now. But it is also renewed, no doubt more profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work, valorized, distributed, and in a sense attributed, in a society. (Foucault, 1981, p.6)

Truth as defined in the quote above is a product of power. In this relationship between truth and power, the former can be conceptualized as a product of institutional processes (i.e., policies that influence practices) that allow specific ways of knowing to become common or normalized. As Foucault (1981) explained, such normalization simultaneously creates a process of marginalization through the systemic exclusion of information deemed “unnecessary” in the formation of a certain truth. If the institution putting such “knowledge to work” influences decisions of individuals beyond its own walls, such systemic exclusion can have far reaching implications in terms of perpetuating specific ways of knowing (i.e., epistemologies). Brown (2015) explained epistemologies based on such power become synonymous with reason and are rarely questioned for their validity – rather becoming “common” knowledge. This, according to Foucault (1975), is how the modern state controls populations “from afar” – not by threats of obscene punishments such as those seen in medieval Europe (e.g., “the rack”) – but through the defining of normed reason. One way such norms can be operationalized is through a process of discourse, as described below.

As the relationship between power and truth relate to this article, the question we hope to address is what sorts of normed reason are being perpetuated by leadership at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in relation to ideas of “quality” research. To do so, we will use a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (e.g., Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2014) of blog posts by the former director of IES, Mark Schneider. We chose IES for this analysis because the institute has been the largest federal funder of educational research within all content areas in the United States (U.S.). For instance, the National Science Foundation (NSF) has awarded more money for grants each year; however, these projects are specific to the field of science. IES historically has funded projects in all fields of educational research and has been allocated approximately \$600,000,000 in funding from Congress annually to support educational researchers (Office of Research Development and Education, 2014).

IES was established as a component of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA). The mission of IES was stated therein as providing, “...national leadership in expanding fundamental knowledge and understanding of education from early childhood to postsecondary study” (U.S. Congress, 2002, p. 5). To carry out this mission, researchers supported by IES must ensure that their activities are, “objective, secular, neutral, and nonideological and are free of partisan political influence and racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias” (U.S. Congress, 2002, p. 6). In 2013, IES published the *Common Guidelines for Education Research and Development* to give specific instructions for how educational researchers might go about fulfilling its mission. Orienting goals toward the expansion of “fundamental knowledge” as described in its mission, writers of the common guidelines explained, “At its core, scientific inquiry is the same in all fields . . . a continual process of rigorous reasoning . . . It builds understanding in the form of models or theories that can be tested” (Institute of Education Sciences, 2013, p. 7). In this statement, the writers of the guidelines used a construction metaphor to reveal a specific sort of epistemology that IES as an institution situates as common – one that understands social science to be similar to

that of the natural sciences, where “rigorous reasoning” is only found through a process of replicable testing. It is through decisions of what research to fund that IES leadership puts this sort of knowledge to work beyond the walls of the institute.

Bridges (2018) explained, “exactly how [research] is funded and on what terms and conditions might have some impact on the nature of research itself” (p. 175). Informed by Becher’s (1985) five strategies of control, Bridges (2018) argued those who fund research influence the sort of knowledge such research foregrounds across disciplines through persuasion and sponsorship. Because funders of research control the sort of research implemented within or because of an institution, these funders also control “the identification and designation of a preferred theme and the encouragement of academics to put forward proposals for research related to this theme” (Bridges, 2018, p. 176). While there is a National Board for Education Sciences that advises and consults with the IES director to identify potential research and other priorities for the institute – as well as four “research centers” that disseminate the funding – it is the director (as the title implies) that determines the overall direction of the institute in terms of the research outcomes IES will invest in.

Accordingly, we chose to analyze blog posts from the former director because doing so provides a unique and accessible way to examine the discourse driven by IES leadership. Our analysis, however, is by no means the first to critique the conceptualization of quality purported by IES. Before presenting our data and CDA, we will situate our work within the ongoing critiques of IES and education research.

Situating our Critique: What Has Been Done Before?

In the introduction to their volume entitled *Education Research on Trial: Policy Reform and the Call for Scientific Rigor*, Walters and Lareau (2009) described the national context in which IES was established as one where a series of federal laws were being passed to “put in place new definitions of ‘scientifically based research’ or ‘scientific validity’ in education research” (p. 1). These authors went on to explain leaders in these reform efforts placed randomized control trials (RCTs) as the “gold standard” toward which such efforts should be directed. While in 2009 implications to these shifts were still unknown, the authors also explained such shift were likely to make significant changes to “core aspects of the field of education research” relating to “what counts for legitimate knowledge [and] what research is funded...” (p. 1). Such a quote echoes that of Bridges’ (2018) argument in highlighting the significance of pushing the field of educational research toward RCTs – reified by funding agencies such as IES. While goals of redefining what was considered “valid” educational research were based on methodological arguments, Walters and Lareau (2009) also exposed how such decision were products of the “social and political underpinnings of scientific norms about educational research...” (p. 2).

As Walters (2009) explained, Congressional Republicans in the early 2000s were buoyed by the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which indirectly influenced educational research by stipulating “that to be eligible for federal funding, a program’s effectiveness has to have been demonstrated by methods deemed scientific” (p. 38). With the passage of ESRA and creation of IES, these lawmakers were able to have a direct impact on the kinds of research that would be rewarded by federal funding. Specifically, Walters (2009) argued the Bush Administration and likeminded lawmakers were able to set standards in the field of educational research through their emphasis on “good science” as synonymous with RCTs. Alongside IES, the “What Works

Clearinghouse (WWC)” was created to synthesize “existing research on particular topics by assessing the scientific quality and rigor of the work” (Vinovskis, 2009, p. 68).

Like Walters (2009), Packer (2010) highlighted the ways federal backing of RCTs to measure the quality of educational research revealed more than preferences for specific research methods. He described the work of the National Research Council (NRC), a committee organized by the National Educational Research Policies and Priorities Board (NERPPB), which was replaced by IES after the passage of ESRA. Packer explained members of NCR proposed that educational research be undertaken through a “middle ground” a “balanced position . . . in which research design was driven by one’s question rather than by a-priori commitments to a specific methodology, and the middle ground was a place where there was room for both quantitative and qualitative methodologies” (p. 19).

While research would be guided by questions in this middle ground, Packer explained the committee only believed certain sorts of questions were valid: “1) What is happening; 2) Is there a causal effect? and 3) What is the causal mechanism?” (p. 19). As such, rather than being method-neutral, NCR supported an epistemology that viewed science as, “a logical process of testing hypothesis,” of which only certain methods could be used to find answers – a position reflected in 2013 as described in the IES *Common Guidelines for Education Research and Development* presented above. Therefore, “. . . randomized clinical trials are built on the logic of hypothesis testing, which is a very narrow conception of what science is and should be, and embedded in this logic are specific ontological and epistemological assumptions” (Packer, 2010, p. 19). Such assumptions misplace efforts in the field of educational research based on a narrow conceptualization of the sort of questions educational researchers should be asking.

For instance, Lareau (2009) explained the most pressing questions in educational research cannot be answered by methods such as RCTs:

One problem is that the research questions that can be asked using this [RCT] method are relatively narrow and thus cannot accommodate the complexity of the educational process. The method seeks to control all features except for one important variable or “treatment” effect. Yet . . . educational institutions are multifaceted organizations; there are constant changes in many of the “independent” variables that have an impact on the “dependent” or outcome variables. (p. 145)

In what follows, we join the conversation with these scholars by asking what sort of external validations were being supported by IES leadership during Director Schneider’s tenure. More than a decade after the critiques above were published, has IES leadership expanded their narrow definition of quality research?

Methodology

We were interested in uncovering the discourse perpetuated by the former IES director in relation to what he considered quality research. Our goal with such an analysis was to further understand how such discourse can incentivize educational researchers who hope to obtain IES funding to adopt specific types of “quality” data generation methods. The specific questions that guided our analysis were:

1. How does the former director of IES conceptualize and explain the purpose of the institute on his blog?

2. How does the former IES director conceptualize “quality research” as it relates to his descriptions within his blog?

To answer these questions, we used axial coding strategies (Richards & Hemphill, 2018) through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to develop thematic inductive codes.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis involves the “systematic investigation of signs [used] to accomplish social actions” (Wortham & Reyes, 2005, p. 40) and “construct and represent . . . the social world” (Rogers, 2014, p. 20; see also Fairclough, 2013). Pushing past traditional discourse analyses, CDA “illuminates the ways in which [these discourse processes] ‘enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society’ (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353; see also Rogers, 2014) and reproduce social structures at macro levels, particularly when they pertain to injustice” (Rogers, 2014, p. 19). We utilized CDA in the present study because of its attunement to issues of marginalization and privilege as mediators in the relationship between signs (language) and social practices at local, national, and global levels (Rogers, 2014). To do this, we employed pertinent elements of Rogers’s (2014) “survey of linguistics features and functions,” which enabled us to draw conclusions about these issues and the power dynamics surrounding them as they were conveyed in the former IES director’s blog posts.

We appreciated Rogers’s (2014) definition of discourse as a “way of representing,” which she explained “refers to the ideational component of language or the discourse” (p. 12). To critically analyze such ideation, we centered two of Rogers’s “discursive features”: *lexicalization* and *exclusion*. In the former, Rogers explained the selection of wording is essential. Questions to ask by a CDA of word choice were recommended as (but not limited to): “What ideas are represented? What social categories underlie the lexical strings in the text? How are ideas represented through word choice?” (p. 34). Echoing Foucault (1981) in relation to exclusion, Rogers (2014) explained critical discourse analysts should consider what sort of information is being suppressed or excluded by common word usage. As presented below, the most common word choices of the former director’s blog posts highlight the ideas he purported in relation to our research questions (i.e., the purpose of IES and conceptualization of quality research) and in turn reveal what the former director therefore rejected in relation to each as well.

Source and Analysis

Sourcing consisted of blog posts published on the IES website from the former director between the beginning of his term (2018) until 2020 (when the first iteration of this writing took place). All blog posts were publicly available at the time of writing. All posts analyzed were solely written by the director according to the IES website, other than the final post from December 2020, which was co-authored by the managing director of Schmidt Futures, which, according to its website is a “philanthropic initiative . . . that finds exceptional people and helps them do more for others together” (Schmidt Futures, 2021). Table 1 presents all blog post titles in chronological order and a short summary of each. Posts are cited accordingly within the subsequent results section.

Table 1*Blog Posts by Director Schneider 2018-2020.*

<i>Date/Title of Post</i>	<i>Content Description</i>
2018a, June 14: Changes are coming to What Works Clearinghouse – Educational Research	Outlines planned improvements to the WWC, including increased focus on cost analysis, better communication with stakeholders, updated practices for statistical significance, and expanded coverage from preK-12 to postsecondary education.
2018b, July 30: Developing an evidence base for researcher-practitioner partnerships	Highlights the importance of Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships (RPPs) in bridging the gap between academic research and practical application, emphasizing the need for evidence-based outcomes to improve student success.
2018c, September 5: Changes are coming to research competitions	Announces upcoming changes to research competitions, including the introduction of a new rating system for the WWC, simplification of requests for application (RFAs), and alignment of research standards to enhance evidence-based decision making.
2018d, October 10: An update on the IES version of LEED standards - Institute of Education Sciences press release	Introduces the Standards for Excellence in Education Research (SEER), inspired by LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) building standards, to incentivize higher quality in education research through key domains like study registration, meaningful outcomes, scale, and cost analysis.
2018e, November 14: How to make education research relevant to teachers	Addresses the disconnect between education research and classroom practice, emphasizing the need for research to be more accessible and useful to teachers and proposing initiatives to better engage educators in the research process.
2018f, December 17: A more systematic approach to replicating research	Discusses the need for systematic replication of educational interventions to better understand what works for whom under various conditions, proposing a grants competition to support diverse replication studies.
2019a, April 15: List of proposed interventions for the systemic replication RFA	Shares a list of NCER- and NCSEER-funded studies that IES is interested in having systematically replicated to better understand their effectiveness across different contexts and populations.
2019b, April 23: First year accomplishments	Reviews first year as Director of IES, highlighting efforts to improve communication, emphasize long-term outcomes, increase postsecondary research, and address the challenges of identifying effective educational interventions.
2019c, June 19: Some thoughts on the new IES RFAs	Discusses the integration of SEER principles into IES's RFAs, emphasizing the importance of cost-effectiveness analysis, long-term outcomes, systematic replications, and simplifying the application process to improve education research.
2019d, December 9: Update on topic areas and other thoughts about upcoming RFAs	Provides an update on IES's research topics and RFAs, emphasizing the importance of SEER principles, long-term outcomes, and systematic replications while considering changes to the topic structure to encourage innovation.

<i>Date/Title of Post</i>	<i>Content Description</i>
2020a, January 8: A new year's update from the director of IES	Reviews IES's accomplishments over the past 20 months, highlighting efforts to improve communication, emphasize long-term outcomes, increase postsecondary research, and address the challenges of identifying effective educational interventions.
2020b, February 4: Research-Practice Partnerships, redux	Clarifies IES's support for Research-Practice Partnerships, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between researchers and practitioners to improve learning outcomes, while allowing flexibility in partnership models.
2020c, March 3: Scaling is the new black	Discusses the importance of scaling effective educational interventions, emphasizing the need for cost analysis, strong dissemination plans, and partnerships with practitioners and entrepreneurs to achieve widespread impact.
2020d, March 31: IES in a time of pandemic	Addresses the challenges IES faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting efforts to support ongoing research, provide resources for remote learning, and maintain rigor in identifying effective educational practices.
2020e, May 5: Making common measures more common	Discusses the need for common measures in education research to improve comparability and cost-effectiveness, outlining IES's plans to identify and implement widely accepted metrics in future RFAs.
2020f, May 12: IES Centers: A Reassessment	Supports the creation of a new assessment center within IES, arguing that separating assessment activities from NCES will better serve the nation's needs and improve the translation of assessment data into actionable insights.
2020g, May 27: New directions for next year's funding opportunities	Outlines new directions for IES's RFAs, emphasizing the importance of SEER principles, common measures, long-term outcomes, systematic replications, and increased dissemination efforts to improve education research
2020h, August 31: The value of cost analysis	Emphasizes the importance of cost analysis in education research, highlighting IES's efforts to provide technical assistance and support to researchers in conducting high-quality cost analyses.
2020i, September 28: On learning and loss in a time of COVID	Discusses the significant learning losses due to COVID-19, highlighting the economic impact and IES's efforts to support digital learning platforms and accelerate research on effective online education.
2020j, October 26: Introducing Operation Reverse the Loss	Introduces Operation Reverse the Loss, an initiative to accelerate the identification and scaling of effective interventions to reverse COVID-19-related learning losses, focusing on rapid testing, replication, and common measures.
2020k, December 9: Operation Reverse the Loss, Redux	With Kumar Garg from Schmidt Futures, outlines three main actions IES should pursue to address pandemic-related learning loss: understanding the crisis, building tools to help students catch up, and ensuring high-need students don't get left behind.

To more easily highlight and organize emergent themes, we downloaded and saved each blog post as a PDF document.

After downloading the blog posts, the first author read through each consecutively by date of entry to understand any possible patterns or narratives across each. He then re-read entries while searching for specific thematic patterns related to our first research question. This process led to an inductive code of “understanding what works and for whom” as pertinent within a majority of posts. After this, the first author re-read the posts in relation to our second research question. Specifically, common themes were searched for across the blog posts relating to ways the former director described specific problems in educational research and how he believed IES should address them. The second author then reviewed these themes and confirmed their soundness based on her own readings of the posts.

By searching for instances in which the former director shared his views regarding what he considered problems in the field, we were able to determine the sort of research questions and goals he believed sufficient to solve them – and, inversely, those excluded (Rogers, 2014). Specifically, we critically analyzed the lexicalization within the posts by counting common words to understand what actions the former director incentivized in terms of data generation methods to answer the evaluation question “what works and for whom.” Based on this process, a theme of “external validity” was developed. This code was expanded to “replication and scale” based on word usage as presented in table 2. After this search, the theme of “replication and scale” was confirmed based on a lack of posts in which discussions of the inverse were presented (i.e., disconfirming evidence related to designing non-replicable or scalable projects). As highlighted below by our use of Rogers’s (2014) feature of exclusion, such omissions provided useful data to better understand our research questions.

Results

Utilizing two of Rogers’s (2014) discursive features, we were able to uncover three general themes based on the lexicon of the former IES director that drove the discourse in his posts: 1) “What works and for whom”; 2) Replication, replicate, or replicating; 3) Scale, scalability, or scaling. Table 2 presents the aggregated percentage each word or phrase was used across posts (i.e., Lexicalization). For instance, our first thematic phrase “What works and for whom” was used a total of 18 times across all 21 posts analyzed, giving us 87% usage. Our exclusionary criteria are in relation to possible inverses in the lexicalization of the discourse reported below.

Table 2
Aggregated Word Usage Across Analyzed Posts

<i>Rogers (2014) linguistic features</i>	<i>Phrase or Term</i>	<i>Number & % usage over all posts (n=21)</i>
Lexicalization	“What works and for whom?”	N=18; 87% (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2019c, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g, 2020i, 2020j)
	“Replication” or “replicate” or “replicating”	N=55; 262% (2018a, 2018b, 2018d, 2018e, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2020a, 2020c, 2020h, 2020i, 2020j, 2020k)
	“Scale” or “scalability” or “scaling”	N=31; 148% (2018d, 2018e, 2019a, 2019d, 2020a, 2020c, 2020f, 2020g, 2020i, 2020j, 2020k)
Exclusion	Missed opportunity to mention: Appreciation for the ways outcomes of educational research are intimately connected to the contexts where they were encountered;	All posts but one in relation to the admittance that “No single model of partnerships or anything else is ever going to work everywhere” (Scheider, 2020b)
	Non-replicable outcomes as valid goals of educational researchers;	All posts
	Power of RPPs in developing sustainable partnerships not aimed at scale	All posts

Purpose of IES: Find Out “What Works and for Whom”

Posts to the IES website made almost every month, sometimes multiple times a month, by the former IES director show he believed the institute had a role in shaping teaching practice. To do so, on his blog he presented the WWC as the “flagship product” of the institute. The WWC has goals to “change how education is delivered” by moving from understanding “what works” to “what happens.” In doing so, the former director explained the IES Practice Guides, which seek to “translate research into practice” were essential (Schneider, 2019b).

The Practice Guides are posted on the WWC website and are specifically designed to change classroom teaching practices by describing the outcomes found in research projects funded by IES (i.e., tools to move from “what works” to “what happens”). Use of the WWC guides support his emphasis that IES is an “applied research agency” (Schneider, 2019b). While celebrating the end of his first year in the position, the former director emphasized that IES,

...has invested—and will continue to invest—in basic research, but that is not our core function. Rather, as a science agency housed in the U.S. Department of Education, our work focuses on improving the outcomes of learners throughout the life cycle. This means an emphasis on *translating research* for widespread use to improve outcomes. (Schneider, 2019b, emphasis in original)

To translate research to be used beyond the context of the original study, the former director explained IES has a central goal of understanding, “what works for whom and under what circumstances/conditions”—a phrase he used often in his posts.

By finding out what works for whom and when, the former director sought to make educational research funded by IES “useful, useable and used” by solving what he termed the “last mile problem – how to get information into the hands of people who need it most” (Schneider, 2018c). Unfortunately, however, he admitted that the majority of IES funded studies that have found impact, “contribute little to helping us meet that goal” because “. . . the great majority of these projects were carried out in a single location and/or tested using a relatively small number of settings, teachers, and learners” (Schneider, 2018e). Therefore, to work toward solving the “last mile problem” and overcoming limitations relating to scale, the former director put forth a specific conceptualization of “quality research.”

Quality Research: Specific Conceptualizations of Replication and Scale

The former director outlined the goals of the institute across his predecessor’s tenure and his own, explaining, “In 2002, under the direction of Russ Whitehurst, IES launched a revolution in education sciences on increasing rigor and a heavy reliance on RCTs . . . For me, SEER consolidates that victory and lays the foundation for the next wave of rigorous education science” (Schneider, 2020h). The SEER (Standards for Excellence in Education Research) principles are meant to, “identify the domains and core questions, that, from the IES perspective, constitute the most important dimensions of high quality education research” (Schneider, 2018d). Modeled on LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification assessments used in architecture, the SEER principles include six domains to assess educational research: Register Studies (i.e., did the researcher execute the research as described in their proposal?); Focus on Meaningful Outcomes; Identify Core Components [of the intervention]; Analyze Cost; Supporting Scaling Up; and Document Implementation. As they relate to solving the “last mile problem,” the former director often landed on the second-to-last SEER domain in his posts (see Table 2). In other words, “scaling up” through the development of common measures or standards was a central component of the IES discourse under Director Schneider – and was the way he believed IES continued to increase the “rigor” found by his predecessor, who perpetuated a discourse of quality as synonymous with RCTs. Even though IES explicitly supported replicating quality (i.e., RCT) studies aimed at solving the “last mile problem,” Director Schneider often lamented about how these projects followed the same patterns that led to dead ends regarding their success in scaling up.

In his New Year’s update from January 2020, the former director described external validity as “high on [their] list” in terms of outcomes he hoped to read about from IES funded researchers in the new year (Schneider, 2020a). As it related to the “last mile problem,” however, the director admitted researchers and teacher practitioners often have, “different needs and different time frames” that made it difficult to generate alignment regarding goals of both research and practice.

In his post from July 2018, the former director described Researcher Practitioner Partnerships (RPPs) as, at least on paper, a way to bridge this gap (Schneider, 2018b). He explained “back of the envelope calculations” showed IES funded over \$40 million per year on RPPs from its Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) (Schneider, 2018b). At their best, the director explained these labs were meant to “build strong partnerships with states, districts, and teachers around research, development and evaluation capacity” (Schneider, 2019b). His perception of RPPs, however, was that these designs often fell short of their best in relation to understanding their actual impact. Paradoxically, the strength of RPPs in providing space for building strong partnerships as described above was in reality a weakness. Specifically, the former director described how the complexities of RPPs, based on the nature of their designs (i.e., locally driven goals), lead to difficulties in both evaluation of outcomes as well as replicability. He then went on to explain in detail how he believed IES should model itself to solve these problems – and designs such as RPPs, as currently administered, were excluded from his discourse of quality research.

Test More, Fail Fast

The former director explained his colleagues in medicine often had, “dozens upon dozens of trials going on at the same time” finding answers to interventions such as Alzheimer’s treatments (Schneider, 2020j). He argued that to understand if programs such as RPPs were producing positive outcomes in schools, the institute needed to learn from colleagues in medicine by, “test[ing] more” and “fail[ing] fast” to identify useful interventions and understand the conditions and circumstances that lead to such results (Schneider, 2020j). In a post from February 2020, the complexity of his position as it relates to his understanding of quality research was apparent.

In response to his previous post regarding the shortcomings of RPPs, the former director explained many readers of his blog seemed to misunderstand his position. While he continued to explain RPPs lacked the sort of replicable outcomes necessary to obtain the best results for students at scale (i.e., they lacked quality), he admitted,

No single model of partnerships or anything else is ever going to work everywhere, so researchers and practitioners need the freedom to test new models—so long as they are squarely focused on meeting the needs of learners and the communities in which they live.” (Schneider, 2020b)

Like projects seen in the field of medicine in which scalability had been found, the former director explained IES leaders needed to begin examining their own funded research. Specifically, “pattern[s] of movement ‘up the ladder’ of testing” would be used to determine how funded projects were moving to scale (Schneider, 2019d). After completing such an evaluation of funded projects, the former director explained these analyses did not show patterns of linearity in terms of progressions toward scale, but rather a series of, “twisting, turning pathways” (Schneider, 2019c). He went on to explain that even the most twisting road leads somewhere, and it was his intention to lead IES down these paths through a careful monitoring of funded-project outcomes. In this journey, his hope was to ensure the institute moved toward more “rigorous testing” and scaling up of quality research designs (Schneider, 2019c).

As the data above show, the former director acknowledged the complexity of undertaking educational research. What these data also reveal are that the former director believed the best way to better understand such complexity was through scaling specific types of quality research – defined as designs modeled on those used within fields like medicine and architecture – and aimed

at understanding what works for whom and under what circumstances by testing more and failing fast. In the following sections, we will explain how modeling educational research designs on those that create replicable results within fields such as medicine might fall short in solving the “last mile problem” in schools based on multiple forms of contextually defined inequities seen in the field of education. Moreover, we will explain how the former director’s conceptualization of replication is a misrepresentation of the concept as understood in fields such as medical education. In such fields, along with a deep understanding of universal medical knowledge (which, as we will explain, does not translate to educational research) students are taught to appreciate the value of experience and contextual nuance to solve medical problems.

Discussion

Using Rogers’s (2014) discursive features as a guide revealed that the discourse perpetuated by the former IES director normed concepts of replication and scale and thus excluded researchers who seek to acknowledge and understand unique power dynamics within specific contexts. This was clear in his critiques of RPPs. Therefore, the former director and his colleagues incentivize researchers who hope to obtain IES funding to adopt specific data generation methods that align with the former director’s conceptualization of “quality” through a common set of norms. Despite his aim of aligning these goals with medical research, such norms are in themselves a misrepresentation of how members of fields such as medical education conceptualize replication.

“When You Hear Hoof Beats, Think Horses, not Zebras”

The quote above has been used within the field of medical education to teach future medical doctors that based on experience, the simplest explanation for a problem is more likely correct than a complicated one. Such a quote stems from the principle of logic known as Occam’s Razor (Parrish & Beaubien, 2019). Contrary to the interpretation of medical research as expressed by the IES director, however, Occam’s Razor is meant to show the ways contextual knowledge—that is, knowledge developed through time and experience within certain spaces—can and should be used to understand problems and design for their amelioration. Such a lesson highlights the ways Cronbach (1982) conceptualized valid research within the fields of social science.

Cronbach (1982) described “extrapolation” as a more accurate understanding of replication within social science – a term House et al. (1989) explained meant “. . . a projection of the information outside the range of study . . .” that required “substantive modifications in reasoning contrasting the similarity of the two situations” (p. 12). In other words, as the former director admitted, no intervention is going to be applied identically across contexts. Rather than “testing more and failing fast” to understand what interventions might work best, however, Cronbach’s (1982) extrapolation principle encourages educational researchers to consider the ways personal experiences and the wisdom such experiences can generate might be used to inform definitions of “best practices” across contexts.

For example, House et al. (1989) showed how prior knowledge and post-application observations are often used by teachers to generate conceptualizations of “quality” practices in their classrooms:

The teacher has something in mind, tries it out, and judges its success or failure. The determination of whether the lesson works is based largely on firsthand experience, on performing, and through those experiences the teacher develops a

personal set of cause-and-effect relationships about teaching. These are singular causal claims and not dependent on universal laws or regularities that assert universal correlations of events. Rather, they are based on personal experience (p. 11).

In other words, the unique histories of people and places will uniquely influence outcomes of interventions within communities, schools, and classrooms. By acknowledging this reality, the former director might find better explanations for why IES funded projects have been unable to solve the “last mile problem”: the reason being not a lack of scalability, but a misunderstanding of how scalability can be achieved both in social science and educational research.

Researchers working more recently have confirmed the reality described by House et al. (1989). Penuel et al. (2016) found that both administrators and teachers in schools across the U.S. were not averse to utilizing educational research to inform their professional needs. What sorts of research they sought out, however, confirms the example provided by House et al. (1989) and highlights a continued disconnect between educational researcher and teacher practitioner epistemologies regarding quality research. For instance, Crain-Dorough and Elder (2021) found that while educational researchers considered their own and the work of their colleagues as valid in producing applicable outcomes to apply in teachers’ classrooms, teacher practitioners themselves were more interested in outcomes derived from practical experiences in their own classes. Particularly, “practitioners use specific types of knowledge that include content knowledge and knowledge about the organization’s context and history” (Crain-Dorough and Elder, 2021, p. 72). In other words, classroom teachers appreciate outcomes closely connected to the places where teaching and learning occurs. These sorts of outcomes, context-based and nuanced, are at odds with the sort of outcomes sought through the misrepresented conceptualization of replication described by the former IES director.

Along with misrepresentation, purporting a discourse that conceptualizes scale and replication in ways that do not appreciate the contextual nature of schooling can have detrimental outcomes for historically marginalized populations within the schools where such research interventions are applied. This is because the lived experiences in such communities are unique and nuanced and generate different types of knowledge (i.e., epistemologies) than those from the normed reason of majority-serving institutions (hence the terminology of marginalization). Therefore, such communities will not benefit from a discourse of quality educational research that does not acknowledge and appreciate the wisdom of experience living in these communities generates.

How the Director’s Discourse Marginalized the Marginal

Guided by Snow (2015), Crain-Dorough & Elder (2021) explained, “members of the research community often conduct their research without input from the practitioners who understand the educational contexts where the research is conducted and where the findings need to be applied” (p. 75). While Asen et al. (2011) presented the fact that some educational researchers do appreciate practitioner-experiences to inform their research design and outcomes, Ming and Goldenberg (2021) explained that conceptualizations of quality research have historically privileged “. . . academic over practical concerns, internal over external validity, experimental over descriptive methods, and quantitative over qualitative methods” (p. 139). Moreover, “. . . by constraining what is studied, learned, trusted, and used . . . educational research[ers] . . . overlook

important phenomena, settings, and populations, and . . . exclude the experiences of the multiply marginalized” (p. 139). It is within this exclusion that the discourse of the former director of IES was considered here. Purporting a discourse that quality educational research is synonymous with a misunderstood conceptualization of replication incentivizes research designs that seek to generalize outcomes of research across P20 schools rather than appreciating the complexity of experiences therein. Such discourse perpetuates majority-normed epistemologies that are insufficient for understanding contexts where norms are developed through racially or otherwise minoritized experiences.

Without such considerations of positionality and power, standards developed to be applied across contexts often perpetuate majority-normed epistemologies (Ladson-Billings, 2000, Milner, 2007). This relates to the normed reason within IES because with the former director placing the SEER principles as the guide toward finding impactful educational research, common measures would be needed to compare outcomes of educational research across contexts. As Shujaa (1993) explained, however, ideas of commonality are often “put forth typically by people who already believe that their cultural orientation is ‘the’ common culture” (p. 345). Because SEER principles would be developed based on a common discourse that norms a problematic understanding of replication and scale with definitions of quality research, contextual nuance related to experiences of marginalization within educational settings would therefore not be considered “common” experiences and not included as common measures. Instead, educational researchers who seek IES funding and therefore choose to apply SEER principles might ironically contribute to the reasons educational researchers have been failing in both finding replicable outcomes and uncovering and ameliorating multiple forms of inequity with their research. This is because while at its core scientific *inquiry* might be the same in all fields as described in the IES Guidelines (2013), the ways to find answers to those inquiries are likely not.

Milner (2020) explained that within the U.S., historically minoritized Populations of Color are affected by structural policies that result in numerous barriers to opportunity within the communities where many Youth of Color attend school. These schools are often located in areas ripped apart by decades of under-investment and/or “urban renewal” projects (i.e., gentrification) that remove both people and property in the name of “progress” (Pearman, 2020). Tate (2008) named the ways geographical contexts can influence opportunities inside and outside of schools as “geography of opportunity.” The effects of geography of opportunity have been compounding for decades, accruing like a debt on the educational experiences of minoritized populations in the US. (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In other words, the history of oppressive policies and their outcomes on schooling are intimately connected to specific geographical contexts and the relationship between a person’s intersectional identities and experiences therein (Leonardo, 2004). Such identities should not be understood as outcomes of oppression alone or “marginal” to society, but rather very much central to societal experiences (Freire, 1968). Such complex stories are steeped in experiences of resilience and intimately tied to community support. Such experiences provide wisdom and an understanding of the world that educational researchers should appreciate through what Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) define as a student’s funds of identity. If educational researchers hope to both understand and ameliorate inequities within schools, adopting methods that allow for the appreciation of contextual nuance would therefore be essential. Contextual nuance, however, is excluded from the discourse perpetuated by the former IES director, and thus from the normed epistemology related to components of quality educational research funded by IES.

Fail Slow: Reflect More

We agree with Flyvbjerg (2001) who argued those in the fields of social science “must drop the fruitless efforts to emulate natural science’s success in producing cumulative and predictive theory” (p. 166). A reconceptualization of replication as described by Cronbach (1982) toward extrapolation could provide space for educational researchers to appreciate the value of projects used to inform and aid local actors by centering localized goals. Results found from research designed to be replicated and scaled based on the discourse purported by the former director may only represent dominant norms and experiences. Such normalization can contribute to a perpetuation of majority perspectives that further marginalize experiences of historically minoritized groups. For instance, the former director described the need to design “common measures” across funded IES research, without which there would be, “. . . little ability to look across interventions for what works” (Schneider, 2020a). Standards represent normed behaviors created to extend the likelihood of specific outcomes across contexts. If standards are developed without consideration of topics such as positionality (Milner, 2007), geography of opportunity (Tate, 2008), or funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) the standards developed will often bias majority epistemologies (Annamma, et al., 2013; Delpit, 1988). As the Foucault (1981) quote at the beginning of our manuscript lays out, if these standards are used to inform policies and practices within and across educational institutions, these norms create “systems of knowing” that marginalize and exclude “othered” ways of knowing at the systemic level (Ladson-Billings, 2000). By only perpetuating a discourse that appreciates this sort of knowledge, IES is hampering the development of goals within educational research that seek to understand contextual nuance and engage in self-critique.

What a discourse that lies beyond that perpetuated by the former IES director would incentivize researchers to do is reflect on how their assumptions/experiences might be misaligned with the norms of a certain context. A discourse informed by transformational approaches as described by Cho and Trent (2006) could meet these goals. Cho and Trent (2006) defined transformative validity as “. . . a progressive, emancipatory process leading toward social change that is to be achieved by the research endeavor itself (Cho & Trent, 2006, pp. 321-322). The core of transformational approaches to research, as Cho and Trent described through quoting Richardson (1997, p. 167), is to “change the researcher’s relationships with the researched, and . . . attempt [to] ‘chang[e] one’s relationship to one’s work’ (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 325). Essential to such work, however, would be the use of reflexivity and deep understanding of researcher positionality (Milner, 2007; Milner et al., 2024).

Transformative approaches to social science emphasize the importance of personal reflection, which Cho and Trent argued would be essential to consider, “. . . the multiple dimensions in which the inquiry is conducted (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 325). Because self-reflection is essential to transformational approaches, if IES leadership or leaders within other influential funding institutions within the field of educational research perpetuated a discourse that equated such approaches with quality research, researchers would then be incentivized to reflect on how their research impacts the communities where they work. Moreover, interpreting replication through Cronbach’s (1982) conceptualization of extrapolation is a likely first step to ending the “last mile problem.”

As Flyvbjerg (2001) explained and the former IES director acknowledged, “praxis has always been contingent on context-dependent judgment, on situational ethics” (p. 136). Possibly

nowhere are situational ethics and judgments more prevalent than in specific classrooms nested in specific schools nested in specific districts nestled in specific communities within specific states. Whereas the former director sought to emulate the field of medicine through a misrepresentation of replication, the field of public health offers the former director another model in solving the “last mile problem” and closing opportunity gaps in educational settings.

Puddy and Wilkins (2011) argued evidence-based research used to aid workers in public health should be a mixture of the best-available research (which is deductive/transferable), as well as experiential and contextual evidence. The authors wrote,

While the Best Available Research Evidence is important ... it is not the only standard of evidence that is essential in violence prevention work. Literature suggests that two other forms of evidence are also very important when making decisions based on evidence: experiential and contextual. (p. 3)

Puddy and Wilkins went on to define experiential evidence as being based on insights and knowledge accumulated over time. Contextual evidence was described as based on useful and feasible strategies for a particular community.

As leaders in fields such as public health expand their conceptualizations of what quality research is to meet the needs of society, leaders in the field of educational research such as those within funding organizations like IES could follow suite. At the time of this writing, however, new federal priorities regarding research have created great uncertainty as to the role IES will play in future educational research. Along with exposing negative and authoritarian overreach, such a reality also offers possibilities to re-organize and re-prioritize educational research funding. Whether at the local, state, or federal level of funding, expanding the discourse of quality beyond a misinterpretation of replication could push educational researchers to appreciate the role of reflexivity, adaption, iteration, and localized power dynamics in their work. Such a discourse might provide educational researchers new ways to close the “last mile problem” by both understanding the contextual dependency of inequity and designing strategies to ameliorate its perpetuation.

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Authors

Jacob Bennett's current research focuses on how the power of critical connections between teachers and colleagues can support sustainable change toward equity within K12 schools. He interrogates ways teachers' knowledge of contextual nuance, feelings of personal and collective efficacy, and proximity to power influence both understanding and ameliorating barriers to learning and belonging within community schools.

Vonna Hemmler is a STEM Education Postdoctoral Researcher at Amherst College. Her research interests pertain broadly to the equitable education of students from diverse backgrounds. She has taught courses on educating multilingual and culturally diverse learners, and her work has been featured in the *American Education Research Journal*, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *Educational Policy*, the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, and *Qualitative Research*, among others.

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