Evidence-Based Education and the Ideal of Freedom - Meaning and Mystique

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The Debate around Evidence-Based Education

Since the 1990s, the idea that educational research should provide scientifically sound evidence as a basis for educational policy and practice has been strongly advocated within both the academic research and government documents, not only in the US and the UK but in many other European countries. Criticism has in part been focused on the lack of dissemination of the products of such research to practitioners and policy-makers (Hargreaves, 1996; Hillage et al., 1998) and in part on the its alleged methodological inadequacies (Tooley and Darbey, 1998). In the US, the advocacy for such an approach has been presented in a more strident, evangelical tone, especially in the National Council Research (NRC) paper that laid the way for No Child Left Behind: this argued that all educational research could and should be at least in part scientific (Feuer et al., 2002). The integration of the scientific educational research methods with the needs of practitioners and policy-makers has come to be known by the name ‘Evidence-Based Education’. ¹

Although it is hard to provide a single definition of EBE because of the variety of methods in understanding and approach, and differences in tone amongst these different agencies, I believe it is possible to identify two general features of EBE: first, there is the priority given to the Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) as a research method (Goldacre, 2013); second, there is there is the effective dissemination of the findings through systematic research review (Davies 1999; Oakley, 2001). In the light of these two factors, it is commonly believed that educational research is to be oriented towards finding out ‘what works’ rather seeking to understand ‘why it works’. This is a professedly pragmatic approach, modelled in part on medical.

The discourse of ‘what works’ has aroused multiple reactions. There has been concern about the rise of faith in science and rationality (Thomas, 1998, Standish, 2000) and about government involvement in these developments (Lather, 2004), while a series of doubts and questions have been raised regarding whether enquiry into education can be approached in the same manner as other social science and medical research (Hammersley, 1997; Elliott, 2001). The tension between scientific and democratic control over educational practice and research as well as the politicising process that is inherited in the discourse of ‘what works’ has also been questioned. (Biesta, 2008; Oancea and Pring, 2008).

The debate between the proponents and the opponents of EBE reveals obvious gaps in the understanding of crucial concepts in education, including the role of the educational researcher, the nature of practice, and the substance of education itself (Oancea, 2005, p. 158). A further significant difference between the parties to these debates has to do, as Philip Hodgkinson has noted, with ontological and epistemological problems: he accuses EBE of adopting a Cartesian approach (1998, p. 17). And in some ways this smacks of the Two Cultures debate between science and the humanities. As Alis Oancea (2005) puts it,

at least two discourses emerge and consolidate [in educational research], one lamenting the misbehaviour of educational research from a managerial
perspective (associated with a ‘big science’ model of knowledge production and an ‘engineering’ model of knowledge use), and the other attempting to defend it in the name of academic freedom and right to diversity, or to reinstate it through a humanistic model of knowledge transfer (Oancea, p. 157-8).

Although I have more sympathy with the critique of EBE, the purpose of this paper is not to argue for one instead of the other; I am not setting out to advance the antagonist’s case. My sense is that the nature and form of this debate may be a distraction from thinking about more fundamental problems. Rather, I would like to claim that there is an ironical similarity between this conception of scientifically approved evidence and the ideal of freedom found in the humanistic model of knowledge transfer. In both, as I shall try to show, there is something that is not only mystificatory but carries the quality of mystique.

In this paper, I am not questioning the validity of evidence by itself or the value of freedom, but discussing the kind of aura that is attached to these ideas. It is this, I shall try to show, that - in practice and in advance - validates these ideas. Gary Thomas has argued that the myth of rational research is generated and secured by an uncritical faith in science and rationality (Thomas, 1998). While the term ‘myth’ is certainly apt here, my view is that this does not quite explain the nature of the mystique that is generated. Moreover, I want to suggest that a similar mystique is found elsewhere: it attaches to the idea of freedom in the humanistic understandings of education of the kind that Oancea appears to have in mind. I shall try to show that the core characteristic of the mystique in both is rooted in a rigidity of thinking, in the understanding of human being. Finally, through a reading of two texts of Martin Heidegger (2004, 2013), I shall offer a positive account of freedom as thinking. This will, I hope, provide an ontological account for thinking, which will cast light on evidence-based education.

The Mystique of Evidence-based Education

In the Oxford Dictionary ‘mystique’ is defined as ‘a quality of mystery, glamour, or power associated with someone or something.’ And in its sub-meaning, mystique indicates ‘an air of secrecy surrounding a particular activity or subject that makes it impressive or baffling to those without specialized knowledge’. A concept or way of thinking acquires mystique when it becomes immune from doubt. A certain understanding or explanation is adopted of a kind that makes sense only in the already established framework of thinking. And that kind of understanding is often developed or normalised through political rhetoric. None of this is to imply conspiracy; rather it reveals something of the allure of these forms of thought. My purpose is to draw attention to the way that glamour or power is generated in EBE discourse. This implicitly excludes ways of thinking that do not conform to the discourse of ‘what works best’. To do so, and in view of the extensive range of research that has developed
around EBE, I shall pay specific attention to a recent paper by Ben Goldacre: ‘Building Evidence into Education’ (2013).

This is a government-backed report that seeks to demonstrate the effectivity and effectiveness of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews. Through a comparison with medical research, of the kind advanced through Evidence-Based Medicine, Goldacre attempts to show that education should also pay attention to the evidence-based practices with scientific experiment.

In countering the numerous criticisms this approach has received, Goldacre (2013) draws attention to what he takes to be a common myth or misunderstanding that is attached to EBE. This myth includes four main claims: (i) on the strength of a combination of experience and common-sense, policy-makers and practitioners already know what works in education; (ii) RCTs are costly, and this is unnecessary expense; (iii) their adoption as a method of enquiry into educational practice is ethically questionable; and (iv) they are difficult to run. Myths of this kind, he claims, may to our shame prevent the effective application of RCTs in EBE research, thereby hindering advances in educational practice.

The correction of such myths is expounded extensively by Goldacre elsewhere, and it involves a series of denials and counter-claims (see, for example, Haynes et al., 2012, pp. 15-18). First, ‘we don’t necessarily know “what works”.’ The authors claim that the effectiveness of the intervention cannot be assured without sound evidence. Second, ‘RCTs don’t have to cost a lot of money.’ Instead of showing how much expenditure is involved in RCTs, the authors reiterate the question, ‘what are the costs of not doing an RCT?’ And this implies that the cost caused by the trial must be trivial compared to the costs incurred later by policies that turn out to be less effective or even harmful. Third, ‘There are ethical advantages in using RCTs.’ The authors claim that RCTs are used where the effectivity of a treatment is not yet established. They also argue that RCTs are ethical in that ultimately they generate high quality information on the effectivity of the interventions. Fourth, ‘RCTs do not have to be complicated or difficult to run.’ Against this, the authors argue that RCTs are the simplest kind of investigation to run in a straightforward manner. Such difficulties as there are can be overcome with the benefit of expert advice. Indeed it is in the light of this that the UK government has established several such expert centres.2

The logic in the defence can be summarised as thus: although we do not know what is best, sound evidence obtained through RCTs can help us to identify this. Although some of the misunderstanding surrounding RCTs may be clarified in the responses offered by Goldacre (2013) and Haynes et al. (2012), the clarification the provide does not even address or even consider the fundamental problems, where a particular way of thinking about education and human being is in question. The nature of the clarification that is offered is such as to fit the criticisms into the framework of the ideas being proposed, which by its very nature excludes other possible ways of thinking or squeezes them into the wrong categories.

It is, therefore, held to be reasonable to establish a research centre in order to correct the misunderstandings rather than investigating other possibilities or venturing other suggestions.3 Hence, this kind of ‘clarification’ does not begin to address other ways of thinking or questioning, and this blocking move is one step in its shrouding of
itself in mystique. This kind of mystique has nothing to do with the lists of the myths that are addressed above. Rather, the mystique is generated through this mantra-like reiteration of RCTs central tenet, the veracity of which is plainly in question. To put this in other words, what we have here is the assertion of an idea that makes sense in the context of unquestioning faith in an already established framework of thinking, and this might be called ideology; but it becomes mystique through its self-promotion and glamorisation, and through its generation of an aura of clarity, the terms of which effectively exclude and obscure more carefully reasoned responses. Its way of thinking is often normalised through political rhetoric. This is the nature of the mystique I find surrounding EBE.

Let us revisit some of Goldacre’s counter-claims.

The discourse of ‘what works best’

In EBE, evidence is sought to prove the effectiveness of the funded programme, intervention, or treatment (Slavin, 2002). But sometimes evidence does no more than to loosely point towards possible practice in an ‘actionable’ form (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 412). Although Pring (2000, 2004a) has consistently called for the attention to the differences in what can count as evidence in different aspects of educational practice, in EBE discourse the meaning of evidence is taken as relatively unproblematic: it is a matter of the effectiveness of the policy or practice in question, and this is evidence of ‘what works best’.

The discourse of ‘what works’ is based on a pragmatic understanding of the role of the teacher. According to David Hargreaves, this would be oriented, as it is in the case of medicine, towards asking ‘what works in what circumstances’ matters (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 410). Researchers are expected to provide the specific evidence of what is working. Yet there are inevitably certain restraints on enquiry because the questions researchers can pose are already bound by assumptions (Biesta, 2008; Smeyers et al. 2008). As Gert Biesta claims, ‘Evidence-based practice provides a framework for understanding the role of research in educational practice that not only restricts the scope of decision making to questions about effectivity and effectiveness but that also restricts the opportunities for participation in educational decision making’ (Biesta, 2008, p. 6). The evidence of effectiveness of funded programmes may also engender an immunity to doubt on the part of practitioners and policy-makers. The ‘what works’ question narrows down to an enquiry into what works best, rather than to why it works or indeed why it is in the first place that this particular outcome is sought. Within the ‘what works’ discourse, the scientifically proven programme generates a mystique that clouds the idea of judgement, reducing it to convenient assumptions that this is right and that is wrong.

The reliance on science
There is, in EBE discourse, a tendency to rely on and celebrate a narrowly constrained conception of rationality (Oancea, 2005, p. 176). In her discourse analysis of EBE, Oancea argues that there is tendency to equate good research practice with scientific soundness, explicitness, rationality, and the avoidance of bias and partisanship. In fact, it is a common criticism on the part of EBE that existing research is ‘biased’ or fragmented, especially as a result of its combination of elements from different methodologies (Oancea, 2005, p. 164); it is in contrast with this that RCTs and systematic reviews are held to be scientific. In his criticism on the rationalism of this approach, however, Gary Thomas (1998) refers to a ‘tyranny of method’: this, he believes, should at least raise doubts about the claim to objective rationality. The products of this supposed rationality include: (1) the injunction to researchers to adopt conventional tidying methods in their own thinking, and (2) the assumption of the accessibility and rationality of the human mind (p. 142-3). In his analysis of Thomas Kuhn’s account of the ‘myth of rationalism’, Barry Barnes also makes the point that the myth lies in the belief in a homogeneity of thought and activity across different aspects of experience (Barnes, 1990, p. 86; Thomas, 1998, 151). Enthusiasm for scientific evidence of the effectiveness of funded programme should be reassessed in these terms. In EBE discourse, researchers are bound to ask questions within the terms of their own constrained conceptions of scientific method and rationality, and this disables any consideration of the mystique towards which that discourse tends. Its self-referential, self-perpetuating tendencies are further evidence of this mystique.

Normalisation through political rhetoric

Oancea also claims that in EBE discourse there is a political rhetoric (Oancea, 2005). According to Hodkinson (2004), the onward march of EBE indicates a ‘new orthodoxy’ in educational research, and this smacks of the political or propagandistic (Oancea, 2005, p. 170). Moreover, it has proved to be an effective way of normalising ways of thinking, allegedly with the benefit of scientific evidence. The direct politicisation of the EBE discourse is evident in a number of EBE initiatives. Their setting up has involved major investment on the part of government, as is seen, for example, in the case of the EPPI-centre and EBE in Durham, and as is apparent in various government reports. Major government involvement in EBE in some countries extends to the legislation of scientific method in enquiry into education (Lather, 2004, p. 759; Gallagher, 2004), which is often legitimated in terms of the interests of taxpayers. Of course, taxpayers have reason to be concerned that appropriate attention is given by the government to state education, but government-led RCTs are scarcely free doubts about the neutrality they claim. Such trials can be set up in such a way as to provide the kinds of evidence the government wants to see. Pring also argues that:

Ironically, the moral imperative behind this enterprise – namely, a liberation of people (teachers, say) from the control of those who sponsor research and use its results in the interest of management - creates the very opposite of such a liberation. Of course, it is true, and worth pointing out rigorously, that educational arrangements are increasingly organised (and their description
This kind of concern is expressed in Biesta as ‘a tension between scientific and democratic control over educational practice and educational research’ (Biesta, 2008, p. 5). In the end the political impact of EBE on education research and practice may be based not purely on its purported scientific thoroughness but rather on the force of its political rhetoric – a rhetoric that may simultaneously shore up government policy and secure EBE’s own good. A problem with the rhetoric of EBE is the speed with which it becomes a politicised and moralised, effectively outlawing approaches that do not conform to its method.

These authors claim that this now prevailing discourse is increasingly overt about its political dimension, which is manifested in the way it presents itself as the way of thinking in educational research. Mystique can appear even in the most apparently scientific research – or even, let us say, in the professed espousal of scientific rationality. The mystique derives from the way such research is constructed, disseminated, and promoted. Serious critical questioning is dissolved in the acid test of what works. And so the real problem becomes one of how this way of thinking is chained or fixed in a certain kind of thinking without questioning. My purpose in this paper is not to promote scepticism about science or to eulogise some kind of ‘creative thinking’ in educational research. There are ways of thinking to be considered critically in both scientific and humanist forms of enquiry. If we think of research of a more humanistic kind, it is worth acknowledging how mystique can also enter there – as, for example, in the discourse of freedom. In the next section, then, I shall turn the attention to the way that the idea of freedom also is subject to mystique.

The Mystique of Freedom

It may seem absurd to bring together such different things, but in terms of mystique there is a similarity in the way the discourses of EBE and freedom have developed: they have in common a particular way of thinking about education and human being. I shall shortly try to illustrate the nature of this connection, but I need to lay the way for this first by saying something about the debate that emerged between progressivism and the idea of a liberal education.

Let us begin with the idea of autonomy. Robert Dearden (1968; 1972; 1975) professes its importance as an educational aim.5 He goes on to say that personal autonomy is not only a matter of human intelligence. He analyses the distinction between autonomy, freedom, and independence, and the relationship between autonomy and reason, morality, and truth. Finally, he considers the values inherent in autonomy insofar as it constitutes an educational ideal.

Broadly speaking, Dearden’s account of autonomy is Kantian. Freedom is a necessary condition for autonomy. No autonomous activities can take place purely as

‘reconstructed’) to serve economic and social interests as these are conceived by political leaders (Pring, 2000, p. 256).
the result of external influences. To position freedom as a necessary condition emphasises its negative sense (as ‘freedom from’). At this stage, then, one might expect a fully Kantian perspective on freedom, autonomy, and morality, and Dearden’s own account encourages this expectation in some respects. He pays less attention, however, to the relationship between autonomy and positive freedom. What interests Dearden more in this discussion is whether freedom is also a necessary condition for the development of autonomy:

Attempts to identify the two more closely lead to a version of ‘positive’ freedom which may make a kind of sense but which is ill-advised. For when autonomy has as yet no psychological reality in a person, coercion may then be passed off as liberation, as being what he ‘really’ wants or wills, and thus as needing no further justification. Discussion of different positive ideals of character, or worthwhile exercises of freedom, will also be confused by each view claiming that it alone gives a true account of what freedom is.

What is more interesting from the point of view of autonomy as an educational ideal is the question of whether freedom is a necessary condition for the development, as opposed to the exercise, of autonomy (Dearden, 1972, p. 11).

The quoted passage constitutes the textual moment when Dearden most clearly analyses the conceptual relationship between freedom and autonomy. It would seem that clarity about this relationship requires a clear account of each, but Dearden does not in fact discuss freedom in any depth. I have considerable sympathy with his cautious approach; but this in itself would not serve to justify this neglect, and the result is that freedom comes to be discussed in largely quantitative terms. This in effect blocks the path to a radical re-appropriation of Kant in the meaning of freedom in education.

Among Dearden’s achievements in thinking through autonomy, however, the extension of autonomy to include daily activities or life needs also to be appreciated. His attention to daily activities rather meta-theoretical questions about autonomy presumably extends the relevance of the concept in education. Nevertheless, it reveals relatively little of how autonomy is grounded in freedom. This lays the way for the following debate.

The debate between liberal and progressive educationalists developed around the question of the amount of freedom that should be given to children to encourage their autonomous development. Although understanding freedom as a necessary condition for autonomy, Dearden emphasises that it is not necessary for the development of autonomy (1975). Freedom should not be given freely in childhood at a time when children are influenced by peer group or cultural pressures. Rather he contends that a strict upbringing may be required for the development of autonomy. On the matter of the amount of freedom, Victor Quinn (1984) rejects Dearden’s idea of how to develop autonomy. For Quinn, autonomous behaviour involves the exercise of skills, and these need to be practised in the course of education, from the early years. In this respect, a reasonable amount of freedom needs to be given to children so that they can exercise and develop their autonomy.
From my point of view this discussion founders on lack of problematisation of the idea of freedom in education. As we have seen, freedom functions as a necessary condition for autonomy, but it then more or less disappears from Dearden’s account. Freedom for the development of autonomy becomes a matter of the physical conditions for children’s daily lives – say, in free time or freedom of movement. The core of the debate becomes a matter of the physical conditions of freedom. In these restricted terms, which keep at bay any consideration of freedom as a necessary condition for autonomy, the debate becomes fruitlessly self-propelling.

The bypassing of a more fundamental discussion of freedom can also generate mystique of a kind: it can fix a way of thinking, where standard arguments are rehearsed and where practical implications are duly identified. The mystique of freedom in education then attaches to the idea of the educated being as autonomous. In spite of the understandable reputation that Dearden’s work on the meaning of autonomy in educational contexts has gained, his contribution has lent credence to the circumscription of deeper questioning of freedom in education. This then seems to have led, with the exception of politically-oriented debates, to a conceptualisation of the meaning of freedom in education that is somewhat impoverished.6

The Rigidity of Thinking

The mystique that I have identified in the discourse of EBE is in fact evident extends not only from the natural sciences to the social sciences but also to the humanities. It should, however, be acknowledged that there are difficulties in bringing these different kinds of discipline together under one umbrella criticism.7 Yet one can find an element of mystique in the discourses of both EBE and freedom in education. This kind of thinking is not new with the advent of the 21st Century. Across the scientific as well as humanistic understandings of man, as Jacques Derrida (1982) points out, there is a ‘grand tradition’ of metaphysics that is embedded in this way of thinking: as Thomas phrases this, ‘Derrida attempts to deconstruct by examining the falsity of supposedly natural oppositions such as speech and writing, mind and body, literal and figurative. One might add theory and practice to the list’ (Thomas, 1998, p. 148). The problem, in this respect, lies not simply in the polemic of ‘qualitative vs. quantitative’ research methodology (Pring, 2000). It is more deeply entrenched in a certain tradition of thinking. And, as Emma Williams has shown (Williams, 2015), and contrary to a number of critics (Oancea and Pring, 2008; Biesta, 2008; and Issit, 2007), this is something beyond an epistemological matter. The question of on what grounds evidence is counted needs to be put in the same manner as it must be asked on what grounds freedom is understood. To put this differently, the particular way of thinking that underlies the ideas of both of evidence and freedom is the question. The origins of mystique can be discovered in the traditional way of thinking whose basis is left unquestioned or unthought but which nevertheless functions as a ground. But why is this so much of a problem? The problem is that these traditional ways of thinking have settled and fixed the way we understand the world and ourselves.
The first affirmation of the traditional way of thinking is based on the subject-object division. Such a division is first found in the vocabulary in EBE. In the EBE discourse, it is rather obviously marked in the claim that EBE methodology is the objective, scientific, and unbiased approach (Hargreaves, 1997). In this approach, the world and the human being appear to be observable objects whose substance can be examined and calculated, while the one who observes the object believes themselves to be separated from the object. If this is readily apparent in the discourses of EBE, objectivity as it arises in the conceptualisation of freedom depends upon a certain metaphysical presupposition. Martin Heidegger makes the claim that, within the Kantian way of thinking, both transcendental and practical freedom are understood in terms of an object-world governed by causality. Heidegger insists that this is a traditional assumption made on the basis of an object-construing truth (1962, p. 258). In Kant, this way of thinking is not far from installing freedom as an object (Heidegger, 1997, p. 224). Having a sense of the object in this way already consolidates the sense of the subject. The idea of the object separates the subject from the world and sets up a division as the inner ego vs. the object - that is, the external world. Heidegger claims that the objectivity of objects is based on subjectivity. And such subjectivity affirms for itself ‘the essential lawfulness of reasons’, which in turn provide ‘the possibility of an object.’ (1991, p. 80). The way of thinking that is based on the idea of the subject-object division coincides with a certain idea of reason. Yet the subject-object correlation does not constitute a simple pair, as we shall see.

The second affirmation is rooted in the consequence of the subjectification of human being. Bolstered by reason, the human being has an active subjectivity. The active subject is the one who can achieve freedom, and the one to calculate the world with evidence. The creation of this active subject has been understood in philosophy in terms of the modern man, ever since Nietzsche’s declaration that ‘God is dead’ (Heidegger, 2013, p. 107). The human being has become the active subject, willing dominion over other objects. As Heidegger puts it, ‘modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such’ (2013, p. 14). In modern science and technology, Luce Irigaray claims, such a tendency becomes:

The imperialism of the sciences and techniques, but also that of customs and habits, and of opinions or beliefs. And an arrogant criticism too which leads to a worse nihilism and sometimes amounts to personal psychic problems or cultural decay. And a wish to act our Western tradition: granting primacy to the mind and forgetting concrete and sensible experience; privileging appearance and visibility to the detriment of invisible reality, wanting to actively master without agreeing to passively receive, etc. (Irigaray, 2008, p. 235).

Thus, one should not reduce the criticism of EBE to its self-styling as scientific research. The criticism must be addressed to the traditional way of thinking based on the subject-object division. And such a division is manifest not only in scientific ways of thinking. It is inherited also in the way freedom is conceived in education – that is, as something to be measured and distributed in the right amounts in order to develop autonomous
human beings. This is the rigidity of traditional ways of thinking, which enjoins us to think of the world and ourselves in this particular way. Because of this rigidity, one no longer questions the way of thinking but resides within a realm of thought within which the discursive matters are already circumscribed.

But then, how is freedom to be understood? The last part of this paper presents a positive account of freedom in relation to thinking.

**Freedom as thinking; and beyond**

Although this paper questions whether we are thinking enough on the discussion of EBE and the idea of freedom, its purpose is not to suggest some better thinking *skill*. Even critical thinking is not free from the traditional way of thinking (Williams, 2015). So does it not seem, then, that the discussion has merely rejected everything, pushing all ideas to the edge without offering any alternatives? For the sake of brevity, I draw attention on the traditional thinking in terms of the subject-object division. Such a division has positioned human beings as active subjects. The active subject has been crowned as the measure of the world and the calculator of its resources, and it is this that characterises modern technology. But if the traditional way of thinking is thus attached to the subject-object division, how can we re-think the ideas of object and subject?

In his analysis of the epistemological sense of object, Heidegger draws attention to a metaphysical distinction that arises in the translation of the Latin *objectum*. According to him, the translation of *objectum* can be both *Gegenstand* and *Gegenwurf*, a distinction that is marked somewhat unsatisfactorily in the English translation as ‘object’ and ‘Object’. These two terms have a different tone to them. The former indicates the object that is thrown against ‘the recognizing I’ and available for the investigative examination. Such objectivity is determined (in Kant) by the sufficiency of reasons (Heidegger, 1991, p. 81). In these terms, the object is ‘the representational throwing-over-against’ rendered by the subject. The latter, Object, by contrast, is not to be understood as what the subject renders. The Object as ‘thrown over against and brought to the cognizing subject simultaneously stands on its own’. In other words, the Object is ‘the over-against’ as that ‘against’ reveals itself to the perceiving, viewing, hearing human being, over those who have never conceived of themselves as a subject for an Object (*ibid.*). Heidegger puts the distinction as follows: the former is what the subject counters [*Gegen*], and the latter what the subject ‘en-counters’ [*Be-gegnen*].

The distinction is of help to us in realising the tyranny of the traditional way of thinking. The traditional way of thinking positions the human being as the active subject who counters the other in the world and converts it into the measurable form. The Object, on the other hand, brings us to the point where the subject is also recognised by the other in the moment of ‘encounter’. This is not, however, to degrade the position of the subject. The point, first and foremost, is to recognise the receptivity of the subject in the moment of encounter. As Williams (2015) points out, the human being is receptive insofar there is an ‘opening up and revealing of the presented to us. Hence receptivity
bears witness to the co-dependency between us and the world’s coming to light’ (p. 12). In thinking along these lines, one should consider on what ground the EBE and the debate over freedom in education are thought.

Ironically, however, there is no such ground or concept to rely on in terms of thinking. Thinking is not something one can actively advance or conceptualise (Heidegger, 2004, p. 211). Instead, Heidegger makes an interesting connection between freedom and thinking along the following lines:

The call to think determines what the word “to think” calls for. Yet the call which commends our nature to thought, is not a constraining force. The call sets our nature free, so decisively that only the calling which calls on us to think establishes the free scope of freedom in which free human nature may abide. The originary nature of freedom keeps itself concealed in the calling by which it is given to mortal man to think what is most thought-provoking. Freedom, therefore, is never something merely human, nor merely divine; still less is freedom the mere reflection on their belonging together (Heidegger, 2004, pp. 132-133).

In this respect, freedom is not something that the human being can achieve as an autonomous being at the end of education, but to be experienced through thinking. Thinking is not to be grounded in a subject-object metaphysics but must itself be in movement: it is not something one has but is experienced in the encounter, and this experience is freedom. Concepts are resting places that are always in danger of becoming too fixed, and then they can become fixations. This generates mystique, and mystique arrests thought.

This is the way that educational research presents itself. There is an allure to EBE the discourse, to the profile of the research, to the status it has acquired with government and other bodies - status that implies a hard-headed and conscientious practicality. Would-be researchers are drawn into this discourse, and they soon learn that if they become fluent in its use, they will be received warmly by its adepts: they will speak the language of the tribe. In philosophy too there can be a self-conscious rhetorical style that easily recruits enthusiasts. No one would accuse either Dearden or Quinn of being in the grip of the rather crude, macho, argumentative rhetoric or of jargon-ridden vagueness, both of which sometimes beset philosophy of education. On the contrary both are eloquent and measured in their expression. But to the extent that I have exposed the limitation and the presence of mystique there too, it should be apparent that this will be all the more significant. My purpose has not been merely critical, however. I have tried to move from the exposure of mystique to the provision of a positive account of thinking, which is entwined with an elaboration of the idea of freedom.
A range of initiatives for narrowing the gap between research, practice, and policy-making in education has been established in the United Kingdom. Most of these have been set up with government funding, as for example is the case with the London Institute of Education Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (the EPPI-Centre), the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) UK Centre for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice and its Evidence Network, formerly at Queen Mary College and now at King’s College London, and the Durham University Evidence-Based Education Network (EBE) (see Oancea and Pring, 2008, p. 19). In the United States, since the advent of NCLB, the website Best Evidence Encyclopedia has been created by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education’s Centre for Data-Driven Reform in Education (CDDRE), also funded by the US government.

1 Goldacre’s paper was in fact written for the occasion of the opening of such a centre.

2 To the advocates of EBE ‘other possibilities’ already sounds problematic, for there is no concrete evidence to support the idea of alternatives (Oakley, 2001). In her rejoinder to John Elliott’s criticism on Hargreaves’ TTA lecture, Ann Oakley criticised Elliott for the lack of ‘the real literature and the actual methodological positions of the side he attacks’ and for simply ‘setting up a straw man and then knocking him down’ (2001, p. 575).

3 Although Dearden’s account on autonomy as an educational ideal first appears in his book Philosophy of Primary Education (1968). As Stone (1990) indicates, his philosophy of autonomy ripens in both of his essays in Autonomy and Education (1972) and Autonomy as an Educational Ideal I (1975).

Albeit that there is a different texture in the political rhetoric of Paulo Freire’s account of the freedom of the oppressed, his idea of freedom has become normalised as a kind of political liberation with professedly educational aims (e.g. Freire, 1972). Here again I find the elements of mystique. In the wake of Freire’s pioneering and evangelising work, it is reasonable to ask about possible constraints. The difficulties attendant on the discourse of freedom in political philosophy constitute, as Karl Popper (1966) correctly notes, following Plato, the paradox of freedom.6 Richard S. Peters (1966) summarises the paradox in the witty formula ‘it takes a constraint to catch a constraint’ (p. 186). But once again this is to think of freedom in quantifiable terms. He also acknowledges Popper’s lead in understanding that freedom in education encounters this problem, the problem of justification of freedom in education. There is of course nothing wrong in adding a political sense of freedom. This also requires us to think about what ground we assume when we consider the idea of freedom. Without this, like the paradox of freedom, one may get the illusion of the idea of freedom that is never achieved. Would it be too strange, then, to question whether the unachievable is due to the idea of freedom itself or the way of thinking on freedom?

7 John Issitt Although there is an attempt to analyse the connection between the EBE discourse and the notion of autonomous being (Issitt, 2007), the difference in tone of discussions and debate on EBE, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other, is far too great, it might be contended, for them to be addressed in terms of the same characteristic. In his reading of Foucault, Issitt analyses the idea of the ‘autonomous learner’ within the ‘evidence-based’ movement, via the powerful scientific discourse of cognitive psychology – in particular through the notion of ‘metacognition’ (Issitt, 2007, p. 381).

8 Elaborating on this is beyond the scope of the present paper, for the further discussion see, ANON, 2014.

Reference
ANON. (2014)


**Website**

Ben Goldacre (2013) Building Evidence into Education


