Empirical Research Becoming the Most Powerful Driver of the Scientific Development of Education Research in China

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With the concerted effort of the National Office for Education Sciences Planning, Guangming Daily, and Beijing Normal University, we have raised the curtain on the Seventh Forum on Empirical Education Research (FEER) held again at East China Normal University both in-person and remotely. Allow me to express my heartfelt congratulations to all the winning teachers and students this year, as well as my sincere gratitude to all colleagues and participants who have managed to organize and attend this event against all odds.

Seeing how far the FEER has come and how much further it is poised to go is incredibly heartening and inspiring. The quality of research works this year was phenomenal, with excellent entries in both the FEER Academic Paper Award and Dissertation Award categories.

Looking back at the first Forum, I still recall how overjoyed my fellow judges and I were whenever we came across a well-written paper. Today, so many good papers were proposed that we struggled to select the winners. Over the last seven years, empirical research has leaped forward both quantitatively and qualitatively, achieving a rate of development and success beyond our expectations.

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Empirical research has now become the most powerful driver of the scientific development of education research in China. Official policy documents published by the Ministry of Education have repeatedly emphasized the importance of strengthening empirical research and establishing it as an academic orientation. Adopting empirical methods has become a vital criterion for the National Office for Education Sciences Planning when deciding whether to award certain academic achievements or to fund competitive projects, as well as in the selection and review process of major educational journals. The key to raising academic standards and societal value of education research lies in enhancing the rigor and sophistication of the discipline itself. In this case, rigor and scientificity are two sides of the same coin. Certainly, the development of human sciences has predominantly depended on the innovation and advancement of methods. Powered by empirical research, science is constantly developing and advancing; education research is no different.

Thanks to the efforts of educational researchers, empirical papers have continued to grow in terms of both quantity and quality. In recent years, a large pool of highly skilled research teams, dominated by young scholars, has risen to prominence.

First, research design—that is, what constitutes a good study and how to conduct a study—reflects significant improvements in design awareness and the quality of research designs. Second, there has been a significant headway in the theoretical and ideological quality of empirical research. In the beginning, the field of education research was under criticism—and rightly so—for using the methodology for the sake of methodology, and statistics for the sake of statistics. That being said, all things are subject to the process of development. After years of effort, the theoretical quality of empirical education research has drastically improved. More importantly, education theories are becoming increasingly robust and more closely aligned with practices, providing a better guide for pedagogical practice and leading to greater theoretical improvements. Academic papers by Chinese educational researchers are gaining increasing attention around the world, with a growing international readership and number of citations. Meanwhile, China is amplifying its voice in the international field of education research every day.

In addition to the theoretical quality of education research in China, there have been substantial methodological advancements in the field. In recent years, enormous strides have been made in exploring more scientific and intricate ways of studying the complex social phenomenon of education. Indeed, participating in or understanding many of the forums, like the FEER hosted today, requires specialized research or professional literacy. The days when anyone can weigh in on a discussion will soon be history. It just so happens that this year’s Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2021 was awarded to a study applying complex systematic methods to education research (The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, 2021). This is a clear testament to the economic contributions of education and lays a solid foundation for the formulation of education policies. That the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences has been awarded to an education-related study also attests to
the value of education research methodologies. It gives me particular delight to see how the questions raised and methods explored in various forums have grown exponentially more sophisticated since last year. Five years ago, these subjects were impossible to conceive, let alone put forward.

Even now, the FEER has attracted numerous researchers from other branches of the social sciences. Fellow researchers in the social sciences have remarked on the rapid growth of the field of education research in recent years. In the past, disciplines such as economics, sociology, and linguistics viewed education research with some measure of disdain—the question “What kind of research is it that you are doing?” was often posed with a degree of scorn. Now, many of our research colleagues in other disciplines are exclaiming, “We’re falling behind! We’re struggling to keep up with your development!” Empirical research has not only promoted the development of education research itself but driven the development of empirical research and the advancement of methodology in China’s social sciences on the whole.

Practices have proven that academic papers in education research are now treated with increasing respect, and the discipline of education is being treated with greater dignity. Self-serving papers that convey one’s subjective opinions and thoughts liberally are rarely published and are increasingly unwelcome in various forum reports. Only well-designed studies grounded in facts and statistics carry weight and value. However, despite such significant progress, we must be acutely aware of the fact that education research remains ill-adapted to the requirements of educational practices in the face of the complex and ever-changing education landscape. Another unignorable aspect is that a wide gap still exists between the overall quality of empirical research and the requirements of scientific rigor.

Idle boast the strong pass is a wall of iron,
With firm strides, we are crossing its summit (Mao, 2000).  

Continuously enhancing the scientific quality and social contributions of education research is a necessary and worthwhile endeavor. My fellow educational researchers, let us keep going!

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Editors’ Note
On October 30, 2021, the Seventh Forum on Empirical Education Research held its grand opening ceremony at the East China Normal University. This article is a transcript of the address delivered by Prof. Zhenguoyuan,
Chair and founder of the Forum and Dean of the Faculty of Education at East China Normal University, during the Forum’s opening ceremony and the fifth award presentation ceremony of the Awards for Excellence in Empirical Education Research in China. The Forum on Empirical Education Research is a prestigious academic forum promoting empirical research in education, annually attracting over 1,000 participants and 100,000 audiences in China. It was launched in 2015 and held in the last week of every October.

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