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Anticipations of practice-near school research in Sweden

Martin Malmström 

Department of Culture, Languages and Media, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Practice-near research has been on the agenda in education policy during the last few years in Sweden. The research is supposed to make the academy and school collaborate and the expectations are high. This article aims to give an account of different kinds of expectations of practice-near research, and the underlying perceived problems it is supposed to solve, in the Swedish educational context. Drawing from theories from the research field sociology of expectations and Carol Bacchi's discourse analytic WPR approach (What's the problem represented to be?), different kinds of documents on practice-near research were analysed. Five anticipatory narratives about practice-near research were identified: practice-near research for ensuring a school based on 'scientific knowledge and proven experience', as a cure of educational research of little relevance, for increasing teaching efficiency, for making teacher education research-based, and for increasing attractiveness of the teaching profession. The article concludes with a discussion of the anticipatory narratives related to discourses of change and education crisis.

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Introduction

One of the most cherished concepts in educational Sweden and elsewhere (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), of late is practice-near research.¹ In today's usage, it usually denotes research in which there is a collaboration between one or a few researcher/s and one or a few practitioner/s. The proximity to practice is significant, and by some kind of intervention carried out by the practitioner/s, the practice should be changed, transformed, and improved for the better (see e.g. SOU 2018, p. 19). This definition is, however, as will be seen, not obvious and static but rather preliminary and dynamic. Practice-near research could be considered a *boundary object* whose meaning differs in groups and constellations but is robust enough to keep a shared identity in different contexts (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Serder & Malmström, 2020).

During the last few years, there have been several efforts in Sweden to encourage practice-near research. In 2015, the Swedish Institute for Educational Research (SKOLFI) was founded, a government agency whose undertaking is to produce summaries of state-of-the-art research in areas relevant to practitioners, and fund practice-based research (SKOLFI [Swedish Institute for Educational Research], 2023). In several Government Official Reports, for instance, the report by the inquiry into practice-near school research in collaboration (SOU 2018, p. 19),

practice-near research has been endorsed. Another example is the ULF agreement, an effort to contribute to more collaboration between the academy and school (ULF agreement, 2020). During the past few years, there has also been a steadily increased media interest in the phenomenon.

In Sweden, these new efforts have only recently been subjected to discussions within the research community (see e.g. Author, 2020, Blossing, 2020, Carlgren, 2020, Ideland, 2022, Nihlfors, 2020). However, less attention has been given to analyses of expectations of practice-near research and policy-makers' arguments for its implementation. This article aims to give an account of different kinds of expectations of practice-near research, and the underlying perceived problems it is supposed to solve, in the Swedish educational context. The study offers insight into the anticipatory narratives that may be discerned in policy about practice-near research. Expectations of practice-near research in policy and amongst stakeholders are imperative to analyse since they shape ideas and direct actions (cf., Borup et al., 2006). Drawing on various kinds of documents, such as policy documents, official reports, and media accounts, the analysis focuses on what practice-near research is supposed to accomplish. The analysis is guided by Carol Bacchi's (2009, p. xv) WPR approach (What's the 'problem' represented to be?), a research methodology to critically analyse taken-for-granted assumptions in policy. The research questions that

CONTACT Martin Malmström  martin.malmstrom@mau.se  Department of Culture, Languages and Media, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

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have guided the analysis are the following: What expectations of practice-near school research could be discerned in policy and media documents from 2010 to 2021? How can the expectations be understood?

In the next part of the article, practice-near research is contextualized and placed in the tradition of practitioner and action research. Then the theoretical approaches – theories of expectations of science and discourse analysis – are presented, followed by a description of the material and the method of analysis. This is followed by a contextualizing historical background of practice-near research in Sweden, a presentation of five different anticipatory narratives and a discussion of what is left unsaid. The findings are finally discussed and related to discourses of change and crisis.

Origins of practice-near research

Some of the first efforts to get teachers to study their teaching were made in the U.S. almost a century ago (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p. 300). The legacy of John Dewey, who wanted teachers to study their teaching, is important. Since then, the general interest in practitioner research has been wavering, much due to trends in the view of epistemology and pedagogical research (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

In their historical exposé, Zeichner and Noffke (2001) identify five different waves of practitioner research. The first is the action research tradition in the wake of the research conducted by Kurt Lewin (1946) and others. The action research would be a joint effort performed by researchers and practitioners and consist of a spiral of different steps of planning, action, observation, and evaluation (McTaggart, 1994, p. 315). The participatory character of the research, its democratic procedure, and its contribution to both social science and social change would in Lewin's (1946) vision improve ordinary people's lives. In research on education, Corey was one of the pioneers (Somekh & Zeichner, p. 7). He stressed the importance of being open to revision since it is impossible to know exactly what will happen in an action research project (Corey, 1953). In Sweden, action research became popular in the 1970s in research on social work, and in the 1990s in research on education (Rönnerman & Salo, 2017).

After the first wave, the interest in action research was waning (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In the 1960s, educational research had become ever more technical, and the self-reflexive action research projects were claimed not to be rigorous enough, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 166). In the 1970s, however, several British action research projects, such as the Ford Teaching Project (Elliott, 1990), paved the way for an action research renaissance. Especially

important were Lawrence Stenhouse (1988) and John Elliott (1990), who saw the teacher as a researcher, that is, the teacher should be able to reflect upon and study her or his teaching.

These ideas were an important influence on the third wave, the North American teacher researcher movement (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Another influence was the new view of writing and writing research during the 1970s and 1980s (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), as well as Schön's theories of the teacher as a reflective practitioner, and an increased use of qualitative methods in educational research (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001, p. 303). In Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1993) view of practitioner research, the importance of the teachers' taking part in educational research is stressed, since the teachers bring specific knowledge into the picture, a knowledge the researchers themselves cannot reach, according to the authors.

A similar kind of research, the fourth wave, is the North American self-study tradition (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). In the 1990s, inspired by the teacher researcher movement, teacher educators started investigating and questioning their teaching by reflecting on underlying values and writing personal histories.

Zeichner and Noffke (2001) also bring up the fifth wave, the participatory action research (PAR) tradition, which took off in North America in the 1970s but has mainly taken place in countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The PAR tradition has predominantly focussed on adult education and literacy intending to emancipate marginalized groups.

Drawing on Habermas' knowledge constitutive interests, Carr and Kemmis (1986) distinguish between three different kinds of action research. Based on instrumental claims of the natural sciences to control nature, *technical* action research is supposed to bring about knowledge that is then applied to practice. In *practical* action research, the incentive is to understand and describe the perspectives of the people in the studies and the right way to proceed in different circumstances. This approach, however, fails to recognize how practical thinking is influenced by ideology. Therefore, the authors promote *critical* action research aiming to emancipate the oppressed (for critical discussions of this categorization, see Hammersley, 1993, Elliott, 2005).

A similar categorization is made by Noffke (1997), who describes three different dimensions of action research. Historically, the *professional* dimension has been engaged in developing educational research and raising the status of teachers. The most important aim has been to develop and improve the practice. The *personal* dimension aims at reflecting on and improving one's practice. The *political* dimension raises issues of democracy and social injustice.

Noffke (1997) emphasizes that there are overlaps but also tensions between the different dimensions. Many scholars raise a concern about the fact that action research of today is often used as a mandated form of development and part of a neoliberal global educational reform movement (see e.g. McWilliam, 2004, Noffke, 2009). Noffke, therefore, emphasizes the importance of the political dimension.

As the background witnesses about, the history of practitioner and action research is – in the words of Borges – a garden with forking paths. Practice-near research, a part of the practitioner research tradition, could today be a grassroots movement as well as part of a global reform agenda. The next section takes historical promises of science as a point of departure, before turning to expectations of science today as discussed in the research field *sociology of experiences*. Bacchi's discourse analytic approach (2009, 2012) is also described.

Theoretical points of departure

The promise of science is a distinctive feature of the modern age (Mülberger & Navarro, 2018).² At least since Francis Bacon (1561–1626), there has been a belief in science and technology to be able to establish the dominion of man over the universe (von Wright, 1988). Since then there have been strong and long-lasting expectations of science to bring about the preferred future outcomes (Mülberger & Navarro, 2018). According to Koselleck (2004), changes in the pre-modern world occurred so slowly that the expectations depended on the experiences of the predecessors. In the modern time, however, the situation has changed. Koselleck (2004) claims that one of the characteristics of the modern time is that the difference between experience and expectation has increased. Social and technological changes have made previous experiences insufficient for grasping the 'possible otherness of the future' (267). This opening of the horizon of expectations, Koselleck (2004) continues, is congruent with ideas of progress, a specific modern phenomenon, in which the future was believed to be better than the past and where science and technology would make the world a better place. In late modernity, the tendency of hyperbolic expectations of future promise and potential has intensified (Borup et al., 2006), which means that science itself becomes *the* promise of the future, regardless of what it denotes (Mülberger and Navarro, 2018).

In the last few decades, the research field of *sociology of expectations* in Science and Technology Studies has gained ground. It critically analyses how the promises of science are used for enacting a desired future. According to this research field, the expectations and promises of science have a far-

reaching effect, since they 'guide activities, provide structure and legitimation, attract interest and foster investment' (Borup et al., 2006, p. 285f). The expectations play a role both at the macro level, for example in national policy and research agendas, and at the micro level, for instance for research groups or school staff or the single researcher, school leader, or practitioner (cf., Borup et al., 2006). Konrad (2006) makes a distinction between individual expectations, which could be attributed to individual actors, and collective expectations, which refer to expectations shared by many actors. The collective expectations may turn into taken-for-granted assumptions that become prerequisites for action (Konrad, 2006). The expectations *do* something; they are performative and can be defined as statements about the future that circulate (van Lente, 2012).

Promises and expectations of science are impregnated with ideas of the good society (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). According to Popkewitz (2020), the promise of science is to provide practical knowledge for the betterment of people and society writ large. He traces this view of science to the Enlightenment and claims it became increasingly pronounced in the modern welfare state. When it comes to education and its pedagogical practices, practical research has rather a long history (Popkewitz, 2020). It relates to American progressivism of the late 19th century, the research and development (R&D) reform movement of the mid-20th century, today's international assessments of national education systems, such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS, and the recent calls for collaborative research. What these different research approaches have in common, according to Popkewitz (2020), is a desire for research to make specific kinds of people. In this sense, the research is and ought to be useful for society and could be legitimized by its improving education and society at large. Ideas of progress are thus still prevalent, albeit in a somewhat different fashion. Popkewitz (2020), however, asks whether there is historical evidence for claiming that practical research has effected the desired changes or if this doxa of science is to be considered a 'false prophet' (4).

High hopes, anticipations, and expectations of science are commonplace, but since expectations are at their height at the beginning of scientific endeavours or technological innovations, the vision is rarely fulfilled, which indicates that disappointments are 'almost built into' expectations (Borup et al., 2006, p. 290). However, past disappointments tend to be forgotten or seen as a special case (Borup et al., 2006). Therefore, new, or supposedly new, research fields or strands of research – such as practice-near research – are greeted with enthusiasm, excitement, and high expectations.

As Borup et al. (2006) point out, expectations are discursive and material. In this article, I focus on the discursive character of expectations in policies on practice-near research in Sweden. I am interested in what practice-near research is expected to achieve, and what assumed problems it is supposed to solve. Expectations are created in the form of stories of what practice-near research is supposed to solve and simultaneously how the different drives for practice-near research are legitimized. I have therefore identified what I call *anticipatory narratives* of practice-near research. These anticipatory narratives draw from discourses of education, education research, and teacher education and could be seen as answers to the discourses. The important question of how policy is enacted (Ball et al., 2012) is thus not considered here. However, even though policies ‘rarely tell you exactly what to do’, they may ‘narrow down the range of imaginative responses’ (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 486). Since policies govern and direct actions, critical policy studies are imperative.

For analysing policy critically, Bacchi (2009, 2012) has designed a Foucault-inspired poststructural research methodology to problematize the way ‘problems’ are represented in policies or policy proposals. Policies are seen as cultural products implying that there are problems that need to be solved, but according to Bacchi (2009, p. x) policies ‘give shape to “problems”’, rather than address them, and ultimately seek to solve them. Since the problem representations (or problematizations) govern us, Bacchi claims, the underlying assumptions and discourses of problem representations in policy need to be critically analysed by making the implicit ‘problems’ explicit and scrutinizing them carefully (see below).

Material and method of analysis

The data consist of different kinds of policy documents, government and government-affiliated documents, official reports, and media accounts, in which practice-near school research in Sweden is discussed, either as the main concern or in passing. Through searches in an archive of Swedish official reports (SOU-sök) for ‘practice-near research and/or praxis-near research’, about 20 reports from the 1970s until 2021, in which practice-near research in school is discussed, were selected. The criterium for selecting the texts was that they express expectations that legitimize the demand for practice-near research. The documents from 1970 to around 2010, together with previous research on researched-based education in Sweden, were used in the analysis of the history of practice-near research in Sweden. Most of the policy documents are however from 2010 and onwards. These documents were analysed to identify anticipatory narratives in the recent calls for practice-near

research. For this purpose, media material was also used. From the media archive *Retriever research*, about 200 articles from 2010 to 2021 were selected (search terms ‘practice-near research’ and praxis-near research”). Just as the policy documents, the selected articles discuss practice-near school research at some length (i.e. articles in which practice-near research is only mentioned were not selected). The media material consists of various kinds of articles from daily newspapers as well as the teacher union press. Most of the articles are from 2015–2021, which illustrates the media coverage of the phenomenon. The media material serves the purpose of triangulation, as described by Wodak (2008). It brings another layer to the analysis since it gives voice to other actors’ ideas of practice-near research than the policy documents and, thus, illuminates the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between policy and media texts. The media texts, then, broaden the scope of the article since they contribute to the socio-cultural contextualization of the policy texts (cf., Nordin, 2014).

The analytic process was guided by Bacchi’s (2009, 2012) discourse analytic WPR approach, an analytic tool for critical scrutiny of policy (see above). Bacchi (2012, p. 4) claims that it is possible to ‘work backwards’ to deduce how a policy proposal produces a ‘problem’. She introduces a series of questions that help the researcher trace the genealogy and the effects of different problematizations (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2):

- (1) What’s the ‘problem’ (...) represented to be in a specific policy?
- (2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?
- (3) How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
- (4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
- (5) What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
- (6) How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

The framework can be applied in individual studies of policy. Since the questions are interrelated, the point of the analysis guides which questions are foregrounded and in which order they are presented. Additionally, all the questions do not need to be addressed in every analysis (Bacchi, 2009, p. 101). In this study, I focus on the first four questions, even though questions five and six are partly answered in the analysis of the anticipatory narratives and the discussion.

The analytic procedure was inspired by a reflective thematic approach (cf., Braun and Clark, 2006, 2019).

The first step was a reading of the documents to find passages where practice-near research was discussed. The passages were identified and marked. In the coding process, the data were categorized and, finally, five different themes about expectations of practice-near research were generated. The themes – the anticipatory narratives – serve various functions, most notably to legitimize the different drives for practice-near research, and, by doing so, tell stories of what practice-near research is, what it is supposed to accomplish, and, not least, what ‘problems’ practice-near research is believed to solve. There are no clear-cut boundaries between the themes, which means that phrases and arguments may appear in more than one theme. This is reflected in the presentation of the narratives.

The historical contextualization of practice-near research in Sweden aims at answering Bacchi’s third question, and partly question six. In this section, policy documents and previous research on research-based education in Sweden are referenced. The analysis of the anticipatory narratives answers Bacchi’s first question. In the presentation of the narratives, there are references other than the primary material, such as research articles and reports in order to examine underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies (cf., Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84f) and answer Bacchi’s second question. The goal of question two, she states, is to ‘uncover the (assumed) thought that lies behind specific problem representations’ (Bacchi, 2009, p. 5). The section ‘Practice-near School Research as the Solution?’ discusses Bacchi’s fourth question about what fails to be problematized and what is silenced. The discussion answers the second research question.

History of practice-near school research in Sweden

In this section, the historical background of the concept of practice-near school research in Sweden is given. It answers Bacchi’s third question: *How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?* The historical contextualization of the developments helps to understand the anticipatory narratives described in the next section and thus also partly answers the second research question.

The international development of practitioner research sketched above is important for the development in Sweden as well since international educational trends play a part. Additionally, trust in science has historically been strong. Aasen and Prøitz (2004) argue that the relationship between research and education in Sweden has historically been strong. Swedish researchers were the (social) engineers behind the two major educational reforms of the 1960s, Grundskolan (9-year comprehensive school)

and Gymnasieskolan (upper secondary school) (Román et al., 2015). There was a belief that with the help of science, the educational future could be planned following economic and social needs (Ringarp & Waldow, 2016). The close connections between researchers, policymakers and practitioners have, however, also contributed to increasing instrumental claims for research to be of direct use for practitioners, that is, a belief in a seamless transformation from research to didactical imperatives (Aasen & Prøitz, 2004, p. 8, 40). According to Aasen and Prøitz (2004), this view changed in the 1990s, due to advances in the theory of science, and experiences from the practice. It was simply not possible to directly convert research results into practice. The research, the authors claim, would instead make practitioners reflect upon their actions, and constant dialogues with researchers would make the practitioners part of the whole process. During this time, several national collaborative school development projects were established with researchers and practitioners involved (Lindholm, 2008)

At the beginning of the new millennium, a new part of the Swedish Research Council, the Committee for Educational Sciences, was instigated, and a new discipline, Educational Sciences, was created. The committee was to fund research and emphasized the importance of the research being ‘of the highest scientific quality’ (Aasen & Prøitz, 2004, p. 51, my translation). A venture for *praxis-near basic research* was initiated. In two reports published by The Research Council, several praxis-near research undertakings were presented illustrating the elasticity of the term. There were projects spanning from reflections on art education, researcher-initiated studies carried out in the practice, and studies with research questions originating from the practice. In the first report, praxis-near research is said to be carried out close to the professional practice and first and foremost have knowledge-generating aims, rather than improving practice (Swedish Research Council, 2003, p. 5). Thus, *the research* is highlighted. In the second publication, however, in a long discussion of praxis-near research, a scholar argues that a kind of clinical educational research is missing, in which the practitioners take an active part in the actual research, rather than just transforming research into teaching (Swedish Research Council, 2005). The different meanings of praxis-near research illustrate the broad scope of the term and the boundary work of some scholars in trying to define it.

Over the years, the term *practice-near research* has become more widely used and has gradually substituted its forerunner praxis-near research. The concept of praxis-near research has been criticized for being vague. In a Government Official Report (SOU 2005, p. 31), the function of the concept is

questioned, and in another (SOU 2008, p. 30, p. 43, my translation), educational research is said to ‘gravitate between praxis use and abstract theory application’. The renaissance of the concept of practice-near research, first used in the 1990s (Eriksson, 2018), would vouch for applicability rather than theory formation, and thus to a greater extent contribute to research-based education. In a Government Bill from 2009 (Prop 2009/10:89, p. 59), for instance, it is stated that research supported by the Committee for Educational Sciences should be relevant to the practice to contribute to evidence-based education. As mentioned before, SKOLFI was founded in 2015. The overarching aim is to “contribute to children’s and pupils’ development and learning” (SKOLFI [Swedish Institute for Educational Research], 2023). There are similarities with What Works Clearinghouses in various countries but also differences, at least from the most ardent proponents of evidence-based education, such as the What Works Clearinghouse in the U.S., in which only quantitative studies suffice. In SKOLFI’s systemic reviews not only quantitative research is included, but also ‘practice-based research’, that is research ‘for and with pre-school teachers, teachers and other professionals in the school system’ (SKOLFI, 2023).

Another forum where practice-near research has been called for is Government Official Reports. In several state public reports, the importance of promoting practice-near research has been announced, most notably in *Forska tillsammans: samverkan för lärande och förbättring* [*Do Research Together: Collaboration for Learning and Improvement*] (SOU 2018, p. 19), which is devoted to mapping and endorsing practice-near research, that is, collaborations between teachers and researchers. A third effort is the previously mentioned ULF agreement (Utbildning, Lärande, Forskning [Education, Learning, Research]). ULF is a government-instigated pilot project between 2017 and 2021 (extended to 2024 to become permanent), aimed at establishing research environments with new ideas of collaboration between academia and school (ULF agreement, 2020).

As mentioned in the introduction, the use of the concept of practice-near research in the media has steadily increased since it took off a few years into the 2010s. A search in the media database *Retriever Research* shows that the concept was hardly used at all concerning education until well into the 2010s. From 2015 onwards, the use of the concept has risen steeply. In 2020, the use decreased, probably due to the COVID-19 crisis. In 2021, however, the use increased again.

So, the expectations of educational practitioner research changed during the 1990s, from hopes that it would be of direct use to practitioners to seeing

dialogues between researchers and practitioners as a way of making the practitioners reflect on their actions and be part of the whole process. Later, when the Committee for Educational Sciences was formed, this change of perspective lingered on, but the vagueness of the aims of the praxis-near research was criticized. Instead, the anticipatory narratives described above were directed to practice-near research.

Anticipatory narratives of practice-near school research

In this section, the first research question is focussed. Expectations of practice-near research in policy documents and media texts from 2010 are accounted for. The expectations could be considered as proposed solutions to real or imagined problems (cf. Bacchi, 2009, 2012). The section answers Bacchi’s first two questions: *What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?* and *what presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?*

Five different anticipatory narratives have been identified. This is in line with Bacchi’s (2012, p. 4) premise that ‘what we say we want to do about something indicates what we think needs to change and hence how we constitute the “problem”’. The identified five anticipatory narratives are

- (i) practice-near research for ensuring a school based on ‘scientific knowledge and proven experience’
- (ii) practice-near research as a cure of educational research of little relevance
- (iii) practice-near research for increasing teaching efficiency
- (iv) practice-near research for making teacher education research-based
- (v) practice-near research for increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession

Practice-near research for ensuring a school based on ‘scientific knowledge and proven experience’

In 2010, Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce research-based education as a legal requirement (SFS, 2010, Bergmark & Hansson, 2020). From then on, the Education Act (2010, p. 800) states that education should be based on ‘scientific knowledge and proven experience’. When practice-near research is legitimized in policy documents from 2010 and onwards, the wording of the Education Act is recurrently referred to. In the Government Official Report *Med undervisningsskicklighet i centrum* [*Focussing Teaching Skills*] (SOU 2018, p. 17, p. 148, my translation), it is stated that ‘the demand of school to be

based on scientific knowledge implies that practice-near research needs to be substantially developed in the future'. The wording 'substantially' [rejält] makes it clear that practice-near research is believed to be an important part of making school research-based. The great expectations of practice-near research could also be exemplified in the *National Research Bill 2016/17* where it is argued that practice-near research 'strengthens the scientific knowledge and proven experience that the education according to the Education Act should rest on' (Prop 2016/17:50, p. 105, my translation).

The scientific basis, as described by The National Agency for Education [Skolverket], is about form as well as content, that is both *what* is taught and *how*, which means that it differs from the usage in higher education where the content has been seen as most important (Persson & Persson, 2017). 'Proven experience' is the joint knowledge of the profession. In the version of The National Agency for Education, the proven experience needs to be documented, shared and tested collegially (Lindvert & Minten, 2012) and can be related to the international evidence movement (see more below) and ideas of *what works* and *best practice* (Bergmark & Hansson, 2020). Persson (2017) discusses the problem of distinguishing proven experience from research. In the Government Official Report *Forska tillsammans* [*Do Research Together*] (SOU 2018, p. 19, p. 27), proven experience is described as a potential starting point for researching the practice. It has however been difficult for teachers and school leaders to understand what scientific knowledge and proven experience should imply (Bergmark & Hansson, 2020). In the material of this study, practice-near research is considered as important for implementing the policy. One of the most important uses of practice-near research is hence to help ensure and enact a school based on scientific knowledge and proven experience.

Practice-near research as a cure for educational research of little relevance

The lack of practice-near research and the absence of educational research of use for practitioners are aspects that are often referred to when practice-near research is legitimized. 'The fact that practice-near research within the field of educational sciences is neglected goes back a long way', the managing director of IFOUS, an independent research and development institute, states in an article in a teacher union magazine (Ahnborg, 2018, my translation). IFOUS is an important boundary organization with the objective 'to stimulate practice-oriented research in the field of education' (www.ifous.se/english; see also Adolfsson & Sundberg, 2018). In another article

(Holmqvist et al. 2018), classroom studies are claimed to be almost non-existent, a statement based on a scientific report on research-based teacher education. In policy documents, this idea is prevalent, as well. The School Commission (SOU 2016:38, p. 147) states that much school research has focused on school and the education system, but not primarily on developing knowledge of use for teachers and school leaders, with a reference to a text by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Minten, 2013), in which it is affirmed – without references – that the relationship between research on education and teachers' practices historically has been weak. This narrative figures prominently in the discussion about research-based education.

As a cure for 'impractical' educational research, clinical educational research is endorsed (see e.g. SOU 2018:19). In (SOU 2018:19), it is argued that clinical research in education should be given the obvious role it has in medical research, research that is conducted in connection to the teachers' professional activities and concerned with teaching and learning from teachers' and students' perspectives. It is a form of 'developmental research' (SOU 2018:19, p. 30, my translation). In this sense, clinical educational research is supposed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, as 'teachers are involved in the research process, and work directly with changing and improving the classroom practice' (SOU 2018:19, p. 31, my translation). Another concept borrowed from medical research is 'evidence-based'. The concept was increasingly used in the context of school reform in the 1980s and 1990s (Hammersley, 2007, p. x). In a lecture in 1996, for instance, the educational researcher David Hargeaves (2007) accused educational research of not being worth the money spent, since it was not cumulative, not evidence-based, and thus not of any use for teachers. Instead, he wanted educational research to learn from medicine to become relevant to practice. Since then, the evidence movement has gained ground, not least in the new millennium, and when used in education the concept of evidence often denotes *what works* (Biesta, 2014). In policy, practice-near research and evidence-based education are sometimes lumped together. Evidence-based research to support the development of school and teaching could either be practice-near or emanate from research not conducted in the practice, according to the School Commission (SOU 2017:35). In *Forska tillsammans* (SOU 2018:19), evidence-based education is, again, related to medical research. There is a plea for evidence in the form of systematic reviews and meta-analyses, as

well as procedural knowledge in how to implement improvement work.

The notion that there is a lack of practice-near research could be seen as a (not always) veiled form of critique of educational research. The research is believed to be of little use to practitioners and therefore irrelevant. On occasions, this critique is explicitly voiced. ‘School research needs to be more useful’, the chair of the school leader union asserts (Flodin, 2012, p. 3, my translation). An issue of concern for the National Union for Teachers in Sweden is that ‘over the years we have seen vast amounts of research about school on a systemic level, but far too little about what really makes a difference in the classroom’ (Lärarnas riksförbund, 2018, my translation). Even the research that is conducted in the practice is criticized, since the research questions, and thus the results, are not related to the teachers’ tasks and questions (Carlgrén, 2012). The notion is related to the oft-expressed theory/practice gap in educational research and teacher education. A researcher in a collaborative project about the effect of exercising for improving learning, claims that the gap is a problem since educational research is therefore not applied in the activities of the school. The problem is hoped to be solved, or at least dealt with, by the collaborative approach of the project (Järfälla kommun, 2020).

Practice-near research for increasing teaching efficiency

Another salient narrative is that practice-near research could increase teaching efficiency. The purpose of practice-near research in the *National Research Bill 2016/2017* is said to be ‘to develop and improve the teaching in school and preschool to increase the compliance rate of students and preschool’ (Prop 2016/17:50, p. 105, my translation). A trend in the recent drives for practice-near research is that the scope of the concept has been reduced. Practice-near research is supposed to be of ‘direct use and utility’ (Prop 2016/17:50, p. 105, my translation). In *Forska tillsammans* (SOU 2018:17, p. 31, my translation), ‘practice-developing research’ is the preferred term, since it elucidates ‘that the results of the research should lead to an advance of the scientific basis of the practice’. Improving practice, rather than knowledge formation, is highlighted, and can be compared with the aim of ‘praxis-near research’ (mentioned above) which ultimately was to create research ‘of the highest scientific quality’ (Aasen & Prøitz, 2004, p. 51). This is an international trend in practitioner research (see e.g. Constable, 2018, Ellis & Armstrong, 2014). Noffke (2009) points out that this kind of research has become

part of the global neoliberal reform movement which has resulted in a performativity culture. In a culture of performativity, the individual practitioners’ performances are measured by output or quality (Ball, 2003, p. 216). A reason for the shifted focus to ‘direct use and utility’ is the international reform movement and probably the advances of the international evidence movement. As previously mentioned, practice-near research has in policy often been related to ideas of evidence-based education. The Swedish School Commission claims that evidence-based research can support the development of school and teaching, either as practice-near or as conducted at a distance from the practice (SOU 2017:35).³ In another report, evidence-based education is compared with its counterpart in medicine. Evidence-based medicine is about finding the best available knowledge, and even though there are some differences, there are parallels to education, the author of the report claims (SOU 2018:19, p. 28). The narrowing down of the concept is part of a larger trend. The evidence movement has made advances in many countries during the last two decades or so (Adolfsson & Sundberg, 2018, p. 55). When Adolfsson and Sundberg (2018, p. 57, my translation) summarize the efforts of the last 25 years to make education in Sweden research-based, they describe a gradual shift from ‘indirect to more direct initiatives’. This move is apparent in the history of practice-near research as well. The research is supposed to solve a great number of problems.

One of the problems is Sweden’s results in international large-scale studies, such as PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS. Sometimes, mostly in the media, but also in policy documents, large-scale studies are referred to. In the previously mentioned debate article by Lars Flodin (2012), then director of The Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education, the author refers to Sweden’s falling behind internationally. He, therefore, calls for more practice-near research, defined as based on the needs of the practitioners and dealing with the learning situation, as opposed to existing educational research. The article was taken up by a large number of local daily newspapers and was thus widely spread. In an analysis of media and parliamentary debates, Lundahl and Serder (2020) make similar observations. In the parliamentary debates, there are calls for practice-near research, from all political orientations, to help solve the alleged school crisis. Practice-near research, in the media as well as in the parliamentary debates, is requested to increase low PISA results. So, practice-near research is used as a tool for making Sweden

competitive in the international education race (cf. Grek, 2009).

Practice-near research for making teacher education research-based

Not surprisingly, teacher education is important for the recent drives of practice-near research. Practice-near research is supposed to make teacher education research-based to a greater extent. In the final report of the School Commission (SOU 2017:35, p. 174, my translation), it is maintained that a stronger scientific basis of teacher education ‘demands both practice-near research and a wider research base’. The establishment of ‘excellent centres’ or ‘strong environments for teacher education’ are also requested for improved quality and status of teacher education. The wording of ‘excellent centres’ could be related to the performativity culture of education (cf., Ball, 2003). The pivotal role of practice-near research is also stressed in the *National Research Bill* (Prop 2016/17:50, p. 105) where collaboration between education, practice, and research – in the form of practice-near research – is said to be of ‘decisive importance’ for strengthening the research base of teacher education. The drastic wording is also used by the former Minister for Higher Education and Research, Helene Hellmark Knutsson (2016), in an article in a union magazine. These expectations of a *science-based* teacher education could be compared (and perhaps contrasted) with the concept of *pedagogic professionalism*, which seems more common in a German teacher education context where the teacher’s sound judgements are endorsed (cf., Dodillet et al., 2019).

One of the aims of the Committee for Educational Sciences was to fund research that would make teacher education more research-based. Therefore, the subject of educational sciences was created. However, in a report on the establishment of a Swedish institute for educational research, the investigator claims that there has only been a limited amount of practice-near research in educational sciences, even though the subject was fashioned to produce such research (U 2014, p. 02, p. 8). There is, thus, an implicit critique of the committee. The practice-near research promoted by the report is, contrary to the research funded by the committee, about how different methods have effects on students’ learning, that is the *narrow* view discussed earlier.

The ULF agreement (see above) is also closely related to teacher education. Due to a perceived gap between theory and practice, the aim is to establish research environments and to promote researchers and teachers to carry out joint development or research projects. Another objective is to create combined positions, that is, to enable researchers to work both in

higher education and school, and teachers and school leaders with a Doctor’s degree to get the opportunity to have research as part of their job description. An important aspect is an ambition to increase collaboration with teacher education, for instance by relating students’ in-service training or exam projects to practice-near research (ULF agreement). One of the aims of practice-near research under ULF’s wings is to make teacher education more research-based.

Practice-near research for increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession

Performativity culture is also evident in the hierarchisation of the teaching profession during the last decades in Sweden. Today, the teaching profession is divided due to individual salaries, lecturers, so-called ‘first teachers’, and ‘ordinary’ teachers. Since 2010 there have been several reforms with a focus on enhancing the status of teachers (Hardy et al., 2019). The anticipation is that by creating new career paths for teachers, a greater number of the most outstanding students will consider choosing to become teachers, and fewer teachers will leave the teaching profession. A way to accomplish this, and at the same time tie teacher education and school closer together, is to design combined positions in which teaching in school is combined with doing practice-near research. It is also expected to bring greater variation in the job (Höglund, 2021). One of the aims of the pilot operation ULF is to find forms for these kinds of positions. ULF is one of a number of actions to solve the lack of teachers, according to the Minister for Health and Social Affairs (Hallengren, 2017). Practice-near research, then, is supposed to increase the status of the teaching profession.

The vision of ULF is that in 20 years, researchers and teachers in the whole country will collaborate in practice-near projects and that practice-near research is the foundation of the teaching profession and teacher education (ULF-agreement, 2020). This can be seen as an effort to professionalize the teaching profession, a trend in Europe and other Western countries which has been linked to the global economy where education is seen as the key to success for individuals and states and teachers as imperative for contributing to economic growth (Dodillet et al., 2019).

In profession theory, a profession is based on science and the class teacher is sometimes seen as a semi-profession, an occupation with some of the attributes of the classical professions, but not all, or not to the same extent (Brante, 2009, p. 16). Professionalisation is ‘the process whereby an occupation increasingly meets the criteria attributed to a profession’ (Hoyle, 1982, p. 161). Tying school closer to the academy is a way of borrowing some

of the latter's scientific splendour. The teachers will not only be consumers but also producers of scientific knowledge. According to Noffke (1997), action research in the contemporary era has often centred around enhancing the status of the teaching profession, a statement that is still valid. This is noticeable also in the Swedish context, where the trade unions have been important boundary organizations in professionalization efforts. In an article about teacher professionalism, Lilja (2014, p. 505) claims that

for the unions' aspirations towards a professional status for teaching to be legitimate in the world of today, they need to be founded on a knowledge base that is firmly placed within the boundaries of science and simultaneously owned exclusively by teachers themselves.

In line with the quote, practice-near research is endorsed by the unions. The chair of the Swedish Teachers' Union, Johanna Jaara Åstrand (2015), believes that strengthening the relationship between education and research could be beneficial in many respects: increasing career possibilities, salaries, and specialization of teachers, as well as improving student results. She emphasizes the importance of the teachers conducting the research since they are the ones who know what needs to be developed (2015). Åsa Fahlén, the chair of the other major union for teachers, the National Union of Teachers in Sweden, raises similar issues, and believes teachers' experiences are important to consider, not least since educational research, she asserts, is mostly distanced from the practice (Olsson, 2017).⁴

Practice-near research as the solution?

In this section, what is left unproblematic in the problem representations and the silences are discussed. It answers Bacchi's fourth question and partly the second research question.

The Promise of Science is a master narrative of the modern time. In the material of this study, analogous hopes and expectations apply to practice-near research. There are, however, no discussions of what good research is. Instead, the need for *more* practice-near research is voiced time and again as a collective expectation (Konrad, 2006), and it is presupposed that a greater amount of research will produce improved results (see e.g. Prop 2016/17:50; SOU 2018:17). In this sense, practice-near research is automatically considered to be good research. Practice-near research is perceived as the research *par excellence* when it comes to how research is used in schools and policy-making. The idea of *direct use* is based on the assumptions that educational decision-making should be *based on* rather than *informed by* research, and that

the relationship between research and practice is linear (cf., Farley-Ripple, 2018). There is, however, research on instrumental, conceptual, strategic, or symbolic *purposes* of research use, whereas 'little attention has been paid to *the practice* of evidence use', that is, what practitioners do with the research (Farley-Ripple et al., 2018, p. 236, emphasis in original). An alternative to the linear problem-solving model of research utilization described above is to realize that research use is messy, indirect, diffuse, and possibly delayed and that research may rather have an *enlightenment* function (Weiss, 1977). In this view of research, there is a place for other, for instance critical, kinds of educational research (cf. Biesta, 2015, Popkewitz, 2020). But the enlightenment function of research utilization does not get any attention in the material of this study. Instead, the high expectations of educational research to be of direct use, imply that the popular notion that practitioners have little use for educational research can persist, even though research about the issue is scant (cf., Farley-Ripple et al., 2018).

Apart from a lack of discussions and examples of good research, there are other silences, such as a lacking historical perspective. Historically, there have been several efforts to make the academy and school collaborate closer together in different forms, and Sweden has a fine tradition of action research, both in pedagogy and social work. There is a vast amount of literature on the challenges and obstacles of action research projects, not least from a Swedish perspective (e.g. a special issue on action research in the journal *Sociologisk forskning* from 1982). Reflections like these – on the different rationalities of action and research, differing expectations of researchers and practitioners, the epistemology of action research, or international research on practitioner and action research as part of the neoliberal reform movement (Noffke, 2009) – are not considered in the anticipatory narratives of practice-near research identified in this study. The rich tradition of action research is invisible. Similarly, the previous efforts to create collaborations between the academy and school are not discussed. This exemplifies the concept of 'historical amnesia', discussed by Borup et al. (2006, p. 290).

Discussion

In this study, the aim was to give an account of different kinds of expectations of practice-near research, and the underlying perceived problems it is supposed to solve, in the Swedish educational context. The historical background demonstrates that efforts to make higher education institutions and schools collaborate have been a long-running issue in policy. This fact is however not observed in the recent calls for practice-near research. Instead, the hopes of what practice-near research might accomplish are ambitiously high, for instance, improve

teaching, ensure better results in international rankings, help digitalize education, and promote skills in teacher management to get to grips with disciplinary problems in school. In this sense, the expectations and promises of practice-near research illustrate the concept of *educationalization*, the idea that education can and should solve any social and societal problem (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2008). In the material of this study, there are some specific problems that the research is hoped to solve.

Five different anticipatory narratives were identified: practice-near research (i) for ensuring a school based on ‘scientific knowledge and proven experience’, (ii) as a cure for educational research of little relevance, (iii) for increasing teaching efficiency, (iv) for making teacher education research-based, and (v) for increasing attractiveness of the teaching profession.

A shared characteristic of the anticipations is that they can all be related to discourses of change. Of course, this is in line with ideas of progress in the modern time (Koselleck, 2004), and aims of the practicality of research (Popkewitz, 2020), but also late modern discourses of constant (professional) development (McWilliam, 2002), hence the concepts of motion, such as ‘practice-developing research’ and ‘improvement research’, used in *Forska tillsammans* (SOU 2018:19). The concepts demonstrate the yearning for unrelenting advancement, but also the ‘strategic turn’ of research and innovation policies in many countries in late modernity where scientific knowledge is seen as crucial for societal development since it is related to ‘economic growth and international competitiveness’ (Borup et al., 2006). This explains the desire for practice-near research to be able to make school and teacher education research-based. In education, globalization and international competition are probably best exemplified by the influence of transnational organizations on national and local educational policies (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011) and international large-scale assessments, such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. These studies are occasionally referred to in the material in the recent calls for practice-near research in policy and the media, but also in parliamentary debates, and Sweden’s negative trend in PISA has been identified as an education crisis (Lundahl & Serder, 2020). In this regard, practice-near research is represented as one of the measures for making Sweden an educational superpower again.

A tendency in much of the material about the new interest in practice-near research is a perceptible sense of crisis. Like many other countries, Sweden has had its fair share of ‘education crises’ during the last century (Landahl et al., 2021). Crisis rhetoric has it that standards are falling, and that instant change is needed, even though the alleged crises are often related to demographic and social changes. During the last decades, however, crisis rhetoric has intensified, both in the media and politics, especially due to

disappointing results in international studies, such as PISA, which have become major media events (Landahl, 2021). In public and popular discourses, it is taken as a given that Swedish education is at a loss, but the opponents argue about the causes and solutions. Some anticipatory narratives are related to the ‘educational crises’. Teaching efficiency should be increased by practice-near research. The idea that educational research should make educational action more efficient is a long-running issue, according to Biesta (2015) dating at least from the end of the 18th century. Teacher education in Sweden has been fiercely criticized in the media and politics at least since the start of the new millennium (Englund, 2012), not least due to the theory/practice problem of educational research. The contempt for educational research and researchers is constructed on similar grounds. At times the critique has been harsh, so much so that the Swedish journal *Confero* devoted a special issue to ‘The “Bashing” of Educational Research’ in 2018.

The crisis discourses about educational research are apparent in the material, for instance, the often-stated idea that practice-near research is lacking. The story goes something like this: in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers became interested in the education system as such and about conditions for schooling, and since then classroom studies to develop teaching have been sparse. When it comes to Swedish *effect studies*, the narrative has some truth in it (Broadly et al., 2011). The same conclusion is reached in a report belonging to the research project SKOLFORSK aiming to map Swedish educational research. According to the authors, there are few effect studies and design-based studies and most research is interpretative (Wahlström & Alvunger, 2015). The report however also makes clear that there are numerous examples of practice-near research, especially action research. In another report belonging to the same research project, the researchers analysed 101 dissertations from three different research schools for teachers. It turned out that the dissertations could be categorized as practice-near, dealing with questions of the profession, and that half of them studied learning methods. They were also considered relevant for the practice (Rönnerman & Langelotz, 2015). Since the 1980s, there has also been a great interest in didactics and subject didactics, an interest evoked by teacher education becoming part of academia in 1977 and a long-time neglect of issues of teaching and learning in pedagogical research (Englund, 2007). In this narrative, practice-near research is supposed to cure the ills of educational research and educational researchers who, in popular discourse, refrain from dealing with the practice, that is, they do not deal with issues of real concern for the practitioners (for a critique of this view, see Hammersley, 1993, 2007). The idea that

practice-near research is lacking is however only accurate if a broader view of the concept is ruled out.

The notion of crisis also plays a part in the narrower scope of the concept of ‘practice-near research’ compared with the former term ‘praxis-near research’. There is a tension between different uses of the concept – it is a boundary object – but in policy and the media it is presently predominantly the narrower view, the technical knowledge interest (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), that is asked for. This historical development of the concept is related to the ‘strategic turn’ (Borup et al., 2006) as it attests to ever more instrumental ideas of research; it should increase teaching efficiency and be of direct use to practitioners. However, the narrow, technical view could be seen as an answer to the education crisis created by large-scale assessments. This also applies to its conflation with evidence-based research of *what works* and the urge for clinical educational research, an unabashed flirt with the more prestigious academic field of medicine. It is fair to suggest that *crisis awareness* has made its appearance, a *feeling of crisis* that is performative in the sense that it makes us act as if there was a crisis. Stability may be kept in a situation where education has a certain kind of legitimacy, but during the last decades, this legitimacy is lost. An illustration of this is that the pace of policy reform has increased, due to declining results in international, large-scale studies and discourses of derision (Hardy et al., 2019). In this crisis-ridden landscape, practice-near research is used as an answer to the perceived problems of Swedish education.

Given the history of research-based education in Sweden, it is to be doubted whether practice-near research is the silver bullet to solve the educational problems in Sweden. However, since most higher education institutions that host teacher education programmes are involved in the ULF agreement, there is ground for some cautious optimism that the effort will last and therefore be of help in creating the infrastructure needed for collaboration between researchers and practitioners to occur. And even though it is mostly technical research that is promoted in policy, this view of research may not resonate well with the views of researchers (and practitioners). It is not until some years after the policies have been enacted that we will know what kind of research the effort results in. This is something for future research to dig into. Considering the national and global flows of education policy, however, there is reason to believe that there will be more demands for problem-solving research in the future. A faint hope is that policymakers will play down their expectations a little and learn from earlier experiences.

Notes

1. *Practice-near research* is a literal translation of the Swedish concept *praktiknära forskning*. Sometimes

the concepts of *practice-based research* and *practice-informed research* are used, but I would claim that the ‘nearness’ to the practice is important to hold on to.

2. When the concept of science is in this article, I refer to the natural sciences as well as to the social sciences, that is, the study of and knowledge about both the natural and the social world.
3. Sweden’s unsatisfying results in PISA made the OECD write specific country reports of Sweden in which suggestions for the future were given. The Swedish School Commission could be seen as a response to the reports of the OECD (Grek, 2020).
4. In January 2023, the two major unions for teachers merged in Sveriges Lärare [Sweden’s Teachers].

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ORCID

Martin Malmström  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2390-0338>

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