This article explores the idea of exemplarity in relation to educational research and teacher education. Exemplarity is introduced as an alternative to the paradigm of evidence and ‘what works’, which seems to be omnipresent in educational research at present. The idea of exemplarity relates to the particularity of educational practice. The claim of this article is that we need to skew the dominance of functionalistic studies of education, which focus on skills and solutions to problems, or on providing quick fixes and methods to be applied in practice. I will argue that this tactic shuts down interpretive spaces and gives the teacher an illusion of simplicity and efficacy that connects poorly with the complexities of pedagogical practice. Exemplarity provides a different way of answering the question of ‘what works’, since it does not claim generalisability, but instead offers a path to reflective engagement with the complexities of educational processes. The idea of exemplarity highlights how educators can be invited to lend an ear to practical experience and pedagogical theorising, and through these develop their tact and reflective abilities through exemplars that display pedagogical principles. This, in turn, offers the possibility of retuning one’s practice, and in the scope of this article, retuning educational research itself.

**Keywords:** exemplarity; educational research; teacher education; philosophy of education; evidence

**Introduction**

I will begin this article with what I believe to be a common occurrence. A tale that will perhaps resonate with others working in teacher education or other university programmes. Each year when a new batch of students begin, they are very much of a mind to be given concrete answers to educational and pedagogical issues. They want to know how to plan a lesson, they want to know how to solve conflicts; they want to know what to do and ‘what works’. During one of the first lectures, we might introduce them to a case, for example regarding a conflict between two pupils. The students more often than not ask how one solves conflicts. We then proceed to discuss the fact that this question cannot be answered in any general way. There might be some general rules that apply. For example, always leave an exit open for pupils in conflict, never raise one’s voice or use physical force unless absolutely necessary, and so on. These are general rules, and as such do not always apply, but are often useful to keep in mind.
The students generally tend to accept this argument against general rules and answers and the fact that we cannot provide the answer to how one solves conflicts. Usually, however, this discussion is followed by a student saying something along the lines of ‘OK, but then how would you solve the conflict?’ Here we are faced with a different question. What the student is asking for here is an example or an exemplar. How would an exemplary teacher solve this conflict? This opens up a reflective space where we can engage the complexities of the conflict itself, and the function of exemplarity itself. What does it mean to learn from someone, what is the role of teacher authority here, and how do we choose which examples are valuable? The example thus provides a basis for pedagogical reflection and future action.

In this article, I will try to explore the role of exemplarity in educational practice and thinking. It will be presented as an alternative to the dominant ideas of evidence-based practice and ‘what works’ (see e.g. Hargreaves, 1996; Hattie, 2012). These have been dominant over the past decades when it comes to policy-making and research in the field of education. However, much critique has been raised against these frameworks for not corresponding well with educational practice (Smeyers and Depaepe, 2006; Biesta, 2010, 2015b; Masschelein and Simons, 2013). Embedded in the ideas of evidence and ‘what works’ are some claims regarding causality and applicability that are problematic when it comes to educational practice. Often the claims made point to a causality that is very hard to determine given the many factors in play in educational processes (Kvernbekk, 2016). This means not only that huge amounts of research funding seem to be poured into what are highly problematic ‘evidence studies’, but also that teachers risk being misguided in their actions, because of a serious lack of humility on the part of educational researchers eager to get funding.

As an alternative, I will present the idea that exemplarity is a better tool in guiding educational practice. In the first part of this article, I will briefly sketch the debate on evidence-based and ‘what works’ research and explain why I believe we need to retune educational research. In the second part of this article, I will present the idea of exemplarity and its connection with educational judgement.

Before turning to the critique of the evidence movement, one very much borrowed from Gert Biesta, a few words on context are perhaps in order. This article explores the educational debate from two vantage points: (1) teacher education, and someone primarily concerned with teaching prospective teachers and confronted with the issues and concerns this practice and these students raise; (2) a continental—or perhaps more precisely Germanic/Scandinavian—view of educational practice and theory.

From the latter vantage point, education (Pädagogik) is seen as a discipline in its own right, and as such this article can be said to emerge from a geisteswissenschaftliches or human science pedagogy perspective. From this perspective, theory and practice are understood as tightly connected, which also entails that when we speak of educational theory, this is not seen as separate from practice, but as in fact interpretatively intertwined with practice. Here, pedagogy or education is considered ‘as one of the humanities or arts rather than as a science’ (Tröhler, 2003, p. 759). From this perspective, the mode of reflection involved in educational theorising is not seen as removed or distinct from practical pedagogical reflections in that both are interpretive and normative practices. They are hermeneutic practices. This means that when I
shift between reflections on the practice of teacher education and the relation between theory and practice in education, I am not so much shifting the content of discussion as I am simply looking at a different aspect of the same phenomenon. This phenomenon is the interpretive practice of pedagogy.

The simple claim of this article, as I will attempt to lay it out, is that when we are reflecting on pedagogical practice, whether how to theorise it, how to teach it or how to practice it, we are better off consulting exemplars than consulting so-called evidence-based studies that tell us that the effect of our action has a score factor of 0.4, such as Hattie (2012) for example would have it. Rendering educational principles in such a general and technical manner gently skips the interpretive dimension, and permits a political usage of the educational principle in a universal way. Embedded in this way of conceiving education is a technicist and skills-based understanding of education. As David Carr has recently advised us, perhaps ‘the role of the academy in professional education is less that of advising practitioners what to do and more that of initiating them into the profound normative and evaluative complexities of professional practice’ (Carr, 2003, p. 41). The problem with the ‘what works’ use of evidence studies, the functionalistic and technological view, is that here evidence is presented as though it provides solutions and quick fixes.

The other path, which I want to suggest in this article, is a hermeneutical path, where judgement is not seen to provide answers about what to do, but instead offers the possibility of reflecting on practice. ‘Such a mentality can never give rise to a definitive world view which, once adopted, is immune to further experiences in the world because it has hitched itself firmly to one possible perspective’ (Arendt, 1995, p. 8). In this way, pedagogical examples should not offer answers to the question of what to do, but rather offer reflective and interpretive spaces.

Evidence and causality

One of the foremost critics of the evidence regime is Gert Biesta, who for some time now has been arguing against what he calls the technological view of educational research. This view of education(al research) sees educational processes as causal and pre-determinable. The idea of evidence-based practice—‘what works’—falls under this view. In the following, I rely on Biesta’s critique of the technological view in order to outline some of the problems with the evidence movement and a technological or functionalistic view of education. In a recent article, Biesta outlines a gap in educational research between those who subscribe to the technological view and those who see educational processes as communicative processes constituted by ‘meaning making and interpretation in which questions of cause and effect actually have no place’ (Biesta, 2015b, p. 12). This gap has been deepening, and in my view rightly so, since the technological view has been far too dominant in recent years, particularly when it comes to the educational policies and reforms being implemented across the globe. However, as Biesta adds in his article, there is some legitimacy to the question of what works, at least at the practical level. The student who asks how to solve conflicts is asking a legitimate question, the problem is that educational research cannot provide a universally applicable answer to such a question. Biesta proposes an alternative way.
I wish to outline a way forward in which the question of how education works and how it can be made to work better is considered as a legitimate question, but where the answer to this question takes into consideration the specific nature of educational processes and practices.

(Biesta, 2015b, p. 12)

In this article, I will connect with the idea that educational theorising should respond to educational practice and instead of looking to the medical and natural sciences for answers, we should instead look to human science or the arts, not for answers, but for perspectives that help us to recognise the complexities of pedagogical practice. It is, as Andrew Davis (2017) has recently shown, not necessary to leave a social science perspective in order to argue along these lines. Davis in fact, argues convincingly for much the same as will be presented in this article, albeit without the explicit focus on exemplarity to be presented here. His article, however, is very much an exercise in exemplarity as I read it. He brilliantly gives irrefutable examples of why rules cannot be applied universally (pp. 299–300), and of why the dimension of interpretation is paramount in education (p. 293). Here, I will present exemplarity as a means to establishing an educational theory that responds to the legitimate questions concerning educational action and judgement, but that is sensitive to the interpretive and normative dimensions of educational practice and theorising. I will try to show how claims of evidence and effect in educational research propose a problematic closure of this interpretive and normative space.

Gert Biesta has highlighted three different ways in which claims of ‘what works’ are problematic when it comes to education. In his epistemological critique he has shown how the technological epistemology subscribes to a ‘representational epistemology in which true knowledge is seen as an accurate representation of how “things” are in “the world”’ (Biesta, 2010, p. 494). If only we are able to develop the appropriate methods, the real (educational) world will reveal itself to us. Biesta counters this position by turning to a transactional epistemology, which shows how every method is an intervention into the world, and the ‘spectator view’ is thus highly problematic. Or, as Hannah Arendt once put it, ‘the answers of science will always remain replies to questions asked by men; the confusion in the issue of “objectivity” was to assume that there could be answers without questions and results independent of a question-asking-being’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 49). Biesta adds that the term ‘what works, when applied within the representational epistemology contains a false prophecy, since research and practice structurally can only have knowledge of “what worked”’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 16). This critique mirrors what Luhmann and Schoor (1982) called the technology deficit in education. The fact is that it is hard to identify a linear or regular causal link between cause and effect in educational processes. I return to this question below.

In his axiological critique, Biesta has described how the evidence regime faces a democratic deficit because of its simplistic causal structure, which highlights a particularistic, functionalistic and instrumental definition of learning as the primary factor in education (Biesta, 2015a,b). This learnification, driven by the OECD and the evidence regime (OECD, 2004), blurs the discussion of why the learning outcomes driven forward by this movement are more valuable than others, and presents practitioners with a reductionist view of educational processes (Biesta, 2013, 2015b). The aims of education are being reduced to learning outcomes under a simplistic
understanding of the causal structure of educational processes. Before turning to the central discussion of causality, a few words about Biesta’s praxeological critique, as this will be the starting point for the subsequent section.

In this critique, Biesta highlights how the evidence regime tends to over-rule the educational judgment of practitioners, reducing educational processes to mechanical and instrumental processes. Because ‘education can never be practised through fixed protocols, because in a very fundamental sense we are always dealing with unique and new situations’ (Biesta, 2015b, p. 19) we need educational judgement in order to navigate and act in educational processes. Providing educational practitioners and students in educational professions with ready-made evidence-based manuals and methods is to create an illusion of certainty. When we provide them with evidence-based answers to their legitimate question of what works, we provide them with practical tools that do not offer reflective space, but rather a space of acting in accordance with specific general principles or rules. The only choice left to the teacher is to either follow the principle or disregard it.

Before returning to the central question of judgement, it is necessary to take a closer look at the concept of causality as it is being employed in educational research. Paul Smeyers claims that the evidence-based movement simply follows a general tendency in the social sciences of being ‘occupied with finding causes in order to be able to manipulate particular outcomes’ (Smeyers, 2009, p. 59). ‘What is longed for is something similar to the law-like explanation and “prediction” of the natural sciences. Here, for many to explain an event is to identify its antecedents, i.e. its causes’ (p. 76). This desire leads to a steady flow of regular causal claims being made in reports, textbooks and policy documents based on evidence research (Kvernbekk, 2016; Vembye and Siggaard Jensen, 2018). The problem with this is that causal claims that are highly contentious are being translated into methods and manuals provided to practitioners and students in the educational professions as though we knew that if you do A, B will follow. In any field of human inquiry it is hard to determine causes (Cartwright, 2007), and this certainly applies when it comes to educational processes (Biesta, 2015b; Kvernbekk, 2016). ‘What can be found in so-called quantitative empirical research is often of very limited use in a practical educational context’ (Smeyers, 2009, p. 75).

Connecting this back to the technological deficit mentioned above, there is always more in play than what a technological or functionalist view can incorporate, and human interaction is always imbued with concepts and meaning, which makes it necessary to look for more than causes when trying to understand it. This in turn leads Smeyers to argue that while quantitative large-scale studies are not irrelevant for searching out patterns, they must always be complemented by conceptual and reflective work in order to become educationally meaningful. In other words, in order to inform educational judgement, they must be put in connection with concrete practice, and the particularity and interpretive nature of educational practice. This very connection is what is often lost in large-scale evidence studies.

This of course does not entail that we must reject causal structures in educational practices. Merely, that these are highly complex and when large-scale studies simplify these complex matters, as they must in order to arrive at anything generalisable, the messy details of practice disappear. Nor does it mean that empirical and quantitative
studies do not offer valuable insights for education. They can function as interpretive reference points for educational reflection. The main problem arises when these studies are sold as providing the answer to how to solve educational issues and when specific skills are claimed to have universal usage in educational practice. The alternative presented here is thus not offered in order to replace these types of studies, but rather to displace them slightly, thus making room for more hermeneutic and human science-oriented explorations in education.

**Particular and general: the role of the example**

The attempt to generate general rules or principles in order to guide pedagogical practice is as old as pedagogical theorising itself. The way in which the evidence movement has gone about this business, by mirroring the medical and natural sciences, and trying to quantify the particular into generalisable measures, is only a recent one. As we have seen, although not without relevance for pedagogical practice—when executed properly that is—this idea entails some problematic assumptions about the relation between the particulars of pedagogical practice and the general principles we need to guide this practice (again, see also Davis, 2017).

As Irene Harvey has recently shown, the practice of exemplarity, and the use of examples in general, sheds some light on the function of examples and their way of complicating—in a productive way—pedagogical (and philosophical) theorising.

Examples always exceed whatever frame one seeks to place around them, or whatever cage one strives to capture them within. Such is the necessary danger of the use of exemplarity. Outstripping any argument or as-structure placed around, in front of them, or behind them, examples retain a secret of their own.

(Harvey, 2002, p. ix)

In her study on the functioning of exemplarity, focusing on Rousseau and Derrida, Harvey shows how the example tends to do much more than simply structure the move from general to particular or vice versa, and how the taken-for-grantedness of this idea is an under-examined aspect of the history of philosophy. Building on De Man and Derrida, and her own reading of Rousseau’s *Emile* 1910, Harvey shows the functioning of the example as something which always betrays that which it is supposed to exemplify. Or to put it in other words, the particular example of a general rule or principle always betrays the general claim, because it is but a particular instantiation of it.

In this way, Harvey shows how classical conceptions of exemplarity, such as Elgin’s two-step definition—an example instantiates and makes explicit reference to some general claim or principle (Elgin, 2011, p. 400)—do not fully grasp the role of the example. Because the example always exceeds both the particularities of the particular and the generality of the general claim or principle, the assumption of a clear connection between general and particular is faulty. Harvey thus questions the transaction between general and particular implied in the functioning of examples.

Harvey calls examples the elixir of thinking, since they have permitted us to presume to penetrate the fabric of existence by moving from the particular to the general, by way of simply saying, *for example*. However, the ‘example is never simply or
only a particular, and never simply or only exhibits the general. Likewise, the listing of examples is never simply arbitrary in its ordering, choices, and demarcation. Again, the application of a rule to a particular implies a reduction so that the example will be read in a certain way and not others – a hermeneutical foreclosure that can never be saturated’ (Harvey, 2002, p. 260). This means that when the evidence movement makes claims such as the ones Hattie makes when he claims, for example, that feedback has an effect factor above 0.4, there is a hermeneutical foreclosure at play, which attempts to simplify both the particular and the general. In Smeyers’ words again, ‘[w]hat can be found in so-called quantitative empirical research is often of very limited use in a practical educational context’ (Smeyers, 2009, p. 75), because it does not play into the hermeneutical reflection on pedagogical practice. Instead, it seeks to close down the hermeneutical ‘space’ by providing a transaction between general and particular, which in fact shuts down the reflective space; ‘feedback, for example, is good’.

Instead of seeking the functioning of exemplarity in this transaction between general and particular, Harvey wants to explore what she calls the labyrinths of exemplarity. She explores how the functioning of examples is embedded in the very ontological structures of how we conceive of and theorise our being. When we equate the particular with the/an example, we are simply doing what philosophy has done for centuries. We do it so as to ‘foreclose what else is taking place when something is made into an example’ (Harvey, 2002, p. 212). There is of course an aspect of violence involved in this exclusion of something literally for the sake of argument. Reducing particulars to examples of a general rule necessarily involves this kind of violence, and it is not surprising that such violence is part and parcel of pedagogical theorising—how else would we find general principles to guide particular action?

The point here, as I am sure it is not Harvey’s point, is not to stop making transactions between general and particular, and certainly not to stop using examples of general principles, but that we be more sensitive to the transaction that is in fact going on and the hermeneutical foreclosures involved in this. To me, the greatest problem with the emergence of the evidence movement is the insensitivity to this very issue it brings with it, especially at the policy level. In the following section, I will turn to the question of the role of exemplarity in the formation of judgement, thus momentarily leaving Harvey’s labyrinth, and returning to the reductive transaction between general and particular as it is found in Kant and Arendt. I will return to the labyrinth thereafter in order to clarify how I think exemplarity can and does contribute to pedagogical thinking and practice.

Judgement and examples

In the following sections, I will outline an idea of how to conceive of a more hermeneutically sensitive account of pedagogical theorising. Focusing on exemplarity, as an alternative to evidence, I will outline how to connect reflections on educational principles with educational decisions in particular contexts. The point being that examples can be more sensitive to the messy details of pedagogical practice than large-scale studies are. The link between the example and the messy details here of course is educational judgement or pedagogical tact. That indefinable quality which,
according to Winch et al. (2015, p. 204), is that ‘which distinguishes the very best teachers from others’. Developing pedagogical judgement or tact is that which allows educators to navigate in the varying contexts of educational practice. As we have seen, this is what many students and practitioners are asking for: guidance of judgement concerning educational situations. It is also what evidence-based research is attempting to answer, albeit in a problematic way.

So how do we become skilled in our professional and practical judgement? Winch et al., also offer a reply to this: ‘Teachers may become practically wise, or phronimos, through experience of deliberating and making judgments about educationally wise actions, through learning from the virtuosity of other professionals, and through care for their own development as resourceful, discerning and insightful professionals’ (Winch et al., 2015, p. 205; see also Nussbaum, 1990 and Biesta, 2012, 2015b). Developing phronesis and pedagogical tact\(^4\) is at the same time the content of teacher education and the continual reflective and interpretive practice of pedagogy. One obvious way of proposing to go about this is by using examples. After all, as Kant famously put it in his first critique, examples are ‘the go-cart [Gängelband] of judgement’ (Kant, 1965, p. 178). However, it was not until the third critique that Kant formulated his theory of judgement. It is to this work and Arendt’s unique reading of it that I will turn first in order to explore the relevance of exemplarity for educational judgement.

As we saw above, developing educational judgement hinges on deliberation, learning from others and care for our own development. It is a matter of practising our ability to judge right and wrong in particular situations (Smeyers, 1992). According to Arendt, ‘our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives. And again, this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present’ (Arendt, 2003, pp. 145–146). Judging is thus practised by leaning on others, or by visiting the perspectives of others as well as events past or present. These examples function as leading strings or go-carts for judging by presenting us with the possibility of testing our initial apprehension of a situation by comparing it with how similar situations have played out or could play out, or by imagining how other exemplary persons might judge the situation.

Arendt, as mentioned, picked up her understanding of judgement from Kant, and developed his definition of aesthetic judgement into a description of how to judge politically in what she coined dark times. In such times, the traditional banister for judging and thinking, which religion and tradition provided, has disappeared and we are left with only judgement to guide us. This has been seen as a turn to subjectivism, but both Arendt and Kant wanted to preserve a measure of validity in the process of judging. They turn to the communicability of experience and judgement in this endeavour, in order to show how, when judging, we appeal to a sensus communis, which may not be objective, but can still offer a form of validity for our judgements. This sensus communis [gemeinen Menschenverstandes] is brought about, or rather appealed to, when we visit the perspectives of others and compare them with our own. ‘We compare our judgments not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of
everyone else’ (Kant, 1987, p. 160). This ability to think from the standpoint of others, Kant refers to as the art of enlarged thinking [erweiterte Denkungsart].

It is this ability which Arendt attempts to develop into a principle for judging in dark times. ‘To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting’ (Arendt, 1992, p. 43). By training our ability to visit the standpoints of others and ‘examples of incidents, past or present’, we are deliberating and learning from others and thus developing our ability to judge. ‘Both aesthetic and political judgment address themselves not to transcendental certainty, but to a shared public world characterised by a continuous process of coming to agreement, and, as we have seen, the means by which such agreement is achieved is not through rules of conduct, or the application of concepts, but through the compelling influence of examples’ (DeCaroli, 2007, p. 386). Thus, returning to the introductory example of students asking for guidance in judging educational situations, we could say that by offering examples of acting and judging particular examples, we are offering our students the possibility to go visiting. We open an interpretive and reflective space.

By using examples, we are not appealing to certainty or causality but to communicability. ‘Examples are validated by historical precedent, and it is to such precedents that judgment turns for guidance. Consequently, examples exist both in relation to communities of people who have repeatedly judged them to be exemplary, and in relation to the history of those judgments that have set certain objects and individuals above others as models’ (DeCaroli, 2007, p. 378). In educational terms, this means that examples are validated by continued use in educational thinking and teaching. This is why Mollenhauer claimed that ‘Pedagogy must work with cultural and biographical recollection; it must search out in this recollection those principles which are of lasting value; pedagogy has to find a precise and suitable language for this task’ (my translation). Part of this work consists in finding suitable examples that illuminate the task of the educator and which help to develop our ability to judge in educational situations.

Mollenhauer undertakes this work by identifying exemplary texts and works of art and using these to ground his analysis of the educational task. This is made explicit in the introduction, when Mollenhauer exclaims: ‘Take Kafka for example’ (Mollenhauer, 2016, p. 1). Mollenhauer is referring to Kafka’s famous letter to his father and shows how ‘this letter will be anything but a straightforward reckoning with his father. Instead, Kafka will be passing judgement on his upbringing’ (p. 1). This is not done in order to describe how this might have been done better or what to do, but ‘because the magnitude of the matter goes far beyond the scope of my memory and understanding’ (quoted in Mollenhauer, 2016, p. 1). In other words, no fixed or final answers can come from such an endeavour, but it can function as a means of reflection and an exercise in judgement. ‘Kafka’s solution is to engage in an imaginary conversation with his father’ (p. 2). Kafka goes visiting in order to try to reconcile himself to his past—and in this endeavour teaches us something significant about educational experience.

Interestingly, Arendt also turns to Kafka when describing the role of judgement in human existence. Arendt uses a parable from Kafka’s collection of aphorisms ‘HE’ to describe the activity of judging:
In this gap between past and future, we find our place in time when we think, that is, when we are sufficiently removed from the past and future to be relied on to find out their meaning, to assume the position of ‘umpire,’ of arbiter and judge over the manifold, never-ending affairs of human existence in the world, never arriving at a final solution to their riddles but ready with ever-new answers to the question of what it may be all about.


Kafka’s letter to his father can thus be seen as an experiment in judging and going visiting, which is educationally exemplary because it offers the possibility to students and scholars alike of judging and visiting the educational reckoning with the influence of Kafka’s father on his existential condition. Judging represents a complex path towards a heightened understanding of what it means to be in the world and acquire a grasp of ‘reality’. Returning to Arendt, we can state that it is in judging that we find the firmest ground upon which to stand as human beings in the world (Pahuus, 2003, p. 74). Educationally speaking, it is in the use of examples for judging that we can find the firmest ground to stand upon in educational matters.

**Exemplarity and the art of teaching: back into the labyrinth**

In the preceding sections, I have attempted to sketch how exemplarity can function in an educational theory attuned to the complexities and particularities of educational practice. However, as Harvey says of Rousseau’s educational theory: ‘There is no single theory here, and no one archè or telos for the use of exemplarity. Furthermore there is no single concept of “the example” in play here’ (Harvey, 2002, p. 121). The example can take a multitude of forms, and the whys and wherefores of what is exemplary are still unclear. Perhaps that is the point of this whole exercise. That exemplarity pervades pedagogy in a way that is very difficult to outline in a systematic way.

In Harvey’s words: ‘To be open to influence is to be open to pedagogy, and to one’s own potential, hence, the world offers itself as and through examples. The tempter motif, to be avoided by the tutor, reveals what is at issue in pedagogy: to separate the good from the bad examples. What examples are to be followed and which to be avoided. This is the question here. There is no possibility of the nonexemplary’ (Harvey, 2002, pp. 122–123). In education, the world offers itself in the form of examples, and the art of teaching concerns to a large extent dealing in and with exemplarity. Both in the form of embodying exemplary ways of being in the world, as well as the practice of selecting what examples to make use of in teaching. Seeing and meeting examples is the quintessential activity of being educated according to Harvey’s reading of Rousseau: ‘Such is the ontological structure at work here in this pedagogical theory wherein examples are the very being of the process’ (Harvey, 2002, p. 123).

One important aspect here is that Harvey is not proposing a reading of Rousseau’s pedagogical theory as an emulation model of education. ‘The example betrays and opens up an essential incommensurability with any hermeneutical matrix established to constrain and control it. Thus to give an event meaning by calling it an example of “X” is not to understand the event, to name it, but to attempt to an impossible appropriation. The excess is what will allow the event...”
always to be read otherwise, to have further rather than an identity’ (Harvey, 2002, p. 135). The excess of exemplarity opens rather than shuts down interpretive horizons and spaces.

We see this, for example, when Mollenhauer argues for the educational relevance of Kafka’s letter to his father and other works of art. ‘In many instances, these are not success stories. They neither advance the view that any one concept is the only and true path to successful upbringing, nor do they encourage others to follow blindly in their footsteps; indeed, they don’t even worship success as the be-all and end-all. These works do not use fashionable buzzwords or offer simple solutions. All the same, they express themselves in a comprehensible and compelling fashion’ (Mollenhauer, 2016, p. 1). These works speak to us in ways that are both within and outside of our immediate grasp. They resonate with us and trouble us at the same time. They set our thinking in motion.

Educational texts, works of art or theory do not become relevant for us by pointing to what works or by providing specific answers to practical questions of judgement, but by challenging us to consider the complexity of educational situations. This is why Emile continues to invade the educational imagination. It continues to confront us with the fact that educational processes are complex and require extreme and close attention to the particular pedagogical moment, while at the same time speaking to us in a familiar way. Rousseau continually uses examples to portray this, and to explicate how the educational experiences required for Emile’s development are laid out. These experiences in fact often being of exemplary nature (Harvey, 2002, p. 13). That some texts continue to speak to us is thus—and here I follow Harvey—because they do not simply point from the particular to the general or vice versa, but because they exceed the relation between particular and general. They point to what is more, what is in excess of what is particular and what is general. They point to the messy details, and how pedagogical tact or educational judgements are reliant on the recognition of this excess of meaning, which is part of every pedagogical situation. The quality we are looking for in pedagogical examples (be it from literature, theory, film or any other form of media) is thus not that they resonate with a preconception, or make us adhere to specific advice for what to do (for which we might have evidence), but rather that they connect with us, and at the same time call us to give a response and an interpretation.

The teacher may embody a pedagogical principle, like listening or giving feedback, but the teacher is always more (also to the student) than the principle being embodied. In the evidence framework, we can only make statements of efficiency. Listening or feedback ‘is good’, whereas using an example offers the opportunity of exploring the complexities involved in giving feedback or listening as pedagogical practices. Taking Socrates for example as a pedagogical figure who both listens and gives feedback offers interpretive space instead of shutting it down. The example of Socrates shows us the complexities of these practices and gives us opportunity to discuss the possible exemplarism of Socrates’ pedagogical methods, and the normative implications of listening and giving feedback.

This of course also helps to highlight again the responsibility involved in both being an exemplar and in choosing examples to use pedagogically. We cannot escape the fact that sometimes the student will give legitimacy to an example based not on the
example itself, but on respect or admiration for a teacher. A student may also reject an example based on dislike of a teacher. There is always potential for manipulation and perhaps even potential for a subtle form of violence in the use of exemplarity in education. However, I believe that this fact only helps to illustrate further the need to seriously engage the question of the role of exemplarity in education.

Concluding remarks

Turning away from evidence and causality and moving towards exemplarity is a movement away from the hold that social and natural science-inspired ideas have been gaining over the field of educational research. It is a (re)turn to a human science or Geisteswissenschaftliches perspective on how to think and theorise about educational processes. By turning to these concepts, I have tried to offer an alternative to an educational lingo focused on effects and efficiency. This alternative is one rooted in a hermeneutical understanding of educational practice and theory. It is an attempt to answer the legitimate question of ‘what to do’ in a manner that does not rob the one asking of the possibility of educational judgement and reflection.

By offering examples instead of evidence, we open an interpretive space in which teachers can explore different perspectives—they can go visiting. By not trying to provide specific answers and general claims of applicability and efficiency, we remain open to the influence of examples and the particularities of educational practice. In this way, we answer in an affirmative way (yes, we can judge this situation), without determining what will come, or to put it in other words, without foreclosing possible hermeneutical spaces. We open a collective potentiality for thinking about educational practice and for imagining anew our work as educators when we use examples. I believe we are in dire need of such imaginaries and that educational research as a whole is in need of a retuning—one that is sufficiently open in the face of the magnitude of the matter.

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Ethics

Ethics approval was not required as empirical data were not collected.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created in this study.
NOTES

1. Without of course subscribing to the at times nationalistic undertones that have marred this tradition. See Töthler (2003).

2. It is in fact often in the slide from empirical evidence studies to policy or method that general principles become universal methods. Or more precisely, when what is meant as generalised claims derived from empirical studies are presented as universally applicable skills or methods. See examples in note 3.

3. There are numerous examples of educational quick fixes on offer to municipalities and policy agents. See e.g. James Nottingham’s Challenging learning process, Learndirect.com, the PBS (positive behavior support) model or in the Scandinavian context, the influential LP model (https://laringsmiljosenteret.uis.no/#Skole).

4. I will not delve into the differences between these two ways of conceiving of pedagogical aptitude or proficiency here, nor attempt to explicate what is involved and how we might define them, since that would take up too much space. In addition, the aim of the article is something else, namely that of exploring the function of exemplarity and resonance. For extensive discussions of the two terms, see the following. Phronesis: Nussbaum (1990), Carr (2003), Wittesasdt (2008), Biesta (2012, 2015b), Kinsella and Pitman (2012). Tact: Herbert (1896/2012, Muth (1962), van Manen (2016a,b), Friesen and Osguthorpe (2018).

5. ‘Die Pädagogik muß an kultureller und biographischer Erinnerung arbeiten; sie muß in dieser Erinnerung die begründbaren (zukunftsfähigen) Prinzipien aufsuchen; sie muß für diese Arbeit eine der Sache angemessene, genaue Sprache finden’ (Mollenhauer, 1991, p. 10). The translation in the 2014/2016 English edition reads: ‘education should focus on cultural and biographical memory, and should seek lasting principles in this memory that develop the child’s potential. Finally it should also find a precise and suitable task for these tasks’ (Mollenhauer, 2016, p. 2). To me this is not entirely precise, since Mollenhauer is not speaking about the child’s development, but about the practice of pedagogy as a practical and theoretical activity.


References


