

Standing Already in What Comes Next: Educational Research Between Continuity, Responsibility, Acceleration and Policy Needs

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Abstract

This paper is a lightly adapted version of a keynote speech that was delivered as part of the 60th anniversary conference celebration of the Educational Research Centre (ERC), which took place in January 2026. It reflects on the role of educational research institutions such as the ERC as custodians of institutional knowledge, and the tension in educational research between being able to contribute to longer-term societal understanding while also delivering insights that effectively support policy and practice in an evolving educational landscape. It also considers the importance of capacity building, standing capacity for flexible deployment, and effective data infrastructure systems to strengthen research responsiveness to emerging policy needs.

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Opening Reflections: Time, Research Institutions, and Continuity

This year, the Educational Research Centre (ERC) in Ireland marks its sixtieth anniversary and I am proud to have been given the opportunity to deliver a speech at an event to mark this important milestone.

Eight years ago, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) marked its own sixtieth anniversary, and last year, the Danish School of Education – of which the National Centre for School Research is a part – celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Although the Danish School of Education (DPU) was formally established in 2000, its institutional history reaches further back through earlier research institutions. In particular, the Danish National Institute for Educational Research (DPI), founded in 1955, later formed the core of what eventually became the DPU.

Of course, none of these stories truly begin with anniversaries. They have in common a history that reaches back to the 1950s and 1960s, into a period when scholars across Europe and beyond began to ask a new kind of question related to human capital: how can education be studied systematically, comparatively, and responsibly – not just as normative pedagogy, but as a social institution with profound consequences for individuals and societies?

When we celebrate sixty years of the ERC in Ireland, and the other sibling-institutions of that time, we are not celebrating something old and dusty. We should instead recognise that these institutions represent something durable over time. Educational research institutions such as the ERC, the IEA, and similar centres across Europe belong to a small group of organisations that have learned to think in long time spans. They operate across generations of students, teachers, and policy cycles. They carry questions, methods, and standards that outlive individual projects and individual careers.

That is not a small achievement, and it matters enormously today.

I want to begin with a short literary reflection. A colleague of mine published a collection of poems. They are poems about the love of doing research – and about what it means to stay with difficult questions over time. The collection is called *Standing in What Comes Next* (Thestrup, 2025). One of the poems is called “The Old Ones”. It includes the following lines:

Time passes, and they say the same things again.
Nothing here claims to be new or spectacular.
Still, one is expected to listen to them.
There is no casual talk of alternatives.
The small kingdoms must be looked after.

I find this deeply reassuring and quietly demanding because it reminds us that educational research has never been about novelty for its own sake. It has always relied on patience, endurance, and institutions willing to protect fragile forms of knowledge. At the same time, it reminds us that standing still avoids nothing. That tension - between continuity and responsiveness - is the thread I will follow in this reflection.

Institutions as Custodians of Accumulated Knowledge

Anniversaries invite us to reflect not only on time, but on where knowledge actually resides. Research is, of course, carried forward by individuals. It is shaped by intellectual curiosity, high expertise, and professional courage. And it is made visible through publications that accumulate over time, are debated, criticised, and refined. It informs policy making and professional practice.

But knowledge does not endure through individuals or through publications alone. Knowledge also depends on institutions. Institutions provide continuity. They preserve standards. They accumulate experience. They remember why certain methodological choices were made, why particular safeguards exist, and why some questions refuse to disappear. In this sense, institutions such as the ERC in Ireland, the IEA, and the National Centre for School Research in Denmark act as custodians of accumulated educational research and knowledge. They do not own this knowledge. They hold responsibility for it.

In Denmark, we are particularly conscious of this role. We often refer to the work of psychometrician Georg Rasch - not as a monument, and not as a national possession, but as an intellectual lineage. Rasch's contribution to measurement theory continues to underpin almost all large-scale comparative educational studies today. What matters is not the name. What matters is the principle. Once ideas about fair measurement, comparability, and transparency are developed, tested, and refined, they become part of a shared methodological foundation. They outlive the individuals who first articulated them. They travel across borders and generations. This is a defining feature of institutions like the ERC and the IEA. The knowledge they help to produce is not proprietary. It is not created for private gain or institutional branding. Rather, it is created as a public good. That places particular responsibilities on institutions:

- a.** Responsibility for quality.
- b.** Responsibility for transparency.
- c.** Responsibility for integrity.
- d.** Responsibility for how results are interpreted and used.

Institutional memory, in this sense, is not a luxury. It is part of the scientific infrastructure itself.

Education as a Societal Question: Educational Sociology and Human Capital

If we remain with the historical moment in which many of these institutions were founded, another feature becomes visible.

This was a period when education research increasingly understood itself as a way of analysing society. Educational sociology insisted that schooling could not be understood in isolation. Schools were embedded in social structures, power relations, labour markets, and cultural expectations. Education became an object of analysis in its own right - linked to questions of stratification, mobility, participation, and inequality. At the same time, education was increasingly framed as a driver of economic and societal development. Ideas about investment in human capital gained prominence. In Denmark and Germany, the young people who, at the time, did not flourish in the educational system were referred to as an "intelligence reserve" - intelligence that was not used for the better good of society yet. Education was no longer seen only as a cultural or civic institution, but also as a strategic societal resource.

This shift mattered. It brought education research closer to policy and planning. It increased its visibility but, at the same time, and what is fairly the case these days, it increased expectations in regard to educational research. It also introduced a lasting tension because while education contributes to economic productivity, it also shapes human capabilities, dignity, participation, and democratic life. Its value cannot be reduced to economic returns alone.

From the beginning, educational research therefore carried dual expectations: to contribute to long-term societal understanding, and to produce knowledge that could inform decisions in the present at times when unexpected situations emerge to rock the boat, such as the COVID crisis and widespread homeschooling, or easy accessibility to large language models such as ChatGPT. This tension between the long-term structures of knowledge accumulation, and short-term unforeseen societal problems to be addressed, was not an accident. It was built into the foundations of the field.

Why the Tension Never Disappeared

This tension has never disappeared, not because educational research failed to resolve it, but because it reflects a structural condition of education itself. Education is simultaneously a long-term social institution and an object of immediate political concern. Its effects unfold over years and generations, but its consequences are debated in the present. Educational research has therefore always operated across two temporal logics at once. One values explanation, depth, and cumulative understanding. The other demands relevance, timeliness, and applicability. Neither

of these logics is illegitimate, and neither can replace the other. I would argue that the long-term accumulation and research tradition is a necessary condition, but in itself it is not sufficient.

Long term research institutions matter because they make it possible to hold this tension responsibly. They allow research to be slow where slowness is necessary, and responsive where responsiveness is unavoidable. In my interpretation and reading of the history of educational research, what has changed over time is not the existence of this tension between long term cumulative research knowledge in a particular educational system and immediate relevance when new things occur. What has changed is the speed, density, and visibility of the demands placed upon it.

Societal Acceleration and Educational Research

One of the most striking features of the current educational landscape is acceleration. In the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa's work, acceleration is not simply a matter of speed, but a structural condition of modern societies (Rosa, 2013). He argues that modernity is organised around a need for constant renewal: technologies, institutions, and social arrangements must continually change in order to remain functional. This creates a situation in which stability is no longer achieved by maintaining continuity, but by permanent adaptation. Rosa refers to this as dynamic stabilisation – a condition where societies can only reproduce themselves by continuously moving forward. One consequence is an increasing reliance on anticipation and planning, including forecasts and evidence intended to reduce uncertainty. Yet these anticipatory tools often need constant revision, revealing a gap between the desire for control and the unpredictability of social reality. For Rosa, acceleration therefore reshapes not only institutions and decision-making, but also how individuals and societies experience time, responsibility, and their relationship to the future. In educational research, we find with the examples previously mentioned that new challenges emerge rapidly. They overlap and they demand responses while uncertainty is still high.

The COVID-19 pandemic made this painfully visible. Almost overnight, schools closed. Teaching moved online, and education systems were confronted with questions that research was expected to help answer immediately:

- What happens to learning when schools close?
- Which students are most affected?
- How do inequalities change under conditions of disruption?

These were not abstract questions. They were urgent, political, and deeply human. Acceleration did not end with the pandemic. Schools across Europe now welcome children whose families have fled wars and conflict zones. Education systems face increasing diversity in languages, experiences, and vulnerabilities. At the same

time, digital technologies – and most recently generative artificial intelligence – have transformed the conditions for teaching, learning, and assessment. These developments were not fully predictable but they demand attention now.

ICILS and Responding to an Unexpected Event

Within the IEA, the challenge of responding to acceleration became particularly visible in the context of the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS). ICILS was not designed as an AI study. It was designed to understand how students learn to use digital technologies – in school and outside school – and how schools prepare young people for participation in digital societies. However, precisely because of this focus, ICILS provided a framework that could be mobilised quickly when generative AI suddenly became widely accessible. ICILS 2023 allowed us to capture how school leaders perceived both opportunities and risks associated with tools such as ChatGPT. On the one hand, there was optimism. AI tools were seen as potentially supporting lesson planning, feedback, individualisation, and efficiency. On the other hand, there were serious concerns. Concerns about authenticity, about misinformation, about dependency, and about the professional judgement of teachers. The value of ICILS here is not that it provides definitive answers. It is that it provides credible orientation at a moment when schools are already acting.

Structure, Event, and Courage in Educational Research

To understand what is at stake here, it is useful to draw on a distinction made by the French philosopher Alain Badiou between structures and events. Events are not simply changes within an existing order. They are moments that break – make a rupture – with what was previously taken for granted (Badiou, 2005; Kjeldsen, 2014). They expose the limits of existing categories and routines. The COVID pandemic was in my view such an event. The sudden democratisation of access to generative AI was another. In such moments, research cannot simply wait for the next cycle of data collection. Research and its institutions must be able to reorient themselves temporarily.

This does not mean abandoning standards. It means drawing on accumulated knowledge to exercise pedagogical judgement under uncertainty. This requires courage: courage to act without complete evidence; courage to revise positions; and courage to accept the risk of being wrong.

The American physicist, historian of science, and philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, best known for his book *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962), reminds us that paradigm shifts do not render existing knowledge useless. They test its limits. Standing in the new requires openness and responsibility.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Conditions for Students' Learning

To some extent, researchers need, in the present, to be able to raise questions that are based on what is already known from the past but are also relevant to a yet unknown future. As we look to the future, it is my professional judgement that it becomes even more crucial to distinguish clearly between what schools can change and what lies beyond their immediate reach.

There are intrinsic conditions for learning such as teaching practices, school leadership, professional collaboration and relationships with parents. In this context, improvements, insights from research, and policy making depend on cooperation among all actors within the school system, including researchers working closely with schools and policy makers. However, there are also extrinsic conditions that shape learning profoundly but lie outside the school's direct sphere of influence.

One example concerns student sleep or, more accurately, tiredness when students meet the school day. Analyses that I recently performed with David and Leslie Rutkowski, based on TIMSS and PIRLS data, show a growing proportion of students arriving at school tired across 39 school systems in the world (Kjeldsen et al., 2026). This is strongly associated with lower achievement in reading, mathematics, and science. Sleep is shaped by factors far beyond the classroom: digital media use, platform design, family routines, and broader societal rhythms.

Schools cannot regulate global technology companies. But educational research has a responsibility to make these extrinsic-to-the-school influences visible and to inform policymakers when solutions lie outside the school itself.

Where to go From Here? Data Infrastructure and Future Capacity

Finally, I want to point to a concrete area of investment and development in educational research. In many European countries, we already have very rich educational data collected at regular intervals and for the full census of students: administrative registers, national assessments, well-being surveys, and teacher-student linked data, to name a few.

What is often missing is research and data infrastructure. There is a strong case for developing systems that allow these data sources to be brought together responsibly through shared identifiers. This allows us to move from snapshots in annual or international cross-sectional studies to following more closely the individuals' trajectories. When done carefully, such infrastructures strengthen both research and policy – and make better use of the data schools already provide.

In regard to research, a crucial part of the answer to the tension between long-term research and short-term demands lies in capacity building. Not only capacity in monetary terms – although funding always matters – but, even more importantly, capacity in human terms. In an accelerated society, the decisive issue is often not whether resources exist somewhere in the system, but whether they are already available at the right moment. When new questions arise suddenly, as they did with school closures during the pandemic, with large-scale migration, or with the rapid spread of generative AI, the window for meaningful contribution is narrow. If research institutions must first wait for political decisions, external calls, project approvals, and funding cycles, the moment has often already passed.

In my view, what this means is that research institutions must have standing capacity. They need people with time, expertise, and trust who can temporarily shift focus, redeploy their competence, and engage with emerging questions as they unfold. This kind of capacity cannot be built overnight. It depends on stable institutional environments, on long-term investment in researchers, and on stable long term organisational structures. In that sense, capacity is not an inefficiency in the research system. It is a precondition for responsiveness. In my interpretation of the accelerated society, preparedness matters as much as productivity, and if educational research is expected to contribute responsibly under conditions of uncertainty, then institutions must be equipped not only to produce knowledge slowly, but also to enter new research needs immediately when they arise. That readiness is what allows research to remain both credible and relevant.

Closing Reflection

Let me end where I began, with research institutions that provide knowledge for society that is cumulative, credible, and shared. Today, that responsibility has intensified because institutions are increasingly asked to help societies orient themselves when something new is already unfolding. That requires steadiness, and it requires courage. Courage to hold on to long-term perspectives. Courage to respond when events disrupt established structures. And courage to say clearly when evidence points beyond the school.

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