

# Professor Slavin and the Development of Evidence-Based Education in China

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**Abstract.** *In the new century, the quantity and quality of empirical education research in China have been greatly improved, and more people are paying attention to and engaging in evidence-based research and practice in education. In this context, Professor Robert Slavin, a well-known expert in evidence-based education at Johns Hopkins University in the United States, contributed greatly to the guidance and assistance to the development of evidence-based education in China. He clarified some vague understandings of Chinese scholars on the research and reform of evidence-based education, trained and instructed Chinese scholars and students, and built a platform for exchanges between Chinese and foreign scholars, which has played an inestimable role in promoting the development of evidence-based education in China.*

*Best Evidence in Chinese Education* 2021; 8(1):1021-1028.

*Doi: 10.15354/bece.21.or30.*

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**How to Cite:** Yao, J. (2021). *Professor Slavin and the development of evidence-based education in China. Best Evidence in Chinese Education, 8(1):1021-1028.*

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**Keywords:** *Robert Edward Slavin, China, Evidence-Based Education, Development*

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**Conflict of Interests:** None.

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## The *Status Quo* of the Development of Evidence-Based Education in China

**F**OR a long time, education research in China has focused on qualitative research, especially speculative research. This situation leads to a single academic research paradigm, insufficient scientific characteristics, and disconnection between theory and practice. Meanwhile, China's educational practice and reform are mainly based on experience rather than scientific evidence, which make decision-making and practice often biased. It is difficult for principals and teachers to get the guidance of policies and research based on scientific evidence to effectively improve the efficiency of management and teaching.

Since the beginning of the new century, this situation has been greatly improved. On the one hand, educational decision-making departments have paid more and more attention to the role of scientific research in the process of educational reform and development, and vigorously promoted educational scientific research from the system and management level. In October 2019, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the "*Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Strengthening Educational Scientific Research in the New Era*" (The Policy and Regulations Department, the Ministry of Education, China, [2019] No. 16). It is required to further innovate the scientific research paradigms and methods, with particular emphasis on the requirement of "strengthening empirical research, insisting on facts and evidence as the basis, and continuously tracking major issues, focusing on long-term and systematic research". This reflects a strong sense of evidence at the national level. On the other hand, in terms of the transformation of China's education research, it has become a consensus in China's education field to vigorously strengthen empirical research in recent years. In 2015, East China Normal University held the first *National Education Empirical Research Forum*, which has been held for six consecutive sessions so far. The forum has grown from the initial participation of more than 600 people to the participation of dozens of journals and universities today; it is a grand event for China's education empirical research with thousands of offline participants and more than 100,000 online participants. It has greatly promoted the development of empirical research on education in China. As a landmark event, on January 14, 2017, deans of education faculty (department) of 14 universities in China including East China Normal University, the chief editors of 32 educational research journals, the leaders of the National Educational Science Planning Office, and the Education Research Center of the People's Daily issued the "*East China Normal University Action Declaration to Strengthen Empirical Research in Education and Promote the Transformation of Research Paradigm*" in Shanghai. The release of this "*Declaration of Action*" indicated that vigorously promoting empirical research in education has become a consensus and unified action in the entire Chinese education field.

In this context, the empirical research in Chinese education research in recent years has shown a greater degree of improvement in both quantity and quality. The con-

tinuous emergence of high-quality educational scientific research results has played a more significant role in promoting educational reform and development. But it goes without saying that the foundation of China's education research is relatively weak, and there is still room for improvement. Studies have found that on the basis of comparing the top domestic and abroad educational journals, although the proportion of empirical research results on education in China was on the rise, the proportion was still relatively low. The methods used by them still focused on statistical description, the application of cutting-edge analysis methods was less, and the overall research level was not high (Zhu & Ma, 2020).

In the past two decades, the development of evidence-based education research and reform has been the most exciting thing in the education field in European and American countries. Such progress has also attracted the attention of Chinese researchers and policy makers. In recent years, Chinese researchers have noticed the development of evidence-based education in the West, but most of them were concentrated in the field of comparative education. They mainly focused on the tracking and introduction of western research trends, and research and practical exploration based on local evidence-based education were still lacking (Deng et al., 2019; Li & Cheng, 2019). In this process, no matter in terms of theoretical research, method application or practical exploration, the development of domestic evidence-based education in China has many areas that need to be clarified and improved. This situation has changed slightly in recent years, but as a whole, the development of evidence-based education in China still has a long way to go.

## **The Impact of Professor Slavin's Team on the Development of Evidence-Based Education in China**

As a leading researcher in the research and reform of evidence-based education, Professor Slavin has made outstanding contributions to its development. In 2018, Professor Slavin and his wife, Professor Madden Nancy, were invited by the School of Educational Science of Nanjing Normal University, accompanied by Professor Alan Cheung of the School of Education of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to visit mainland China for the first time. Since then, Professor Slavin has paid great attention to the development of evidence-based education in China. He has repeatedly participated in related academic activities organized by universities in mainland China and did his best to help Chinese universities and scholars carry out related research. He has made indelible contributions to accelerating the development of evidence-based education in China.

### ***He Clarified Some Vague Understandings of Chinese Scholars about Evidence-Based Education***

Although there have been some preliminary explorations, the research and practice of evidence-based education is still a new thing for researchers in mainland China, and their understanding of it is still vague or even inaccurate. In response to this, professor

Slavin accepted the invitation of Science Insight Education Frontiers to specially write an article in response to the questions and criticisms on the reform of evidence-based education from the Chinese scholars. In this paper, Professor Slavin responded to the following questions at length: Does evidence-based research rely too much on experimental research to narrow education research? Why can't high-quality qualitative research, case studies, and experience become "evidence" in evidence-based research? How should evidence-based research be promoted in developing countries? etc. He believed that in developing countries like China, exploring rigorous and valuable evidence is an effective way to efficiently promote educational research, practice, and reform. In this process, it is equally critical to vigorously promote local evidence-based research and learn from foreign experience (Slavin & Cheung, 2019). In 2020, invited by the journal East China Normal University Education Review, Professor Slavin published a paper entitled "How could evidence-based reform advance education?" in the journal, in which he once again discussed the importance of evidence-based reforms to the development of pedagogy (Slavin et al., 2021). These discussions clarified the vague understanding of some key issues of evidence-based research in education in mainland China, and further pointed out the direction of related research while deepening the relevant understanding.

### ***He Made More Mainland Researchers Pay Attention to the Development of Evidence-Based Education***

In recent years, Professor Slavin has come to China to participate in academic conferences and lectures. In 2018, Professor Slavin and his wife were invited by the School of Educational Science of Nanjing Normal University to visit Chinese university for the first time. During the period, they gave a number of lectures to teachers and students of Nanjing Normal University, and systematically introduced the latest development of evidence-based education reform in European and the USA. In 2019, Professor Slavin and his wife visited China again. Together with experts from all over the world, they participated in the "International Forum on Ideas and Actions in Pursuing Educational Excellence" hosted by Nanjing Normal University and gave keynote speeches. They discussed with Chinese evidence-based researchers on ways and paths to promote evidence-based reforms in education. Following this, Professor Slavin went to Shanghai to participate in the "Fifth National Educational Empirical Research Forum" hosted by East China Normal University. The keynote speeches made by Professor Slavin and his entourage at these conferences further expanded the influence of evidence-based research among Chinese researchers. It has effectively promoted more researchers and practitioners to pay attention to and participate in the research and practice of evidence-based education.

### ***He Guided and Helped Chinese Researchers Grow***

Professor Slavin was very concerned about the talent training and professional construction of evidence-based education. In addition to providing up-to-date information for

researchers, he also led his team to contributed to the development of evidence-based education in China. During his two visits to China, Professor Slavin gladly accepted the invitation of Nanjing Normal University and was successively appointed as a foreign consultant expert of the School of Educational Science of Nanjing Normal University and the “Hongguo Chair Professor” of Nanjing Normal University. In addition, the Center for Research and Reform in Education of Johns Hopkins University led by Professor Slavin has also received visiting students from China many times. Under the guidance of Professor Slavin’s team, these students have been greatly improved in their research vision and abilities. It has laid a solid foundation for the sustainable development of China’s Evidence-based Education at a higher level in the future.

### ***He Actively Promoted the Research Results of Evidence-Based Education in China***

During his first visit to the mainland China, Professor Slavin signed a cooperation agreement with the School of Educational Science of Nanjing Normal University to co-found the “*Best Evidence in Brief (BEiB)*” project in the mainland. The *BEiB* project is a global evidence-based research and reform public welfare project led by Professor Slavin and participated by several universities and research institutions. It compiles the most cutting-edge, most effective, and most interesting evidence-based research results, so that researchers and first-line practitioners can obtain timely first-hand information, thereby promoting the development of evidence-based education. After intense preparations, the *BEiB* project in mainland China was launched in November 2018. Professor Slavin also introduced and shared the website link on his blog. This project has not only received extensive attention from domestic education colleagues in China, but has also become an important window for international evidence-based education researchers to understand the research dynamics in China. So far, *BEiE* in mainland China has nearly 10,000 subscriptions and is read hundreds of times every day, and its influence is gradually expanding.

On this basis, in order to further expand the influence of Evidence-based education research in China, after discussion with Professor Slavin, the Chinese *BEiE* project team decided to launch an academic journal dedicated to the achievements of evidence-based education in China. In 2019, *Best Evidence in Chinese Education (BECE)* was officially launched, and Professor Slavin personally served as the chairman of the editorial board. During the development of the journal, Professor Slavin has given strong professional support. In 2020, with the global spread of Covid-19 pandemic, how to maintain the operation of the education system under the premise of pandemic prevention and control has become a key issue for global educators. In this context, Professor Slavin was invited by the journal *BECE* to publish a COVID-19 themed paper. Together with scholars from many other countries, they discussed the international anti-pandemic experience in education. Once this group of papers was published, it attracted widespread attention and the journal’s influence increased rapidly. So far, *BECE* has

been abstracted or indexed in more than ten important databases including EBSCO, ERIC, SSRN, etc., showing a good momentum of development.

## **Professor Slavin's Prospects for the Development of Evidence-Based Education in China**

Professor Slavin has expressed his expectations for the future development of evidence-based education in China on many occasions. During his first visit to China, Professor Slavin expressed his view in the lecture exchange session that China, as a big country different from the West, has different national conditions and educational conditions from the West. However, in terms of evidence-based reform, both East and West should be consistent in promoting education reform through the acquisition of scientific evidence. In this regard, China, as the most populous country, has its own advantages, and its development prospects for Evidence-based Education are promising.

Professor Slavin has also expressed his views on how to accelerate the development of evidence-based education in China. In 2019, during Professor Slavin's participation in the conference in Nanjing, a participant ever asked him as: China's current evidence-based education research foundation is still relatively weak, and many decision makers have not formed the consciousness of making decisions based on evidence. Therefore, in this situation, how should we overcome difficulties and advance the development of Evidence-based Education research and practice? Professor Slavin's response to this issue was that even in Europe and the United States, evidence-based education reform would be questioned and criticized, which was normal. For a country like China, it is in the initial stage of evidence-based education, the first task was to start it first. In the initial stage, it might be difficult for researchers to obtain excellent and sufficient experimental research conditions. In this case, even doing some research that reduced the rigorous requirements was better than doing nothing. Researchers should work closely with front-line teachers and decision makers to make evidence serve the reform and practice of education. In this process, try to gradually improve the quality of research and people's sense of identification with evidence-based reforms, and subsequently and gradually the research and reforms would be easier to carry out. Such a deep and pragmatic insight is not only a suggestion for the research and practice of evidence-based education in China, but also a great encouragement to researchers and practitioners who are interested in it.

Professor Slavin hoped that China's evidence-based education research and reform can run its own way. When the author accompanied Professor Slavin and his wife in 2018, I once proposed an idea to use the resources of "Success for All (SFA)" and apply its implementation model to carry out related work in China. Professor Slavin did not approve of this. In addition to SFA's resources are not suitable for China, he believed that China has its own unique national and education conditions, and therefore also has its own problems that need to be solved. He even advocated that Chinese researchers should use evidence-based reform ideas and methods to solve China's own problems based on the experience of other countries. Such a view is obviously very en-

lightening and should be the development direction of evidence-based education in China.

Professor Slavin has always paid close attention to the development of Evidence-based Education in China. In recent years, the progress of China's evidence-based research in education and reform has also made him very pleased. Due to the pandemic, many planned exchange activities have been suspended, but we have been planning to invite him to visit China again to answer questions and guide Chinese scholars again. Professor Slavin also said in his last letter to the author that he hoped to work with me again after the pandemic was over. But what I never expected was that this had become a wish that Professor Slavin could never realize. On April 25, 2021, Professor Slavin left us forever. When the news came, many scholars in the Chinese education field who were familiar with him were quite grieving. Even if Professor Slavin has passed away, we believe that the tree of evidence-based education in China will continue to take root and sprout until it flourishes. This is perhaps what Professor Slavin would like to see most.

I would like to deeply in memory of Professor Slavin with this article!

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*Yao. Professor Slavin and the Development of Evidence-Based Education in China.*

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*Received: 17 May 2021*

*Revised: 19 May 2021*

*Accepted: 22 May 2021*