


Do No Harm

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Education is a field of dreams, and so is educational research. As educators, we dream of schools that can improve the lives of students, solve social problems, and enrich the quality of life; as educational researchers, we dream that our studies will enhance the effectiveness of schools in achieving these worthy goals. Both fields draw recruits who see the possibilities of education as a force for doing good, and that turns out to be a problem because the history of both fields shows that the chances for doing real harm are substantial. Over the years, research on teaching and teacher education—the topic of the discussion in this special issue—has caused a lot of damage to teaching/learning and learning to teach in schools. So I suggest that a good principle to adopt when considering the role of research in teacher education is a version of the Hippocratic oath: First do no harm.

The history of educational research in the United States in the 20th century supports a pessimistic assessment of the field's impact on American school and society. There was Edward L. Thorndike, whose work emphasized the importance of differentiating the curriculum to provide the skills and knowledge that students would later need in playing sharply different roles in a stratified workforce. There was David Snedden, who labored tirelessly to promote narrowly vocational training for that large group of students who would end up serving in what he called "the rank and file." There were the kingpins of educational testing such as Lewis Terman, who developed instruments that allowed educators to measure student ability and student learning, which in turn helped determine which track students should occupy and what role they should play in later life. Put together, these kinds of enormously productive educational researchers helped build a system of schooling that emphasized sorting over learning and promoted a vision of teaching that emphasized the delivery of curriculum over the engagement of students. They laid the foundation for the current machinery of curriculum standards and high-stakes testing that has turned American teaching into a machinery for raising test scores.

Of course, these educational researchers usually did not intend to do harm. (Snedden is the exception here, a man who was on a mission to dumb

down schooling for the lower classes.) For the most part, they saw making curriculum more scientific and intelligence testing more accurate as ways to allow individuals with merit to escape from the clutches of their social origins. Like most educational researchers, they were optimists about the possible impact of their work. But their examples should serve as a cautionary tale for researchers who see their work as an unmitigated exercise in human improvement.

One factor in particular tends to bend the work of researchers toward the dark side of the force, and that is research funding. Very few government agencies and foundations are eager to support basic research in education. Instead, funding aligns with the latest educational policy objectives, and to get funded, researchers need to demonstrate that their work will in some manner serve these objectives. That is not to say that the researchers necessarily support these policy missions, but to win the grant they do have to harness their work, at least rhetorically, to the aims that motivate the request for proposals. In the current global policy climate, that means the work needs to address issues around accountability and standards and improving test scores. If you cannot spin your work in this direction, you will have trouble getting funded.

Another factor that interferes with the educational researcher's desire to do good for teachers and teacher educators is the need to confront an educational version of Gresham's law: Bad research tends to displace good. The best research is complex, and this puts the researcher at a competitive disadvantage, since policymakers and teacher educators prefer results that are definitive and easy to understand. The most sophisticated work we produce tends to show an educational reality that has a complex array of elements interacting within a fiendishly complex organizational structure, which means that research findings have to be carefully qualified to the point where it is nearly impossible to say with clarity that a particular form of educational practice is effective or ineffective. Instead, we have to report that "it all depends." In addition, to understand the research findings in any depth, you need to be able to sort through issues of design, methodology, and validity that are accessible only to experts in the field.

Meanwhile, there is a vast array of research available to policymakers and practitioners that supports clear answers to educational problems and does so in a manner that is easy for the layperson to comprehend. This kind of work comes from two kinds of groups: think tanks and entrepreneurial organizations for the delivery of education. Think tanks remove a key element of complexity from the research process by deciding in advance what the politically desirable policy is and then conducting studies that provide clear support for that policy. In the United States, there are a variety of nongovernmental organizations that are active in promoting and delivering a particular brand of educational service, such as Teach For America (with its alternative to traditional teacher preparation) and the Knowledge Is Power Program (with its alternative approach to running schools in low-income

neighborhoods). These organizations commission research that conveniently demonstrates the effectiveness of what they do. And both types of research producers are particularly effective at marketing their findings to the relevant actors in the policy and education communities.

University-based educational research cannot compete with these other producers in clarity and understandability, but they can undercut the impact of this work a bit by doing what university researchers have always been good at. We have an advantage in being the only group without a dog in the policy hunt, which allows us to perform credible fundamental research about how schools work, how teaching and learning happens, and how teachers learn to teach. Work like this can help show how simplistic and politically biased these other research products really are. And it won't do much harm. **TEP**



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