

Educational Research

by

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Don't take it personally – I'm sure your research is great, but taken all together, educational research has become absurd, out of harmony with sound judgment. Unfortunately, we have come to know too well that absurdity in the seat of power causes human harm.

Consider first the absurdity. Educational research has fattened horribly. Yes, that may offend, but sometimes a friend must be honest. Researchers don't notice the excess as they worry about too much here or too little there, over-extending the quantitative, too little qualitative, not enough of the triangulated, the doubly blinded. They rush too quickly after the method *du jour*, hoping to chomp data into another published roll of flab, by which the oleaginous field oozes up the ladder of promotion and tenure.

A gross exaggeration? AERA is accepting proposals for new handbooks of educational research and to get an inkling of what to expect, look closely, for instance, wondering with skeptical admiration, at the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, since 2001 in its fourth edition. As AERA suggests, this "resource for students and scholars in education and beyond, . . . will inform practice-policy, school administration, teaching, instruction, and parenting." Is it fit for the effort?

At \$85, the member price, the *Handbook* offers value, but \$15 for shipping tips us off. It has heft – circa 7 pounds, just under 1,300 pages, 8.5 by 11, double columns, set in 10 point Times Roman, ungenerous margins. 85 distinguished authorities contribute 51 articles, each on average discussing 160 research studies. The subject index identifies over 4,000 topics of note; the name index cites 7,130 persons who merit attention. The *Handbook* covers the field, of course. Multiple articles on the intellectual foundations and the methodologies of research open it, and surveys of research on teaching key subjects, on the learner, on policy, on teachers and teaching, on the social and cultural contexts of teaching, and finally on the practice of instruction all follow. Indeed, the *Handbook* is an epitome of research on teaching, the concern at the heart of educational research writ large.

Does the *Handbook* represent an absurd effort? It epitomizes thousands of person-years of methodical inquiry, each piece of it fine fare, but in bulk indigestible. It assembles work, *pointless* in a deep, existential sense, for the research goes off in every direction, leaving those in "practice-policy, school administration, teaching, instruction, and parenting" without a clue what to do. Before them, a research landscape spreads out, a vast plain, with a hillock here and there among the dead – Dewey, Freire, Piaget, and Vygotsky – and the living – Shulman, Darling-Hammond, and a few others. The contributors cite their 7,000 plus researchers on average a little over twice each and mention the median researcher only 3 times. What is the message? How should the eager reader react to the 4,200 isolated studies, which the *Handbook* mentions only once in its million or so words? Which of them is the key unlocking whatever problem is at the reader's hand?

Can the policy maker at the federal, state, or local level use the *Handbook*, or the thousands of studies to which it points? Perhaps, for this or that, but in a helter-skelter manner. Will the *Handbook* help the harried school administrator, pressed to meet standards, eager for his school to shine on tests, struggling to keep things humming on a parsimonious budget, having to cope with the kids living at the margin and testing every boundary? And can those engaged in teaching and instruction work with the *Handbook*, and all the research it represents, as they engage daily 120 protean persons, each distinctly different, in the trial of mastering some skills, values, and knowledge? With the *Handbook* in hand, follow a teacher, good or bad, for a week, and try to offer sage advice from it as the teacher sees teachable moments flit forth for this pupil and that one. And then, can someone parenting use the *Handbook* well? Imagine, him or her after a long day at work, settling into bed, 7 pounds of book resting on stomach muscles that have begun to sag from fatigue and age, intently squinting at the small-print on double-columned pages, and on 919 exclaiming suddenly – "Honey, here's the answer!"

In the lexicon of educational researchers, "education" denotes schooling and researchers must start asking to what degree their work can determine the realities of schooling. These realities are imperious, domineering, imperative. Schools work the same way the world around; they have powerful routines and massive institutional inertia. Tradition, ritual, convention, interest, bureaucratic procedure, folly, the lore of practice, and expedient intelligence determine the actualities of schools.

Let's be honest and humble: because educational researchers have proven unable to exercise rigorous control and account for the relevant variables in carefully designed inquiries, their studies have had notoriously conflicting results. If researchers cannot master the variables in controlled settings, why expect practitioners, caught in institutional cross-currents and daily coping with complexity, to be able to rationalize school activities according to the prescripts of research findings? They can't; they won't; the direct application of research will have no coherent effects.

Oh, yes – perhaps direct application has not been the point. Educational researchers also staff the professional schools of education as the faculty members who educate the educators. Perhaps as the researchers prepare pre-service novices and bring in-service practitioners up-to-date with newly proven techniques, their educational research will shape practice indirectly. This faith constitutes the educational version of the great trickle-down delusion. Do we believe the very rich when they assure us that their getting ever richer will soon improve all our pay, benefits, and security? Alas, the trickling down of educational research from the schools of education will have even less effect than do the leavings of great wealth upon the annual income of the ordinary person.

So, in sum, the absurdity: educational research accumulates in great, growing bulk, with all manner of contradictory findings, and no leverage by which to effect practice in any significant way. Better schooling depends, less on research, but on adequate resources for the job, human and financial, and lots of hard work, day by day, in an ethos of support and high expectation, in school and out.

Consider now the harm. The vast quantity of educational research produced year in, year out, serves no real need or opportunity in the workaday world of schools, of their management, or of parenting. It does not arise to meet a felt demand from these quarters. It exists because the system of schooling requires many teachers and they require a professional preparation, which occurs primarily in academic institutions. In turn, those academic institutions need a faculty and they assess the ability to conduct and publish research as their primary criterion for deciding who to recruit, promote, and tenure as faculty members. The vast bulk of educational research will have no effect on anything except the process of recruitment, promotion, and tenure in schools of education. It exists for the sole reason that both individual researchers and the institutions that employ them consistently use the research for this purpose.

This assertion will come as no surprise to anyone who has spent much time with eyes open in schools of education. But what harm does the practice do? Four injuries result.

- Skill in educational research often has little to do with the real educational work that should take place in the professional preparation of educators. By relying on the demonstration of extraneous research skills as the prime criterion for recruitment, promotion, and tenure, schools of education risk making bad decisions about the composition of their faculties.
- School improvement requires quotidian labor, many persons thinking hard on their feet, responding to an endless flux of concrete situations with knowledge, care, and insight. The myth that fixing the schools somehow depends on the magic of educational researchers deflects attention, material support, and respect from those charged with the real tasks of keeping school, diminishing their morale and confidence.
- Contemporary culture has a great need for thoughtful work that will inform the public consideration of education throughout life and not merely in schools. Relying on educational research for recruitment, promotion, and tenure leads to a great over-production of useless research about schooling, which throttles public communication about education in a din of nonsensical noise. Good schools work poorly in a culture enervated by pedagogical pollutants – excessive inequalities, mendacious leaders, grasping fiduciaries, narcotic entertainments, distorted ideals. Research should lay bare all that dampens educational aspiration, but it avoids this challenge, for it may anger this interest or that, prejudicing its value as a tool in recruitment, promotion, and tenure.
- By working primarily to secure their recruitment, promotion, and tenure, educational researchers become alienated and defensive. They avoid intellectual risks; they become imitative; they seek narrow, predictable specialties; they address a limited readership and nurture small ideas that others will find unexceptionable. In so doing, they educate themselves poorly and as poorly educated educators, they prove impotent as the educators of educators.