Biographical Note

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Raising the Standards for Democratic Education: Research and Evaluation as Public Knowledge

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The standardized testing movement in the schools may be the product of educational research but our growing reliance on these tests is scientifically shortchanging the education system and the nation. The tests deploy advanced statistical methods, reliability and validity assessments, and controlled conditions and sampling principles, all to ensure as accurate as possible measurement of student achievement. They represent another reassuring application of the modern scientific methods that deliver clean water to our taps and cool air-conditioned breezes to our homes on a hot day. Yet if their one-size-fits-all approach may be misaligned with today's diverse economy, as labor economist Robert B. Reich (2000) has pointed out, I would also add that they set far too low a standard for science's contribution to an education system that serves the nation well.

The tests represent a decidedly retarded view of research and a diminished democratic conception of public schooling, given all that the realm of educational research has to offer. That is, while most everyone would agree that test performance does not encompass the whole of what it means to learn or to be educated, it also needs to be recognized that the tests do not encompass the whole of the truth that research has to offer on the school experience. Similarly, this faith in testing fails to deliver what should be expected from an education system in a democratic society. We need to raise the standards of accountability for research and education so that we are working from a far more complete and diverse picture at creating a democratic and educated society.

Educational research rarely tells a singular story, rarely offers but one answer, and certainly not of the sort that tests scores do, in which a single number, sitting in comparison with others, determines the fate of a child, a teacher, a principal, a school, a district. In the face of this public faith in what the test scores say about the schools, people need to appreciate that research already affords, largely at public expense, a far-reaching understanding of what it means to send children off for a dozen years to learn about as many subjects, across a handful of schools. Contrast that with how this current focus on a singular answer to how our children are learning, on whether a schools is good or bad, provides little public incentive to discuss questions of educational means and ends. Thinking about test score standards, measured against national curriculum standards, displaces local and global thinking about what the school should be like, and

how it can serve the children and the community. Poor test results suggest the need for test mechanics to come in and tune the schools for better performance, better results.

The tests may well reassure the public that they know how this school compares to that school on a single measure, but they do little to inform the public about the nature of education, about the risks and possibilities of learning, which is something that educational research is good at, something that could go some distance in developing the conditions of a more deliberative democracy. We want to set a standard of accountability for education and the research that supports democracy, that allows — to call on one of public education's most traditional goals — for a strengthening of democratic purpose and process, especially as that purpose and process concerns the schools themselves.

Let us raise the standards, then, of educational accountability. The public deserves to know more, far more that standardized test results can tell. They deserve to know more not only because they have already paid for this wealth of educational research, not only because their children's and their own future depends on what it has to be tell us about the education system, but because such knowledge is vital to democracy, and because people might well wish, as a result of this education, to learn more about learning. This is a call for strengthening the basis of participation, of informed advise and consent. If the current standardized achievement scores do not help us think about different approaches to educating bilingual children, of creating an appreciation of literature and other arts, of developing critical thinking skills, of improving the health and well-being, the different talents, then those measures are not helping education's democratic project.

We need not abandon the standardized tests. They are one source of information that needs to set within the context of the larger process of inquiry what it means to learn and teach, and how that relates to the economy and welfare, the culture and health, of the nation and the planet. The goal is to raise the standards of public reason and deliberation, as a means of increasing the quality of democratic life. The challenge in adhering and developing these standards of more democratic forms of education and governance rest on developing new expectations — and corresponding information technologies — for the public value of this research among educators, researchers, policy-makers, and the public. To make standardized test results the sole public face of educational research and evaluation, as we have at this point, is like making a baseball players weight the sole statistic available not only to those watching the game but to the team's manager, coaches, and owners.

The research community needs to take far greater responsibility for making the complex and varied understandings afforded by research to how students learn a part of public discourse about education. The lack of talk about any research except test results is not a failure on the part of the public, policy-makers, or educators. Researchers have not made access to this understanding easy; it has yet to fall within research standards to consider a work's contribution to public deliberations. It is time to focus on how educational research constitutes a public good.

The standards for public reason and deliberation, informed by research, can only be raised, however, through support from both the research community and the public. As with any work or performance, the relationship between the producer and audience can build an experience that goes beyond what both had thought possible, an experience that can develop among them, which creates, in effect, a new standard for both parties. So this plea for raising the standards by expanding the expectations for the public value of

research and evaluation studies of education is addressed to both the research community and the public, in the knowledge that an appreciation of its critical contribution to extending the educational reach of democratic possibilities will need to come from both.

As things now stand, with public expectations of a singular standard for student achievement as the whole of the educational question, not only is the democratic basis diminished, but the entire research-into-policy system is open to wide-scale abuse. In fact, I offer a case study in the misuse of research, in the vital area of teaching the young to read and write, to demonstrate just how critical it is to setting this new standard for educational research as a viable form of public knowledge. It will demonstrate that while researchers are very good at policing the standards for research as professional practice, they have a distance to go in appreciating the standards for research as a democratic form of public knowledge. And until the whole of educational research becomes part of that public standard, the schools are left to the dictates of research's most singular and narrow form of inquiry, the achievement test.

Research and Democracy: A Case Study

In 1997, Bonita Grossen published the influential white paper, 30 Years of Research: What We Know about How Children Learn to Read, through the Centre for the Future of Teaching and Learning in Santa Cruz, California (Grossen, 1997). Her synthesis of reading research was intended to demonstrate that a consensus had been reached on the value of "code-oriented" or phonics when it came to teaching children to read. The paper, which drew on a good deal of National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) research, delivered an assured and singular answer to the question of what we know, and it has played a significant role in successful efforts to shift the educational programs of Texas and California.

Yet, it was not long before the paper's claims were called into question by Richard Allington and Haley Woodside-Jiron, two educational researchers at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement at the University of Albany (1999). They found Grossen's white paper to have misrepresented the research, and thereby proposing essentially unsubstantiated instructional recommendations for teaching reading. Allington and Woodside-Jiron then argue, that this "misuse of educational research" is grounds for questioning "the reliability of any 'consensus' document whenever 'research' is used as a policy lever," and they advise American Educational Research Association (AERA) to "develop an early-warning system and a viable procedure for responding to similar advocacy events in the future" (1999, p. 11). The cold-war allusions to early-warning defense systems suggest just the sort of the boundary between university-based research and the public arena of policymaking that needs to be overcome.

Allington and Woodside-Jiron are obviously concerned that "consensus documents" such as "30 Years of Research" can distort the autonomous and independent nature of research and researchers in the name of having a greater public impact. My concern here is that the shroud of suspicion which they would cast over public advocacy and consensus only serves to absolve researchers of their civic responsibilities for ensuring that their work informs democratic deliberations over education. It lowers research's public accountability, and reduces, in turn, the prospects of it contributing to the public's thinking about education, leaving that field to the narrow channel of

standardized test results as the sole scientifically based measure of what schools are doing. While I have no objection to AERA setting up a committee to monitor public uses of research, in an effort to prevent misrepresentations of research results, I think this should be only the first and not the final step in increasing the public presence of educational research, especially at this time of great changes in scholarly publishing.

It does seem apparent that academic journals will inevitably migrate to the web over the next decade for reasons of economy, productivity, and plain convenience (Ekman & Quandt, 1999). However, in a field such as education, researchers face a critical choice in this process. They can let it happen in ways that does not alter the basic process of researchers publishing research for researchers, or they can work with these new technologies and our own research practices to improve the public presence and value of educational research, with an eye to making this research more accessible, coherent, and comprehensible on a public scale (Willinsky, 1999; 2000). They should be encouraged, for example, by just how quickly the public, in considerable numbers, has taken to using online medical and financial research services.[1] The research community should see this process of going public with what is known as a way of limiting the political misuse of research, as a way of raising educational standards by enabling the public to learn far more about the risks and possibilities of schooling, knowledge that can be shared on a global basis. Where should reliable and rigorous educational research stand with advocacy, consensus, and public concern when it comes to such critical educational issues as literacy? What is at stake is the integrity of the research enterprise.

Research's Public Value

Whether representing industry alliances, social issues, environmental concerns, or consumer groups, the interest group has increasingly come to represent the forceful public voice of advocacy with significant political clout.[2] Interest groups have been particularly active around educational issues, getting behind state referendums on bilingual education and affirmation action, for example, as well as the teaching of evolution.[3] Now it may be tempting to think of interest groups as distorting the natural course of democratic processes, to see them as a ganging up of the opinionated and vested against the individual expression of equal citizens, but interest groups also represents a freedom of association around deeply felt values, issues, and interests, if only in response to a politics of issue-less candidate consumerism.

What we need to recognize is that advocacy has raised the public profile and deliberative role of research, as Allington and Woodside-Jiron make clear in identifying three forms of advocacy in this questionable case: "(a) The appearances of NICHD staff and NICHD-supported researchers before policymaking forums (b) the widespread dissemination of this research through the popular print media, and (c) the use of a particular policy tool – a white paper (Grossen, 1997) that purports to summarize the NICHD-supported research" (1999, p. 4). My concern is that, the flaws of the Grossen paper aside, public uses of research are not inimical to the goals or quality of scholarship. Researchers have long been advocates, especially with literacy, whether for or against code-oriented curriculums (Stahl, 1999). The research community, rather than reinforce its defenses against the political use of flawed work, however, needs to do more to make its work part of the public domain, which would provide, among other things, its own check on such abuses.

What might the increased public presence of educational research look like? Well, to offer a quick-sketch version, think of a public-access website – developed in conjunction with post-print journal publishing – that would enable educators, policymakers, and researchers to survey related studies. This needs to be more than AskERIC which provides a list of authors and titles linked to abstracts, although it could start that way. Say one was interested in learning to read and chose Grossen's "30 Years of Research." To appreciate what research has to offer in this online universe of knowledge, one should then be able to link to not only the studies which she cites, but also the ones that have gone on to cite her study and the studies she cites, through a two-way citation process. This would enable readers to see how well these works have stood up to critical comment. It would enable one to visit formal reviews of Grossen's work (such as Allington and Woodside-Jiron's) as well as join informal discussions that have referred to it. There should also be a further linking of research to the relevant policies and practices in various states, to appreciate how this research works.[4] Such a public knowledge website of could be supported by specialized dictionaries and sites of practice and application, much as the National Library of Medicine's MEDLINEplus provides for health research.[5]

It will take much experimentation, collaboration, and research to develop an accepted and sustainable standard for a public-access site like this. It will also drive up the level of debate among interest groups, while providing people and policy makers with greater confidence in using research as part of the deliberative process. In this way, it would speak to Penelope L. Peterson's concerns, expressed in her presidential address to AERA, "Why Do Educational Research?" a few years ago, when she insisted that the goals of this association and thus of its membership were not only to "ensure the continued funding for research," but to "communicate the findings of high-quality research in ways that influence policy and practice" (1998, p. 9).

The current standard for assessing research's value or quality is on its internal consistency, on the validity and reliability of its measures, on the soundness of its conclusions. Yet what we as often herald in our research, from the initial funding proposal to the study's conclusions, is how it offers practitioners and policymakers, parents and the public, nation and world, a better understanding of, say, students' reading and writing. This may not apply to all educational research, but at some point in pursuing a scholarly understanding of literacy, it seems fair to ask whether what we know could offer more to people who want to understand more about literacy and act on that understanding. We are educators, after all, and this element of public education seems worth our attention at a time when the very medium of scholarly communication is changing.

This does not mean abandoning peer review and other, albeit imperfect, methods of ensuring the distinguishing quality of research as a form of knowledge, but it does mean thinking more about how research works in public and whether by design and publication, it could work better in helping people think about what they want from schools. It may be too soon to argue that the public's capacity for research is increasing with this web-borne age of information, but to judge from the medical and financial research sites at least, people are hungry for knowledge that once was the sole domain of experts and professionals.

Educational research's contribution to policy making need not be seen as external to its scientific claims but as another potential source of their validation. As literacy research often seeks to better understand how educators can improve children's reading and writing, it seems appropriate to judge its effectiveness as it informs those involved in this democratic process of setting and enacting educational policies. We may refer to this process, a little self-righteously I find, as talking truth to power, and yet it calls for more than keeping a watchful eye on publics uses of this knowledge, like librarians who see themselves as, above all, protectors of the books. It calls for improving the public's ability to tap into what truths, what powers, this knowledge offers, as if that were the very object of undertaking this research. This is to raise the standards of both the schools and the talk about the schools. It is to expect more educational work from both research and public. Research into educational practices should matter to people, all the more so in an age of interest-group politics. The public quality of this knowledge, to reiterate my theme, is surely the best protection against its abuse by the politics of expertise.

Knowledge without Consensus

A critical point for raising the standards of educational accountability — which I am proposing we do by increasing the public quality of research on the schools — is whether the public has a stomach for results that do not reflect a consensus among researchers. To stay with our case study, Allington and Woodside-Jiron's critique of "30 Years of Research" is principally based on its pretence to representing a consensus among literacy researchers. As I noted above, they end up calling the very concept of consensus into question, at least in policy settings: "The research community, in our view, should be concerned about the reliability of any 'consensus' document whenever 'research' is used as a policy lever" (1999, p. 11). I agree, and hope to see that concern extended to the public's own regard for consensus among researchers. The value of research's contribution lies in the detail, in how it renders the differences among programs, the overlooked consequences, and the nature of students' and teachers' experiences.

Yet a consensus is also at work here, a consensus over the validity of such differences in research approaches and findings. Researchers are trained very well to scrutinize each other's work with its divergences and distinctions, identifying its strengths and weaknesses. This ability to judge the quality of this divergent work is surely part of what the research community has to offer, part of what makes this form of knowledge interesting and potentially helpful. While it may seem that the public and policymakers will balk at any research that does not represent researcher consensus, policymakers at least have learned to work with a range of, according to Barker and Peters, "cognitive difficulties" posed by the relevant research, from the merely complex to the scientifically unknown and perhaps unknowable (1993, p. 2).

If the public can set aside the idea that research is a process of arriving at a singular, universal truth, at least with something as complex as learning to read and write, it will have the chance to better understand how literacy can be encouraged and studied in different ways. Rather than encourage the impression that research seeks a consistent and single-minded body of findings that would dictate, in effect, how to teach literacy – as if the decision of how to teach should be left up to the experts – we would do better to develop ways of representing the divergence and the agreement within this field of inquiry. Knowing the possibilities and risks identified so far, knowing the challenges the

research still faces, provides its own comfort to people, its own basis for taking action, in the face of always partial knowledge.

On the one hand, presenting this consensus over divergence seems simple enough. We make plain for people how the research has been divided, neatly so at times – much as is the field of practice – between code and process oriented, phonics and whole language. Go back to that public access website I sketched earlier and imagine a series of concept maps and summaries representing the division between code and process studies, with commentaries bringing comparable studies between the two schools of thought into juxtaposition. This division is made abundantly clear, as it turns out, by Stephen Stahl, a professor of reading education at the University of Georgia (1999). Stahl's own tireless research efforts over the years captures the divergent literacy goals that divide the two approaches, while demonstrating that the impact on learners, whether in motivation or achievement, often failed to differ, apart from signs that whole language, for example, favors voluntary use of reading strategies, while its lack of interest in reading achievement diminishes test scores. Stahl also demonstrates how these reading programs appeal to a world view among educators and researchers that concerns more than test-score impact. Researchers need to help people see why studies might differ; they need to help them see the difference made by those differences. But this brings me to the more difficult part of representing this consensus over the divergent state of the research.

For as things stand, these differences diminish the public impact of research. "As long as the research community tells the policy community contradictory things," Robert Donmoyer explained on the topic of talking truth to power, while he was editor of Educational Researcher, "the research community cannot expect to have much influence in decision making" (1997, p. 2). One challenge is to find ways of presenting studies that challenge and contradict what has come before in a way that enables people to judge for themselves, or that invites additional studies to further resolve the matter. Another challenge is to design and present studies that support ready comparisons and contrasts among divergent stances – as Stahl, for example, notes how less than half of the 40 whole language studies he examined used achievement measures favored by code studies, although in fairness this needs to work both ways (1999, p. 17). It should be obvious, then, that rendering research as a public resource of greater coherence and comprehensibility, even in its differences, will take far more than a nifty website. It will require a rethinking of the standards and practices that guide our scholarship, but that seems appropriate to this whole question of what we want to do with these new technologies for managing and sharing knowledge.

We might think of it as extending the example of the National Academy of Sciences' open inquiries, as it makes going public a regular part of what it is to do and publish research. It could well augment public confidence in research, policies, and resulting practices, while offerings researchers a far greater sense of audience for their work. This is to use the web as the printing press was originally used, at the origin of scientific journal publishing somewhat more than three centuries ago, to expand the reach and usefulness of knowledge (Eisenstein, 1979, pp. 543-566). Up to now, this new medium has been largely directed at making it easier to publish research for researchers, which may well increase access among researchers on a global scale. But I want to ask, as we take this initial steps, whether we should not explore ways of using this increased access offered by the web to make research a greater part of the larger social process of

sense-making which could only, in turn, make this larger sense-making a greater part of the research process.

I recognize that I am asking a lot of researchers who have grown wary of politics. I hear the resistance in Stahl, for example, when he lends his support to Allington and Woodside-Jiron, in concluding his perhaps premature obituary for whole language by insisting that "we need to understand the nature of political movements in education so that we can transcend them to provide effective instruction to the young" (1999, p. 21). No, I want to respectfully counter, researchers need to understand political movements in education so that they can increase the presence and play of publicly funded research in the necessarily political processes of organizing and directing education in a democratic state. Researchers need to understand political movements in education so that their work contributes to the scope and informed basis of democratic participation, be it of individuals or political movements, by equipping them with the knowledge that can improve instruction in directions decided through public processes. They need to do so because they believe, in its own form of research consensus, that the knowledge which they are so carefully pursuing through research has a valuable contribution to make to people's understanding and to the potential level of public reason, in a phrase borrowed from Kant, more recently worked by John Rawls (1999).

"Effective instruction" for the young does not require transcending the politics of democratic participation in education, as if to finally separate the singular researched truth of reading, as ascertained by a test score, from the rabble-rousing politics of education. What research can tell us about effective instruction and the effects of instruction should help us realize the consequences of those politics, help us to appreciate the risks and possibilities in coming together to create an education system for the young. The research should help educators and the public make sense of what is at stake in how we understand, approach, and teach people to read and write. That we expect this research to contribute to democratic processes raises the educational standards for both researchers — in rendering their work incisive, coherent, and intelligible — and the public, as people's use of this knowledge to increase their democratic and civic engagement adds to the very reasons for the public's investment in education.

Innovative experiments are already underway in publishing research in electronic forms (Pea, 1999; Kiernan, 1999; Norris, Smolka, & Soloway, 1999).[6] And if there is no telling what shape this medium will take in the years ahead, or what impact it will have on the role that educational research plays in public forums, we should not be dissuaded from experimenting with new technologies that can increase the play of knowledge in the public sector, encouraging people to democratically engage with the institutions that govern their lives. A consensus among researchers over the value or possibility of improving the public value of research is as unlikely to form as it is on how to teach reading and writing. But they might still agree that we should test the possibilities that educational research can do more to inform the public and professional talk about education falls within the public responsibilities of a research enterprise devoted to understanding educational processes, and that is just the sort of cautious and concerned consensus that would advance the interests of democratic deliberation.

We should attempt, then, to set new standards for public knowledge so that people are able to readily draw on research findings, and we should set new standards for what educational research can contribute to our understanding of the schools that go well

beyond the narrow scope of a standardized test-score. Such standards will contribute to an increase in effective democratic participation; they will help people realize the full value of publicly funded research; and perhaps most importantly, they will speak to the very value of public education in all of its contributions to the civic and political responsibilities that constitute a democratic state.

Notes

[1] Donald A.B. Lindberg, Director of the National Library of Medicine, reports that "when the Library discovered that one third of the almost 200 million MEDLINE searches per year are being done by the public, for their personal health and the health of their families, the Library immediately began planning a new program to help consumers easily access health information on the Internet and MEDLINE*plus* was created as part of this effort" (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/aboutmedlineplus.html). This new service provides access to extensive information about specific diseases and conditions and also has links to consumer health information from the National Institutes of Health, clearinghouses, dictionaries, lists of hospitals and physicians, health information in Spanish and other languages, and clinical trials.

[2] As a front-page story in the New York Times explains the current political climate: "So many independent interest groups are poised to spend large sums on advertising to influence elections this year that Republicans and Democrats alike fear the candidates may find themselves playing bit parts in their own campaigns" (Berke, 1998, p. A1).

[3] The most recent example of interest group impact is found in the Kansas Board of Education's 1999 decision to make the teaching of evolution optional in science classes. As Stephen Jay Gould has pointed out, it took the fundamentalists behind that vote three elections to secure a one-vote majority on the ten-member board (Dreifus, 1999, D3). But then journalist Richard Wright has accused Stephen Jay Gould's popular work on evolution of feeding the creationists' cause, as creationists "love the conspiratorial aura of Gould's description of these gaps [in the fossil record] as the 'trade secret of paleontology'" (Wright, 1999, p. 61). This risk of misuse that follows from the very accessibility of Gould's work is a necessary aspect, I am arguing, of research playing a greater public role.

[4] These ideas are based on the two pilot projects of the Public Knowledge Project at the University of British Columbia. The first was a collaborative effort with the Vancouver Sun, a daily local newspaper, examining how print journalism could be extended by providing links to related research, policies practices, programs, and organizations available on the Internet (http://www.educ.ubc.ca/faculty/ctb/pkp). A Public Knowledge Policy Forum was then created with the British Columbia Teacher's Federation (http://pkp.bctf.bc.ca) to facilitate public participation in the policy-making process of the BC Ministry of Education supported by access to the relevant educational research and the government policies and plans.

[5] MEDLINEplus, National Library of Medicine (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus). See footnote #1.

[6] For the work of the Public Knowledge Project in this regard, see note #4 above.

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