

Education That Matters

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Forty years ago, the Summer Olympics were being held in Montreal, the CN Tower opened to the public, and Canadians were introduced to a bite-sized piece of fried dough called a Timbit. “I Write the Songs” by Barry Manilow hit No. 1 on the music charts, and Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs started a small company called Apple Computer in the garage of Jobs’s parents’ house in Cupertino, California. The same year, the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), Canada’s premier association for professors, students, and researchers in education, published the first issue (January 1976) of the *Canadian Journal of Education* (CJE). It was distributed free to all CSSE members (non-members could buy one for \$2!). In his opening editorial, founding editor Ronald G. Ragsdale expressed his hope that Canadian educators would use CJE as a “national forum for the exchange of ideas...a written record of the issues in education of concern to Canadians” (Ragsdale, 1976, p. 1).

The comparable U.S. publication, *The American Educational Research Journal* (AERJ), had already been in print for a dozen years. Although both CJE and AERJ would become important to my future career as a professor, I was not aware of either when I began teaching middle-school students in the New York City public schools in the 1980s. Neither, I’m guessing, were my fellow teachers. I have never been of the opinion that teachers must necessarily be avid consumers of peer-review education research journals, nor that researchers should write only for the broadest possible readership regardless of

the reader's training or interests. Depending on the journal, the language may be highly specialized and written for an audience of other researchers, not K–12 teachers. I am, however, intrigued by the writing of Dr. A. Richard King who, 40 years ago, was a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria.

In a brief article in the inaugural issue of CJE, King (1976) argued that the needs of teachers, administrators, and policy makers are seldom served by the kind of research on offer from professors of education.¹ School personnel, he noted, want research outcomes that lead to new understandings and solutions to the educators' problems. Researchers, on the other hand, pursue "academic respectability, logical analysis [and] an aura of 'objectivity'" (p. 85). In a sentiment that seems as relevant today as it was when he wrote it, King summarized his concerns: since the "rewards available from research are top-heavy in favour of the researcher [and] all too often minimal or even negative for the educator...[it is] little wonder that the general climate for social-science research in school systems has been one of suspicion, defensiveness, and recalcitrance" (pp. 84–85).

In the same year that CJE launched its first issue, Harold Howe II, former U.S. Commissioner of Education in the Lyndon Johnson administration, addressed members of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in a lecture titled "Education Research: The Promise and the Problem." After sharing stories about his various roles in education administration and policy, Howe (1976) confessed that he had been "continually perplexed about what education research was suggesting can be done to improve schools" (p. 2). He cites, for example, the famous 1966 "Coleman Report" that had been used variously to oppose desegregation efforts and support them; to argue both for and against increased funding for schools; and to bolster and refute the idea that schools do not have much to do with learning in the first place. Similarly, Fred Kerlinger (1977), in his AERA Presidential Address, proclaimed that "there is little direct connection between education research and practice" (p. 5), and a visiting scholar from India, Dr. Shib Mitra (1974), noted that "educational developments seem to take place independently of educational research and, sometimes, even in spite of educational research" (p. 5).

That the very first issue of Canada's premier scholarly journal of education research would already contain an implicit critique of its own usefulness to schools should

1 King's critique appears in his response to an article by B. Y. Card that was published in the CSSE Bulletin titled "The State of Sociology of Education in Anglophone Canada" (CSSE Bulletin, vol. 2, no. 1, February 1975).

not surprise anyone. As the small sample above illustrates, questions about the impact of research on practice were already plentiful in this period (the 1970s). Moreover, in what appear to be recurrent cycles, the question of whether education research is useful for improving schools has continued to arise in the decades since, episodically, across a broad array of English-language education journals around the globe. Often a great deal of hand-wringing ensued over the disconnection between research and practice. In the mid-1980s, Stanford professor Elliot Eisner interviewed his own colleagues and found that not a single one of them could provide a convincing example of education research informing their teaching practice. Eisner (1984) published the results of his ad hoc study in *Phi Delta Kappan*, a rare cross-over journal read by both researchers and teachers. If the people who conduct education research do not use their own research findings to guide practice in the institutions where they work, Eisner wondered, why should we expect teachers and school administrators to use research to guide theirs? In the 1990s, Carl Kaestle (1993) published an article in the “Research News and Comment” section of *Educational Researcher*. The title speaks for itself: “The Awful Reputation of Educational Research.” In 1999, and across the Atlantic, former president of the British Educational Research Association Peter Mortimore quipped that “educational research accumulates in great, growing bulk, with all manner of contradictory findings... If educational research did not exist, it would not be greatly missed” (n.p.). By the turn of the new millennium, articles, speeches, conferences, and debates about the uncertain impact of educational research results on education practice abounded. These concerns could be summarized by Teachers College (Columbia University) professor Robert McClintock’s (2007) comment in *Teachers College Record*: “The vast quantity of educational research produced year in, year out serves no real need or opportunity in the workaday world of schools” (p. 3).

Research That Matters

Although you may at this point in the essay be thinking otherwise, my point in cataloguing the many periods of self-critique throughout the last 40 years of research in education is not to elevate those critiques but rather to contextualize them. For as long as we have had schools, educators of all sorts have sought to improve the lives of students and improve society in substantive ways. The pages of CJE, like those of other leading

education research journals around the world, brim with evidence of those kinds of efforts.

But education is not rocket science. By that, I mean it is infinitely more complicated. Research on gravitational pull, jet propulsion, orbital speeds, and heat resistant materials have goals far more easily defined, conditions far more predictable, and effects far more reproducible than any in most education subfields. There are, of course, examples of shoddy education research, but often education researchers produce contradictory findings because questions vary, goals vary, conditions vary, and—perhaps most importantly—children vary. The critiques of the impact on practice of research in education that I cited earlier should not be seen as an argument for the uselessness of such research but rather a healthy frustration with how difficult it can be to solve educational problems; indeed, there is considerable challenge to even define the problems in the first place. I noted Harold Howe's (1976) pointed critique of the questionable impact that research might immediately have on school practice. But in his address to all AERA members at the time, he also said this:

In education, the fundamental units with which we deal are individual human beings whose behavior is influenced by differing inheritances, by varied experiences in life, and by feelings and attitudes that are unpredictable and changing as life experience changes. Information about human beings cannot be put into computers with the expectation that calculations about them will have the same predictability that the laws of gravity will produce when fed into the same computers. (p. 6)

Human behaviour is infinitely complex and therefore any empirical inquiry into human behaviour will be so too. That is not an indictment of education research but a celebration of it. Beginning with the very first published issue and continuing through four decades, CJE has published articles on school reform and policy analysis, curricular improvements and educational access, bilingual education and multiculturalism, equity and social justice, religious education and privatization, language development and mathematical reasoning, historical thinking and scientific inquiry, students-at-risk and students at play, teacher recruitment and teacher development, school dropouts and school uniforms. This list only scratches the surface. These research areas do not denote problems to solve. They are signposts for domains of worthwhile inquiry.

Complexity, however, is not the only reason for the persistent gap between what education studies recommend and what happens in schools. Even research findings that clearly indicate a need to do something differently do not effect immediate change in policy or practice. Most policy decisions in education are made with greater reference to values, social norms, and ideology than to any empirical evidence. At the classroom level, teachers' decisions are based on all of those plus an extraordinary mix of experience, instinct, and human relationships. But—and this is the main point I would like to argue before moving on—those values, social norms, ideological commitments, the ways we interpret experience, and the ways we make sense of our human interactions and relationships are all influenced by research studies. Discovering that math teachers call on and encourage boys more than girls shapes understandings and eventually changes the way that not only researchers but all of us think about girls and mathematics. Documenting that minority students are routinely sorted into vocational courses while their white peers from wealthier backgrounds are funnelled into university-bound streams does not erase bias, but it does nudge us along the path toward equity. Both studies that emphasize the technical efficiency of using phonics to teach rudimentary reading *and* those studies that show the importance of holistic approaches to reading and writing for creativity and critical thinking teach us that literacy is a multidimensional construct, one that encompasses multiple and sometimes conflicting means and ends. When John Dewey drew attention to the importance of experience in formulating a theory of teaching and learning, classroom practices did not conform to his vision, but his ideas shaped the way educators appreciate the pedagogical relationship between teacher and child and between children and the society they inhabit. In other words, good conceptual and empirical scholarly works have indirect influence on policy and practice because they shape beliefs and understandings. The power of those indirect influences should not be underestimated. It is true that as a young teacher, I was not yet aware of every research study that might inform decisions on how and what to teach. But my teaching would have undeniably benefited in countless indirect ways from broader discourses in education that preceded.

There is a saying that the best teachers are those who show you where to look, but don't tell you what to see. I am suggesting that the same may be true for the best researchers. Researchers in education are rarely able to tell policy makers, teachers, administrators, or parents exactly what to see in a way that effects immediate change, but we are well-equipped to show them where to look. With that more modest goal in mind,

I intend to direct the remainder of this essay to a modest proposal drawn from reflections on my own experience as a teacher and filtered through my training as a researcher.

Schools That Matter

Before becoming a professor of education, I taught middle-school students in the New York City public schools. Like many idealistic new teachers, I entered the profession committed to nothing less than instilling in young people the confidence, knowledge, and skills required to change the world. I wanted my students to treat one another with respect, to challenge injustice when they saw it, and to learn that they were powerful, that they could make a difference, and in the process find deep meaning in their social and professional lives.

Archeem, an African American student in my Grade 7 social studies class, thought otherwise. For my first six months in the classroom, Archeem and I were at loggerheads. He was not good at what Denise Pope-Clark (2001) calls “doing school.” He was a C-minus student. And I was not yet a skilled teacher. I assumed that by offering Archeem something beyond the superficiality of rote memorization and regurgitation, he would work hard, learn more, and enjoy school. Archeem and many of his classmates, on the other hand, figured that I was a newbie who should be challenged.

My first mistake? I figured that as a teacher, I got to dream up the background material for a script that would then unfold within the humane and educative conditions I had put in motion. New teachers often believe they get to write the script, set the stage, and raise the curtain. But students know something that only later becomes evident to the adult in the room: the play has already started. I was entering in Act III. In Acts I and II, the plot had been established, the parts cast, the good guys and bad guys already chosen, the narrative arc long since determined. There were “smart” students and “dumb” ones. There were class clowns and teacher’s pets. Kids know how school works long before they enter their first classroom. They see television cartoons about school; they see movies about school; they’ve heard other children talk about school; they have older siblings who’ve gone to school. Our culture has already dictated that school entails a timeless, existential battle between the tasks and rules adults impose, on the one hand, and students’

efforts to preserve their own souls without getting thrown out, on the other hand. They wouldn't describe it that way, but that's the gist of it.

Let me give an example about the difficult-to-break narratives already in place before a teacher even sets foot in the school building. Ask any group of children what happens when a substitute teacher comes to the classroom. What are they likely to report? Mayhem—children move the desks around, change their names, and inform the substitute teacher that their “real” teacher allows them to wander around the room whenever they want and to eat their lunch at 9:15 a.m. In short, they make the life of the substitute a temporary hell. Substitute teachers are clueless and have no idea how to teach, goes the script. Socrates himself could arrive in a Grade 5 classroom for a day. It wouldn't matter. The play is already in motion.

Narratives, however, *can* be rewritten. It takes time, patience, and creativity. Back in my first year of teaching, I guessed (having read his school file) that in Archeem's internalized narrative, school was mostly about humiliation. It was the teacher's job to catch him not knowing things, and it was Archeem's job to try to avoid those encounters. I imagined that he recognized the usefulness of acquiring some of the skills and knowledge being taught in school, but that in a larger sense, the connection between what went on in school and his life outside of school was tenuous at best. In those first few months of teaching, neither Archeem nor I knew this yet, but we were both going to find our way outside the dominant narrative of school. And I was going to learn a thing or two about teaching students to think critically about the world around them.

At this historical moment when some of the world's oldest democracies are threatened by vast economic inequality, fear, prejudice, xenophobia, and a dangerous populism, research that helps us understand the ways young people are impacted by and respond to these phenomena is essential. I would like to suggest that education researchers devote maximum effort to the big ideas of a public education. I do not mean that research on the developmental, technical, or procedural aspects of teaching and learning be abandoned (and, of course, I would have no way of having any influence over such a move). But I believe it is incumbent on researchers to reassert the place of our work broadly conceived in fostering schools that make a difference, that strengthen the bonds between us, and that reclaim the importance of democratic values and the common good. How can we teach students the kinds of thinking skills they need to participate fully in civic, community life?

What Archeem Taught Me about Teaching Critical Thinking

After a week of classes in which we had discussed the Civil Rights Movement, racism, and prejudice in America, all of my students were duly outraged at the injustices perpetrated against black people throughout history. Students couldn't believe the folly of thinking that someone's intelligence, skills, or rights could be judged by the colour of his or her skin. They sat riveted by excerpts from the 14-part documentary *Eyes on the Prize* and speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. I quickly became aware that although the students would criticize a kind of racism that was already widely reviled in the United States and elsewhere, they failed to carry that critique or moral commitment to any other sphere. I witnessed African American students calling Hispanic students "spic." I saw Archeem and his friend yell "faggot" at a student who didn't share their athletic prowess in dodge ball. When I asked students if they thought people were still pre-judged for superfluous reasons, they didn't know.

I knew something was not working, and I had an idea.

Two weeks earlier, various cities had been observing Gay Pride Week. It was highly controversial, even in New York, and certainly in New York City public schools (this was in the mid-1980s). Despite the explosive nature of the debate, our school principal had agreed to allow an "out" gay teacher to use the second-floor glass display case for posters and newspaper articles about gay pride. But four days after the teacher had spent a great deal of his own time on the display, someone or some group of students smashed in the glass with a chair. The teacher and the principal decided to leave it that way for the time being.

I had a conversation with José, the school janitor. I asked if he would help me by arriving at the beginning of my next social studies class with a ladder and insist that he had to fix a ceiling light which inexplicably would require a power drill and his other noisiest possible tools. He agreed, and as soon as class had started and he began to work, there was no hearing what anyone was saying. I asked students to grab their chairs and to carry them downstairs to the large second-floor hallway where we set up in a circle around the display case with the smashed glass to continue our discussion about racism in America.

I continued to lead the discussion, waiting for what I was not sure would happen. But something happened, and it happened because of Archeem. He had been leaning back

in his chair looking characteristically disinterested in the conversation when he suddenly rocked forward and raised his hand. I nodded to Archeem, not sure what would happen next.

“It’s like that,” Archeem said, pointing to the broken glass. All the students in the circle swung their heads to look directly at the centre of the case and the broken glass.

“Like what?” I asked, hoping I was masking my nervous anticipation of his response.

“Racism is like when you hate someone just because of something about them that you don’t even know nothing about.”² Silence followed. Here was this 13-year-old African American boy somehow, indirectly, standing up for gay people, and perhaps more importantly identifying a contemporary example of prejudice and connecting it to a widely agreed moral standard that called prejudice wrong.

The other students nodded, and a discussion ensued about the connection between different kinds of prejudice:

“What Archeem said made me realize all the different ways human beings diss each other.”

“Do you think the way Southern white people felt about black people was like how some of us think about gay people?”

“No, it’s not the same—being gay isn’t natural.”

“Isn’t that what they said about blacks being free?”

“No, it’s not the same because gay people are disgusting!” [*laughter*]

We hadn’t reached a progressive teacher’s nirvana by any means, but the conversation had started. For the rest of that week and the next, students researched Civil Rights-era documents from the 1950s and 1960s. They read historical opinions about whether blacks should have the same social and political rights as whites, and they compared those opinions to contemporary positions (in newspaper articles and legislation) about gay rights. In

2 Quotations here are taken from journals I kept in those days.

classes that followed, students continued to refer back to the conversation Archeem had sparked. Two of them wrote a note to the teacher who had created the gay pride display apologizing on behalf of “whomever was too chicken to apologize for themselves.”

It became evident to both me and my students that teaching about slavery (racism is bad) or teaching about the Second World War (Hitler was evil) was too easy. The historical lessons were fine. But the more important message didn’t stick: history doesn’t stand still, and we can never be complacent about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. If schools are to be instrumental in helping young people engage with the world around them and work to improve it, then the lessons in school have to teach more than a calcified version of past events. Schools need to offer lessons that encourage new interpretations and that lend themselves to contemporary problems.

It is relatively common for good teachers to demonstrate to students the potential tyranny of opinion over facts in landmark historical controversies (e.g., the idea that people whose skin is black are not as intelligent or deserving of rights as those whose skin is white). Less clear, however, is whether such lessons give students the analytical skills they need to critically analyze contemporary problems and injustices—the kinds of skills they need in order to be thinking and engaged democratic citizens. These lessons may be applied to history teaching but are not confined there. A good education helps prepare students for deliberative democracy by equipping them with the tools to participate in robust public debate and action. Students must learn that democracy is not a spectator sport.

Archeem and the Future of Education Research

The reason I propose deliberative democracy as a framing idea for a research agenda is threefold. First, the current historical and political moment calls for focused and sustained attention to strengthening democratic institutions in Canada and the world. Second, the last two decades of school reform policies have redefined the goals of public schooling, foregrounding individual, economic benefits while eroding commitments to public education for the common good. Third, education researchers have an obligation to use the fruits of our research to engage in public discourse around school reform and the common good. I expand briefly on each of these ideas below.

As CJE enters its 41st year of publication, Donald Trump has been elected President of the United States, Marine Le Pen is perilously close to a presidential victory in France, and a significant proportion of Dutch citizens hoped to have a country governed by nationalist Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom. Most analysts and scholars agree that a global economy that fosters vast economic inequality as well as a broad array of social, cultural, political, and environmental phenomena have all contributed to the growth of anti-democratic forces worldwide. This means that solutions will necessarily require broad engagement from many sectors. Education, however, has a special role to play. In a democratic society educators have a responsibility to create learning environments that teach students how to critically analyze multiple perspectives and develop the passion for participation in the kind of dialogue on which healthy democracies rely. Much as Darwin's theory of natural selection depends on genetic variation, any theory of democratic engagement depends on a multiplicity of ideas and on a citizenry able to think about competing perspectives on societal improvement.

Second, the tendency of global education reform to reduce educational goals to job training and economic growth requires opposition from the education research community. The widespread cultural and political preoccupation with accountability and standardized measures of success has, in the case of public education, resulted in an emaciated curriculum that shifts attention from democratic aims. When learning goals are limited to only those outcomes that can be measured by standardized tests, students lose opportunities to explore the kinds of broad questions that demonstrate the richness of inquiry itself and that reflect the kind of diversity of ideas that thinking in any democratic society requires.

Finally, although it is true that research will not necessarily dictate educational practice, it does not follow that researchers should be content with research that is discrete and disconnected from public policy and public deliberation. Critical thinking, for example, is not meaningful in the abstract. One needs a context within which to engage critically. Research evidence is not transferred from the researcher to the public but rather constitutes a form of participation in public dialogue. Regardless of the focus of inquiry, educational researchers should work together to cultivate a process by which researchers become deeply engaged in public conversations. This does not require immediate and measurable "impact" on schools, but it requires an orientation toward scholarship that engages with national and global competing notions of the common good.

Education for the Common Good

There is and will be infinite variety in approaches and values that shape educational research. But that does not mean that both researchers and practitioners should not share any common goals whatsoever. I have suggested that education in Canada and elsewhere should always embrace certain goals unique to democratic societies. These include teaching students how to ask critical questions and exposing them to multiple perspectives and viewpoints on important issues that affect everyone's lives. Educators who see in schools the possibility for social change and improvement must similarly embrace a multiplicity of ideas in the school curriculum. Students must be exposed to multiple perspectives and taught to think and to dialogue in the kinds of expansive ways on which democracy thrives.

There will always be pockets of success: individual teachers, programs, schools, and even entire districts that embrace meaningful teaching and learning and that see membership in a community of citizens as an important educational goal. The end goal is for all schools to look that way. That may take a while. The influence of research will be indirect. The late playwright and statesman Vaclav Havel (2004) observed that hope is not the same as choosing struggles that are headed for quick success: "Hope...is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out" (p. 82). Hope requires, as the late historian Howard Zinn (1980/2010) eloquently wrote, the ability "to hold out, even in times of pessimism, the possibility of surprise" (p. 634). The singer-songwriter-activist Holly Near expressed this artfully in her anthem to the many social change movements that have existed for as long as there have been things to improve. Change does not happen at broadband speeds, and the influence of any one research study or even an entire field of inquiry is indirect and difficult to trace. But knowing one is part of a timeless march toward good goals makes much of what we do worthwhile. In her song "The Great Peace March," Near (1990) sings: "Believe it or not / as daring as it may seem / it is not an empty dream / to walk in a powerful path / neither the first nor the last." Educators throughout Canada hope to improve the educational experience for all children through their work. If I could hope for one certainty in those efforts, it would be this: the knowledge—whether in the face of immediate successes and setbacks or more indirect influence on children, schools, and society—that we are walking in a powerful and worthwhile path.

Notes

Parts of this essay (in particular the section about Archeem and my teaching experiences) are adapted from my book, *What Kind of Citizen* (Teachers College Press, 2015).

Lyrics from Holly Near's "The Great Peace March" are used with permission.

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