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Educational Morass Forever

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Educational Morass Forever

... public intellectuals on educational issues (including this author) should be regarded cautiously. They are not always mistaken, but they are mistaken often enough on critical issues to warrant much higher standards for assessing what they have to say. As long as no negative consequences follow even egregiously mistaken credence goods, better educational policies are improbable. Better policies require improvements in the market in which educational policies achieve professional and public approval. (Lieberman, 2007, p. 292)

In the last two chapters of his last book, *The Educational Morass*, Myron “Mike” Lieberman (2007) introduces the concept of “credence goods.” Not “goods” at all in the sense we normally use the term (i.e., products). Rather, Mike was referring to how we evaluate the morass of information in U.S. education—facts, figures, quotes, research results, poll results, and so forth—that is unreliable, skewed, misrepresented, suppressed, exaggerated, or, in short, tortured in every way imaginable, by many interests.

It requires long seasoning in the bog for any person to develop a taste for which education information is accurate, which is myth, and which is just plain dishonest. That is, if it is even possible for anyone to figure it out within a lifetime. In his later years, Mike was well aware that much of what he thought was true when he was younger turned out not to be. This happens to anyone who wades in the education morass long enough. In due time, some realize that much of what they originally believed—of what they read or were told—was wrong and, like Mike, they change. Others assume ownership of the fallacies and falsehoods and stubbornly defend them.

U.S. education information is so complicated—that is to the advantage of its vested interests—that few of the hundreds of millions of U.S. citizens with a stake understand it. So, they rely on people they believe (or hope) they can trust (i.e., they accept someone else’s word for what is true), and they decide whom to trust based on their “credence-ials.” The credentials trusted may be academic, as in trusting someone with a degree or a faculty position at a prestigious university. The credential trusted may be political, as in trusting someone who advocates for one’s own preferred public policies on most other issues. Or, the credentials trusted may be based on other criteria.

Are those with the trusted credentials—our education information spokespersons—providing accurate information? They cannot all be. One

can easily find examples of different spokespersons declaring diametrical opposites to be factual.

In educational literature, criticism of conservatives by liberals, and of liberals by conservatives, is rampant and mainly useless because the criticisms are interest oriented, not truth or agreement oriented. The opposing parties never get together to work out a test or trial that they agree would resolve their differences; the contrast with scientific research and policy based upon it could not be more stark. (Lieberman, 2007, p. xix)

In an above ground, upright education community different versions of the truth might be sorted and evaluated in people's minds. But, in the education morass, people rarely hear all sides. Advocates disseminate the information they want, in the amount they want, with the interpretation they want, and to whom they want. And oftentimes, if not usually, the trusted credentials lead their audience to believe what they're telling them is all there is to know on a topic. Contrary research, evidence, or points of view are not mentioned or, in the most insidious cases, are openly declared not to exist. (See, for example, Phelps, 2012b.) There is no purpose to arranging a debate if the other side apparently does not exist.

Those old enough to discern the pattern have witnessed countless generous and well-intentioned, but naive do-gooders, either with time on their hands or money in their hands, enter the education morass with a desire to change U.S. education for the better. Then, they face a mass of contradictory signals and don't know which information and people to trust. So they make a choice based on credentials and direct their energies or their funds where they are told they will do the most good.

Everyone knows the outcome. The intervention doesn't make things better, and the do-gooders, now cynical about U.S. education, move on to other endeavors. Cynical veterans of the morass call what just happened another fad.

PERVASIVE MYOPIA

First, we can safely say that the public, policymakers, and media will continue to rely on credence goods; it is unavoidable as a practical matter. Second, this reliance is often egregiously unwarranted. (Lieberman, 2007, p. 292)

Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, is well known. Not only is he the son of one former President of the United States and the brother of another, as governor he established a reputation as a hands-on activist

and innovator, particularly in education policy. Not surprising, then, that he would help to create and lead the conservative-leaning education policy advocacy group, Chiefs for Change (the “chiefs” being the heads of state education agencies). I just happened to be attending another meeting in the same hotel when the Chiefs for Change met for their annual conference in Washington, DC in December 2012, and perused their conference program literature and website. I noticed that The Chiefs asserted unambiguous support for using standardized tests as part of education accountability regimes. To buttress the argument, the organization cited a single piece of research to support the policy stance. It would be impossible to overstate the poor quality of that research, or its inappropriateness as support for the Chiefs for Change platform plank. It was chosen because the author is one of the think tank scholars (and one of the several former graduate students of Harvard Professor Paul Peterson) upon whom Republican politicians rely for policy research and advice.¹

The more pertinent point is that a cornucopia of better and more appropriate research existed—summaries and meta-analyses of thousands of studies—that supported the Chiefs for Change plank.² But, apparently, the Chiefs were totally unaware of them. Their reliance on the relatively tiny group of think tankers for information is that stark, that absolute.

Observing a small bit of a much larger reality and assuming it is the whole, or conveniently coincidentally representative of the whole, is sometimes called the “eyewitness fallacy.” Lest one believe that only those policy makers on the right side of the aisle are given pin-holed glasses by their policy advisors, there are plenty of examples one can find on the left side, too.

Consider the concentrated focus the past several years in U.S. education policy discussions on Finland. Testing critics have encouraged us all to examine the Finnish education system, learn from it, discuss it, focus on it, and copy it.³ Whereas the Finnish system appears to de-emphasize testing and accountability, all of the other countries scoring high on international exams strongly emphasize (frequent and high stakes) testing and accountability. Why look at Korea, the Netherlands, Japan, Singapore, China, Flemish Belgium, or the several other countries with strong testing and accountability programs that tend to score consistently highly on a variety of international assessments when one can, instead, focus on the single anomalous country with an apparently mild testing and accountability program that scored highly just once on just one international assessment and, otherwise, tends to score below the world average? Perhaps predictably, Finland’s scores on the most recent Programme in International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments declined substantially (“School league tables,” 2013). Finland’s showings on the more mathematics intensive Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study have been consistently lower.⁴

ANY RESEARCH YOU WANT

The problem is that interests frequently undermine the procedures and data that are essential to valid empirical and policy conclusions. (Lieberman, 2007, p. xx)

Most of the mainstream U.S. education research with which I am familiar exhibits practices and behaviors that any reputable discipline would consider at least biased and unprofessional and, probably, corrupt and immoral. Other disciplines, for example, frown upon selective referencing—citing only that research that supports one’s arguments while ignoring all that which does not. In U.S. education research, however, selective referencing is the everyday norm. (See, e.g., Phelps, 2012c, 2013.) Even dismissive reviews—through which researchers blatantly declare that contrary research and evidence do not exist—are quite common, and commonly accepted as fair play (Phelps, 2012b).

I was amused to read a newspaper article recently in which the new head of the College Board, the entity responsible for the SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) exams, declared that any changes made to the SAT will be defensible because they will be based on evidence (Balf, 2014). Just as amusing are the statements written by advocacy groups in their research report introductions that the contents are all “evidence-based” or “research based.”

In U.S. education policy research, all the latter two phrases really mean is “we didn’t just make things up, we have either references or data.” (Though the sources referenced might have just made things up.) It may not be literally true, but it probably isn’t far off, to say that one can find evidence in the education literature for anything about education one might wish to assert.

GANGING UP

... as long as the supporters of more government funding testify before Congress and the critics do not, most members of Congress will continue to believe in the value of unproductive federal programs. (Lieberman, 2007, p. 57)

Congress is part of the problem, not the solution. At the first hint that Congress is thinking about turning the spigot off, the educational researchers appeal to their representatives in Congress to prevent this from happening. No member of Congress likes to see constituents lose their jobs. (p. 63)

Several years ago, when I was working at their Iowa City office, the test development firm ACT hired a new Senior Vice-President for Research and Development. Given that ACT’s primary business is selling standardized

tests (such as the ACT), their researchers and developers come from the testing guild—psychometricians, statisticians, test developers, test item writers, and the like. The new guy, it turns out had neither any training nor any experience in anything related to testing. His expertise: strategic partnerships.⁵

Why did ACT need expertise in strategic partnerships? The theory was that organizations in education research and policy needed allies in order to win the favor of those institutions tossing around billions in funding (e.g., the U.S. federal government, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation). The amounts of money in play had become so large that winning pieces of the prize could stake one's organization for a generation and place it in the center of the action. Conversely, losing out could relegate one's organization to irrelevance.

... public education is an extremely inefficient system because it relies on lobbying instead of research and development to achieve improvement in results or costs. (Lieberman, 2007, p. 115)

What it would mean for ACT Research became clear when we learned who our strategic partners were. One partner was an organization I had earlier criticized for making grandiose policy recommendations based on the results of superficial and shoddy research work. I learned that I was no longer allowed to criticize their work. Rather, I was encouraged to agree with them and praise their work generously. Holding one's tongue facilitates compromise, compromise facilitates partnerships, and partnerships get things done. And, by golly, don't we need to get things done in education? Well . . . no. We have gotten lots and lots done in U.S. education over the years, and it has taken us from fad to fad to fad, with little real progress to show for all the effort and expense.

What we actually need is trustworthy information for making policy decisions. And, trustworthy information would come from more open discussion with a much wider spread of knowledgeable and interested parties allowed to speak freely. Strategic partnerships stifle discussion.

THE U.S. EDUCATION PRESS

... the lack of knowledge about education among education reporters and editorial writers, their heavy reliance on 'experts' with dubious qualifications, and the absence of any accountability for poor performance. (Lieberman, 2007, p. 267)

Mike Lieberman bemoaned what he perceived to be an uninformed education press, and he may be right that U.S. education journalists are not as informed about the issues as they could or should be. But, my experience

tells me that something else is the matter—an extraordinary lack of independence. Most U.S. education journalists, I believe, do not consider themselves outsiders looking in. They consider themselves insiders looking out. They believe they are part of the education scene, directly involved with what's happening, and essential parts of each new initiative.

I suspect that journalists from other fields, fields in which journalists cast a critical and skeptical outsider's eye on their subjects, be they politicians, businesspersons, athletes, or whomever, would be quite surprised by the behavior of many U.S. education journalists. So, too, would be education journalists from other countries. One need look no further for examples of collusion than arguably the most influential publication in U.S. K–12 education, *Education Week*. Organizations with money can purchase stories in *Education Week*, and there seems to be no embarrassment on *Education Week's* part that they sell their services to those who can pay—they print the identity of the organization paying for the story just above the story. Theoretically, the entity purchasing news from *Education Week* could be shown in a critical light by the story, but that does not seem to happen. If a funder desires something more substantial than a one-off story, they can purchase a multiweek series, or contract with *Education Week's* parent organization, Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) for a full-blown research report on a topic of the funder's choosing.

Lieberman cites an interesting example of the latter in *Morass* (2007, pp. 295–296). Chester “Checker” Finn's Thomas P. Fordham Foundation financed EPE's production of a report on the “most influential” persons and organizations in U.S. education policy. Checker Finn served on a panel EPE consulted to judge who was most influential. Checker Finn was ranked among the top ten most influential by the report (Swanson & Barlage, 2006).

Education Week also makes its online platform available to current movers and shakers to present their own material. Frederick M. “Rick” Hess, of the American Enterprise Institute publishes a blog hosted by *Education Week*, for example. There are likely hundreds of worthy bloggers of limited means who genuinely need the support of an entity such as *Education Week* in order to reach a wider audience. Working at one of the most amply endowed DC think tanks, Rick Hess is not one of them.

A truly independent journalist would not serve as the note taker and head cheerleader on stage in front of thousands at pep rallies for the Common Core State Standards as does Virginia Edwards, the editor of *Education Week*. Far from reporting independently on the education scene, *Education Week* sees itself as a central player in the action; an active participant in each newly funded reform wave. After service at *Education Week*, rather than move on to other, exciting journalistic opportunities, most reporters end up working for the very organizations they covered while at *Education Week*, much as many former congresspersons end up working as lobbyists rather than return to the places and occupations of their roots.

The concept of “conflict of interest” seems not to be seriously considered among most U.S. educators, and suggesting that someone has a conflict of interest is likely to be viewed as a personal attack on someone’s character—at least impolite and probably rude and unprofessional.

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NOTES

1. Rather than use up space here dissecting that research, I refer anyone interested to pp. 40–42 of my article at the other end of this link (Phelps, 2010): <http://nonpartisaneducation.com/Review/Articles/v6n3.pdf>.

2. For example, Larson and Butler (2013), Phelps (2012a), and Roediger, Putnam, and Smith (2011).

3. See, for example, Linda Darling-Hammond and Laura McCloskey’s “Assessment for Learning around the World: What Would it Mean to Be ‘Internationally Competitive?’” (unpublished manuscript, Stanford University). Linda Darling-Hammond is the primary personage in charge of the Smarter Balanced Consortium, one of the two developing Common Core-aligned tests.

4. See also the writings of Astala and colleagues (2006), and Tarvainen and Kivela (2006). Astala and colleagues is an open letter signed by 207 mathematics teachers in Finnish universities and polytechnics complaining about the poor state of Finnish students’ mathematics skills, and the misleading signal given by Finland’s performance on that one PISA test administration. PISA, a test that de-emphasizes the fundamentals of mathematics in favor of examples of “mathematical literacy” from everyday life has been criticized by U.S. mathematicians for tapping skills no higher than the fifth grade level; “shopping cart” math, they label it.

5. In turn, for the position Vice-President of Research, he recommended a young woman with a very short resume who had recently completed her dissertation in the history of education on the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. ACT’s Research VP is the line manager supervising the hundreds of statisticians and psychometricians who develop, score, and analyze all of ACT’s education tests. Apparently, she knew Arne Duncan, the newly appointed U.S. Secretary of Education, personally.

6. Richard P. Phelps is author of *Standardized Testing Primer* (Peter Lang, 2007) and *Kill the Messenger: The War on Standardized Testing* (Transaction Publishers, 2005), and founder of the Nonpartisan Education Review (<http://nonpartisaneducation.org>).

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