

The “Crits” Capture Presidential Power

Top education researchers denounce scientific research

Education Research in the Public Interest: Social Justice, Action, and Policy

By Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (editors)

Teachers College Press, 2006, \$27.95; 274 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

There is not much research to be found or reported on in *Education Research in the Public Interest*: the interests of the editors and contributors are mostly elsewhere, this despite the fact that one editor is the past president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the other is the president-elect. The main title, “Education Research in the Public Interest,” was also the theme for the last annual convention of this important professional association, which publishes a half-dozen journals, has 20,000 members, and attracts thousands to its annual conventions. Oddly, the AERA affiliations of the two editors are not stressed in the book, although the Ladson-Billings presidency is referred to in the biographical note. This is not an “official” publication of the AERA, but does it reflect the views of its members?

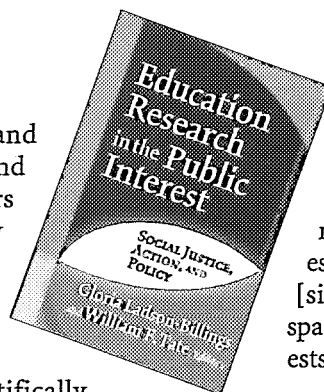
Thirteen contributors were asked to respond to a prospectus that several refer to but unfortunately is not reproduced in the volume. Apparently the prospectus defined research in the public interest as “those decisions and actions that further democracy, democratic practices, equity, and social justice.”

Clearly, the editors are impelled to undertake this project by the steady and depressing reality of the great gaps in educational achievement between the poor and the well-to-do, the black

and the white, and similar issues, and the contributors are motivated by the same concerns. But they are also almost uniformly suspicious of scientifically based research and scientifically based assessments as the means for dealing with these large problems of unequal achievement. They are hostile to the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB), which calls for a great deal of scientifically based testing and assessment. They are equally critical of what they call “neoliberal” and “neoconservative” approaches to educational problems: The first appeals to the market and market-based approaches (as in vouchers and charter schools), the second to more traditional approaches to subject matter and teaching (as in E. D. Hirsch’s core knowledge curriculum). Neither finds favor in their eyes.

But if we are to discard scientifically based testing and assessment, how are we to estimate the scale and character of the problem we are trying to address, or judge the success of various approaches to dealing with them? There is no answer evident here.

One contributor (Thomas S. Popkewitz) takes the extreme standpoint of contemporary “critical theory,” which is suspicious of mainline science in almost all fields. Following Foucault, he views established science as an expression of power relations. He attacks what he calls the “censorship” in NCLB. Censorship? “That censorship lies in the federal mandate that the methods for studying the effects of school reform be evidence-based and scientifically based inquiry. At first



glance, the phrase is seductive. Who could be against evidence or science to understand school reforms? But ... the practices to establish what counts as ‘data’ carries [sic] a strong threat to the public spaces in which the issues of and interests in a democracy are clarified.”

In a long article I find no clarification of just how this threat against “public spaces” in the research called for in NCLB operates, and nothing that sustains the charge of “censorship.”

If one is against “evidence-based and scientifically based inquiry,” what research model is one for? Three of the contributors to this volume (William Ayers, Tom Barone, and Donald Blumenfeld-Jones) advocate the use of the humanities and the arts as guides to research, or substitutes for it, or as inspirers of themes for research. There can be no argument with the notion that research should be broadly based, and that suggestions derived from literature, the arts, and the humanities as to what to look for, and what might be important, should not be neglected.

But “arts-based research”? Could a poem on the circumstances of deprived children or a documentary movie on the condition of homeless youths in New Orleans qualify as research in support of one or another education program? Blumenfeld-Jones, who is taken by a film on homeless youths, *Street Rat*, writes, “I am obliged to report that I have, up to this point in the relatively short history of the genre, not been privy to a completely unblemished work of arts-based research, one sufficiently powerful, by itself, to redirect the educational conversation....”

One criticism found in a number of the contributions is that research must take a wider perspective than the school

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and the classroom: it must be research on the society and its iniquities, for these clearly lie at the basis of differential achievement in education. So Jean Anyon tells us to “document and describe oppression,” “study the powerful,” and concentrate on social movements, all worthy subjects of research. But is not one directed to them in the first place by the assessments and tests that demonstrate the great inequalities in achievement?

Since the contributors to this collection are so uniformly hostile to current reform initiatives, from testing and accountability to charters and vouchers and more traditional curricular emphases, it is fair to ask, what education model are they for? The only possible answer one finds in this volume is the system we already have, which largely fails to educate poor and black children. The contributors are suspicious of charters and vouchers because they undermine, as they see it, the existing public schools. None of the contributors are, as far as one can see from their affiliations, representatives of unionized public school teachers and administrators, but what they have written is in full support of the status quo: they seem to prefer it to any alternate proposals.

There are alternatives that could have been discussed: Some education reformers insist that student portfolios are a better basis for assessing student learning than standardized tests, and researchers using ethnographic methods sometimes come up with insights that we do not find in standard statistically based research. It would have been worth evaluating these.

This book could have gone deeper into the kind of research that NCLB and other legislation require, how the legislative language on required

research and assessment was derived, how it is being interpreted and specified by the federal agencies, and the specific weaknesses in the research that passes administrative muster. Catherine Cornbleth lists the recent legislative provisions that call for scientific evaluation and assessment. But this line is not pursued further, by her or by any other contributor. A book on the dependence in reform legislation on specified research models could have been helpful; unfortunately, the hostility among the contributors to both current scientific research and current policy proposals prevents this from being that book.

One wonders how widespread this suspicion of research of high scientific standards is among the members of AERA. Not very, one thinks: otherwise, they couldn't fill their journals. And yet this volume and its publication by Teachers College Press suggest that the wave of “critical theory,” which breeds an unhealthy disrespect for the best in scientific research and has for some decades now infected to various degrees all academic fields, is well established in the world of education.

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