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**A Choice, Not A Duty**

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David Berliner has argued that some educational psychologists need to engage publicly in policy debates. I agree, and I commend him not only for being willing to do so, but for doing so in ways that reflect the ideals of professionalism outlined in his article. He has delivered truly expert testimony to governmental representatives, based initially on syntheses of policy-relevant research conducted by others, and more recently on studies of his own that were carefully designed to provide fair tests of the assumptions or claims made by advocates of policies that he suspected were counterproductive. But his article focuses almost exclusively on the positive side of the case for professionals’ involvement in public policy debates. I want to express some concerns and qualifications about this idea.

I agree that training in educational psychology should include attention to professional issues, including participation in policy debates. However, I would hesitate to portray that participation as an obligation of all educational psychologists. First, the work of many educational psychologists focuses on issues that are not central to policy debates, so their participation in such debates would not be informed by much special expertise. Also, many whose work does touch on policy issues are hesitant to participate in public debates on these issues, for understandable reasons.

One is the "argument culture" that has come to characterize our public debates (Tannen, 1998), exacerbated by the media's emphasis on provocative sound bites over reasoned analysis. You can exert some control over your image and message by publishing your own books or articles, but if you get involved with the media or participate in a non-scholarly public forum, the chances are good that your views will be stereotyped as more simple and more extreme than they are, and also that your opportunities to express those views will be limited and distorted by interviewers whose questions are designed more to provoke conflict or controversy than to scaffold reflective discussion.

Even if you manage to avoid being stereotyped as a spokesperson for an oversimplified point of view, there are still time and emotional demands to consider. It is difficult to pursue a programmatic scholarly agenda and simultaneously function as a public intellectual. If you are successful at both of these pursuits, you may have to choose between them at some point.

Another problem is David’s emphasis on delivering professional recommendations for which there is an overwhelming consensus based on a rich body of evidence. Unfortunately, opportunities to do this occur only rarely. For example, although I agree with most of the claims about consensus made in David’s article, I believe that recent research has established that the motivationally undermining effects of rewards have been greatly exaggerated, and even when they do occur, they are confined to the undermining of preexisting intrinsic motivation, not achievement motivation in general (Eisenberger, Pierce, & Cameron, 1999; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). In my view, this issue has become so complicated that it is risky to base arguments about high-stakes testing on it. There are better arguments against high-stakes testing, many of which are included in David’s article, so I agree with his conclusions about such testing. I raise the issue of undermining effects of rewards simply to point out that opportunities to base clear policy recommendations on a clear consensus, supported by a rich body of evidence, are rare.

As another example of a difference in perspective on what might seem like a consensus, consider David’s image of what it means to be a professional, based on the six commonplaces associated with professions described by Lee Shulman. I join David, and Lee, in endorsing these six commonplaces as ideal features of professional functioning, but I would underscore the word "ideal." There is another side to the story, in which professions are depicted as staking out and jealously protecting their turf, including the privileges and income sources associated with it, and resisting attempts to make their practitioners accountable to anyone but the profession itself (Carnine, 2000). This can create conflicts of interest when policies that professionals recommend as good for their clients also happen to be good for the profession. In this regard, there has been considerable variation in the track records of various professions. I would rank dentistry rather high (for its support of water fluoridation and other policies that limit tooth decay problems and thereby reduce business for dentists), but I would rank law rather low and medicine somewhere in between. I hope that any efforts to develop educational psychologists as professionals will cause them to act more like dentists than lawyers. Incorporating teaching about those six commonplaces into our Ph.D. programs would be a good start in this direction.

A related qualification concerns David’s point that most teachers practice the profession for reasons of intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic reward. He treats this as a good thing, and I agree, up to a point. I want teachers to derive personal satisfactions and other intrinsic rewards from their work, but only insofar as these are compatible with conscientious discharge of their professional responsibilities. Much more so than other professionals, teachers have responsibilities not only to their clients and their profession, but to society at large. Public schools are established by society to equip each new generation with the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that it considers essential for its citizens. Those goals should drive the system, so in considering potential educational policies, our first concern should be with the degree to which a policy supports students’ progress toward the goals, not the degree to which teachers like the policy or enjoy carrying it out. Teachers’ intrinsic motivation can become a problem, for example, if they depart from established curricular guidelines by devoting more time to some subjects or topics and less to others, for no better reason than they enjoy teaching the former but not the latter (Schmidt & Buchmann, 1983).

Professors who choose to function as public intellectuals, especially if they get involved in policy debates, need to be conscientious in distinguishing between views expressed as personal opinions and views expressed as research-based scientific conclusions. This can be very difficult to do, even when not being pushed toward conflict by "argument culture" people. For one thing, we all operate using defense mechanisms that enable us to believe that the consensus supporting policies that we personally favor is stronger than it really is (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Also, people are always looking for simple solutions to complex problems. This is why Harry Truman proclaimed that he needed one-armed expert advisors, so he could hear something other than, "On the one hand . . . but on the other hand . . ." However, our professional contributions to public debates are more likely to introduce complications and qualifications than to suggest easy solutions.

We can at least point to scientific evidence against certain proposed policies, especially simpleminded "solutions." David identifies some of these in his article, such as high-stakes testing, grade retention for failing students, and quickie routes to teacher certification. But it is much harder to develop complex solutions for complex problems from scientific knowledge bases, usually because of the limited availability of relevant facts or principles about which there truly is consensus.

Also, as David notes, public policy debates often are more about values and related budget priorities than about empirical facts or scientific principles. Many of these value conflicts map rather directly onto political conflicts between a left that wants more government programs and spending and a right that wants less. Not only educational professionals but our society as a whole already knows how to have better schools than we have now, but we have not achieved consensus on willingness to pay for some of the improvements that would be most expensive, such as smaller schools, smaller class sizes, or assessment programs that would address a broader range of goals than achievement, using a broader range of measures than standardized tests.

Given this alignment of most professional policy goals and recommendations with the left side of the political spectrum, sustained involvement in public policy debates unfortunately means de facto identification as a supporter of the platforms and candidates of the Democratic party against those of the Republican party. This makes it difficult for professionals functioning as public intellectuals to confine their involvement in public policy debates to issues about which they have expertise, and to get various stakeholders in these issues to accept them as unbiased scientists rather than partisan advocates. For this reason, I am pleased to see that David confines his message to individual educational psychologists and does not call for involving professional organizations in public policy debates. My sense is that the involvement of a professional organization in political issues not only erodes the external scientific credibility of the organization (which becomes perceived as a component of the Democratic Party), but also undermines the coherence of the organization itself and impairs accomplishment of its internal professional functions. However, I do hope to see the establishment of more media-savvy left-wing political analysis and advocacy organizations to counter the right-wing foundations and institutes that David mentions in his article, and I would join him in encouraging interested educational psychologists to participate in their activities.

In conclusion, David has argued that the preparation of educational psychologists should include attention to our responsibilities to the profession, including potential participation in public policy debates. I agree, but I believe that we should prepare professionals to make informed decisions based on knowledge about not only the potential benefits but the potential costs associated with such involvement. I don’t think that we should encourage such involvement without qualification, let alone suggest that it is a professional duty for everyone.

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