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| *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy,* Issue #26, April 15, 2003. © by *CJEAP* and the author(s).**Addressing an Identity Crisis of a Different Sort: A Response to Berliner’s Call to Action**by Jeanne Ellis Ormrod,University of Northern Colorado (Emerita) and University of New HampshireIn "Educational Psychology as a Policy Science," David expresses a frustration that many of us have felt for a long time: As a discipline, educational psychology has had little impact on educational decision making and policy setting. Decisions about which instructional goals to prioritize, which teaching practices to encourage through training and federal funding, which assessment instruments to employ in measuring student progress and achievement, and so on——such decisions are often made by individuals who have little knowledge or understanding of basic principles of learning, development, and motivation, and little awareness of sound assessment practice.As Berliner points out, the alarm sounded in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) flies in the face of data indicating that national achievement levels are *not* declining (e.g., see Berliner & Biddle, 1995). We do, however, have significant problems that must be addressed. Dropout rates are high, especially in urban and rural areas, and especially for students from low-income families. Some students who graduate have reading and writing skills insufficient for tackling the complex demands of today’s society. Many more do not critically evaluate the things they read and hear.Berliner urges us to enter directly into policy debates, to bring our expertise into the arena of educational decision making. I certainly agree, but I think we can have an even greater impact if we take a hard look at, and then address, the possible reasons why, at present, our discipline is *not* informing educational practice to the extent that it could or should. In the upcoming sections, I make four points. First, it is our mainstream "culture"--which includes widely shared beliefs and misconceptions about human nature--that not only guides current educational decision making but also determines the "problems" that are identified. Second, if concepts and principles of educational psychology are to influence problem identification and inform educational decision making, they must become a part of that mainstream culture. Third, we ourselves may be largely to blame for our current out-of-the-mainstream status. Finally, we ourselves must be the ones to change this state of affairs; I offer my thoughts about what will work--and what probably will *not* work--in bringing our contributions to the decision-making table.**Mainstream Culture and Educational Decision Making**For my purposes here, I define *culture* as "the behaviors and belief systems that characterize a social group" and suggest that it "provides an ongoing framework in which [people] decide what is true, good, healthy, rational, and normal" (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002, p. 540; also see Shweder et al., 1998). Many have characterized the United States as a tossed salad of numerous cultures. When it comes to policy makers’ thinking about educational issues, however, certain core beliefs do predominate and, I suggest, comprise a mainstream "culture" that guides much of educational decision making. These beliefs, which emerge from several sources (e.g., common "sense," folk "wisdom," philosophical and religious perspectives, folk theories of psychology), place parameters on the problems that are identified, and those problems, in turn, steer policy makers toward particular solutions. To the extent that these core beliefs constitute naïve views of human learning, development, and motivation, then the problems and solutions that are identified will be equally naïve and often off-target, as can be seen in Figure 1 below:*Figure 1:**How Belief Systems Do and Could Influence Educational Decision-Making*Let’s apply the framework in Figure 1 above to one concern that Berliner raises, the practice of high-stakes testing. We begin with a few widely held beliefs--for instance, that the vast majority of students who do poorly in school are simply unmotivated to do well, that many teachers don’t care about how well their students perform, that extrinsic rewards and punishments are the most effective motivators, and that a single paper-pencil test can provide a good indication of what students have learned at school. Such beliefs would lead us to define the problem of low achievement in terms of low motivation (e.g., "laziness" on the part of students, "callousness" or "burnout" on the part of teachers) and to identify a solution that entails administering large-scale paper-pencil tests and using students’ test scores as a basis for rewards (e.g., graduation, salary increases) and punishments (e.g., retention in grade, salary freezes or dismissals). This solution is exactly what we see in the high-stakes testing movement.**Bringing Educational Psychology into the Picture**To have the greatest impact on educational decision making, we must enter the picture not at the problem-solution stage, and not even at the problem-identification stage, but at the very beginning, at the acquisition-of-beliefs stage. My thinking here draws from the work of Vygotsky and from conceptions of distributed intelligence (e.g., Pea, 1993; Perkins, 1992, 1995). Vygotsky proposed that cultures pass along to succeeding generations not only certain ways of doing things but also certain ways of thinking about and interpreting the world. Pea and Perkins have suggested that people can think more intelligently about tasks and problems when they have various symbolic systems (words, concepts, diagrams, equations, etc.) that their culture might provide.Let’s consider how the chain of events might differ if we changed the nature of the belief system from which decision makers operate. For instance, imagine that we enrich this belief system with numerous concepts and principles that might explain why some students struggle in school, perhaps including the effects of rote versus meaningful learning, prior knowledge, cognitive strategies, metacognition, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and attributions. Imagine, too, that we bring basic assessment concepts (content validity, sampling, reliability, etc.) to bear on an analysis of the results of high-stakes tests. Such concepts from theories of learning and motivation and from psychometrics lead us to identify a different set of problems (instructional objectives that encourage rote memorization, instructional materials that don’t take into account students’ background experiences, ineffective learning strategies, low self-efficacy, attributions to uncontrollable factors, etc.), which in turn suggest a very different set of solutions (reevaluating instructional objectives, showing pre-service and in-service teachers how to foster effective learning strategies, creating instructional support systems that give students reason to believe they can succeed with reasonable effort, etc.). More generally, I propose that we replace the sequence depicted on the left side of Figure 1 with the sequence depicted on the right side, whereby the conceptual tools and research results that educational psychology offers comprise a belief system that leads decision makers to define and frame educational problems differently and, as a result, to identify more productive problem solutions.**Where We’ve Gone Wrong**By and large, educational psychologists’ ways of thinking--not only our concepts, principles, and theories, but also our conviction that educational decision making must be grounded in research--have not permeated the mainstream national culture. To be sure, a few of our ideas——for instance, the notions of *positive reinforcement*, *self-concept,* and *instructional objective--*have seeped in and become part of many people’s everyday vocabularies. Others, such as *sensitive* (or *critical*) *period*, *learning styles*, and *multiple intelligences* have been adopted but often misconstrued or misapplied by well-being educators and decision makers (e.g., such misconceptions and misapplications have been described by Bruer, 1999; Curry, 1990; Gardner, 1999). Yet many concepts that are central to our discipline and provide potentially powerful understandings of educational problems remain almost solely within discussions among ourselves and our close colleagues in psychology and education.Not only are most people in our society unaware of much of what educational psychology has to offer, in fact many people are unaware of the discipline itself. In essence, we have an *identity crisis* in our field. But this is not your typical identity crisis. We ourselves know who we are and what we have to offer. The problem is that no one else does.Our identity crisis comes in two forms. In the more prevalent and serious form, Form A, people have never heard the terms "educational" and "psychology" together in the same sentence, let alone side by side. Ask yourself how often a new acquaintance has given you a puzzled expression when you’ve described yourself as an educational psychologist. When I reflect on my own conversations with people who’ve asked what I do for a living, I think that about ninety percent of them have looked at me blankly, almost as if I’ve told them I was in psychoceramics or sociocosmetology or some other equally nonsensical field. In a few cases, people have drawn logical but inaccurate conclusions that I am some sort of clinician working in schools with students who have significant cognitive or behavioral problems. I usually follow up by saying that that I study and apply those aspects of psychology that have particular relevance for school learning and educational problems, and I cite learning, child development, motivation, and assessment as topics of particular interest, but even then most people still don’t understand what I really do.Form B of our identity crisis is more subtle, but in some ways more insidious: Many of our colleagues in education misconstrue what educational psychology is. For instance, some seem to think that if they have had a couple of courses in psychology, then they can teach a course called "educational psychology." I first encountered this phenomenon in the late 1970s, when I was a new faculty member at the University of Northern Colorado. At the time, many sections of our undergraduate educational psychology course were taught by people with backgrounds in education and counseling but little or no training in learning theory, cognition, motivation, or other key elements of our discipline. For the most part, these instructors focused on the importance of enhancing self-concepts and self-esteem, perhaps with a little bit of Piaget thrown in.The situation at Northern Colorado changed for the better in the early 1980s (thanks to some new hires and a few unpleasant political battles), but at numerous other institutions it remains much as it was in the 1970s, the only modification being that other trendy topics (e.g., learning styles, multiple intelligences) have replaced self-concept and self-esteem as the foci of the course. I think of two syllabi for a course called "educational psychology" that I’ve seen within the past twelve months, both for courses taught by people with limited if any background in educational psychology. In one syllabus, only one two-hour class session was devoted to the nature of learning and cognition, and the three theories addressed were those of Skinner, Piaget, and Vygotsky; there was no discussion whatsoever of contemporary cognitivists or social cognitivists, no mention of such concepts as *memory*, *elaboration*, *metacognition*, *modeling*, or *self-regulation*. In another syllabus, several articles on a particular topic were assigned each week, and students presumably came to class ready to critique the articles and the issues they addressed. Unfortunately, the articles were almost invariably written by *non*-educational psychologists, and their coverage was so superficial that they could not have provided enough understanding of any single topic to facilitate legitimate critical analysis.Form B of our identity crisis manifests itself not only in the abundance of people outside of our field who think they know our subject matter well enough to teach it, but also in the apparent belief at many institutions that educational psychology is tangential to (and so optional for) teacher education and graduate work in education. For instance, as I’ve visited small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast in recent years, I’ve found several quite reputable ones that, despite offering teacher certification programs, provide no significant coursework in educational psychology. And at many universities it is quite possible (in fact, often highly probable) to earn a doctorate in education without taking any coursework addressing the nature of learning itself.From where do such misconceptions about educational psychology come? I propose that two groups are to blame: (a) our predecessors in the field and (b) ourselves. Let’s begin with our predecessors. In educational psychology, we have a *legacy of irrelevance* we have to undo. In the 1960s and 1970s, courses on learning theory often focused largely on S-R approaches (e.g., those of Pavlov, Skinner, Guthrie, Hull), perhaps with some early cognitivists (e.g., Tolman, Piaget) thrown in. Classroom applications were rare, classroom-based research even more rare. We’ve come a very long way since then, but I suspect that many of our colleagues in other areas of education have, in their own graduate training, been exposed to early perspectives rather than to more contemporary ones, and so they understandably find little value in learning theory. I think, for example, of one well-regarded university that currently offers a doctorate in education. Its graduate course in learning theory was, until the late 1990s, taught by a professor who continued to teach the same theories that he himself had learned in graduate school in the 1950s. When the professor finally retired (much to other faculty members’ relief), his department almost immediately dropped the learning course from the curriculum.But we cannot lay all the blame on our predecessors. We ourselves have been doing very little to set the record straight, or at least we’ve done very little to set it straight *in places where others are apt to take notice*. We publish primarily in journals and other venues that only we ourselves read. Furthermore, our writings tend to be highly abstract and steeped in jargonese. Abstractions are integral to theoretical explanations, to be sure, and some jargon is essential for connecting new findings to what we already know, but when we are exclusively abstract and highly jargonized, our writings become inaccessible to others who might benefit from reading them. And we tend to be concerned more about writing a manuscript quickly than about writing it *well*. Occasionally (and more often than I’d like), I’ve been unable to make much sense of what a fellow educational psychologist has written in a reputable journal, even when I have considerable background knowledge about the topic, considerable self-efficacy that I can understand and learn a great deal from journal articles, and considerable motivation to persist in the face of obstruse prose. I’d be willing to bet (in fact, I’d stake my life savings on it) that we scare many people away from educational psychology not by what we say but by how poorly we say it.**How We Can Make Things Right**We can have a significant impact on educational policy and decision making only if we work hard both to correct our academic colleagues’ misperceptions of what our field has to offer and to bring the very existence of our field into the public limelight. Ideally, we should bring basic concepts and tenets of educational psychology into mainstream national culture, so that genuine findings about learning, cognition, development, motivation, instruction, and assessment replace common "sense," folk "wisdom," philosophical and religious perspectives, and folk theories of psychology. This is a tall order, no doubt about it, and I recognize that those who have not yet jumped all the tenure and promotion hurdles at their own institutions may need to focus their efforts accordingly. But for those who have a little more latitude in establishing priorities, I suggest a few strategies for making our discipline more visible to the public eye:• Become active in school-related activities and public forums on a local or state level. Attend PTA meetings. Run for the school board. Write letters to the editor of the local newspaper about school policies and practices that are likely to have a significant impact (either positive or negative) on children’s learning and development; better still, offer to write a monthly column for the newspaper. Ask a state legislator or government official about advisory committees that might benefit from your expertise.Even limited involvement can make a difference. For example, a few years ago, the principal at my son Jeff’s high school invited me (then an active member of the parent-teacher organization) to join a morning work session in which the faculty and a few community members were meeting to create a set of "common standards" (general and fairly abstract instructional objectives) that would guide the school’s overall curriculum. We began the morning by looking at a set of standards that a few people at the meeting had previously drafted, and I noticed that one of the proposed objectives was to enhance students’ test-taking skills. I argued that while the objective was certainly well-intended, doing well on tests should *not* be a primary goal of a high school curriculum; instead, I suggested, enhancing students’ learning strategies would be of greater benefit and would indirectly impact students’ test scores as well. I made my case briefly and succinctly, speaking for only three or four minutes and alluding only vaguely to research findings. Virtually no one in the room knew anything of my expertise about the matter (people knew me only as Jeff Ormrod’s mom) and so had no particular reason to take me seriously, nor did anyone voice support for my idea at the time, and I left the meeting a couple of hours later doubting that I had had any influence over people’s thinking. Nevertheless, when the principal shared the final *Common Standards* document at a parent-teacher meeting a few months later, I was delighted to see "Learning Strategies" listed as the first of seven major standards for the high school. What had formerly been "test-taking skills" had become the last of six bulleted items under Learning Strategies and had morphed into "Demonstrate knowledge and skills in a variety of assessments." I like to think that my brief comments at the work session had planted a conceptual seed from which grew more productive thinking about how best to help students learn and achieve.• Write for a broad audience. Some misapplications of theory and misconceptions about research findings make their way quickly into the public consciousness, where they take on a life of their own and quickly become "fact." Books written in laymen’s terms are, of course, one way to tackle such misconceptions and misapplications; two good examples are *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), which takes on *A Nation at Risk*, and *The Myth of the First Three Years* (Bruer, 1999), which addresses the misinformed belief that a great deal of brainpower is forever lost if we don’t begin serious instruction in the preschool years.The only problem with books is that people have to make a concerted effort to buy (or borrow) and then actually *read* them, and people who will do so are often those who are already converts; thus, the authors may be preaching to the choir to some extent. We can probably reach a broader audience if we write for magazines and journals with a large readership, including those widely read by teacher educators and K-12 teachers (e.g., *Educational Leadership*, *American Educator*, *The Elementary School Journal*, and many discipline-specific teaching journals) and those read by the public at large (e.g., *Atlantic Monthly*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Psychology Today*, the "My Turn" feature in *Newsweek*). Articles in such publications may not win many kudos with one’s dean or Tenure and Promotion Committee, but they will almost certainly have a greater impact on the core beliefs that underlie mainstream culture.• Take the time to write WELL. As educational psychologists, we know a great deal about how people learn and think and about how to help them learn and think *better*. We often put what we know into practice as we teach, but many of us rarely do so as we write. In fact, *writing is teaching*, and because it produces a fairly permanent "lesson" on paper, its impact can be far-reaching. I urge you, then, to put principles of effective pedagogy into practice as you write. For instance, present your ideas in an organized fashion, and make your organizational scheme clear (e.g., through advance organizers or headings). Give concrete examples to illustrate abstract ideas. Provide visual aids. More generally, engage in *knowledge transforming--*actively helping your readers construct meaning--rather than *knowledge telling* (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).Writing well takes time, a great deal of time. Furthermore, it is hard work, very hard work. Much of my own professional time is wrapped up in writing these days, but I find that I can spend at most about five or six hours of each day writing, and then only when I’ve had a good night’s sleep and devote my "best" time of the day (for me, this is morning and early afternoon) to the process. And I reread and revise what I have written, not just once but over and over and over again, before it ever sees a printing press.• Apply what we know about learning and cognition to a better understanding of what the public thinks and why. As I’ve already mentioned, policy makers and the public at large bring a motley assortment of beliefs and misconceptions to the educational policy-making table. Rather than just complain about this state of affairs, let’s not only address (such as in ways I’ve just suggested) but also *study* it as a phenomenon in and of itself. For instance, *why* do many government leaders who advocate high-stakes testing attribute poor academic performance to poor motivation on the part of students and/or teachers? (Attribution theory may shed light on this issue; e.g., see Weiner, 1986, 2000.) *Why* do people form the particular beliefs they do about human learning and motivation? (Views about epistemological beliefs and "theory theory" may be helpful; e.g., see Hofer & Pintrich, 2002.) And *how* can we unravel some very well-engrained belief systems and replace them with more informed and productive ones? (Research and theory related to conceptual change can help us in this arena; e.g., see Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993; Slusher & Anderson, 1996.)In sum, then I echo Berliner’s call to action, but I believe that entering into the fray at the decision-making stage is much too late in the game. We will have a far greater impact if we share with policy makers, our colleagues in education, and the general public the conceptual tools they need to think intelligently about the problems that face today’s schools.**References**Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (1987). *The psychology of written composition.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. 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