THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

On the Evils of Multicultural Education, Constructivism, and Teacher Preparation Programs

BY BOBBY ANN STARNES

LEAFING through a stack of old mail this morning, I came across a long-forgotten report titled *University of North Carolina Education Schools: Helping or Hindering Potential Teachers?* A publication of the Pope Center for Higher Education, it had been sent to me a couple of months ago by my friend Rita. Scrawled across its cover in red ink above a goofy-looking happy face was a note: "I read this and thought of you. Enjoy. — R."

The Saturday morning peace and quiet seemed a good time to read it. But as I began the executive summary, I was surprised by the report's fantastic claims. The author, George Cunningham, begins by declaring that "most people" believe the purpose of schools is to ensure that young people learn the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life. That seems simple enough, and I agree. That is, I agree that schools should do that. But I am never too comfortable thinking that I know what "most people" think. Knowing what *I* think is tough enough.

Next, Mr. Cunningham outlines the failings of the "dominant progressive/constructivist philosophy" and explains the evils of teacher education programs that value "objectives other than academic achievement" — "multicultural awareness" and lifelong learning, for example. Furthermore, he asserts with unwavering certainty that progressives regard "actually teaching" to be "bad practice" and that the "progressive/constructivist approach is markedly inferior to traditional, 'teacher-centered' pedagogy."

Having set the stage, he gets down to serious business. The state, he says, should adopt a policy that makes academic achievement the goal of public schools (academic achievement being measured, he later points out, solely by scores on standardized tests). Once this policy is firmly in place, he continues, the government should force universities to "revamp the missions, curricula, and personnel in the schools of education . . . to bring them into alignment with that goal." As we've seen in recent years, nothing clears up a mess in education quite like government intervention.

By the time I got to the summary's last paragraph, I *had* to read on. But first, I googled Mr. Cunningham and the Pope Center. As it turns out, the author has written textbooks on testing and measurement and spent 30 years in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the University of Louisville. Apparently a man with no connection to the preparation of teachers and no experience as a public school teacher or administrator, he seemed an interesting choice to write a report on teacher preparation.

Scanning the Pope Center's website, I noted some interesting additional reports. One claimed that North Carolina universities "adopt policies that are guaranteed to suppress prosperity and freedom." Policies *guaranteed* to suppress. Not prone to suppress or with the potential to suppress. Guaranteed to suppress prosperity and freedom.

Next I read the Center's mission, goals, and background. "Motivated by the principles that have traditionally guided public policy," the Center does research and publishes reports. And its agenda is pretty clear. Because "all too often universities allow teaching to become shallow and trendy . . . disparaging traditional principles of justice [and] ethics . . . students know little about the history of their country or the institutions that led to this nation's prosperity and liberty." I suppose the shallow and trendy teaching accounts for the guaranteed suppression of prosperity and freedom.

Mr. Cunningham leads off his 2008 report with a quote from a 10-year-old publication. This sets the stage for his interesting use of references — mostly relying on old, outdated resources selected from a very narrow field of possibilities, seemingly chosen to prove specific points. The "public wants schools with orderly classrooms that produce mastery of conventional knowledge and skills," the quote claims. The evidence? A "recent poll," at least recent in 1998, when the quoted author J. Stone referred to it in his *Education Week* opinion piece titled "'Different Drummers' and Teacher Training: A Disharmony That Impairs Schooling."

Mr. Cunningham appears to be comfortable using a 10-year-old opinion poll as a foundation for his argument. That is unsettling. Opinion polls, even if competently developed, fairly administered, and ethically interpreted, have a shelf life of about 10 minutes. After

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all, in 1998 Arnold Schwarzenegger was playing Mr. Freeze in the latest Batman movie. Would we rely on opinion polls conducted then to predict his role today?

Still, I read on. To prove his point that colleges of education are opposed to academic achievement, he quotes an anonymous professor (the quote lifted from *Ed School Follies,* a 15-year-old "exposé" of bad practice in teacher preparation programs).

Though he doesn't say it in so many words, I think Mr. Cunningham hates critical pedagogy. Singling out a UNC-Greensboro course titled "Introduction to Critical Pedagogy," he ridicules the content and decries its place in a teacher preparation program. Quoting the syllabus, he outlines the course's key themes: "the relationship of education to power, issues of difference and pluralism, the crisis of democratic culture, what it means to teach for democratic citizenship, the social construction of knowledge. . . . Exactly what this means for classroom teaching is unclear."

We can argue whether the implications for classroom teaching are unclear. But let's set that discussion aside. Mr. Cunningham seems to be saying that a course on critical pedagogy is inappropriate for preservice teachers. And, at least according to UNC-Greensboro, it is: they don't offer it to their preservice teachers. As a faculty member in a teacher preparation program, I thought his claims seemed far-fetched. I was right. The course Mr. Cunningham is railing against is an advanced seminar *not* in teacher preparation but in the university's Cultural Foundations of Education doctoral program.

Cunningham also points out that "evidence indicates that the traditional or teacher-centered approaches are more effective" at helping children learn to read. Although we do not see any mention of that evidence, he does offer us a singular example of an exemplary reading program. Direct Instruction. And what makes it so good? Well, in the *1960s and 1970s*, federal agencies "conducted studies of several models in a search for the most effective methods of improving the achievement of disadvantaged students." According to him, Direct Instruction won.

Well, not *exactly* Direct Instruction. In those days, Direct Instruction was called DISTAR, and I remember it all too well. It was the reason I left a public school and started an independent school of my own in the mid-1970s. Although the public school I left was promised big results, all it got was disappointment. The results were so dismal that the program was dropped three years after it was adopted. Soon thereafter, DISTAR all but disappeared from the educational landscape. It's back now, "rebranded" by McGraw-Hill as Direct Instruction, in response to No Child Left Behind's emphasis on scripted reading programs.

But Direct Instruction has distinctions other than my refusal to use it. It was at the center of a 2006 Reading First scandal. When Robert Slavin, developer of a similar scripted program, blew the whistle on unethical practices within the U.S. Department of Education, the inspector general investigated. What he found was that millions of dollars in state funding requests had been rejected because the proposed plans did not include Direct Instruction, that research used to support the program was questionable, and that "members of the National Expert Review Panels and Reading First had commercial or academic ties to Direct Instruction." Of course, it is possible that a reading program's corporate leadership could be ethically challenged and the program itself still be effective, I suppose.

It would be easy to continue discussing Mr. Cunningham's report. There is plenty more to question, and the old research teacher and program evaluator in me finds it hard to stop short. But the troubling thing about this report, really, is not that it is so poorly done. It is that Mr. Cunningham and the Pope Center pretend to be looking critically at big issues. Yet they not only fail to engage in dialogue with those who hold beliefs that differ from their own, they are not even having an honest conversation among themselves. Seemingly uninterested in real intellectual engagement, it seems enough for them to "get" an idea and keep it. And any challenge to the status quo seems to challenge their collective identity. So when confronted with new or different ideas, they retreat to simpler days of a time gone by. In the process, they are mesmerized by idealized visions of good times that never existed and blinded by "traditional values" that created privilege for them while excluding so many others.

Reading Mr. Cunningham's report brings to mind a favorite guilty-pleasure movie, *The American President.* In it, the President, Andrew Shepherd, who has been viciously attacked by his foe, Bob Rumson, finally responds by saying, "We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious people to solve them. And whatever your. . . problem . . . Bob Rumson is not the least bit interested in solving it. He is interested in two things . . . : making you afraid of it and telling you who's to blame for it."

Education does have serious problems, and we do need serious people to solve them, people who can talk about hard things without resorting to half-truths, deception, and empty rhetoric and without continually hoping the past will save us. It won't. But it can guide us. We can look there for lessons that nurture a culture of innovation. And that is what will take us forward. K