



From the Desk of the President *Thoughts on Research Quality While Cleaning My Office*

Usually, the summer ritual of academic office cleaning results in nothing more than the satisfaction of a tidy work space and the ability to find teaching and research materials more easily. However, my efforts this year resulted in a profound sense of “*déjà vu* all over again,” in addition to a clean office. The sources of my disquiet were stacks of articles, books, reports, and speeches dealing with the quality of education research and suggesting ways to improve it. Some were written more than a decade ago (e.g., Kaestle, 1993); others represent more recent discussions (e.g., Henig, 2008; Hess, 2008; Thompson, 2008; Levine, 2007; Feuer, 2006; Shavelson & Towne, 2002; Lagemann, 2000). Some of this attention has come from outside our profession and is reflected in recent federal education legislation that includes specifications of what constitutes “scientifically-based research.”

However, much of this concern has come from within the profession, including from past and current leaders of the American Educational Research Association. For example, during a session at the 2003 AERA Annual Meeting, three past-presidents—Penelope Peterson, James Popham, and Alan Schoenfeld—enumerated what they saw as major problems with education research and AERA’s limited ability to remedy those shortcomings. These included significant variability in quality due to a lack of consistent norms governing research methods and reporting; weak links between research results and educational practice because of an insufficient emphasis on cumulative, replicable studies and a weak infrastructure supporting the development function in education R&D; and a culture that often values openness and intellectual tolerance at the expense of rigor and peer scrutiny. Among my stacks, I also found my handwritten notes from the 2005 Coordinated Committee Meeting, where AERA members serving on a variety of committees discussed the challenges that the Association faces in advancing education research. Their comments mirrored those of the past-presidents, noting the lack of consensus on standards of research quality and how that adversely affects AERA’s external image; lack of conviction among funders that basic research in education is a necessary foundation for sound policy and practice; and the need for AERA to nurture the “big tent” of intellectual diversity while working to build consensus on shared criteria for evaluating research quality.

Needless to say, a few hours of rereading these documents and other assorted books and reports I had highlighted in earlier reading halted my progress in dusting and vacuuming, and caused me

to wonder whether we as a profession have engaged in years of cathartic but noninstrumental hand wringing. Would an AERA president 10 years hence experience a similar sense of futility while cleaning her office?

Perhaps it was the need to get on with the job of ridding my office of the accumulated dust and ash from the recent Santa Barbara fire that prompted me to recall that some notable progress has been made in addressing problems with research quality identified over the past decade and earlier. For example, the publication of the National Research Council report *Scientific Research in Education* (Shavelson & Towne, 2002)—while not endorsed by all researchers—has sparked discussions in a variety of venues about the nature of evidence in education research and highlighted areas of consensus and disagreement among researchers who use different analytical approaches. Similarly, despite extensive criticism of their narrow scope, the definitions of scientifically based research now embodied in federal education legislation have sensitized researchers to the importance that policy makers place on sound and useful research and to the need to provide guidance about how research results should be interpreted in policy and school contexts. Another sign of progress: For the first time in 30 years, scholars are again systematically examining the conditions under which policy makers and educators use research, and funders are expressing interest once again in supporting studies of research utilization.

AERA has played a significant role in seeking to remedy shortcomings in the education research enterprise. In response to the need for clear evaluation criteria, the Association now has “Standards for Reporting on Empirical Social Science Research in AERA Publications” (AERA, 2006). A task force chaired by Past-President Marilyn Cochran-Smith is currently finalizing “Standards for Reporting on Humanities-Oriented Research in AERA Publications,” to be considered for approval by Council at its January 2009 meeting. As part of the Association’s commitment to advancing knowledge about the appropriate use of various research methods, AERA’s Grants Board recently published a white paper entitled *Estimating Causal Effects* (Schneider, Carnoy, Kilpatrick, Schmidt, & Shavelson, 2007); in 2006 the Association published *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research* (Green, Camilli, & Elmore). The Annual Meeting Policies and Procedures Committee, in partnership with

the Research Advisory Committee, has been working over the past year on strategies to improve the caliber of the Annual Meeting and to reduce the uneven quality across sessions that has concerned many attendees. At the request of congressional staff, an AERA working group is helping to fashion a broader definition of scientifically based research that is more inclusive of diverse approaches but still guided by clear principles of scientific rigor.

All these developments suggest that our profession is not the proverbial “frog in the well”—making progress toward the light only to fall back into darkness. The academic office cleaner of 2018 will certainly look back on a vigorous discussion of research quality and might even take pride that substantial headway has been made in remedying identified problems. However, because she and her colleagues are scholars committed to critical reflection, they will recognize that much more needs to be done. They will also realize that the early 21st century presented education researchers with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is the public spotlight of media and policy attention, with the possibility that those outside the profession will define what constitutes high-quality and useful research. The opportunity originates from the same spotlight—signifying public acknowledgment that good research is critical to student learning and will be valued if the profession can ensure the production of valid and reliable studies focused on the core enterprise of teaching and learning.

In other words, our opportunity and our challenge in 2008 is to take care of business ourselves, so that those outside the profession do not do it for us. The first step has to be a commitment to frank, and sometimes uncomfortable, conversations about what constitutes high-quality research, how to reach consensus on a set of principles and standards that apply to diverse methods and theoretical approaches, and what we are willing to do to enforce those standards. That conversation can begin in our own institutions in some of the ways that immediate Past-President William Tate outlined in his *Educational Researcher* column earlier this year, where he discussed “sharing research ideas across boundaries [as] an element of a strong intellectual community” (p. 51). Within AERA, the conversation can be advanced in a variety of venues: in our journals, within and across divisions and SIGs, at the Annual Meeting, and through our mentoring and professional development activities. Through such deliberations and the agreements that emerge

from them, we can begin to create a culture that recognizes excellent research and acknowledges when work does not meet agreed-upon standards. It is a truism to say that if the project of improving research quality were easy, we would have accomplished it by now and there would be fewer stacks of reports in my office. But those reports have made clear what needs to be done, and our recent progress demonstrates that ensuring high-quality education research need no longer be an elusive goal.

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