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What Is "Good" Education Research?

Karl Hostetler

Abstract

The question of what counts as good education research has received a great deal of attention, but too often it is conceived principally as a methodological question rather than an ethical one. Good education research is a matter not only of sound procedures but also of beneficial aims and results; our ultimate aim as researchers and educators is to serve people's well-being. For their research to be deemed good in a strong sense, education researchers must be able to articulate some sound connection between their work and a robust and justifiable conception of human well-being. There is a good deal of history and convention against such a conception of researchers' work. We need to consider the conditions needed if that conception is to be realized. Among the conditions is a concerted and cooperative endeavor for moral education among researchers and the people with whom they work—a context where questions of wellbeing are foregrounded, welcomed, and vigorously debated.

The question of what counts as good education research has been debated for a long time and still concerns researchers. The question can be posed at a philosophical level, as in the debate about the epistemological merits of quantitative as opposed to qualitative research, and at a more particular level, where the issue is the quality of a particular research project. Recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has intruded the U.S. federal government into the matter with its de facto definition of good research as consisting of experimental studies that yield prescriptions for action. This definition provides special political and professional urgency (at least for the near future) to the need for education researchers to ponder and speak out on the question of what constitutes good research.

However, I do not dwell on NCLB here. It is but a recent manifestation of how the question of good research can be framed too narrowly, a frame that I fear education researchers sometimes fall into. This narrowness can come from confining questions of "good" essentially to the methodological realm: "Good" research has an appropriate number of subjects to survey or interview, yields reproducible results or provides for independent review of qualitative data, and so on. One can criticize NCLB because good research need not be experimental; but such a response, while legitimate, keeps debate at the methodological level. What is sacrificed is adequate attention to the question of what good comes from educational policies and practices, how they do or do not contribute to the well-being of students, teachers, and communities.

However, the problem of narrowness is not limited to researchers who are fixated on methodology. Researchers genuinely concerned for well-being can be too narrow if they do not appreciate the complexity of well-being and its pursuit (Hostetler, 1995). In this essay I propose that good research requires our careful, ongoing attention to questions of human well-being, and I urge education researchers to think about how to achieve the conditions under which that attention can flourish.

Perhaps a couple warnings are in order before I begin to make my case. First, clearly I am not sanguine about the state of education research. I readily grant that some number of my misgivings are based more on my personal experiences than on a thorough study of the state of education research. I have read enough and talked enough to colleagues around the country to be confident that I am not totally off-base. Yet my principal aim is to provoke thought and conversation about our work as education researchers, not to analyze our research community. If it turns out that my experiences are unique or that I am delusional, so much the better.

Second, my approach is rather irreverent in places. I think that serious issues cannot be dealt with seriously unless we are willing to be playful with them. I apologize in advance if I offend some readers. But, in my defense, I appeal to Benjamin Barber (1992), who argues that all good teaching is offensive, and to Maxine Greene, whom I heard say that the point of philosophy is to "keep the pain alive." So look at this essay as an experiment on whether being annoying is just what a good teacher and philosopher ought to do.

What's the Problem?

Over the past decade or so, in the pages of *Educational Researcher* and elsewhere, we have seen the question of good education research explored in terms of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. These debates have been valuable for helping us to think about the nature and aims of education research. They have raised important ethical questions about how researchers should understand and work with the human beings they study. The danger is that the debate can be limited to methodology. It would be like debating how we should research the effectiveness of thumbscrews as a means of torture. A quantitative researcher might say we need a random sample of subjects and some quantifiable measure of results, say the pitch and duration of victims' shrieks. A qualitative researcher could retort that such data

are inadequate, and might want to interview the victims to get a thicker and richer narrative of their experience and its meaning for them. Of course, we might realize that we do not have an either–or choice here. We say that both approaches, or some "multimethods" approach, can provide useful data to theorists and practitioners of torture.

The point of my admittedly naughty example is not to disparage quantitative and qualitative methodologies or methodological debates. However, I do disparage blindness to, or lack of interest in, the question of how research serves people's well-being. Good research is a matter not only of sound procedures but also of beneficial aims and results. Our ultimate aim as researchers and practitioners is to serve people's wellbeing— the well-being of students, teachers, communities, and others. Education research can have a profound impact on people's well-being. A cynic might reply, "Well, then, thank goodness no one pays attention to education research." Of course, whatever the truth of that, it does not let us off the ethical hook. And in addition to obligations to others, researchers have an ethical obligation to themselves. Call it an issue of integrity or identity. Education researchers have a right and an obligation to understand what they are doing, to stand for something worthwhile that gives their personal and professional lives meaning, and to articulate that thing to themselves and others.

Readers might chafe at my suggestion that researchers are blind to issues of wellbeing. I certainly do not suggest that questions of human well-being have not been addressed, and addressed well, in education research. I do question, though, whether concern for those questions is as ubiquitous and serious as it needs to be.

For example, many people vigorously promote good-sounding slogans such as "All children can learn" and "Leave no child behind." Yes, all children can learn, but as Noddings (1992) points out, what the sloganeers often ignore is the question, "Learn what?" The assumption tends to be that the "what" is some form of liberal education, but Noddings argues against a liberal education, at least as it is construed traditionally. And about leaving no child behind, if we are herding the lemmings toward the cliff, I am not sure we do the laggards a favor by making sure they keep up with the pack. Good-sounding slogans are no substitute for genuine ethical understanding of the ends we are trying to achieve.

Good intentions do not guarantee good research. However, my argument does not hinge on the existence of bad research. Researchers may well be able to make a sound case for the ethical value of their research; but my argument is that they *do* need to be able to make that case. And that is where my doubts lie. Researchers are expected to be knowledgeable and articulate regarding the processes of research. I am not sure there are similar expectations regarding the ethical ends of research—expectations that researchers be knowledgeable and articulate regarding human well-being.

I propose that, if their research to be deemed good in the fullest sense, education researchers must be able to make sound and articulatable, if not fully articulated, connections to a robust and justifiable conception of human well-being. I choose my words carefully. Stating the proposal this way allows for stronger and weaker senses of good research. I think we have to acknowledge that research can be good in the relevant sense without the researcher's really understanding that it is good. But that is a weak sense of good research. I urge that we work toward a stronger sense of good research, requiring researchers not only to serve well-being but also to understand how they are serving it (or not).

So, what is there to understand? "Wellbeing" itself is a difficult concept. Philosophers debate whether it is essentially a state of mind, a state of affairs, or a melding of both. Is a student doing well if she thinks she is succeeding in math even if she is not? Is she doing well if she is succeeding but gets no pleasure from it or affirmation? If state of mind is important, then what state of mind is important? Pleasure? Satisfaction? Pride? Is success an important state of affairs? What does "success" mean? The complexity of the concept does not preclude our making legitimate judgments about a person's well-being (Griffin, 1986), but it should keep us from being complacent about our understanding of well-being and the goods that contribute to it.

At the same time, how far must we go with skepticism? Thumbscrews are one thing, but must we really take seriously the idea that educational aims such as teaching math or reading or character, or assessing students' learning, or preparing preschoolers for school, or promoting young people's health, need to be questioned for their contributions to wellbeing? Yes, we really must take that idea seriously, and for two basic reasons: the complexity of goods, and the complexity of a good human life.

The Complexity of Goods

One reason that educational aims must be researched is that the concepts we use to articulate educational aims typically are contestable. What does it mean "to read" or "to learn" or "to prepare"?

Consider the notion of character. One of the more popular character education programs is "Character Counts." This program posits six "pillars" of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Deborah Meier (1995) offers a rather different view. For her it is essential that students learn to be observant, playful, skeptical, imaginative, respectful of evidence, able to communicate, caring, and possess a good work ethic (p. 170). There is overlap between the two perspectives. Both mention caring, for example, and Meier clearly ties her traits to the demands of citizenship. However, there are various ways to manifest care and citizenship, and, although I will not fully argue the point here, I suggest that Meier's conception is rather different from what is emphasized in "Character Counts." We at least get a suggestion of that if we focus on items in Meier's list such as skepticism, regard for evidence, and playfulness. Imagine a school that encouraged students to be skeptical about school rules or a teacher's ideas, to play around with alternatives, to demand evidence for why things should be as they are. Perhaps Meier's virtues are consistent with "Character Counts" "pillars," but it is significant that they are made explicit and placed at the forefront.

John Dewey (1909) offers a still different view. Virtues that he considers essential are force of character, judgment, and responsiveness. Students need to be willing and able to stand for something, while using good judgment about when and how to do so and being willing and able to activate their "force" and judgment because they are sensitive to the people and events about them that call for a response. What I note here is that Dewey does not see character as a matter of some-

how "possessing" traits such as "respect" or "care"; for Dewey, virtue is shown in action, and situations and the actions that they call for typically are complex. Simple prescriptions about being respectful or caring or whatever just do not get us very far. Again, if we imagine a school where students are encouraged to respond to their whole surroundings, to take stands (perhaps against adults), and to exercise their own judgment, I think we get a very different picture of character.

My concern here is not to defend or attack any particular conception of character. My point is that even an "obvious" good such as character merits careful scrutiny. At stake are quite different conceptions of that part of a good human life.

The Complexity of a Good Life

A second reason for taking the question of good seriously is that, even if some educational aim is found to be good, it constitutes only one good. But human well-being is complex. Rarely do good things come without some sort of cost or tradeoff. Academic achievement, whatever that is, may be good, but at what cost? Is it really worth the cost of cutting art, music, recess, and other supposed "extras"? I am pretty sure that Meier and Dewey would say no. People tend to just assume that "the basics" are reading, writing, and arithmetic. Plato, however, argued that gymnastics and music are basic, stressing the fundamental value of movement and harmony of the body and soul. Granted, that was some 2,500 years ago, but I have to think that we might benefit from greater concern for soul even nowadays.

Or how about reducing school violence? That is a good thing, we cannot deny. But again, at what cost? Proponents of character education sometimes try to justify their programs by offering data that incidents of violence decline in schools that have such programs. What they tend not to look at are other attendant outcomes. Are students also discouraged from exercising force of character and judgment, the principal if implicit virtue stressed being mere obedience? It is far from obvious that having a safe school is inconsistent with Deweyan virtues, as the example of Meier's school shows.

Following Martha Nussbaum (1990), what these issues demand of researchers is "vision" that they be "finely aware and richly responsible":

> We live amid bewildering complexities. Obtuseness and refusal of vision are our besetting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars. Our highest and hardest task is to make ourselves people on whom nothing is lost. (p. 148)

The questions that researchers must face are difficult. I do not propose that the correct answers will become obvious if only we look hard enough. We should not always expect, or even desire, unity of judgment. What we can and should expect, however, is unity in the belief that we as researchers have an obligation to ask these questions of ourselves and others, and to see that they are being answered well.

(Re)Conceptualizing Researchers' Work

This orientation implies a particular conception of an education researcher's work, which I begin to articulate by contrasting it with some recent suggestions by Labaree (2003) regarding how a researcher's work differs from a teacher's work. (My disagreements with Labaree may be more semantic than substantive, but I believe the issues are important nonetheless.) Labaree proposes several shifts that teachers must undergo in their transition to researcher. I will consider two: from the normative to the analytical, and from the particular to the universal.

Labaree is clear that researchers have, or can have, moral concerns. Still, he describes the transition from teacher to researcher as involving a shift from the normative to the analytical. I agree that some such shift may be appropriate. For example, I can see the point that, "[p]osed with a situation in which two children are fighting in the back of the classroom, the scholar wants to ponder the social, psychological, economic, and pedagogical reasons for this conflict, while the teacher wants to separate the combatants" (Labaree, p. 18). (However, I also think the separation of roles should not be overdrawn. Teachers can and should analyze classroom situations, and I hope that researchers would be ready to step in to stop a fight.) However, I would describe the shift as one *within* rather than *away from* the normative realm. The shift may be from more immediate, less explicitly analytical normative concerns to less immediate, more explicitly analytical concerns—but this is a shift in the *way* that the normative is served. The ultimate concern still is, or should be, normative. What if we can explain a classroom fight in terms of some sort of socioeconomic class conflict; a poor kid resents a rich kid. But what does that really explain? Why should class differences generate resentment? Something vital is left out if we cannot embed the analysis within a realm of normative factors, such as a human being's desire for dignity and a fair chance at a good life. Analysis may be inspired by moral concerns, and it may be used to serve moral concerns, but even more than that, *it is itself a moral activity*, a form of practical philosophy (Carr, 2003). Inevitably, education research has moral implications. The choice for researchers is whether they will give voice to those implications or remain silent about them.

I have similar concerns about Labaree's shift from particular to universal, which I need to address, given my belief about the importance of "intense scrutiny of particulars." Again, there may be some point in such a shift. Rightly, researchers are concerned about developing generalizations and theories. Indeed, inquiry into human well-being can and does lead to generalizations about what a good human life entails (as in Nussbaum, 2000) and can therefore help us to understand what may be good for any particular person. But here, too, I am uneasy about speaking in terms of a shift away from the particular instead of a shift to a different way of serving the particular. Perhaps the danger is most obvious in research using randomized populations.

The basic idea there is to make irrelevant the influence of at least some particulars that might distinguish people one from another. That can have some virtue, but it can also have the vice of suppressing just those particular factors and experiences that are essential to individuals' well-being. Imagine research that establishes a strong positive correlation between some teaching approach and students' success in reading (however that might be defined), irrespective of students' particular backgrounds. That can be valuable information; yet something is missing if the research is silent on what happens to particular students. We find a way to improve students' reading. Okay, but was it worth it? What were the costs, the tradeoffs?

Did some kids enjoy the curriculum and the instruction? Were some miserable? Resistant? If the emerging theory is not somehow addressing, or at the very least acknowledging, the complexity of ethically relevant particulars that affect the well-being of particular persons, the moral task is incomplete.

I am well aware that adopting such a conception of researchers' work might necessitate some dramatic changes regarding how research is done, how student researchers are educated, how different sorts of research are rewarded, and so on. For example, when researchers are attuned to particulars, clearly the scope and complexity of their research expand. A higher-education culture that values quantity of publications might not be especially hospitable to such research. The conception of research attuned to particulars also suggests how vital it can be for researchers to have partners, such as teachers in classrooms, who can offer insights into particulars because of their intimate involvement with students, parents, and others—an intimacy that is difficult for researchers to achieve.

To move toward my proposed conception of good research, we would need to address attitudes and concerns that challenge it. In the space allotted here, I cannot offer anything close to an adequate discussion of the implications of this conception; however, I will venture to note some of the basic issues involved and some basic conditions needed for its realization.

Conditions for Research Into Human Well-Being

Can the Good Be "Researched"?

One issue to face is a history of education research during which questions of value have been marginalized. Lagemann (2000) describes how, early in the twentieth century, the desire to make the study of education more "scientific" led to a separation of reason from value and so put value questions out of bounds. Academic philosophy no doubt abetted that move with logical empiricists' conceptions of science and knowledge. Also, in philosophy, interest in well-being waned, perhaps because of its connection to utilitarianism, which was falling out of favor. However, these trends have been reversed in recent decades. Philosophy of science has debunked the putative separation of reason and value. Human well-being again has become an issue for philosophic inquiry (Griffin, 1986; Hurka, 1993; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Raz, 1986; Sher, 1997; Sumner, 1996; Taylor, 1989; Warner, 1987; White, 1991).

Nonetheless, the reason–value separation persists. For example, a danger I see in Labaree's shift from the normative to the analytical is that it seems to suggest a separation between value and reason, even if implicitly and unintentionally.

I have had students and colleagues state that inquiry into the good (and other philosophical issues) does not merit the status of "research," because these issues are just "a matter of opinion" or merely "subjective." Often, these claims rest on the existence of ethical controversies and disagreements. But the mere fact of disagreement does not entail the conclusion reached. For one thing, if disagreement in some area showed that only "opinions" were involved, then science, which is full of disagreements, would be a matter of opinion, too; but usually science is taken as the paradigm of objectivity.

In addition, we should not exaggerate the extent of disagreement about ethical issues. In the classes I teach, I prefer that students talk. Sometimes they are reluctant to do so. Usually, I do not resort to sticking them with cattle prods. I imagine most people would agree that this is a good policy.

Now, the reply might be that science nevertheless is different because it is based on facts and experiment. In language that is popular these days, one might ask, What is my "research base" to support not sticking students with cattle prods?

If the demand is for data that show an experimental group of students stuck with cattle prods talked no more than students in the control group, then I have no such data. My reply is that I need no such data and, in fact, would be pretty screwed up if I thought I did. To engage in ethical thought and action at all, one has to accept certain baseline commitments, such as respecting the dignity and humanity of persons.

Does that make ethics arbitrary or merely subjective? Hardly. But if we insisted that ethics was arbitrary because of that, we would have to conclude the same thing about science. One cannot do science without certain basic commitments such as respect for evidence and the value of simplicity and consistency in explanations.

And if science has facts such as "the earth is spherical (roughly) and billions of years old," so does ethics—facts such as "it is wrong to cause gratuitous pain" and "all people deserve a fair chance at a good life." Of course, there might be people who deny those last two propositions. But then there are people who deny that the earth is spherical and ancient. In the latter case, we do not conclude, therefore, that the shape and age of the earth is all a matter of opinion; similarly in ethics.

Also, if science has its experiments, so does ethics. Life is the laboratory for ethics. History and contemporary life offer a rich account of struggles, of successes and failures, of "experiments," in which human beings have sought to live lives that are worthwhile. Empirical evidence surely is relevant to research into well-being. For example, in her research with women in India, Nussbaum (2000) found that the women aspired to many of the same things that people everywhere aspire to, things like the integrity of their bodies, health, and self-respect. Such findings are important for our understanding of human well-being.

However, even though empirical findings are relevant to ethical questions, to engage with questions about well-being we must be clear about the necessity to go beyond the empirical. In other words, good education research requires philosophy, in particular moral theory. As the point sometimes is stated, "'Is' does not imply 'ought.'" Facts about the way the world is cannot tell us what we ought to do. If students responded well to cattle prods, it would not follow that they ought to be shocked. If children can learn the alphabet before entering school, it does not follow that they should. If abstinence-only sex education programs were shown to reduce the teenage pregnancy rate more than other programs, that alone would not determine that those are the programs we should use. To each of those scenarios, we can and must say, "Okay, but how does that serve people's well-being?" And to answer that question, we have to venture wide-eyed and strenuously into the "bewildering complexities" of human good.

Freedom

Many people get nervous when venturing into ethics, believing that decisions in that domain should be left to individuals. If we start raising ques-

tions about what is good, visions of Puritans might start dancing in their heads. For instance, in response to the examples just noted, one might object: "But what if parents *want* their child to learn the alphabet in preschool or *want* an abstinence-only program?" Or, "What if faculty colleagues *want* to do such-and-such research? Who are we to say they shouldn't?"

These are important questions. We need to be clear that having moral concern does not mean being moralistic and sanctimonious. Freedom is an important ethical and academic good and should not be infringed cavalierly. Often, maybe usually, we will not want to thwart people's aims, even if we think them mistaken. Still, freedom is not an absolute good. Its value, like that of other goods, has to be judged in relation to its contribution to well-being. Our lives are full of legitimate instances where our freedom is limited for the sake of others' well-being and our own. And even if the goal should not be to thwart someone's projects, we, as researchers and educators, have the right and indeed the obligation to raise questions when we see possible threats to well-being.

Of course, I have found that merely raising questions is too much for some people. In higher education and elsewhere, my experience is that questions often tend not to be welcomed, to put it mildly. It seems that to some people being questioned shows arrogance and/or lack of trust on the part of questioners. To some people, questioners are malcontents unwilling to be team players. But if that is the case, I would have to ask which is more arrogant: thinking there are complexities that need to be addressed, or thinking that one has all the right answers, trusting in oneself so much as to be immune to second thoughts? Who is a team player: someone who figures everyone should do whatever they feel like, or someone who tries to engage with others in a common struggle to do what is best for the people they serve? And who is discontented if that project falls short?

The Need for Moral Education

What mechanisms are needed for the requisite questioning to occur? It could be pointed out that already there are mechanisms in place, notably institutional review boards (IRBs), which guard against harmful research. IRBs are indeed important, but preventing harmful research is not the same as promoting good research; good research is not the same as nonharmful research. In addition, IRBs are concerned with the more obvious physical and emotional harm that research subjects may suffer. However, what counts as an important harm or good may not be obvious and may even be contentious. I do not propose that IRBs become arbiters of these debates. Issues of well-being are too complex—and too important—to be handed over to a small, select panel. What is needed is a concerted and cooperative endeavor for moral education among researchers, in collaboration with those with whom they work.

This brings me to another objection that I sometimes hear from colleagues around the country or around the cooler. It goes something like this: "If people are bad, talking at them or having them take courses or having them read books is not going to reform them." The observation is true, but it is a red herring. I return to Nussbaum's vision metaphor. The presumption is not that people err with regard to well-being because they are evil. We err because we overlook something, misperceive something. All of us have blind spots. But we can improve our vision. And observing, arguing, reading, and thinking certainly have a role in helping us achieve that.

At the same time, "refusal of vision" certainly is possible. I myself have been around long enough to despair of ever persuading some people to open their eyes. What we as a community of researchers can do, though, is begin to expect that from researchers. In our own institutions, with our students and faculty colleagues, we can begin to foreground issues of the good and hold people accountable to them. We can engage in serious conversation about well-being.

Diversity and Community

This communal inquiry needs a diversity of perspectives. Pursuit of well-being is a broad enough and complex enough challenge that all sorts of research have a place in it. As much as I urge researchers to be attentive to questions of well-being, I do not say that all researchers should always make those questions their immediate concern. And as much as I have stressed philosophy, I am not saying that everyone has to read and know "philosophy." Questions of human good are confronted in history, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and other disciplines. And (and maybe I should not put this in print) philosophy, at least some sorts of philosophy, may not always be helpful for questions of well-being. That is why Nussbaum (1990), philosophical as she is, so often uses novels to explore human life. For education researchers who have not seen them, I would also recommend "The Simpsons" and "South Park" for explorations of philosophy and human life.

The point is, somewhere along the line researchers need to gain adequate awareness of, concern for, and understanding of issues of well-being. Even if their research is not immediately concerned with wellbeing, they need to understand how it is related to well-being.

Knowing We Don't Know

Frankly, I wonder how many education researchers have that sort of understanding. I hasten to add that I am not condemning them for that; as I have noted, the culture of education research, at least in the past hundred years or so, has not emphasized such understanding. For example, when doctoral students are told to write literature reviews for their dissertations, I suspect that, often, they are not directed to the sort of literature I am talking about. But that in itself is a relatively minor problem.

I turn to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer to suggest what is really essential. Gadamer (1960/1989) writes:

> Knowledge always means, precisely, considering opposites. Its superiority over preconceived opinion consists in the fact that it is able to conceive of possibilities as possibilities. . . . [So] only a person who has questions can have knowledge. [However,] there is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what is questionable. On the contrary, the example of Socrates teaches that the important thing is the knowledge that one does not know. (p. 365)

I draw your attention to three elements of this passage. The first is the role of questions. As I have tried to show, the quest for well-being continually presents us with questions, with possibilities and opposites to consider. Even if we can get past the question of what is good, we must ask whether the good thing is good for *these* people, at *this* time, in *this* situation.

The second element regards "conditions." There is no method for learning to ask questions. Reading stuff might help, but not if it is used only to warehouse information. Conditions have to be such that reading and other activities lead to awareness of an expanding horizon of unexplored territory, of ethical questions to be asked.

There may be a number of conditions needed for good research, but the third element I note is Gadamer's (1960/1989) essential condition: knowledge that one does not know. If we consider the state of education research, does it include knowledge that we do not know? We cannot look into people's heads, but let us think about the conditions that education researchers find themselves in and ask whether knowing that one does not know is the sort of knowledge that is valued and encouraged.

Of course, in some sense, all research starts with a question, awareness that one does not know something. The problem is that research tends to end with an answer. Hello? Of course, I am not saying researchers should not try to answer questions. The problem is *ending* with answers—being unaware of or uninterested in the ethical questions generated or avoided. The "answers" to research questions do not end things but offer new circumstances for exploring the persistent question of what is good for people.

Unfortunately, these days many people tend to want to end with answers. Given the state of U.S. education, with the attendant pressure to produce "results," one can understand why people look for "answers." And the problems are not limited to elementary and high school. For instance, one concern of mine is the increasing emphasis on grants in higher education. If we are not careful, winning grants will become an end in itself rather than a means to accomplishing something worthwhile. That is just one threat that I see in a general move toward a corporate model of higher education.

Conclusion: Reasons for Optimism?

To avoid a pessimistic conclusion, I will step out of character and conclude by proposing that we have reasons for optimism. I may be wrong about all of this. If so, I nevertheless hope to have presented issues worth thinking about. A philosophy professor of mine once described Bertrand Russell as one of the great philosophers of the 20th century, then added that it was too bad he had been wrong about nearly everything. I am not comparing myself to Bertrand Russell. But research that is wrong in its conclusions may still lead to progress.

On the other hand, even if I am right, there is reason for optimism when we remember the extraordinary things that people have done to challenge the status quo and make life better for their fellow human beings—people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, and Martha Stewart. Well, maybe not Martha Stewart. And in education we have people such as Deborah Meier (1995), who have done remarkable things to show how schooling can be guided genuinely and successfully by an explicit ethical conception of what is good.

But remember, too, that good things need not be extraordinary. It is in the power of every researcher and educator to do something to improve the lives of people. Progress is not always easy, of course. It requires understanding, commitment, compassion, patience, and likely some amount of courage.

As education researchers, we have a particular obligation and opportunity to take a leading role in seeing that the research that is done is truly good research. As we do our work, we need to think beyond questions of how we will study students or analyze school policies: We need to think about how we can make life better for people. We need to think beyond our taken-for-granted ideas of well-being and what is good and make those ideas the objects of serious, communal inquiry. Serving people's well-being is a great challenge, but it is also our greatest calling.

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