

# Curriculum and methods research in special education

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## I Antecedents

More than 15 years ago, we concluded that the preparation of teachers remains an unstudied problem in education (Sarason, Davidson, and Blatt, 1961). We later concluded that it is unsatisfactorily studied for the same reasons that curriculum and methods research is of little consequence, inadequate because for the most part their basic underpinnings are inadequate (Blatt and Garfunkel, 1973); both the clinicians and researchers rely too much on specific methods, or curricula, or administrative organizations to solve or study pedagogical problems; and in our colleges of education professors offer their students "best" methods and "best" curricula, hoping to arm them with sufficient technical and clinical capabilities to teach well. These connections among educational researchers, teacher preparers, and teachers themselves are so direct as to hardly permit the separation of one from another, with the goal of each seemingly to discover or invent universal and happy solutions to complex problems and issues. Shades of the Middle Ages and their alchemists in search of the panacea! And the foolishness continues as we continue to "grind" out teachers whose work reflects the conception that education is primarily what one puts into children rather than what one can get out of them, whose preparation has probably introduced and has surely reinforced the above conception, who might be able to claim that they are good technicians, but little more (Blatt, 1974). Witness the new competency-based efforts, our new certifications and uncertifications, and the new technologies, and you may conclude that the return of thoughtfulness to pedagogical research and practice is not imminent.

During the years, we've written about the educational enterprise as a monolithic system no more capable of dealing with reconceptualization and revision than any other monolith, much as one might write about Big Business (Blatt, 1972). As we once said:

*We advertise segregated schools, open schools, free schools and ungraded schools in the educational supermarket for the same reasons others advertise Chevrolet, Keds, and popsicles; we believe we have the best product or, at the very least, we wish to convince the consumer that — all things being equal — our products offer the most value. As a result, our schools virtually have become franchised — duplicative in the same way General Motors and Howard Johnson are duplicative — strengthened by our teachers' colleges which have always been educational supermarkets — "you don't have to (we know you can't) think independently; see all the goodies we offer, choose within this wide array, consume to your satisfaction level, beyond if you wish, buy, but don't create, don't struggle to understand the process from the product, don't go beyond the boundaries of the marketplace, be different, but don't be different from any of the rest of us, be a part of this wonderful educational slot machine world" (Blatt, 1974, p. 88).*

In that paper, we suggested educational models be studied from historical rather than prescriptive perspectives; that is, from the context of what was accomplished rather than from what must be attempted. And we had reasons and some modest advice for researchers and, by implication, for practitioners. Hence this argument.

## II Focus

I cannot forget a particular childhood experience, probably because as far as I know it was the first time I thought about language as being something other than words. It was the first time I was made aware that human beings are circumscribed and bound, as well as freed, by their language. Awesome stuff for a very young child.

What was the experience? Someone visiting our home was heard telling my parents that a mutual acquaintance decided to stand for public office and, in order to influence public opinion, he bought

a newspaper. Not for days later did this puzzled child understand the statement. Not for days later could he comprehend how making a nickel purchase — something that even the boy had done — could in any way influence public opinion, much less help anyone to be elected to public office.

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Not merely children, or naive adults, live in worlds that are circumscribed by their language, by the metaphors they employ, by their understandings of the idioms of their culture, by what they know to be — or think they know to be — the “rules of the game”. Scientists, too, are culture-bound as well as time-bound, grounded by their experiences and, undoubtedly, victimized as well as enriched by them. All words, and the language that words form, have antecedents. If there are no words to describe a thought or a wish then not only do those become unthinkable ideas, but impossible ideas. Add to that our peculiar human frailty for exhibiting either contempt or awe for what we don't understand. Add to that the probability that even among the best of us, rather than struggle to fathom the complex and difficult, we are wont to either wallow pridefully in our disdain or our worship of the incomprehensible. Is it any wonder that we often search for guidance, for road maps, for *a priori* solutions, for the opportunity not to have to think to develop our own unique solution to a problem; rather, we prefer to implement the “standard” solution. Possibly, the rarest gift of all — that sometimes curse — is independence of mind.

Like the emperor's clothes, for many years curriculum research proceeded along traditional lines of investigation. In spite of the null hypothesis consistently obtaining, in spite of our inability to either learn very much or help very much — not necessarily related matters — we continued to apply traditional approaches to the study of very complex field problems, invariably with very unsatisfactory results.

The problem of relevancy of research methodology has been particularly troublesome in the broad field of research on children with special needs.<sup>1</sup> With some rare exceptions, research on people with special needs has followed traditional lines of experimentation, survey analysis, and test construction

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<sup>1</sup>The remainder of this paper is a brief summarization of our chapter (Blatt and Garfunkel) “Teaching the Mentally Retarded,” published in the *Second Handbook for Research on Teaching*, edited by Robert Travers, Rand McNally, 1973, pp. 632-656.

and validation. With rare exceptions, participant observation procedures, situation analyses, historical research, autobiographies, and process analyses have not been applied to these populations or problems associated with them.

As we had said elsewhere, the above remarks are not meant to belittle formal experimentation. Our concern is with the extent to which traditional models have determined the kind of research that is being conducted — rather than, conversely, models determined by the nature of problems studied. Further, we are dismayed that such traditional research models have also determined the kinds of independent variables (i.e. sources of intervention and treatment) that are selected for study and influence the scaling of independent variation. To state this in another way, researchers in the field of special education are confronted by the problems connected with the assignment of children to treatments and, to further complicate this, of teachers to treatments. This problem becomes formidable when the researcher attempts to effectively deal with the triads of teachers, children, and methods.

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Therefore, when one designs an experiment that includes children (who vary) and teachers and, possibly, some other adults (who vary) in classrooms, the notion of homogeneity of variance that assumes there is a similarity in the way a treatment occurs in different classes with different teachers and different children is questionable. Traditional research strategy in education is based on the belief that the method of teaching or the curriculum (or the curriculum organization) is the most significant independent variable. In such studies, the kinds of children and the personalities of the teachers are considered to be peripheral to the experimental comparison being made. Therefore, the controls are employed to equalize the other potentially independent variables. One objective of this argument is to present a rationale that is a reversal of the above example. By this we suggest the values that may obtain by assigning specifically for the purposes of field research on teaching major independent variables which relate directly to teachers and children, and intervening variables which relate to method and curriculum content.

For example, much attention has been given to the proposition that the teacher-child relationship is critical to the teaching process, suggesting the importance of not only the “how” of teaching, but

the relationship that develops between the teacher and both individual children and the total group (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1966). (In spite of serious reservations concerning their design and data analysis, Rosenthal and Jacobsen provide an interesting review of this literature.) An example of this phenomenon is the so-called *Hawthorne Effect*. By *Hawthorne Effect* we mean the change which occurs in an experimental group as a consequence of its participation in the experiment rather than as a consequence of the treatment itself. In fact, not only does the *Hawthorne Effect* persistently appear in psychological and educational experiments but seems to be more consistently related to improved performance than any particular method or curriculum. Therefore, the excitement generated by a research project (i.e. the "*Hawthorne Effect*") is an experimental side effect that appears to have more research significance than so-called main effects. Consequently, one assumption the researcher should consider is that something like the *Hawthorne Effect* is necessary to the development of a significant interaction. Yet another way of stating this is to specifically design *Hawthorne Effects* (one example may be to assure teachers that children can change under stipulated conditions) as important components of educational research.

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### **What makes the greatest difference? Is it heredity or environment? Is it school or home?**

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Although we believe that something akin to the "*Hawthorne*" is necessary, we do not believe that, in itself, such an effect is sufficient. We often talk about variability. What makes the greatest difference? Is it heredity or environment? Is it school or home? Latin or home economics? Discipline or therapy? If a child has a problem, what (or who) had the most to do with it? What is the main, most significant, most pervasive cause? What is the best, very best, way of undoing the problem? Does the answer to the first question (cause) lead to the answer to the second (undoing)? Does what is wrong indicate what should be done?

Eventually the question is: What should we do? And, how do we obtain that answer? Does it depend on who does it, or where it is done, or how much time there is? It is wishful thinking to expect that there is a clear relationship between what exists, why it exists, and what to do about it. Useful reductions probably are impossible, at least in the usual sense. Prescriptive education is a reduction. Therapeutic education is a reduction. Montessori, Frostig, Kephart, Cruickshank, Bereiter, A. S. Neill all offer reductions. To a degree, what we say

about reductions is a reduction; hence the tautology of it all and, if we're not careful, the self-inflicted trap. In this paper we have attempted to discuss the potential dangers of any reduction — be it "theirs" or ours. Simply stated, reductionists say *this* is what to do with children who present or behave in *this* manner. Whatever *this* is, there is the assumption that *this* can be identified, described and distinguished from something other than *this*.

What contributes to difference? Some children are poor, come from families who have inadequate housing, food, medical services, space — are crowded into cities (or rurally separated) — and they do not do well in school! Or on tests! Or on the cello! Often, they are migrant or immigrants. And, they do not speak Standard English. They are different. They do not feel well.

A lot of confusion exists about what people should do, how they should do it, and when it should be done. Who are to judge? Are the judges' values my values? Or yours? How can it all be put together: poverty, delinquency, migration, retardation, language, values, disability, learning? Or, can't it? Is it psychological, sociological, anthropology, epistemology? Some individuals in some groups do not fit. The first problem is to decide about fit: individuals who do not fit, groups that do not fit, or individuals who do not fit groups that do not fit.

There are several differences to being an individual who does not fit (or is not well matched) rather than being in a group that does not fit (or is not matched). For example, the new field of learning disabilities has epitomized the Individual-no-match (Blatt, 1969): Find out what is wrong, then treat it. The patient will subsequently get better. Mental retardation has always been in the Individual-no-match category. Unfortunately, this was a strategic error and interferes with progress in our field. For example, the Black population of the United States may be an illustration of an Individual-no-match category that did not begin to move out of a repressive society until they developed Black Power and Pride — i.e. until they assumed a Group-no-fit strategy. So too the Women's Movement.

### **III Summary and presumptions**

The literature in our field indicates that the preponderance of published research is experimental. Most studies of curriculum and methods have used traditional designs, whether they were so-called efficacy studies, follow-up studies of children in special and regular classes, studies of different methodological approaches, or studies of different curriculum approaches.

We believe there are more appropriate ways to study teaching-learning in classroom or tutorial situations. However, it is well known that researchers engage not in what they want to do but what they are able to do, not in what is important but what is possible, not in what is risky but what is safe and gives assurance of completion — and publication. People do what can be supported and most of us engage ourselves in activities that are comfortable and appreciated by others. Possibly, the most accurate judgement we can make about pedagogical research in special education now being published is that this is what the people in the field want or, possibly, there is not much else known that they can or wish to substitute for their current mode activity.

#### To conclude:

1. There is nothing inherent in disability to produce handicap, i.e. a belief in one's incompetency. Further, it is not the primary responsibility of the behavioural sciences to determine the validity of the aforementioned statement, but to make it valid. We have supported far too many studies purporting to demonstrate differences between groups or the disorders of one child in contrast with another. All these years, we should have promoted and encouraged research that sought to make it come true that a child would learn after participation in a special program or curriculum.

2. The above leads directly to a second recommendation, *viz a viz* the study of particular pedagogies, for the purpose of demonstrating their efficiency is rather fruitless and whatever is demonstrated will eventually be contradicted by subsequent research. Such "all or nothing" studies of methodologies and curricula prove little. By "all or nothing", we mean studies that compare the efficacy of one method with that of another or compare the superiority of one type of individual with that of another.<sup>2</sup> As methods do not exist outside of psychological-educational settings, and as they are implemented by unique groups of human beings, only a naive researcher could conclude that the demonstrated superiority of his method has direct and specific transferability to other educational settings.

Our research preference is to study children, and how they change, in different educational environments. We believe it is more defensible, and will make greater difference, to generalize about children interacting with each other and with adults in situations than it is to generalize about procedures. It is from evaluations of varieties of methods, with varieties of children in more or less formal and

informal settings, utilizing teachers with heterogeneous backgrounds, that hypotheses will be generated that will lead to viable theories concerning human development and learning. It appears to us that in this kind of strategy theory construction shifts from methodological concerns to those involving human interactive concerns.

We have attempted to discuss a relatively unpopular position among researchers and clinicians, a position that assumes that human research should not be an activity that is separated from values and prejudices about people. Further, we believe that it is impossible for the researcher to separate completely his beliefs from his research activities, even if he makes deliberate efforts in that direction. Therefore, research with so-called disabled persons should proceed, first, from a statement of values, then to an intervention and evaluation, with careful efforts to explicate the former, rather than to submerge it in contrived research designs that merely conceal such biases.

What is our bias? Put as simply as possible, we believe that capacity is a function of practice and training; e.g., intelligence is educable. And, as we have said earlier, it is a task of researchers, as it is *the* task of all clinicians, to validate this bias. In the ultimate sense, that should be the central mission. We also have the bias that although teachers are not "born" but are helped to unfold, the improvement of teaching in our schools will not occur in any remarkable way by attempts to create new curricula and methods and to increase the technical capabilities of the teachers. We surely must engage in those kinds of activities, but more to bring thoughtful examination to these questions than to attempt to replace a teacher's creativity and initiative with a narrow technical competency. Unfortunately, what the researchers appear to be pursuing is what is reflected in our schools. What was it that Pogo or one of his friends said about who the enemy is?

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<sup>2</sup>Or, as Campbell and Stanley (1963) incisively concluded, ". . . we must increase our time perspective, and recognize that continuous, multiple experimentation is more typical of science than once-and-for-all definitive experiments . . . we should not expect that 'crucial experiments' which pit opposing theories will be likely to have clear-cut outcomes." (p. 3).

On the other hand, we are not ready to suggest that there is **nothing** but uniqueness in an educational setting. There must be possibilities for building generalizations for, if "knowledge" is an objective, we must be concerned with the degrees of non-uniqueness. Unfortunately, as we stated above, the numerous dimensions of child-teacher interactions have been neglected and, consequently, hardly understood.

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