

The Politicization of Education Research and the AERA

Richard Phelps

“When you are studying any matter or considering any philosophy, ask yourself only: what are the facts and what is the truth that the facts bear out? Never let yourself be diverted either by what you wish to believe or by what you think would have beneficial social effects if it were believed. Look only and solely at: what are the facts?”

—Bertrand Russell, *To Our Descendants*¹

A story line in one of my favorite television shows—a courtroom drama—concerns a rogue judge caught tipping the proverbial scale of justice toward his own personal biases. At his disciplinary hearing, the presiding judge says to him matter-of-factly, “You’re not supposed to care who wins, remember?”

As it is supposed to be with judges in the U.S. court system, so it is supposed to be with academic research faculty. As Bertrand Russell implored, objective scientific inquiry requires that investigators not be diverted by what they wish to believe, or think would have beneficial social effects if it were believed. If not genuinely disinterested, objective scientists should at least conduct their research such that unfavored outcomes are possible. Otherwise, outcomes are predetermined, and the activity is not research, but advocacy. If research is performed for the sake of advocacy, that fact should be made transparent.

To the casual observer, the name of the century-old American Educational Research Association (AERA)—a professional organization largely comprising education school professors—might sound like any academic society, such as the American Historical Association or the Association for Psychological

1 “Bertrand Russell - Message to Future Generations,” Youtube.com, May 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihaB8AF0hZo>.

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Science. Indeed, that juxtaposition fools many who naïvely assume the AERA to be a comprehensive resource for objective expertise.

In its early days, a century ago, the AERA hosted objective research in the teaching and learning of subject matter knowledge and skills. That was before the creation of graduate schools of education, back when most education researchers were either psychology professors or state or local agency program evaluators, and teachers were trained in apprenticeship-like programs at “normal schools.” AERA’s current mission statement hints at this legacy.

*The American Educational Research Association (AERA) is the largest national interdisciplinary research association devoted to the scientific study of education and learning. Founded in 1916, AERA advances knowledge about education, encourages scholarly inquiry related to education, and promotes the use of research to improve education and serve the public good.*²

In more recent decades, however, the actual mission of education schools has grown more ambitious, with research expected to either support grand social change or, in what one might describe as “rearguard actions,” to protect the profession against threats to its autonomy: research finding fault with school choice or standardized tests is generally welcomed and, to my observation, AERA tolerates poorly designed, transparently biased, and fraudulent research that meets these objectives.³

Wearied of the double standard, I let my AERA membership lapse years ago. At the time, I thought its prevailing biases could not get any worse. I was wrong.

Transphobia

Shortly in advance of its April 2021 annual meeting, AERA leaders issued a statement calling on members to “use what we know to eradicate transphobia in our larger society.”⁴ The statement opens with a declaration of original sin: all of us share responsibility for bad thoughts and behaviors.

2 “Who We Are,” American Educational Research Association, <https://www.aera.net/About-AERA/Who-We-Are>.

3 See, for example, Richard Phelps, “A Decade in the Paranoid World of U.S. Education Research,” Part 1: The Scoldings, *Nonpartisan Education Review/Articles* 15, no. 1 (2019), <https://nonpartisaneducation.org/Review/Articles/v15n1.htm>.

4 “Statement from AERA President Shaun R. Harper and Executive Director Felice J. Levine in Support of Transgender and Non-Binary Persons,” AERA. (April 6, 2021), <https://www.aera.net/Newsroom/Statement-from-AERA-President-Shaun-R-Harper-and-Executive-Director-Felice-J-Levine-in-Support-of-Transgender-and-Non-Binary-Persons>.

[W]e call for AERA members and all others who work in education to accept responsibility for transphobic attitudes, cultures, practices, and policies that threaten and inflict harm on transgender and non-binary students and educators.

The AERA leaders side with one faction in the political debate over transgender policies and exhort association members to join them.

Many states are presently considering laws that would be educationally harmful and otherwise devastating to transgender citizens in and out of schools. . . . We [ask] our 25,000 members to leverage their research, platforms, and networks in pursuit of justice for transgender and non-binary persons.

Scholarly research should be objective and impartial, you thought? Not in the AERA, where conclusions formed by social justice imperatives come first, and the rest of the research process shapes to fit. And shouldn't careful investigators wait to assess the results of laws or policies until after they are implemented? Not necessary. AERA knows the "guaranteed consequences," even before policies or laws are adopted.

Given the guaranteed consequences of pending anti-trans bills across states, decisive action is urgently needed to confront the educational, psychological, and physical violence that trans communities will surely endure if existing transphobic public policies are upheld and new ones are passed.

Perhaps you thought the "educational research" embedded in the organization's title might include investigating, say, teaching and learning. No time for that; there are more important things to do.

We have an immediate responsibility to extend the reach of our research expertise on gender, trans people's experiences and outcomes, public policy, and related topics beyond conference papers, scholarly symposia, and academic journals. Research organizations like ours have the expertise and data that matter.

Little is defined in the AERA statement, even while all is already decided. The casual reader might conclude that pretty much anything and anybody could be considered transphobic, which may discourage any inclination to offer even nuanced disagreement. AERA hyperbole—“devastating,” “guaranteed consequences,” and “educational, psychological, and physical violence that trans communities will surely endure”—leaves no room for discussion. What self-respecting education analyst would volunteer to expose his work and reputation to those like Shaun Harper who feel no rhetorical restraint?

AERA intends to boycott any state passing an “anti-trans” law.⁵ Four states currently considering transgender legislation have hosted AERA conferences in the recent past—Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Texas.⁶

Coming Attractions

It is hard to know whether the transformation of AERA into an institution of strident political activism is driven by its leadership or by its rank-and-file members. But AERA’s outgoing president Shaun R. Harper appears to be just the kind of radical ideologue to push such an agenda. I study educational testing, a bogeyman widely reviled among education professors, and one of the few means by which those outside the public school system can gauge objectively what is happening inside. Experts can disagree about the efficacy of testing, certainly, but President Harper sees little room for discussion. Citing no empirical data, Harper declared in his 2020 presidential address to AERA, “An evil education lies to children . . . It traumatizes students of color with white supremacist tests that tell them they are not smart or good or qualified.”⁷ While I let my membership in AERA lapse some time ago, I’m not sure I’d be welcome back anytime soon. It is unlikely, however, that the end of Harper’s tenure will mean a course correction for AERA.

New AERA leaders title their call for papers for the 2022 AERA Annual Meeting in San Francisco, “Cultivating Equitable Education Systems for the 21st Century.”⁸ The statement includes the usual froth about “innovation”

5 “AERA Council Votes to Keep Association Meetings Out of States that Pass Anti-Trans Laws,” <https://www.aera.net/Newsroom/AERA-Council-Votes-to-Keep-Association-Meetings-Out-of-States-that-Pass-Anti-Trans-Laws>.

6 Previous Annual Meetings, AERA, <https://www.aera.net/Events-Meetings/Annual-Meeting/Previous-Annual-Meetings>.

7 “AERA 2020 President Shaun Harper Calls on Researchers to Accept Responsibility for Educational and Social Problems,” <https://www.aera.net/Newsroom/AERA-Highlights-E-newsletter/AERA-Highlights-April-2021/AERA-2020-President-Shaun-Harper-Calls-on-Researchers-to-Accept-Responsibility-for-Educational-and-Social-Problems>.

8 2022 Annual Meeting Presidential Program Theme, AERA, <https://www.aera.net/Events-Meetings/Annua>

everywhere, yet the new, exciting, and ambitious program repeats the same social justice themes of recent years. Here is a smattering of question prompts researchers are asked to consider for the annual meeting.

1. What kinds of teaching and learning processes foster equity, disrupt systemic inequality, and deepen learning?
2. What are the elements of equitable systems? What kinds of policies are required to foster them? How should schools and districts and higher education systems be structured? What social structures, policies, funding structures, and approaches to schooling are essential for equity?
3. What political or economic forces encourage or prevent such changes?
4. What core intersectional ideas and theoretical lenses about race, racism, privilege, and other “isms” (e.g., patriarchy, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, colorism, ageism, etc.) are key to our reimagining of education and schooling?

All equity, all the time. But there’s more!

It is a time for us to be laser-focused on understanding and redressing educational inequalities and building systems that embrace equity and justice. To do this, we must dismantle, redesign, and reconstruct systems that have reinforced and propagated structural racism, anti-Blackness, and educational injustice for minoritized people.

Reimagining these systems also means transforming how education conceptualizes and engages a whole range of human experiences, identities, and practices such as language, Indigenous knowledges, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Discussion

It is not as if there is nothing else that AERA researchers could be doing that would better align with their declared mission. True, much research—research now largely ignored or actively suppressed by AERA researchers—has already answered many of the basic questions about how students learn and how best

to teach them. Still, there remain many issues in need of objective study, and not all of them, or even most of them, concern group equity.

For example, useful research on the optimal spacing of lessons or retrieval exercises (i.e., tests) is conducted in psychology departments, but rarely in education schools. Likewise, research on “cognitive load,” how much, and what kind of, information students can process at any given time has been conducted for decades in psychology departments, but many education schools remain unaware of the concept. Other countries manage active research programs in different types of residential school settings for the most at-risk children. In the U.S., education schools are reluctant to consider any but the standard neighborhood boundary public schools. With all this important work that could be done, the primary national organization for education research prefers to pressure its members to commit their time to advance the radical agenda of identity politics.

So, do we just give up on education schools? Perhaps we could continue to deride education research as inferior; it can be ego-boosting to assure oneself that others hang beneath on one’s chosen academic ladder.

But we ignore what is happening to our schools of education at society’s peril. Despite their poor research reputation, education schools have succeeded in amassing power and influence, largely by behaving entrepreneurially while the canonical social science disciplines stuck to their medieval guild structures. Where is one most likely to find graduate training in program evaluation or testing and measurement? Ed schools. Where can one find programs for training to licensure in both teaching and counseling? Ed schools. Where can one find training programs in “college student personnel administration” (i.e., managing college residential halls and their embedded guidance and education programs)? Ed schools. What is the best place to start a career in higher education management (where one might craft policies that affect disciplinary faculty)? An Ed school. Apparently, a stint at an education school can also launch a successful career in DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), now a multibillion dollar industry.⁹

9 For example, outgoing AERA president Shaun Harper received his doctorate from an education school (Indiana U.), in the field of higher education, with the former head of the College Student Personnel Administration Program as his dissertation advisor. <https://rossierapps.usc.edu/facultydirectory/publications/231/Shawn-Harper-CV.pdf>. He is faculty in both the education school and business school at the University of Southern California.

Scholarly research should be objective and impartial, you thought? It is not in the AERA, nor in other research organizations run by education school professors. There, conclusions formed by social justice imperatives come first, and the rest of the research process is shaped to fit.

As Bertrand Russell said, “Men are born ignorant, not stupid. They are made stupid by education.”