

Reflections on Phil Rodkin's Research and Service from the Institute of Education Sciences

John Q. Easton. University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. June 2, 2014

I am very honored to have been invited to this conference and asked to speak. Thank you, Dorothy. Like all of you, I wish that Phil were here today to participate in this discussion of his work and many contributions to education.

In my five years at IES, I have been invited to visit and speak at least 20 university campuses. My trip here in the fall of 2011 was one of the most memorable of those visits. I was very heavily scheduled, in fact so heavily scheduled that I wondered whether I was being given some kind of endurance test. But I was treated royally and had a wonderful time. I had lively conversations with many interesting people, observed great work in action, participated in many engaging events and the Dean cooked a delicious dinner for me in her beautiful house in the woods.

As I prepared for that trip I asked around IES for background information on our UIUC grantees and their research projects. Liz Albro, Associate Commissioner on the National Center for Education Research, told me to be on the lookout for Phil Rodkin, because not only was he a stellar IES researcher and reviewer, but he was also a graduate of the University of Chicago, a friend of Liz's and a classmate of her husband's.

So given my own connection to the University of Chicago, I was indeed on the lookout for Phil.

The highlight of that visit nearly three years ago was a panel session, when Phil and several other members of the faculty with IES and other U.S Department of Education funding presented brief summaries of their research. I remember these presentations vividly and Phil's discussion of his work on the relationships between teacher practices, classroom dynamics and student sense of belonging. I thought how important these variables are to be studying, and how they are often overlooked or short changed in today's educational policy sphere. I was proud that IES was sponsoring this work.

This study examined how teachers shaped social dynamics of first, third, and fifth grade classrooms across 35 schools. With over 4,000 students, Phil and Scott Gest identified correlations between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding children's relationship dynamics – including friendships, bullying, and cliques. This exploratory study has implications for teacher training and for the development of interventions to address pervasive problems such as bullying and aggression in schools and classrooms. When teachers understand that episodes of bullying between two children can best be understood in a larger classroom peer group context, they may recognize the need to change those group dynamics to reduce the bullying. Phil and Scott also identified

associations between emotional support; specific strategies for managing social dynamics such as seeking to promote new friendships through seating charts; and the peer behavioral norms in the classroom. This study also illustrated how complex the social dynamics in a classroom can be. For example, many children are drawn to "tough" classmates – those who are perceived by peers as both popular and aggressive -- more strongly than they are drawn to prosocial youth.

We at IES expect a lot of our researchers. Not only do we require them to write strong proposals and conduct excellent research, but we often ask them to help us run our shop, especially in helping to review proposals and reports. Phil served as a member of IES' Social and Behavioral Education Research Scientific Review Panel for four years, between the fall of 2010 and this past spring; he was a principal member of the panel for the past 3 years (FY2012-14). Being a principal member is a distinction because we only ask those who have proved their mettle. Phil was scheduled to participate in the grant review that took place earlier this year when he was forced to withdraw, leaving us with very kind and much appreciated words about how much he had enjoyed his work on the panel over the past few years. Phil was strongly committed to the review process and we valued his participation for the thoughtfulness and expertise he brought to his reviews and to panel discussions, and for his conviviality. Lisa Bridges, a senior staff member in our standards and review office, worked most closely with Phil and specifically asked me to use the word "conviviality," because she

thought it conveyed perfectly Phil's liveliness and friendliness. We will miss his service to IES as an excellent reviewer, whose character and personality improved the review process for all.

Phil was an important member of the IES community. He studied relevant topics and aimed to make a difference – to make schools better, safer and more fulfilling places for students. He cared about the right values for students, teachers, schools – and researchers. We at IES valued Phil as a friend, as a colleague, as a highly regarded and respected researcher, and as a convivial member of our community.