

## **IES: Promises and Challenges.**

### **John Q. Easton. Presentation at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA, April 5, 2014**

Good morning. Thanks to Jerry Sroufe and Felice Levine for arranging this session and providing this opportunity to talk about some of the promises and challenges facing IES. And thanks to Mike McPherson, David Chard, Susanna Loeb and Joan Ferrini Mundy for joining today's session.

There's no question but that last year was a very challenging year. We had sequestration and then a shutdown. We weren't able to fund all of FY 2013's qualified applications. We were disappointed in not seeing our 2014 budget return to pre-sequestration levels.

But there was also plenty of promising and positive activity. In the fall we had high hopes for the reauthorization of IES's legislation, ESRA – the Education Science Reform Act. Those hopes were dashed, but suddenly they were resurrected earlier this week when the House introduced a new bill. We spent a good deal of time on the Hill talking to both House and Senate staffers about IES and ESRA. We also spent a good deal of time talking to GAO staff about our work at IES as they prepared a report on us.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-8>

In our many conversations with Hill staff and GAO staff, we heard again and again that IES has earned and maintained a reputation for the highest quality work, for rigor, for objectivity, and for nonpartisanship. We can't all but feel proud of this – Russ Whitehurst's initial work in establishing IES, in developing high standards and expectations and for taking some risks. I personally feel a sense of pride we've maintained our reputation for rigor and quality even as we explore some new directions in our grant making and contracted activities.

At the same time that we heard these words of praise, we were questioned about the relevance and usefulness of our work. We and our grantees were asked repeatedly to point to instances where our research made a difference. Have we helped to improve schools, to increase student achievement, raise high school graduation rates? Have we helped teachers manage their classrooms better, are we helping more students gain access to college? Are schools safer and calmer because of our work? Are special needs students having an easier or better time in school, learning more, making smoother transitions?

Between Hill staff and GAO, relevance and usefulness were the two most repeated words this past year. They are also words that I have used frequently since I've been at IES.

You probably know that we have designed several new funding opportunities to engender greater relevance and usability. These include small researcher-practitioner

partnership grants. We funded six last year and will fund several more this year. This competition is based on the premise that when researchers and practitioners engage with each other, the researchers will conduct useful work, and that at the same time, the practitioners will act on the research. Our Regional Education Laboratories are sponsoring 10 new research alliances.

This year we competed a new topic called Continuous Improvement Research in Education, which also required partnerships. We also competed a Knowledge Utilization Center – a center designed to learn more about how research can inform practice, how researchers can learn from practice and how researchers can conduct research that practitioners will want to use.

Promoting partnerships and studying knowledge utilization are important steps but will not by themselves insure the kind of relevance and utility that our colleagues on the Hill and at GAO are asking. They are steps in the right direction, but they are not sufficient.

As you know, there is already a good body of literature on research use, and one common finding is that there is relatively little “instrumental use” of research. That is, policy makers and practitioners rarely pick up a finding and execute it. More common is what some people call “conceptual use,” that is, research that helps people understand their problems better and helps them to think more carefully and thoroughly about

potential solutions.<sup>2</sup> I think that we need to make this distinction more clearly and show examples of both kinds of research use.

I wonder if IES hasn't built up high expectations for more instrumental uses of research given our emphasis on finding "what works"? I will return to this point.

A few months I read *Restoring Opportunity* by Greg Duncan and Dick Murnane.<sup>3</sup> This is a follow-up to the influential – and depressing – volume *Whither Opportunity*<sup>4</sup> from a few years ago that starkly laid out the growing educational gaps between rich and poor students. *Restoring Opportunity* is a slim, well written volume that describes several promising approaches to improving education for poor students. Duncan and Murnane describe Boston's pre-kindergarten program; a small cluster of charter schools operated by the University of Chicago; New York City's small high school program; and a social welfare program in Milwaukee designed to reduce family poverty. None of these are silver bullet approaches. They are all complex and multi-faceted, built on nuanced theories of change.

The educational programs all focus on high quality instruction. This is not simple to provide: you need good teachers, they need lots of support and time to work together. Teachers need good materials, strong curricula, and good assessments to

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Vivian Tseng, The uses of research in policy and practice.

<http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/File%20Library/Resources/Tseng-Social-Policy-Report-2012.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. *Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press and the Russell Sage Foundation. 2014

<sup>4</sup> Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. 2011.

track student progress. They need strong leaders to guide and coordinate the enterprise. The instructional and support systems must be surrounded by a sound accountability system that provides incentives for people to behave in the best interests of children. All of which needs to be embedded in a broader and more comprehensive view of schooling that recognizes that many children need more help than what a six hour school day can provide.

The educational programs described in *Restoring Equality* are not “packages.” Instead they are combinations and regimens of evidence-based practices and programs that address critical levers identified by research. They rely on research to guide them, not to tell them exactly what and how to do it. They embed research and evaluation strategies into their daily work so that their progress is continually monitored and adjusted, just like they monitor student progress and make regular adjustments.

There are many times when educators need to know what works and then to apply it – these are instrumental uses of research. But these are often discrete programs that address discrete problems. The more holistic approaches to school improvement like the examples in *Restoring Opportunity* are going to be informed by different research findings and involve conceptual rather than instrumental uses.

Let me give another example. Stephanie Jones and Suzanne Bouffard from the Harvard Graduate School of Education wrote a great paper in a Society for Research in Child Development Social Policy Report called “Social and emotional learning in schools:

from programs to strategies.”<sup>5</sup> They argue that many schools need a new approach to promoting social emotional learning that is different from the off the shelf “what works” intervention model approach. Jones and Bouffard argue that social and emotional learning approaches must be embedded in daily practices and routines of schools and teachers. To quote them:

We believe that schools need a continuum of approaches that range from routines and structures school staff and students use on a daily basis, to schoolwide efforts to promote respectful and supportive cultures and positive climates, to universal SEL programming for all students, to intensive services for students in need of the most support. Some schools’ needs will demand, and their contexts will allow, that they utilize approaches from across the continuum, from everyday strategies to intensive interventions. Other schools may begin with the everyday strategies and add other components as the need and opportunities arise.<sup>6</sup>

We should also think of new research paradigms to guide improvement regimens like those described in *Restoring Opportunity* and by Jones and Bouffard. Our new program called Continuous Improvement Research in Education is one such attempt, but I think that there are many others.

For example, I think we could profit by stepping back and thinking differently about the role of RCTs in our research and development work. Often, the RCT is the culmination of a long process of development and is intended to establish efficacy or effectiveness – “what works.” Perhaps the RCTs should play a bigger role earlier in the

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<sup>5</sup>Jones, S.M. & Bouffard. 2012. Social and emotional learning in schools: From programs to strategies. SRCD Social Policy Report, volume 26, number 4

<sup>6</sup> Jones and Bouffard, 2012, Page 12

development of new approaches, testing the myriad of decision points in what we now call iterative development. There is the possibility for being systematic and disciplined in “learning by doing.” A few months ago in *Educational Researcher*, Heather Hill and colleagues<sup>7</sup> argued that we could build better professional development programs by testing early in the development process, holding some aspects of the program constant (like content) and varying others (like delivery mode).

We can also improve our RCTs so that we learn more from them than “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” impact estimates. While we do need to learn what works, we often also need to know much more. In those cases, we need to understand for whom, under what conditions, why and how. More and more researchers and methodologists are taking these questions to heart. There is a surge of interest and activity in the field to help us “get under the hood” to understand mediators and mechanisms and to understand how variability in outcomes relate to important contextual, demographic and subgroup factors. Some of these issues can be addressed at the research design stage, where for example Cybele Raver has called on researchers to make “bright contrasts” between treatment groups so that we can learn something about the whys of an effect.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Heather Hill calls on PD researchers to test PD programs component by component, so that we don’t end up with big complicated interventions

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<sup>7</sup> Heather C. Hill, Mary Beisiegel, and Robin Jacob. Professional development research: Consensus, crossroads and challenges. *Educational Researcher* 2013 42: 476-487.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sree.org/video/index.php?s=2013FBall2>

and can't tell what it is about them that is effective or not. With support from the Spencer Foundation and the W.T. Grant Foundation, researchers like Steve Raudenbush, Sean Reardon and Howard Bloom are helping us think through how to analyze effects of mediators and the variability in outcomes better. So I expect to see progress in how RCTs are designed, analyzed and perhaps also in their role in development activities.

So far I've talked about a couple of ways how we can improve our relevance and usefulness – first, by engaging with practitioners in collaborative research partnerships, and second by specifically differentiating instrumental use from conceptual use and building new research strategies that will assist conceptual users.

There's another task that we may be able to undertake more quickly. Colleagues in our field have already conducted a large quantity of high quality research that is relevant and useful. Even when we don't have the direct answer to a problem, we can help practitioners and policy makers think their way to potential solutions. But we have a communications problem.

Last February Nicholas Kristof's wrote a column in the New York Times headlined "Smart Minds, Slim Impact."<sup>9</sup> The first sentence goes like this: "Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don't matter in today's great debates." There are many reasons this

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professores-we-need-you.html?re=nicholasdkristol>



happens, including the focus on publication in journals that no one but our colleagues read.

At nearly every meeting, the National Board on Education Science, the IES board, asks me and the commissioners about our communication or dissemination strategies. What are we doing to make more people aware of the excellent work done at IES and by our grantees?

We've had a great deal of activity at IES around these questions in the last few years. We're working hard on a complete redesign of the IES website to make it easier to navigate and to highlight fresh content, including videos and blogs. Ruth Neild and her team at IES, along with their contractors, have performed miracles with the WWC and the ERIC websites. The WWC, the Regional Labs, and our evaluation division have introduced a whole series of reports and other informational products that have been well received. We now Tweet and are about to blog. On a lot of this I'm feeling a little out of my own comfort zone, but I know that we've got to try these things or we'll be dinosaurs. We are encouraging our grantees to communicate their work in new ways and to new audiences.

IES values and supports publications in scientific journals. We are simply asking researchers not to stop there, and to consider publications and presentations in venues that are more likely to reach policymakers and practitioners. We understand that a

stronger emphasis on communication is putting some researchers outside of their comfort zone, too. We want to emphasize that researchers do not have to do this on their own. In fact, we encourage researchers to find partners who can help in this effort. This may include University Communications offices, or intermediary organizations that see dissemination as a role they can play. We at IES are also trying to learn how to do better in this area and also how best to encourage researchers to be better communicators. We welcome feedback and suggestions.

At the end of the day, if we want to preserve public funding for scientific education research, we have to do better in demonstrating that the work is relevant and useful to policymaking and practice. In other words, this is in our own self-interest!

I want to end by returning to the title of the session: Promises and Challenges. They go hand-in-hand. I think that with some of the examples I've just described we can turn our challenges into promises and truly be more useful and relevant.

Thanks.