

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

### **Investing in Early Childhood Development**

edited by Alvin R. Tarlov and Michelle Precourt Debbink, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

### **Standardized Childhood**

by Bruce Fuller, Stanford University Press, 2008

reviewed by Richard Sawyer, Ph.D.

For decades, education authorities have warned that the educational achievement of America's young adults is insufficient to maintain the nation's economic and social strength. Moreover, there are disturbingly large differences in educational achievement among demographic groups. Diverse parties have recommended many different strategies for ameliorating these problems. Acrimonious debate has accompanied many of the suggestions, particularly those that involve punitive sanctions, spending large sums of money, or shifts in political power. In particular, the debate over accountability systems mandated by No Child Left Behind has captured public attention in recent years. Much earlier, however, a strong movement arose to solve educational and other social problems by allocating more resources to development in early childhood (before age five). This movement, which has grown steadily since the 1960s with the initiation of Head Start, now accounts for more than eighteen billion dollars per year in federal expenditures.

A common-sense notion of human development is that early experiences related to health, physical skills, social skills, emotional development, or cognitive development affect later outcomes. Furthermore, it seems easier to prevent problems, or at least to mitigate them early, rather than to try to correct them later.<sup>1</sup> Based on

---

educational HORIZONS® (ISSN 0013-175X) is published quarterly by Pi Lambda Theta, Inc., P.O. Box 6626, Bloomington, IN 47407-6626. Pi Lambda Theta membership includes a subscription to educational HORIZONS®. Nonmember subscriptions are available for \$21 per year, U.S.; \$32 per year, Canada and international. Periodicals postage paid at Bloomington, Indiana, and other mailing offices. Single copies: U.S. \$6, Canada \$6.50, and international \$8, plus \$1.75 postage. POSTMASTER: Address changes should be mailed to: Pi Lambda Theta, P.O. Box 6626, Bloomington, IN 47407-6626. All claims must be made within four months of publication. Back volumes available on microfilm from National Archive Publishing Co., 300 Zeeb Rd., P.O. Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346; (800) 420-6272; outside N.A., (734) 302-6500; [www.napubco.com](http://www.napubco.com). Indexed in Current Index to Journals in Education (ERIC). Selected back issues available online at [www.pilambda.org](http://www.pilambda.org). Copyright 2009, all rights reserved, by Pi Lambda Theta. Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Pi Lambda Theta. educational HORIZONS® is a trademark of Pi Lambda Theta.

such principles, “infant schools” and kindergartens emerged by the mid-nineteenth century in Germany, Britain, and the United States. Today, of course, pre-school programs of one type or another are commonplace in this country: in 2000 more than two-thirds of all four-year-olds attended some kind of program outside the home. In addition to the developmental benefits the programs provide, they are a practical necessity for parents who must work outside the home. The current “system” of early childhood education, however, is a hodgepodge of different services, providers, funding sources, accessibility, and quality.

Advocates of early childhood development and education (ECDE) programs are concerned with improving several aspects of current programs: expanding access, serving children by age two or three, and improving the quality of programs to address children’s needs in all developmental domains. Several organizations, including the Association for Childhood International, the High/Scope Research Foundation, the National Institute for Early Education Research, the Pew Charitable Trust, and Pre-K Now, support or engage in research and advocacy related to ECDE.

The Texas Program for Society and Health, headquartered at Rice University, is a collaborative initiative among five educational institutions for research and education on the social determinants of health. The Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition is an allied advocacy organization. In 2004, these organizations sponsored a national conference, “A Summit on the Texas Plan: Enhancing Early Childhood Education and Development—Research, Policies, and Strategies.” *Investing in Early Childhood Development* is based on papers presented at that conference or previously published elsewhere. The book consists of three sections: (1) summaries of findings about ECDE from brain science, psychology, social science, and health; (2) recommendations for effective ECDE programs and discussions of programs in different states (including detailed summaries of programs in North Carolina and Texas); and (3) public policy issues—the effects of expected demographic and economic changes, cost-benefit analyses of the effectiveness of ECDE programs, recommendations for system design and public financing, and recommendations for more effective advocacy.

*Investing in Early Childhood Development* is an excellent resource for policymakers, educators, and advocates of ECDE programs, as well as others who want to learn more about the field. The chapters emphasize several themes: (1) Early childhood environment affects brain structure and therefore mental development; moreover, its effects are long lasting. (2) We must attend to children’s

needs in all developmental areas (health, motor skills, socio-emotional characteristics, and cognitive skills); success in one area depends on success in all the others. (3) Negative environmental characteristics relate strongly to low socioeconomic status; they begin at conception and continue throughout adulthood. The authors believe that ECDE will mitigate the corrosive effects of pathological environments and result in greater overall health, happiness, and prosperity in the future.

The information content in *Investing in Early Childhood Development* is dense, but the prose is quite readable. I particularly enjoyed the chapters on brain science, variables that influence health, and cost-benefit analyses. The foreword states that the purpose of the Texas conference was to “critically evaluate research results relevant to early childhood education and development.” Although the book’s content and tone seem grounded more in advocacy than in critical evaluation, its information and arguments are nonetheless well presented.

\* \* \*

*Investing in Early Childhood Development* contains no in-depth discussions of the history of ECDE in the United States, political and cultural issues associated with its expansion, or research on its effectiveness. *Standardized Childhood*, by Bruce Fuller, does provide such information, if with a decidedly skeptical tone. For this reason, among others, it provides an excellent complement to *Investing*.

Fuller agrees that we need to make a stronger investment in ECDE, particularly for children from low-income families. What bothers him is the prospect that “earnest elites” and “institutional liberals” in think tanks, state governments, and universities are relentlessly propagandizing for monolithic systems controlled by government education bureaucracies. Fuller believes that these bureaucracies could dominate the delivery of ECDE as they now do K–12 education. In his view, they could impose one-size-fits-all programs that might prove ineffective and deprive parents of the traditional right and responsibility to raise their children as they see fit. He fears that government control and delivery would crowd out private community-based providers that have proved effective and compatible with parents’ traditions and values. He also believes that because of the pressure exerted by state accountability systems, ECDE controlled or delivered by government bureaucracies will focus narrowly on improving test scores at the expense of other important developmental domains. Fuller arrives at those conclusions by detailing the political history of ECDE programs in Oklahoma and California. His

stories about the political actors and forces in those states are informative and entertaining.

Not only does Fuller oppose universal, free ECDE because of the tendency of the “earnest elites” to impose bureaucratic government-controlled systems; he also doubts that empirical research has demonstrated significant long-term ECDE benefits for middle-class children. A valuable component of *Standardized Childhood* is its review (co-written with Margaret Bridges) of research on the effectiveness of ECDE programs. This review summarizes benefits by scale and intensity of programs, services offered, populations served, and service providers. As in much social science research, it is difficult to conduct studies that target large-scale, diverse populations; are based on random assignment of treatments; and collect extensive long-term follow-up data. As a result, conclusions on the effectiveness of ECDE are usually open to challenges of one sort or another. Fuller and Bridges’s research summaries tend to view the glass as half empty. That tendency no doubt annoys ECDE advocates, who naturally look for success stories. In making decisions that will affect the lives of millions of children and expend billions of dollars, however, it is probably wise to develop programs and systems incrementally and to adapt them as we learn more about what works well and what doesn’t.

The penalty for adopting an incremental approach is that it delays providing services to children who need them, but the alternative is to risk committing massive resources to systems before they develop adequate designs for management and evaluation or before there is strong evidence of their likely effectiveness. An example that comes readily to mind, of course, is Head Start, to which the federal government commits more than six billion dollars per year. Head Start began in the 1960s, but only recently has strongly designed large-scale research begun to demonstrate benefits from the programs it supports. In the interim, various studies have yielded conclusions pro and con against a background of vociferous debate in education and political circles: the U.S. Government Accountability Office recently criticized the management of Head Start for inadequacies in assessing risks, estimating payments, and obtaining accurate data from grantees.<sup>2</sup>

The writing style in *Standardized Childhood* is engaging. It is narrative, rather than didactic, yet precise. There is also ample wit, occasionally garnished with irony. I think that even people displeased by what Fuller has to say will enjoy his prose.

*Investing in Early Childhood Development* and *Standardized Childhood* are both important resources for anyone who wants to

learn about or debate ECDE in the United States. The former is written from the perspective of insiders convinced that we should greatly expand ECDE programs; the latter, from the perspective of a critic who supports many aspects of ECDE but who is deeply skeptical about state bureaucracies and believes that private, community-based organizations can deliver services more effectively. I recommend both books.

### Notes

1. The *Best Evidence Encyclopedia* (<http://www.bestevidence.org>), for example, has found only small-to-moderate effects in the benefits of high school remedial courses in studies that met their evidence standards. Other research has shown that improving students' educational achievement by eighth grade is likely to result in far-greater improvement by the time they graduate from high school than will either enhanced preparation of individual students or improvements in the high schools themselves. See "The Forgotten Middle: Ensuring That All Students Are on Target for College and Career Readiness before High School," available at <<http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/index.html>>.

2. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Head Start: A More Comprehensive Risk Management Strategy and Data Improvements Could Further Strengthen Program Oversight" (GAO-08-221, 2008). Available at <<http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-08-221>>.

---

### The Educational Morass

by Myron Lieberman, Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2007

reviewed by Linda Seebach

Myron Lieberman chose the title metaphor for his new book with care. *The Educational Morass* examines the conflicting interests that have bogged down some of the most determined attempts to improve American public schools.

Early in his career, Lieberman was an advocate for teachers unions, to the point of running (unsuccessfully) for president of the American Federation of Teachers in 1961–62. Later, he served as a labor negotiator for school boards in several states, even once on the union side, before coming to view collective bargaining, at least as practiced, as bad public policy. He's regarded now, fairly enough, as a conservative, but he points out that his change in viewpoint preceded his association with other self-described conservatives. He certainly apportions blame evenhandedly to both liberals and conservatives.

The early part of the book covers various reform strategies and why they haven't worked and aren't likely to, even when they're widely supported.

Higher salaries for teachers are, of course, highly popular with teachers. The idea, by no means flattering to those already teaching, is that teacher quality is a key to raising achievement, and that higher salaries will attract talented people who are now choosing other careers. And perhaps they will, but at huge cost, given that there are roughly three million teachers now and that raising all their salaries will also increase salaries for support personnel and administrators. Lieberman points out that higher salaries for current teachers, especially those nearing retirement, might well have the effect of postponing retirement—including that of some people districts might like to replace.

If higher pay for everybody isn't feasible, how about higher pay for just some—those who are exceptionally effective in the classroom (merit pay or pay for performance) or those who are especially hard to recruit and retain (math and science teachers, say)? Lieberman points out the less-than-satisfactory results of some past merit pay initiatives, for instance in Los Angeles, though the plan there was probably misnamed since awards were schoolwide and took no account of individual differences in performance.

Though teachers and their unions invariably oppose merit pay, or quibble about the details to such an extent that whatever plan is actually tried bears little resemblance to the original proposal, the idea also has little appeal either to administrators (lots of work) or to school boards (lots of controversy). As evidence, Lieberman notes that states where unions are weak, or where collective bargaining is banned, have been no more eager to try it than elsewhere.

Whatever the merits of merit pay in general, Lieberman singles out math and science teachers, who in his view “should be considered a different occupational group, not a subgroup of K–12 teachers. The talents and skills required are of a different order.” He compares the way they are paid to placing professors of neurosurgery and history on the same salary schedule, a practice that “would result in a dearth of neurosurgery professors, even if we substantially overpaid history professors.”

Another popular reform is reducing class sizes, but besides being hugely expensive, it has limited benefits if implemented on a large scale, as California tried to do. “If class size is reduced, more teachers will be needed, and the additional teachers may be of lower quality and depress whatever gains were made possible by smaller classes,” Lieberman writes.

Lieberman's chapter on charter schools makes an important if often underestimated point. Research on charter results is equivocal; critics and supporters can both see what they want to see. Charter

schools aren't a panacea for all that ails education (not that supporters ever thought they were). But one conclusion is unassailable: whatever charters do, they do it for much less money than the neighborhood schools their students would otherwise attend. That's strong evidence, if it were needed, that shortage of money is not the cause of poor results and that more money will not necessarily improve them.

One area Lieberman thinks is unreasonably neglected is educational research. The substandard quality of educational research—compared with pharmaceutical research, for instance—is well-known. Not a great deal is spent on it, to be sure, but what is spent comes mostly from taxpayers. Nobody has any great stake in ensuring that the quality of the research is good, that significant results are widely disseminated, that they are ever put into practice, or that the real-world results are evaluated. As a result, Lieberman says, policymakers use research to justify what they want to do anyway.

I wish Lieberman had spared a few paragraphs to discuss one of the most spectacular failures of dissemination—the federal Project Follow Through, which involved two hundred thousand children in grades K–3 from 1968 to 1977. It tested a variety of philosophical approaches to early elementary education, and the clear winner, going away, was a highly structured program called Direct Instruction (DI), developed by Siegfried Engelmann of the University of Oregon and colleagues. It wasn't supposed to turn out that way; the models tipped for the winner's circle by project organizers were mostly touchy-feely “child-centered” models. When the wrong horse won, officials decided simply to ignore the whole thing and not promote the only successful model that had emerged. I've met many teachers of considerable experience who have never heard of Project Follow Through or of DI, and all they know about (lower-case) direct instruction is that it's bad for children and that they should always call it “drill-and-kill,” though neither of those points is accurate.

Lieberman devotes a chapter to another unjustly neglected topic, how education is presented in the media. He thinks journalists who report on education seldom know much about it, and what they do know is often wrong. As a retired journalist who often wrote about education, I agree with him up to a point. But I don't see any solution in further training or some kind of certification test, as he seems to suggest. Reporting on education is usually a short-term assignment: when a newspaper's education reporter leaves or moves on—supposing, that is, it's one of the relatively few papers large enough to designate an education reporter—somebody else gets the job for a while. As with any other specialized beat, he doesn't need to know

as much as the people he's writing about; he just needs to know more than the people he's writing for.

No, the larger problem is with the content of any such training. After all, teachers themselves undergo an elaborate certification process, and Lieberman devotes a whole chapter to what's ineffective about the teacher certification process. Why would he expect anything different in journalism on education? He notes that one of the problems already is that most journalism news concerns public schools, and so its sources tend to be people committed to public schools.

Lieberman writes at length about the ideological assumptions hidden in arguments about how much education costs, and how much it should cost. Most spending figures, including those from the National Center for Education Statistics, cite operating costs, excluding capital expenses, debt service, and interest. That's an important comparison; it's just not the only one. In particular, it seriously disadvantages charter schools that have to fund their own buildings. And even those figures are then spun by agenda-driven publications whose state rankings have even become fodder for political campaigns and bumper stickers.

An enormous but largely hidden financial burden on school districts and other government agencies is the future cost of pensions and retirement benefits that are far more generous than those in the private sector, and virtually immune to policy changes until everyone now in the system who will be eligible has left this life, in a century or so.

Those who take the time to read Myron Lieberman's *Educational Morass* in depth will find these and many other useful insights into how group interests shape efforts to find a way out of the morass.