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Fact or Opinion? A Conversation Starter on Educational Reform

By Paula Lancaster & Sean Lancaster, GVSU Faculty

After we agreed to write this article, we began looking for a meaningful quote that might set the tone for our message. When we saw Emerson's words above, we resisted them because "opinion" is simply a personal view or belief. Surely personal views and beliefs should not be the basis for reforming public education, right?

But when we explored the definition of "opinion" further, we found that an opinion could also be "a conclusion of fact."

Imagine what could happen if education reform at all levels (i.e., classrooms, schools, districts, states, and teacher preparation) were based on conclusions of fact. Opinion based on fact could indeed be a powerful and positive force for change. Imagine how we could proceed if a strong belief were tested first in a few small-scale tests. If results were positive, the ideas could be further tested in various field settings. If results were still positive and cost-benefit analysis demonstrated worthy results, the ideas could be

"Every reform was once private opinion."

– *Ralph Waldo Emerson,*
(1841)

scaled up across schools, districts and, potentially, states. This process could inform legitimate reform—and sometimes has.

Unfortunately, many recent reforms in education seem to be based on personal views, judgments and

beliefs—in other words, the types of opinions that are not based on fact (Curtis, Bordelon, & Teitelbaum, 2010). They occur not because of evidence that student learning will improve but rather because someone or some group has a belief about public education. That belief gets shared with like-minded individuals, and a movement is born. The movement might manifest itself as legislation, or a new kind of delivery, or a professional development wave, or college course, or commercial curricula. Unfortunately, personal beliefs can form the basis for ineffective, or worse yet, detrimental public policy (Education Commission of the States, 2010; National Research Council, 2011; Supovitz, 2009).

If we had control over taxpayer dollars, in which type of reform would we want to invest those hard earned dollars...

___ A. Reforms that were personal views, beliefs or judgments?

___ B. Reforms that were conclusions of fact?

Personal views, beliefs and judgments can be the starting point for powerful findings that move our society forward. These thoughts can lead to theories and theories should lead to research, but only research leads to conclusions. In fact, one of our few favorite parts of *No Child Left Behind* is its emphasis on “research-based practices” in the classroom. The phrase appears over one hundred times in the legislation, and it is a focus on which we completely agree. Yet recent education reforms do not seem to hold to that standard. For example, no empirical evidence exists to support the widespread use of various instructional practices such as Multiple Intelligence, Brain Gym, Learning Styles (Hyatt, 2007; Lindell & Kidd, 2011; Spaulding, Mostert, & Beam, 2010; Stephenson, 2009; Watherhouse, 2006) yet these approaches are quite prominent in schools and even teacher preparation programs, often replacing instructional time that could be spent on evidence-based practices. We recognize that future studies might demonstrate that these approaches are associated with some educational benefit, but to date, this research does not exist. At best we are implementing experimental practices that some time in the future may or may not be shown to increase student learning. At worst we are giving away countless hours of instructional time, valuable resources on professional development and products, and public trust in our ability to make good instructional choices.

We believe that the use of research-based or evidence-based practices in education is critical. Our students deserve the absolute best that science in our field has to offer. We owe it to students, families and taxpayers to use approaches that have been demonstrated effective rather than unsubstantiated opinions that find their way into publishing circuits, professional development courses, teacher in-services and, quite frankly, the university classroom.

Other professions have a scientific or specialized knowledge base that guides their practice. If education is to be considered a profession, if we are to maintain any level of autonomy, we need to embrace our knowledge base as well.

We cannot prevent state or federal legislators from making decisions based largely on personal beliefs and political agendas, but we can push back by insisting on the use of evidence-based practices to the greatest extent possible at every level within our field.

We praise those many, many teachers who are not swayed by fads or the latest slick program and instead insist on principled, evidence-based approaches as a matter of professional practice. We know many of them first-hand. We have also witnessed teachers and administrators in school districts who have researched—really researched—programs and interventions before they implemented them. We have deep admiration for those professionals and publicly defend their hard work.

We are aware of many teacher education programs where faculty members ensure that students have access to the best and most current science in their respective fields. We are proud of the College of Education’s recent focus on identifying and sharing with our students and each other the seminal theories, key research, and evidence-based practices that drive our programs and individual courses while we simultaneously work to provide our students both graduate and undergraduate with significant opportunities to implement these practices in the field.

We also believe that some legislators and policy makers must be keenly interested in research. Perhaps a reader or readers will provide an example or two of a recent legislative reform that was based on strong, conclusive evidence. At the moment, we are drawing a blank. In fact, as we looked at research in countries that show the greatest results in public education, our federal and state reform efforts seem to be headed in the opposite direction (Tucker, 2011).

Effective teaching is hard. In classrooms where students are academically diverse, effective teaching is even more difficult. There are no quick fixes, magic wands, ten steps to super smart kids. Learning just doesn’t work that way. Quality education efforts do not come with shortcuts. Teaching requires a strong intellect, knowledge of child and adolescent development, knowledge of pedagogy, content expertise, communication skills, a high level of

energy, thick skin, organizational skills, and much, much more (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The science in our field offers many potential solutions to the complex problems we face. Research in our field is as close as we can come to a *conclusion of fact*. And, we argue, research should always be a basis for reform.

We sincerely hope that this article will serve as a think piece or conversation starter for how we as educators can respond to the many reforms we face. Writing it was not easy, and we are well aware that some of what we included might not be well received. We do not have a strong desire to be personally “right” or to win a debate about this topic, but we do have a desire to move our field forward—this field that we dearly love—to build it up and gain back some of the autonomy that has been lost. We look forward to your comments, questions, and criticisms.

The authors wish to thank Dr. Cynthia Mader for her tremendous assistance on this article. Once again, her clear thinking has made our work better.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Intense Interest Around Reform

I hope you become active in the educational reform debate after reading this issue. Educational reform has been in the front of my thoughts due to the fast paced activity in legislatures across the United States. Keeping track of proposed changes is very difficult with the number of sweeping bills being proposed. Our public school system is changing and it is our duty to stay informed. I hope this issue contributes to your knowledge and interest in education reform.

An article that I would highly recommend, for much needed perspective, was written by Jack Jennings entitled “Reflections on a Half-Century of School Reform: Why

Have We Fallen Short and Where Do We Go From Here?” This must read article is available for free from the Center on Education Policy at <http://www.cep-dc.org/display-Document.cfm?DocumentID=392>.

Interest in this issue has been high after the topic focus was announced. The contributors to this issue have given their best work to Colleagues and to you. Thank you as always to the volunteers that make Colleagues an award-winning publication.

Clayton Pelon
Editor-in-Chief