

## Book Review

### ***The Politics of Inquiry: Education Research and the "Culture of Science"***

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Benjamin Baez and Deron Boyles, *The Politics of Inquiry: Education Research and the "Culture of Science."* New York: SUNY Press, 2009. 252 pp. ISBN 079147688X. \$24.95 (pbk.)

Baez and Boyle provide evidence that educational research is inherently political and shapes how we look at the world, what research questions we ask, and what counts as a valid answer. They show how those who hold powerful governmental and academic positions advocate for and limit funding to research that is positivistic and elevates the natural sciences above all other forms of science. Such an approach not only marginalizes other forms of science but also slights ethical questions of good and right action. Moreover, this narrow view of science guides what research the government, foundations, and corporations fund, what academic journals are held up as most prestigious, which research is published, and what research counts towards tenure and promotion. Most importantly, the current push towards positivist research, exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act and National Research Council holding up experimental research with randomized control groups as the "gold standard," positions teachers and most education professors as consumers of research rather than creators of knowledge. Therefore, in this clear and cogently argued book, Baez and Boyles expose how particular social, political, and economic forces, including the rise of globalization and neoliberalism, shape this increasingly dominant view of science, research, and education. These concerns form the basis for the book's five chapters: "(1) the professionalization of education researchers, (2) the scientism and positivism of education research, (3) the normalization of doc-

toral work, (4) the institution of science in our lives, and (5) the political economy of research” (p. 5).

The authors begin with a critique of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Institute of Education Science (IES), and the National Research Council’s report “Scientific Research in Education” (SRE). The legislation and reports not only promote a narrow view of science but also, as practices, make possible particular thoughts, conversations, and pedagogies while excluding others. Furthermore, they argue, theory and practice have a dialectical relationship with each, in such a climate, reinforcing the other. Consequently, those who hold dominant positions in the research community shape and limit how educational research is conceptualized and carried out, with real implications for educators.

Using the theoretical constructs of both Foucault (1970, 1978) and Derrida (1984), the authors advocate that engaging in debates over what counts as science is inadequate. Instead, they assert that we need to question “the ideological presumptions and political practices that make it possible, particularly those granting legitimacy to scientific knowledge” (p. 31). Therefore, they trace out how the dominant view of educational research, as embodied by the NRC and the IES, aims to prove, through ostensibly objective and replicable experimental design, which educational programs and practices are effective. They describe as a leading advocate of this approach Grover Whitehurst (n.d.), first director of the IES, who held up as the research standard “randomized field trials when the question is the effectiveness of mature programs and practices.”

The authors are not, however, against science. Rather, they are against the ways in which science has become the only acceptable narrative, rather than one narrative among many. They are interested in “the construction and social consequences of scientific knowledge and the expertise it confers on particular actors” (p. 31), primarily those in power and those who obtain funding from the agencies promoting experimental empirical research.

Baez and Boyles demonstrate that the scientism of organizations such as the IES and the NRC are of concern for several reasons, but three stand out for the authors. First, the IES and NRC view experimental scientific research as neutral and objective. However, as Baez and Boyle explain, all research encapsulates human interests and can be neither neutral nor objective. Embedded within all research are assumptions about the nature and purpose of schooling and society and how the world works, which are inherently normative questions of ethics and social justice. Therefore, what questions researchers ask and how they are answered cannot escape being a political, value-laden process.

However, by presenting science as neutral and objective, science is used by those in power to depoliticize public issues by delineating decisions as technical rather than political. And, as the authors suggest and I elaborate on below, this view of science complements the current neoliberal approach to economic and political issues in which questions of what is produced and who gets what is decided by

the ostensibly neutral economic market. Similarly, questions regarding national or global economic development and problems such as climate change are reduced to mere technical problems that can be solved through market mechanisms rather than raising questions regarding global inequality, or our relationship with nature and with one another.

Second, by limiting research to randomized field trials, scientific research and knowledge can only be created by scientists conducting large-scale empirical studies, therefore marginalizing what other scholars, teachers, and other educators know. This narrow definition of research further contributes to the ongoing denigration and deprofessionalization of both teacher educators and primary and secondary teachers. We can see this process at work as teachers are excluded from discussions regarding what and how we should teach. Instead, teachers are increasingly required to implement lessons and units that prepare students for standardized tests, which are developed by large corporations, often funded by the federal government.<sup>1</sup>

Third, such an approach, John Dewey reminds us, undermines the meaning of democracy. Dewey argued that knowing is rooted in the problems faced by people in context, as people attempt to understand and solve their problems. Meaningful research need not meet the requirements of the NRC, but, instead, result from informal and collaborative inquiry conducted as part of a democratic community. Furthermore, the quest for truth or certainty is misleading, and, instead, we should aim for the exchange of warranted assertions as part of multiple contexts and narratives.

In sum, scientific elites increasingly control and promote a narrow view of science that advances their own research and invalidates research created through other means of data collection, such as case studies, ethnographic, and qualitative research designs. They also dismiss educators' knowledge of teaching and learning; therefore, positioning teachers as consumers rather than creators of research.

Such a view of science has come about in part because of the rise of neoliberal economic and social policies, in which increasing corporate profits becomes the central purpose of society and schooling. Neoliberal policies seek to improve corporate profitability by deregulating corporations, reducing governmental spending for social services such as education, increasing unemployment and otherwise weakening the ability of workers to demand higher wages. Because economic expansion and profitability becomes the goal, all questions having to do with ethics or social justice are marginalized as extraneous to the market nexus. Neoliberalism, like the current dominant view of science, is also promoted as a neutral, objective means for making economic and societal decisions.

Under neoliberalism, the purpose of schooling becomes producing efficient workers who will contribute to corporate growth. Subsequently, math and language arts are held up as the most important subjects and science, social studies, and the arts are marginalized. Moreover, as Grover Whitehurst, from the Institute of Education Science stated, education should cost less and, therefore, needs to be

effective and efficient. Therefore, to promote efficiency public schools should have to compete with private charter schools, and high-stakes standardized exams are to be used to compare schools.<sup>2</sup>

Neoliberalism, Baez and Boyles write, has also had a deleterious effect on higher education. Over the last several decades, funding for public universities has been substantially reduced, and all universities face increased competition for funding. Consequently, universities have become increasingly entrepreneurial, as they have sought research grants to increase their revenue and to fund faculty and doctoral students' research.

Moreover, given the narrow view of science held by most granting agencies, coupled with the desire to contribute to the neoliberal enterprise, such grant seeking poses the danger of distorting the values of the university and the activities of faculty and students. The authors provide as an example their own experiences at Georgia State University, where faculty who obtained external research grants would be advantaged in terms of time reserved for research and publishing, access to journals, a reduced teaching load, and more doctoral assistants and travel funding. Therefore, faculty who obtained external funding would more easily gain tenure and promotion and their research "expertise" would become dominant.

Such policies distort the university's mission, research, and teaching activities. Because faculty in the humanities or the arts, and education faculty who do not research science, math, or literacy education (narrowly defined) have more difficulty obtaining external funding, they are disadvantaged compared to their colleagues in the sciences. Consequently, faculty devote increasing effort to searching for possible funding sources and, given the narrow definition of scientific research, often conclude that obtaining external funding requires that they change their field of study. For example, in my own university, a criterion for promotion includes the number and size of external grants. However, because there is scarce external funding for critical theorists with a focus on social studies education, my chances for funding and promotion are limited. My chances may improve now that I have connected social studies to issues of climate change and environmental sustainability, although even there funding organizations tend to hold the narrow, technical view of science described earlier.<sup>3</sup>

The authors, like myself, suggest that the role of the university should not be to contribute to capitalist profits but, rather, to question the role of the market and to provide alternative possibilities for the world, or to reimagine it. In doing so, they do not call for academic freedom and disinterestedness in research in the way in which we once imagined it. Instead, they argue, "the 'public good' has been co-opted by neoliberal rationalities, and so it can no longer serve to explain our existence as academics. The institutional order that supports transnational capitalism should be brought down, because it is exploitive and destroys the possibility of something public ever forming itself again" (p. 212).

I agree with Baez and Boyles that we need to "bring down" neoliberalism. However, I would add that in doing so we need to imagine and create new econo-

mies, new visions of the public good, and new ways to bring the academic together with the public. We must reflect on and critique what is made possible and prohibited by our own discourses, to see their material effects, and to create together a different world. Finally, we must contest the current dominant vision of research and push for research methods that incorporate the personal, the political, the contextual, and the community.

## Notes

1. See, for example, the misuse of supposedly objective research regarding Reading First (Cummins, 2007) and the recent announcement of federal funding awards to Success for All and the KIPP foundation (Dillon, 2010).

2. See my book, *High-Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning: The Real Crisis in Education* (2008), for an in-depth description of neoliberalism and its impact on current education policies.

3. See my chapter, The long emergency: Educating for democracy and sustainability during our global crisis, in DeLeon, A. & Ross, E.W. (Eds.), *Critical Theories, Radical Pedagogies, and Social Education: Towards New Perspectives for Social Studies Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publications.

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