



Richard Anderson

That Controversial Follow Through Evaluation: An Interview with Richard Anderson

Ronald Brandt

"The main implication seems to be that the national government should take care. If it wants to solve social problems at the level of the individual, the Follow Through experience offers no encouragement that it can be done through federally-directed curricular reform. Education is not a convenient and useful lever for the social reformer." Richard Anderson is Deputy Area Manager, Education Area, Abt Associates, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Brandt: The Follow Through evaluation has been interpreted as proving once and for all that an emphasis on direct teaching of basic skills is better than other approaches, including the "open classroom." Is that an accurate interpretation?

Anderson: Well, I don't think anybody interpreted it that way who helped write the reports. James Kilpatrick drew some conclusions of that sort after reading a piece in the *Washington Post*. The *Post* piece was reasonably responsible; its writer had long conversations with me before publishing it. But Kilpatrick said things that were not justified by the results.

Brandt: Let's start at the beginning, then. What were you trying to find out?

Anderson: We were under contract to the Office of Education to do the summative evaluation of the Follow Through Program. We were responsible for analyzing and reporting data gathered over a ten-year period. Most of the data were test scores, but they also included questionnaires and interviews with parents, teachers, aides, and other people involved in the program. Our responsibility was to find out how well Follow Through and its components had closed the achievement gap for poor children, as it had hoped and promised to do.

Brandt: Did you find that out?

Anderson: Within the limits of the measurement, we did indeed find out. We found that as a federal intervention strat-

egy, Follow Through was neither effective nor reliable as a way to help poor children score on tests as if they were not poor.

Brandt: Are you saying, then, that Follow Through was a failure?

Anderson: That would be much too strong. Follow Through did not accomplish the purpose that many of its originators held out for it. Poor children tend to score poorly on tests. After spending a billion dollars trying to change that situation, the trend is still there. The poor children, even after all that treatment, still score poorly on tests.

But Follow Through has been a great success in some other realms. It has managed to gain the enthusiastic and vocal loyalty of a lot of parents, teach-



ers, administrators, and children. It is by all accounts a political success, having maintained its funding through direct appeals to the Congress by its advocates, in spite of the fact that it has been apparent for some time that it really wasn't revolutionizing children's test scores.

Brandt: When you looked at the test scores, you found that some children in Follow Through actually scored worse than if they had not been in the program. Is that correct?

Anderson: Judgments of that sort are necessarily very indirect. They're made on the basis of statistical estimates of what children might have done had they not been in the program. Nobody knows what they actually would have done. The only way we could estimate it

was to look at test scores and other characteristics of a large number of more or less similarly disadvantaged children who didn't receive the Follow Through treatment, and to use the best statistical devices available to make guesses. There are a lot of drawbacks to that kind of estimation, but it's the only approach available.

Having said that, it is true that in most cases, the Follow Through groups performed about as well as expected of similar non-Follow Through groups, neither better nor worse. In the cases where there seemed to be a meaningful difference, Follow Through scored worse about half again as often as it scored better.

Brandt: Well, the other children—the ones you used as controls—may also have been

getting some kind of compensatory education. So, what was the distinction between Follow Through and non-Follow Through children?

Anderson: The real difference between Follow Through and other forms of compensatory education was sponsorship. On top of all of the social, psychological, medical, dental, and nutritional benefits that went with Follow Through as a community action program was superimposed a well thought-out and carefully implemented and supervised educational component, developed and organized and run by one of about twenty sponsors who were among the country's leaders in curriculum development.

That was a very expensive process. Follow Through cost a great deal more per child than Title I. And for that additional cost, one ought to expect an increase in the test scores.

Brandt: You categorized some of the Follow Through models as "basic skills" and you showed that they produced more positive effects than other models. Does that suggest that those models should be chosen for implementation on a wider scale?

Anderson: We've come under a lot of criticism for that categorization. Let me back off from it a bit. That categorization doesn't exist in the part of our report in which we detailed our findings. The results are reported project-by-project, site-

by-site, for each of the 17 models we had enough data to perform our analyses on. It was only when we tried to summarize the results that we lumped the tests and the models to see if useful patterns emerged. Some such patterns did show up, and we reported them. But those patterns have to be seen in the context of the main findings.

Given the fact that Follow Through did not have the huge positive effect that was hoped for, and that *none* of the models had a consistent effect from place to place, it would be silly to say that those that did slightly less badly should be implemented and those that did slightly more badly shouldn't be implemented. The whole experience does not, in my view, justify a mandate to tell all classrooms in the country how they ought to conduct their business.

Brandt: Your evaluation was severely criticized, especially by a committee funded by the Ford Foundation and chaired by Ernest House. They said, for example, that some of the instruments used were poor choices and that you measured very few of the goals stated by the developers of various models.

Anderson: What they said was only a restatement of the cautions that we put into our reports. The test battery—although it was rather burdensome to the people who had to take it—and although it spanned pretty much what people knew how to test ten years ago—and

although it was agreed upon by a rather eminent panel of educators including some of the sponsors—yes, it had its weaknesses. Now, we had nothing to do with choosing the tests; we came along after the fact and had the job of trying to interpret the test results.

We have never pretended that our results—our efforts to see what Follow Through was able to do for test scores—should be taken as a total evaluation of Follow Through. Follow Through is a very complicated phenomenon. A lot of people have looked at it from a lot of angles, and one should not form an opinion of it on the basis of test scores alone.

Brandt: But your evaluation did make some rather flat statements about what worked and what didn't work. I suppose what is frustrating to sponsors and to many of the people involved in projects all across the country is that they consider your flat statements to be unjustified. People often complain that evaluators test for only a few things that can be tested and then overstate what it means in their evaluation reports. Isn't that exactly what you have done?

Anderson: We've said what we had to say in so many forms and in so many forums that we've probably not always been successful in hedging our findings the way we would like to. I think anybody who reads the main summary chapter of our

report will find that we haven't overstated anything there. In some shorter summaries we may unintentionally have led some readers astray. To the extent that we're guilty of that, I'd like to atone for it by emphasizing what we really did find and putting the rest into context. I think the results have some important implications for what educators and the government ought to do.

Brandt: What would you say that is?

Anderson: The most important finding is that the best that education knew how to do—founded on the best theory around, with the devoted efforts of a lot of professionals and the active cooperation of a lot of parents—was not able to solve the problem that motivated initiation of the program in the first place. I would say that the innovator ought to take from that a determination to exercise a great deal of caution next time he's promising what can be accomplished. Innovations brought in from the outside to American classrooms meet with a great deal of passive and active resistance. Nobody has yet found a way to start something in Washington and expect it to change things dramatically at the child's level—for example, to cause groups of poor children to achieve in school as if they were not poor.

Brandt: What you've said is probably related to a state-

ment you have made elsewhere: "Of all our findings, the most pervasive, consistent, and suggestive is probably that the effectiveness of each Follow Through model depended more on local circumstances than on the nature of the model."¹

Anderson: That is, to my mind, a very clear and inescapable interpretation of our results.

Brandt: And that is because the results were so inconsistent among the various sites within each model?

Anderson: That's right. The effectiveness of each model in the various places and the circumstances in which it was tried varied so widely that it doesn't make sense to talk about a model's level of effectiveness. You can talk only about effectiveness in a given set of circumstances.

Brandt: So what, in your opinion, are the implications of that finding for American education?

Anderson: The main implication seems to be that the national government should take care. If it wants to solve social problems at the level of the individual, the Follow Through experience offers no encouragement that it can be done through federally-directed curricular reform. Education is not a convenient and useful lever for the social reformer. It is always tempting, because it's a government agency, and the govern-

ment ought, in principle, to be able to make it do what it likes. But, in our system at least, the autonomy of the local school system and of the individual classroom teacher—indeed the child's autonomy as the intended beneficiary of the program—is such that whatever gets dictated in Washington is just not likely to come out at the bottom line looking the way the reformers wanted it to.

Brandt: You are saying that an attempt to implement a predetermined program under different circumstances is likely to have spotty results.

Anderson: That's certainly what happened in Follow Through. And Follow Through is a pretty fair test of the idea that a program could perform consistently across a variety of communities. If the results are to turn out differently in another context, something will have to change the permeability of schools and children to outside influences. ^[E]

¹ Richard B. Anderson. "The Effectiveness of Follow Through: What Have We Learned?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of AERA, April 1977. ERIC document 139854.



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