

Letters

Credit Where Credit Is Due

"The Training and Certifying of Teacher Appraisers" (April 1987, sidebar, p. 62) makes a few factual errors when describing the Center for Appraiser Training and Certification at the Wichita State University. In point of fact, no such center exists at the university.

The Wichita Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program, currently in place in the Wichita Public Schools, has provided all district administrators and supervisors with skill training necessary to assist and assess classroom teachers in the use of an explicit, single teaching model. Responsibility for that training was contractually assigned to the Wichita State University. The university additionally provided training for 15 district administrators who would internally certify the competency of their administrative colleagues upon the latter's completion of 40 hours of direct instruction.

The actual certification of administrator competence in classroom analysis, script taping skills, and coaching/conferencing is entirely the responsibility of the Wichita Public Schools. Our concern is that the Wichita Public Schools receive appropriate credit for assuming the actual "credentialing" role and for providing the human and financial resources that support this highly innovative approach to observer/evaluator assessment.

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In Defense of Art Critics

Thank you for publishing the recent "discussion" between Drs. Gibboney and Hunter (February 1987). If I understand their debate correctly, Hunter was arguing about what works in a schooling environment, whereas Gibboney was concerned with what counts as an education. If that interpretation is correct, then they were clearly not talking with each other. For what counts as being "schooled" in a subject is clearly not the same as what counts as being educated.

Still, Hunter seems to think she is talking about being educated. For example, she says several times that she agrees with Gibboney that the purpose of education is to cultivate thought or to develop creative problem solvers and responsible decision makers. In each case, however, she adds, "[but] I cannot cite any research to support that statement."

The claim for which she asks research support is either a conceptual claim or a normative one. Conceptual claims concern the nature of a con-

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cept, in this case the nature of education and what it is to be an educated person. Normative claims concern our values and goals; in this case it is the claim that fostering the cultivation of thought is what we *ought* to be about. Research, on the other hand, is descriptive, at best telling us what *is*, not what ought to be. Asking for research to support what is either a conceptual or a normative claim is to misconstrue the very nature of both research and the concepts, theories, and values from which research emanates.

Hunter's reaction to Gibboney is puzzling for another reason. Her concluding criticism—that "one of our most important functions as educators is, when questioning anything, to provide a more tenable alternative. What is Gibboney's?"—seems a bit like the claim, "If you haven't got a better way, then you ought not to criticize my model." Gibboney may well be serving a role similar to that of the art critic whose job is to help us see the work of art more clearly, not to create an alternative work. Many practitioners may not like what he has to say, but he may well provide an alternative vision with great relevance to education.

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Wishful Thinking on Tracking

In his March 1987 article "In Defense of Tracking," Charles Nevi challenged our evidence and concern about the negative educational consequences of school tracking. He justified tracking on the grounds that it accommodates student differences, everybody does it, and research supports it. We wish to call attention to egregious errors in both his understanding of our work and his thinking about tracking.

Only a serious misreading of *A Place Called School* and *Keeping Track* could find, as Mr. Nevi has, a view that all students are alike or that all students should be treated identically. However, implicit in both books is a perspective that is absolutely contrary to Nevi's assertions that "most differences are inherited" and that "appropriate tracking" is a promising means for educating children who are different. The sad truth is that Nevi's claim that a good tracking program "has the same expectations for all students and uses low-level tracking only to provide remediation and to upgrade selected students" is more wishful thinking than descriptive of life in schools.

The evidence that Nevi cites is more than shaky. We refer the reader to Robert Slavin's thorough critique of the Kulik and Kulik meta-analysis of ability grouping, which concludes that the analysis "contained sources of bias serious enough, in my judgment, to call into question one or more major conclusions" (*Educational Researcher*, October 1984, p. 8). On the other

hand, evidence continues to mount that shows harm to children in low-track classes.

Finally, contrary to Nevi's assertion, neither of us suggests that schoolpeople conspire to protect the privileges of the rich or to further oppress the disadvantaged. Our point, rather, is that tracking works *against* educators' best intentions. Ironically, through their efforts to accommodate individual differences with tracking, schools distribute knowledge and instruction: all quality in ways that favor many socially and economically privileged children and disadvantage most of the rest. Doing so, they unwittingly and unnecessarily exacerbate learning differences among children. Our work has not been aimed at blasting educators but at challenging the profession to look critically at one of the least questioned practices in schools. In the process we hope they will question conventional and fallacious conclusions such as those proffered in Mr. Nevi's article.

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Charles Nevi Replies: It was not my intent to question the overall value of the work done by Dr. Goodlad and Dr. Oakes. Of all the reform reports, commission reports, and scholarly works on education published in the last several years, A Place Called School is certainly among the most significant and worthwhile. But I still believe that tracking is not inherently good or bad, and when used appropriately, it can be a viable option in certain circumstances for selected students.

What Do You Think?

We welcome your comments on articles in *Educational Leadership*. Please send letters to: Executive Editor, ASCD, 125 N. West St., Alexandria, VA 22314-2798. Letters selected for publication may be edited for brevity and clarity.

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