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Reframing Educational Psychology for the New Millennium

Jill Lindsey North Ph.D.
Wright State University - Main Campus

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REFRAMING EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The role of education psychology in the 21st century must be to provide a research-based pedagogical foundation upon which preservice and practicing teachers can draw to develop the habits of mind necessary to ensure all students learn. Historically, the field of educational psychology is the study of how people learn (Crowel, Podell, & Kaminsky, 1997). However, the work most associated with the field of educational psychology during the 20th century has been the development of tests and measurements to identify learners' capacities and abilities. Much of the work by educational psychologists has been focused on identifying extremes of performance in the population. Thus, educational psychology has been viewed as largely irrelevant by classroom teachers who see the primary role of educational psychologists as that of labeling students who then qualify for special funding and instruction by gifted or special educators. Beyond the introduction to human development and learning theories provided in one or two preservice courses, educational psychology is viewed by classroom teachers as having contributed little to their understandings of learning variations among "average" ability students or to pedagogical decision making.

In truth, for more than half a century the field of educational psychology has focused on identification procedures and this focus on quantitative assessment now permeates our social consciousness, placing standardized testing at the forefront of social and political agendas. Socio-political policies rely upon the field of educational psychology to provide standardized tests of intelligence and abilities that help identify and label individuals who are not succeeding in school. Most recently, state proficiency test results are being used as a major component of "district report cards" that identify "successful" and "unsuccessful" school systems in Ohio, as well as other states. While many educators express concerns about using test results to permanently label children or determine a school district's success, what is clear is that the work of twentieth century educational psychologists has shaped the face of education as we know it by achieving a level of mastery in identifying and labeling problems. However, identifying and labeling problems is only the first step in any problem solving strategy.

Educational psychology in the twenty-first century must take society beyond identifying learning problems to finding solutions; selecting from various instructional methods and implementing action plans that help students meet grade-level learning goals. The time has come to operate as problem solvers. To do this, educators need a repertoire of assessment skills and content-appropriate teaching methods to guide decisions about instruction. This pedagogical foundation must be integrated into each educator's way of thinking about student learning and teaching. These well-developed "habits of mind" must operate at an intuitive level to direct a teacher's attention to identifying and responding to individual learners' needs. Developing these habits of mind takes time; time to understand the philosophical, theoretical and scientific underpinnings of sound content-related pedagogy; time to develop the pedagogical skills themselves; and time to develop the expertise necessary to make sound pedagogical decisions based upon particular students' needs. These skills cannot be developed in one or two introductory courses for preservice teachers, but must be infused throughout preservice teacher education and on-going professional development.

Educational psychologists can play a vital role in the development of this pedagogical foundation by serving as the bridge that connects education with theory, philosophy, and scientific research in neuroscience, medicine, and psychology. We must include the most current understandings science provides about how people learn in our educational psychology courses and field interactions, and we

must focus our research efforts on developing, testing, and disseminating practical applications of these interdisciplinary research findings in order to provide future and practicing teachers with sound pedagogical alternatives.

The most recent report How People Learn (Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., Cocking, R. R.,1999) published by the National Research Council Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning highlights five new conceptions of learning based on research from the past 30 years. All five areas noted represent a shift in view about effective learning, away from drill and practice toward understanding and application of knowledge in a variety of contexts. These new conceptions of learning require learning environments that are "student centered, knowledge centered, assessment centered, and community centered" (p. xvi). These new conceptions of learning also require that teachers understand pedagogy as it interacts with their specific content knowledge rather than simply learn a set of general teaching methods they apply to any content; recognize the role prior knowledge plays in the learning process; and understand the importance of cultural contexts in learning. Educational psychologists have a responsibility to incorporate these research findings into teacher preparation, staff development, and field consultations.

Educational psychology in the twenty-first century should be focused on finding solutions to the problems identified by the field during the last century. The links between disciplines have become vital to understanding the ways humans learn, and we must serve as education's bridge to these other disciplines. Educational psychologists must move beyond the role of problem finder by reframing our role in teacher preparation and field work to include all the steps in the problem solving model. The field of Educational Psychology played a major role in shaping the focus of education during the last century. In the new millennium, we must continue to shape the focus of education by directing our field's and society's efforts beyond identifying problems to exploring and disseminating solutions.

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