

Method's Web: Gadamer's *Corrective* and Educational Policy

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A radical distinction between the natural world and the world of human history must be made, however much history may have a natural base. The justification for this distinction lies in the unique character of human freedom. Almost all the misinterpretations of human selfhood and the drama of history in the modern day are derived from the effort to reduce human existence to the coherence of nature.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *Selected Essays and Addresses*

During the summer of 2003, in a series of semi-structured interviews, educational leaders (Superintendents, Central Office Administrators, and Principals) from two distinctive districts articulated their current understandings of the *No Child Left Behind Act* signed into law on January 8, 2002. One of the districts was a relatively affluent, suburban community, the other a neighboring community with large pockets of poverty and multiple schools placed on the state "warning" list. In this second district, *No Child Left Behind* sanctions were pending for one school even before the dust had settled on decisions about which tests to use for sub group measurements and what cut-off scores to use for "success" state-wide.

While all of the school leaders interviewed lauded the overarching goal of the legislation — taking the success of every child seriously — they were less sanguine about the way in which it was being operationalized. They asked how we had moved so quickly from this "noble goal" to a definition of school "success" based on scores from standardized tests given near the end of each school year. They wondered how the question of shared civic responsibility for equity in education could be framed so simply as a matter of school choice. They worried about the loss of local control in the shift to federally mandated test preparation, which effectively precluded the possibility of locally shaped curricula. And they were discouraged by the rhetorical transformation of teachers from professionals capable of diagnosis and individualized instruction into recalcitrant "worker bees."¹

As I continued to analyze educators' concerns related to this policy as well as their sense of its strengths and promise, Hans-Georg Gadamer's insights consistently illuminated the tensions and contradictions inherent in the discussions. Before his death in 2002 at the age of 102, Gadamer had been steadfast in his attempt to mediate between philosophy and science. Living in an era enamored with the triumphs of science, Gadamer staked a claim for "applied hermeneutics," a way of understanding that maintains a respect for the precision of "scientific objectivity" while remaining outside its elegant web.² Hermeneutic investigation requires that we acknowledge the way our questions and our languages orient us historically and culturally, even in the realm of the natural sciences. In contrast, *No Child Left Behind* privileges scientific objectivity as the "gold standard." "Scientifically based research," which appears almost 70 times in the document, is specified as the means for achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the measurable educational results mentioned just over 90 times in the legislation.

Implications of two claims made by proponents of the legislation will be examined here as they are mediated by Gadamer's applied hermeneutics. The first is the claim that a "single-minded focus on results" (namely, raising student achievement as defined by test scores) is "nothing less than a renewed moral commitment to our children."³ The second is the claim that federally directed education, vetted by test scores linked to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) trends, is an appropriate *corrective* for this nation's "two education systems — separate and unequal," to use Secretary of Education Rod Paige's words evoking both *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In other words, the claim made by the Department of Education is that scientifically based instruction in pursuit of numerical, test-based goals can be relied upon to safeguard "education as a civil right, just like the right to vote or to be treated equally."⁴ With its attention to the logical priority of questions, its responsiveness to historical and cultural context, and its insistence on truth beyond method, Gadamer's hermeneutic *corrective* confronts Department of Education policy makers with the possibility that the safeguards they have crafted not only distort the educational process, but undermine the noble goal of education as a civil right as well.⁵

THE *EIDOS* OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The "single-minded focus on results" required by *No Child Left Behind* has been translated by states across the nation as a single-minded focus on annual test scores. According to the legislation, it is possible to increase the annual achievement of students in every grade, so that, for example, each year a higher percentage of third graders score at the proficient level on state tests than the third graders the year before. The "renewed moral commitment to children" has been defined as all students testing at proficient levels by 2014. To accomplish this, the law requires incremental improvements in the test scores of all subgroups within each school. If the test scores of any of its subgroups fall below the state cutoffs (in the state of Illinois, a subgroup is defined as 40 or more students in a school who are economically disadvantaged, disabled, limited in English proficiency, or members of major racial or ethnic groups), the school is "subject to school improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under section 1116."⁶ In other words, high numbers of students living in poverty may succeed, against great odds, in achieving above average test scores in math and reading, but if X% of the students in any subgroup in the school test below the state cutoff number, the whole school is labeled a "failing" school in need of "improvement."⁷

The law requires any school remaining in the "improvement" category for more than four years to be chartered or turned over to private or state management.⁸ In this way, state test scores provide clearly delineated goals toward which educational efforts can be directed as well as specific sanctions for failure.

In exploring the classical distinction between *techne* and *phronesis*, Gadamer examines the formulation of goals and standards within the context of applied hermeneutics (*TM*, 552). *Techne*, for Gadamer, is the "branch of knowledge which fills the gaps nature left for human skill."⁹ A craftsperson can determine the *eidos* or ideal shape of the object to be crafted, by considering its application to a predetermined end. Intimate knowledge and wise assessment of the political and moral contexts within which that object might be put to use are not necessary for a *techne* to be taught or learned effectively. The knowledge gained and the education designed to transmit *techne* is directly "fitted" to the application desired (*TM*, 332). For Gadamer, the making and craftsmanship of *techne*, with its predetermined,

clearly delineated end or goal, is not the best model of cognition within more broadly construed educational contexts (*HGE*, 173). In the realm of *techné*, a craftsman, once given a clear order, can possess “unlimited and uncontested competence” in the completion of the order or achievement of the goal. The educator, on the other hand, must contend not only with the power of context, but with the fact that the people who give the orders, however definitively those orders are specified, “seldom really know what they want.”¹⁰ The overarching goals of education (literacy, numeracy, citizenship, human capital, core knowledge, workforce preparation, personal development, social justice) as well as its measures (local, state, national, international tests and assessments) are ever changing and often conflicting.

Gadamer contends that common sense rationality cannot be reduced to a *techné* in the service of predetermined ends, no matter how technically or technologically sophisticated a proposed scientific method may be. Tracing Aristotle's discussion of practical wisdom or *phronesis*, he concludes that the knowledge constituting *phronesis* “does not allow for perfection in the same way as does expertise in *techné*.” While *techné*'s “performance is manifestly independent of the moral and political qualities of human beings,” practical wisdom is constituted by them. In moral deliberations, we “are always already in the situation of having to act” (*HGE*, 172). Unlike the craftsman who can determine an *eidos* in terms of its use independent of context, the moral actor cannot wisely determine specific moral choices and actions “ahead of time,” independent of particular situations and relationships.

Replacing the metaphor of *techné* as crafting with *techné* as steering, as a pilot might steer passengers through stormy seas to a sandy shore, still begs the question, “Is this shore the right destination?” (*HGE*, 174). Hermeneutic reflection, which makes “ultimate ends” conscious, is not simply a matter of “choosing the right means” to pursue “already decided” ends (*eidos*) as in the realm of *techné* (*TM*, 569). In fact, for Gadamer a method or means becomes “ominous” in the social realm when it is used without continuous and scrupulous attention to the social ends or goals it claims to serve. Developing a “technology of society” does not guarantee a wise choice among the technologies available. Experiences leading to clarity and discernment are needed to make practical, political judgments that are feasible given the situations at hand. Situation, for Gadamer, does not imply a relationship in which a particular case can be viewed within a universal principle or a law. A situation does not confront us as an object that we can grasp and measure. Rather, we must put ourselves *within* a particular situation in order to understand more than the “objectively given facts” of the matter (*HGE*, 169).

In place of the predetermined, external ends (the *eidos* of the craftsman), practical wisdom resides in a self always “in danger” of being changed in the process of understanding. *Phronesis* entails not only the skillful employment of means to achieve ends, but also the capacity to set workable goals and take responsibility for them. This goes well beyond mastery of means, mastery of method. In the development and practice of *phronesis*, practical experience represents not a distraction from the theoretical, but “an independent contribution to knowledge” (*TM*, 557).

Gadamer contends that opportunities to exercise judgment based on experience diminish as spheres of application become more and more highly rationalized. Thus, we maintain a “single-minded focus on results” rationalized as standardized test scores, at practical wisdom’s expense (*EH*, 17).

For Gadamer, “the degeneration of the concept of practice” is a consequence of a confusion that stretches from *techne* and *phronesis* to the natural and human sciences. Noting that the human sciences are often asked to justify “their scientific legitimacy on the rationality employed in the selection of means,” Gadamer warns that such requirements too often preclude insights gained through the use of practical wisdom in the public sphere. Gadamer is willing to accept the concept of a science that has certainty as its ideal and isolating causes as its purpose, in all its methodological strictness. But this requires that we learn to understand the limits of science so defined and “restrict our scientific capacities to a responsible knowledge” (*HGE*, 172, 219). The specific claim made by *No Child Left Behind* proponents, that “scientifically based research” can be relied upon to safeguard “education as a civil right” merits further examination in light of Gadamer’s sensitivity to the limits as well as the power of science.

THE SCIENCE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The second claim under consideration is that federally directed education, vetted by test scores linked to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) trends, is an appropriate *corrective* for this nation’s “two education systems—separate and unequal.” The reference by Rod Paige to *Plessy v. Ferguson* implies that if educators demand the same high expectations of all students, irrespective of race, the stranglehold of the “soft bigotry of low expectations” will be broken. This “soft bigotry of low expectations” is not to be confused with the “hard bigotry of high expectations” that absolves the public of its moral responsibility for poor students from various disenfranchised racial and ethnic groups attending unsafe schools with crumbling infrastructures, as long as these students demonstrate that they can pass state and national tests. To achieve “objective” (numerical) test goals, teaching is redefined as the application of scientifically based instruction in pursuit of state (and national) standards. According to “expert” testimony in support of *No Child Left Behind*, safeguarding “education as a civil right, just like the right to vote or to be treated equally” is best accomplished when education becomes as much a science as medicine. Educational health, viewed as student achievement measured by test scores, can then be pursued using instructional methods backed by scientifically based research employed by teachers using “proven methods” with all students. A consistent increase in academic performance is further ensured by increased parental choice. Parents with students in “failing schools” (schools that have not met “adequate yearly progress” goals) that are also Title 1 (high poverty) schools can choose to have their children transported to other schools in the district.¹¹

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer demonstrates that “scientific method” with its “controllable procedures” and requirement of falsifiability, is not the “exclusive path to truth” and that only a science respectful of its own limitations can serve social purposes without usurping them.¹² Though he has been accused of caricaturing

natural science for purposes of critiquing it, he is often careful to distinguish between Science writ large and science as an activity characterized by controlled experiment supported by statistical rigor. He fully acknowledges that formalized methodologies are responsible for the natural sciences' astonishing "capacity, based on the mathematical model, to organize concrete information concerning observed phenomena under general laws." The power of natural science is derived in no small part from its capacity to "objectify" things — to isolate them and measure them "by means of quantitative methods." But he also notes that anything that can be objectified "and made into an object has already been removed from that state of balance which characterizes the realm of nature" (*EN*, 97-98, 135).

One of our principal errors in medicine, according to Gadamer, is to "be so bold" as to "establish so-called standard values" for human health. For him, human health is not only defined by objective measures of vital bodily phenomena, but also by "what surrounds and encompasses human beings" (*EH*, 115). On a number of counts, Gadamer would take issue with Valerie Reyna's (Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement) testimony to the U.S. Department of Education. Reyna asserts:

The bottom line here is these same rules about what works and how to make inferences about what works, they are exactly the same for educational practice as they would be for medical practice.... Same rules, exactly the same logic, whether you are talking about a treatment for cancer or whether you're talking about an intervention to help children learn.

As a member of an expert panel, Reyna explains that the "gold standard" in any discipline is large scale, randomized trials that test interventions without introducing bias based on the nature of each group." Lisa Towne, senior program officer at the Center for Education at the National Research Council, identifies principles of science common across all disciplines, but observes, "A petri dish of heart cells is a heck of a lot better behaved than a classroom of third graders."¹³

Contrary to Reyna's testimony, Gadamer affirms distinctive contributions made by the human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften* that cannot be captured in the web spun by the methodologies of the natural sciences. We must act without the assurance of mathematical precision in the human sciences; we cannot aspire to the same degree of certainty through methodological rigor. Mathematical precision made possible by objectification (removal from the ebb and flow of the equilibrium established by organisms in natural settings), is not the criterion for practical wisdom since *phronesis* is acquired "precisely in application" rather than "at a distance." To understand in this way, the "human science" of applied hermeneutics offers "the other half of truth — the "rich tradition of human knowledge, which comes to us from our historical past and speaks to us and is valid for us as what has proven itself, has been believed, and hoped for throughout history" (*HGE*, 213). In contrast to the natural sciences, what we learn from the human sciences "becomes experience only when actually integrated into the practical consciousness of acting human beings." The human sciences, as Gadamer defines them, do not "select human beings themselves as the immediate object of research" but rather "the knowledge of human beings themselves which is mediated by the historical and cultural tradition" (*EH*, 2, 28).

Hermeneutics provides a way to explore the forestructure of knowledge, the ways language orients us in the world, including the ways in which measurement in the natural sciences represents the answer to a question, not simply an activity legitimized by the “exactitude” of its measurements. In examining policy, hermeneutic activity does not offer knowledge that “could be verified in other ways;” instead, it asks us to consider how and in what context of understanding something becomes meaningful. In contrast to the formalized denotations of natural science methodologies, connotations of verbal expressions do not muddy the waters, but increase intelligibility “insofar as the intended context as a whole gains in intelligibility” (*TM*, 559, 564).

To apply only the logic of natural science methodologies to the administration of educational policy suggests a preoccupation with control “characteristic of managerial thinking and the mentality of social engineering.” It is an approach especially prone to misrepresentation: “The more dominant social and political prejudices are brought into play, the more fictitious the pure expert becomes and with him the notion of scientifically certified rationality” (*HGE*, xviii, 172). As “the concept of technology displaces that of practice” and the “competence of experts marginalizes political reason,” Gadamer asks, “What practical-political consequences can leading researchers legitimately draw from their scientific knowledge?” (*TM*, 556). He concludes that experts “cannot claim superior competence and authority” in the public-political arena (*EH*, 26). For the application of science, the expert must employ not the science that constitutes expertise, but practical reason. “And why,” Gadamer asks, “should that be greater in an expert, even if he were the ideal social engineer, than in other people?” (*TM*, 559). Unfortunately, as individuals continue to adapt to the technical rationality of local, state, and national bureaucracies, opportunities for cultivating personal autonomy in judgment and action, so essential for practical reason, are diminished (*EH*, 17).

The claim that the same “rules” apply to cells in a petri dish, a medical diagnosis, and human behavior in a classroom supports the claim that scientific management, supported by the experimental rigor of the natural sciences and the managerial ethos of a business, can be trusted to steer society in ways that promote education as a civil right for all students. In the case under consideration, the result is *No Child Left Behind*, with its reliance on educational experts far removed from classroom practice and on test developers with the necessary *techne* to generate banks of easily measurable, statistically reliable items. In place of a hermeneutic openness to dialogue, this policy is sustained by a refusal to acknowledge the wisdom residing in experience and in “voices not backed up by coercive force or pragmatic calculation” (*HGE*, xviii).

GADAMER'S CORRECTIVE

Science cannot relieve individuals or societies of continued responsibility for their choices, especially in “the great domain of human decisions regarding family, society and state, for which the specialist does not have sufficient practically relevant knowledge to offer” (*HGE*, xviii). For this reason, a *corrective* is required to provide a constant reminder of the “provisional and in each case limited character”

of what science knows (*EH*, 23). Within the realm of education, characterized by managerial action in the pursuit of technical knowledge, Gadamer carves out a space for learning that is not separate from its application to the self. In the hermeneutical account of education, persons are formed in face to face dialogue with a teacher who can exemplify a relationship with subject matter — as if that teacher belonged to the content “rather than its being in the teacher’s possession.” Gadamer’s hope is that the “primary achievement of education” might be viewed not as a single-minded focus on results measured by standardized tests, but as the ability and inclination to “apply oneself to the possibility of experiences which awaken one’s questions” (*HGE*, xi-xii).

Hermeneutics does not strive to foster the human quality of adaptability, even in the social engineering of noble goals like safeguarding education as a civil right. On the contrary, hermeneutically informed education challenges the narrow definition of learning as quanta of factual knowledge that can be easily adapted to standardized accountability measures. It prompts students to reflect on the otherness of persons and societies and encourages them, out of respect, to “see the justification in others’ points of view” (*HGE*, xviii). What is important, in hermeneutically informed education, is to encounter others and re-encounter the self in the subject matter rather than to comply with standards promoted by modern technologies. Growing self-consciousness is always already embedded in specific cultural, historical traditions. This self-consciousness needs adventure, experiences by which to constitute itself in dialogue with others.

Closer to the ground of human being, hermeneutics provides “the truth of a *corrective*” that allows us to ask ultimate questions in light of a practical wisdom capable of discerning “what is doable, what is possible, what is appropriate here and now.”¹⁴ Gadamer’s *science of humans* includes the various human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] as well as the natural sciences. Both streams of knowledge are required to distinguish between what one can do and what it would be good to do. This distinction “legitimizes expert knowledge within its limits” but does not abdicate to expert authority decisions involving “what is truly the Good.” Gadamer reminds us that even “in their ideal completion,” the sciences remain always “embedded in communicative communality.” A wise educational policy, therefore, does not rely upon scientifically based pedagogy in pursuit of numerical, test-based goals to safeguard education as a civil right, but draws on *phronesis* as well as *techne* — on the human as well as the natural sciences. It takes seriously the possibility that without respect for practical wisdom, narrowly defined scientific rationality, even in pursuit of the noblest of goals, might imperil educational reform and impoverish education. In a hermeneutic *corrective* to the *corrective* of *No Child Left Behind*, Gadamer’s “*science of humans* in their complete diversity becomes a moral and philosophical task for all of us” (*HGE*, 218, 235, 219).

1. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 552. This book will be cited as *TM* in the text for all subsequent references.
3. Etta Kralovec, *Schools that Do Too Much: Wasting Time and Money in Schools and What We Can All Do About It* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 45.
4. Koret Task Force on K-12 Education, "Our Schools and our Future: Are We Still at Risk? Remarks by U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige" (Washington, DC: Hoover Institution, February 2003) <<http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/02-2003/02262003/html>>.
5. Francis J. Ambrosio, "Caputo's Critique of Gadamer: Hermeneutics and the Metaphorics of the Person," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 101.
6. For the full text of the law, see Public Law 107-10, 107th Cong., 1st sess., (3 January 2001), *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, <<http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf>>.
7. While it has been noted that the descriptor "failing school" does not appear in the legislation, the phrases "fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress" and "failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress" appear repeatedly in the document's references to public schools. For Secretary of Education Rod Paige's use of the descriptor "failing schools," see, for example, "Strengthening Public Education by Empowering Parents with Choice" (Harvard University 14 April 2003), <<http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/04-2003/04142003.html>>. Popular references to schools in "improvement" as "failing schools" also abound. See, for example, Diane Rado and Lori Olszewski, "Most in Failing Schools Will Be Denied Tutors," *Chicago Tribune*, 13 September 2003, A1.
8. Julie Miller, *The ESEA Implementation Guide* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 2002), A15.
9. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, eds., *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 174. This book will be cited as *HGE* in the text for all subsequent references.
10. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 20. This book will be cited as *EH* in the text for all subsequent references.
11. Koret Task Force, "Our Schools and our Future."
12. Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 17.
13. Miller, *ESEA Implementation Guide*, J6.
14. Ambrosio, "Caputo's Critique," 104.