


The Tragicomedy of **Public Education**



Laughing
and
Crying
Thinking
and
Fixing

**FULL
COURT
Press**

JAMES M. KAUFFMAN



P.O. Box 930160
Verona, Wisconsin 53593-0160 USA
Phone 1-800-327-4269 Fax 1.800.942.3865

www.AttainmentCompany.com

©2010 Attainment Company, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

Author: James M. Kauffman, University of Virginia
Editor: Tom Kinney

ISBN 1-57861-682-4

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the students in our public schools, all of whom deserve an education that is neither tragic nor comic but simply the best education we can give them.



Contents

Preface	vii
Author	xi
Part I	
Laughing and Crying	
Chapter One: Public Education as Tragicomedy	13
Chapter Two: Truth and Truthiness in Education	27
Chapter Three: The Art of Poor Thinking	43
Chapter Four: Slogans and Trite Phrases	57
Chapter Five: Thinking Gone Off the Tracks in Other Ways	71
Chapter Six: The Consequences of Poor Thinking	85
Part II	
Thinking and Fixing	
Chapter Seven: The Role of Schools in Our Society	99
Chapter Eight: Better Thinking about Standardized Tests	117
Chapter Nine: Thinking Rationally about Direct Instruction	135
Chapter Ten: The Problem of Student Differences and What to Do about It	153
Chapter Eleven: How to Judge Whether a School Is Successful	171
Chapter Twelve: Advising Education Policy Makers	185
References and Websites	199
Index	217



Preface

My central message is that we've got to make public education a lot better, but that we can't really do that until we understand how and why it's so screwed up. First, we need to laugh about things that may make us want to cry. Then we need to think carefully about education and get serious about making our schools better.

One reason public education is in such a mess is that too many people have cried about how bad it is and then tried to fix it without thinking much about it. This is about as smart as observing that your car isn't running right, then getting mad and hitting it with a hammer. If you did this, you'd look foolish and make a lot of people laugh. You'd be comedic without intending to be, just like people who want to fix education because they're mad about schools and don't know what to do except say something cockeyed.

People who should know better have said things about education that are wildly off base yet funny. In doing so, they've made public education in America a tragicomedy. They obviously haven't thought very much about education; they are just blathering. Their nonsense does nothing to make education better. It makes a mockery of the idea that we want to teach children to be critical thinkers. Makes me want to cry and scream! But laughing about it first is better than crying and screaming. If you don't see what's funny, your crying isn't going to help. Screaming doesn't help either. And if you don't figure out what's tragicomic about public education, then you won't know what to do to fix the problem.

I'm sure you have the good sense to ask why anyone should take my comments seriously—or even laugh as I suggest. So, I'll tell you something about my experience and my views. I've been a classroom teacher at the elementary and middle school levels in both special and general education. Beginning in 1970, I taught students who were preparing to become special education teachers, and I also worked with advanced graduate students in education at the University of Virginia. Education has been my professional life since 1962 (for more about me, you can go to www.people.virginia.edu/~jmk9t/ and see what I've been up to professionally since the early 1960s). Most of my time has been spent in educating exceptional children and studying special education.

I think that what I've written is sensible and trustworthy, but you should consider very carefully whom and what to trust, because



public education has in many ways become the dumping ground of bad, scientifically unverified programming, worse ideas, and poor thinking about education in general. The fact that I've been an educator for a long time doesn't mean that I know what I'm talking about; some people with long experience in a given field of work may misunderstand it and say very silly things about it. The fact that I have an advanced degree doesn't mean that what I say or write makes sense; some people with lots of formal education sometimes say or write things that someone with far less schooling can see is claptrap. The fact that I've written a lot about special education doesn't mean that what I write is on the money; lots of gibberish gets published. Read with your brain fully engaged. That's what we expect of kids in school. We should expect it of ourselves.

I've come to realize that most people don't think a lot about public education, much less special education. They aren't expected to, and they don't have to. Why should they? It's only people like me, who've devoted their working lives to education, who *have* to think about it very much. And even some of *us* slip a cog now and then. We just need to recognize when cogs are slipping, whether we're special or general educators or neither.

Those who don't have to think much about education can be excused for thinking poorly about it. After all, even reasonably bright people when asked to think about things they haven't much thought about (like my thinking about astrophysics) often botch the job. They might get caught up in poor reasoning since they don't have the basic information they need, or because they forget critical pieces of information, or simply because they ignore basic facts apparent to those who are knowledgeable about the field. Still, every field of study has its crackpots and embarrassingly incompetent thinkers. Unfortunately, some people who've spent a lot of time as educators don't think productively about their business either. We need to laugh at their nonsense.

So we have this problem of some people who are intelligent but uninvolved in education, and some who are both intelligent and experienced educators doing some very poor thinking about education, especially the education of atypical children. A person can be a good thinker about one thing but not another, or be a good thinker sometimes and at other times not. Good and bad thinking aren't always on or always off, so we have to be careful not to conclude that a person who's brilliant sometimes or at some things is *always* brilliant or that a person whose thinking *sometimes* goes haywire is unintelligent.

Regardless of their age or intelligence, people can say or write things that are funny precisely because they're so off-target or meaningless.

I must admit that some of the things I've read and heard about both special and general education in the past half century or so have been very amusing to me. And I'm guessing that a lot of what you've read is amusing to you, too. In fact, my assumption is that we'd agree that much of this errant thinking would be *only* comical if the consequences of its being taken seriously weren't so tragic for the kids, parents, and teachers involved, not to mention our society. For those of us who take public education seriously and see the damage done by poor thinking about it, it's tragicomic—laughable, yet with horrifying implications.

A lot of my comments are aimed at special education and the parents of exceptional children. Note, however, that special education and general education are no longer separate educational entities. Special education is now an integral part of general education in the public schools, and more and more exceptional children—those with disabilities and those with special gifts and talents and those with both—are being taught in general classrooms. That is, teachers with little or no training in special education are being given responsibility for teaching exceptional children, and students with special educational needs are increasingly being placed in the same schools and classrooms they would attend if they were typical students. Thus, what happens to education in the general case—how people think, what and how they think children should be taught, the policies they make—is something about which all of us should be concerned. Special education is increasingly integrated into general education, and parents would be foolish, indeed, to do either of the following: ignore general education or assume that special education doesn't concern their children.

About the organization of this book

This little book has two sections. In Part I, I describe how too much of what is said and thought about public education is simultaneously tragic and comic. I also explain how people have used poor thinking to hoodwink others. Then I look at the awful consequences of foolishness taken seriously—the tragic results of letting ourselves be fooled by nonsense. In Part II, I suggest how we might think better about public education. I outline the steps we should take to make better sense of educational problems and make rational proposals for change.

Certainly, this book doesn't say it all. There's a lot more to say about education, but I hope this at least puts many readers on the road to



recognizing ludicrous statements about schools and schooling when they read or hear them. I hope some of the quotes I use and some of the comments I offer make readers laugh. I hope reading the book also puts them on the road to insisting that all of us—the general public, educators, and policy makers alike—talk and write more sensibly about one of the most important aspects of public life in a democracy, its public education system.

I'm grateful to more people than I can name for their support in writing this little book. My dear wife, Patty Pullen, is extraordinarily talented at working with people, including children, and writing about her experiences. She's a former teacher extraordinaire, and it's no wonder I wanted her as a life partner in every conceivable way. She patiently read and reread the manuscript and gave me the feedback of an insightful and skillful special education teacher, parent, and writer whose work is always fun to read. My confidence was greatly increased by the comments and suggestions of Barbara Bateman, a wise, thoughtful, and caring lawyer, teacher, special education researcher, and writer whose work I've admired for more than four decades. She writes and speaks with exceptional clarity, and her praise and encouragement have been invaluable. And I must credit her with suggesting the book's subtitle: *Laughing and Crying, Thinking and Fixing*. My friend Sarah Irvine, another writer and editor of great talent, read parts of an early draft of the manuscript and gave me support and useful comments. Finally, I am particularly grateful to Tom Kinney, my editor at Full Court Press, for his faith in my work, his insightful and gentle guidance, and his invaluable help in saying things with greater clarity and force.

JMK

Charlottesville, VA

Author

James M. Kauffman

James M. Kauffman is Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Virginia, where he has been chair of the Department of Special Education, Associate Dean for Research, the Charles S. Robb Professor of Education, and the William Clay Parrish, Jr. Professor of Education. He is a former teacher in both general elementary and special education for students with emotional and behavioral disorders.



Kauffman received his Ed.D. in special education from the University of Kansas in 1969. He is a past president of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD), and among his honors are the 2002 Outstanding Leadership Award from CCBD and the 1994 Research Award of the Council for Exceptional Children. He served as director of doctoral study in special education at the University of Virginia and taught seminars in special education.

He is author or coauthor of numerous publications in special education, including the following books: *Exceptional Learners: Introduction to Special Education* (11th ed., 2009), *Characteristics of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders of Children and Youth* (9th ed., 2009), *Learning Disabilities: Foundations, Characteristics, and Effective Teaching* (3rd ed., 2005), *Special Education: What It Is and Why We Need It* (2005), *The Illusion of Full Inclusion: A Comprehensive Critique of a Current Special Education Bandwagon* (2nd ed., 2005), *Children and Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A History of Their Education* (2006), and *Classroom Behavior Management: A Reflective Case-Based Approach* (5th ed. in press, 2011).

For more information, see Kauffman's website at www.people.virginia.edu/~jmk9t/.

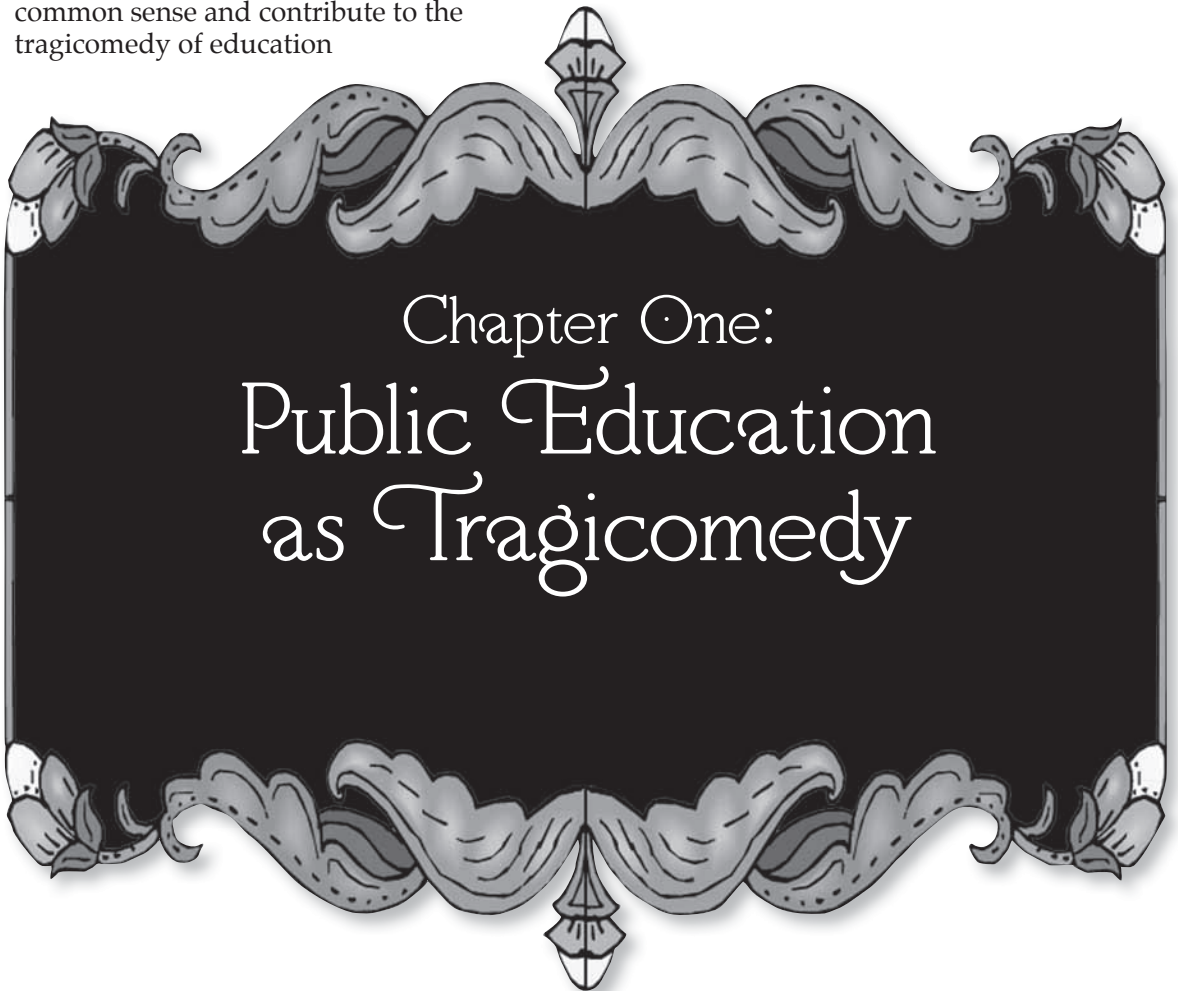


Part I

Laughing and Crying

Containing six expository chapters on:

1. How education needs improvement but is made worse by tragicomic suggestions
2. How education becomes tragicomic when truth is displaced by truthiness
3. How the art of poor thinking is practiced with tragicomic effects on education
4. How slogans and trite phrases sabotage common sense and contribute to the tragicomedy of education
5. How poor thinking drove us off track, creating a tragicomic train wreck of ideas
6. How the tragicomic consequences of poor thinking about education waste time and money and hurt children



Chapter One:

Public Education as Tragicomedy



How Education Needs Improvement but Is Made Worse by Tragicomic Suggestions

Children are no joke. Unfortunately, their education too often is. But their education doesn't have to be miserable. We can make public education better, even make it what it should be. But to do so, we need to see more clearly that much of what's said about it and the policies that govern it are silly and off target and then get serious about its improvement. It's healthy for us to see the comic as well as the tragic in public schooling. In fact, seeing the comic side of children's education is essential. My advice is this: laugh before you cry. *See the absurd, the funny, the ridiculous in what people say and apparently think, and laugh at it before you cry.*

Laugh and cry, but then think things through and take action to make the education of children better. You must take action, and in later chapters I will suggest some things you can do about your own thinking and advocacy with policy makers. Laughing is good for you. It's also the most effective weapon, and sometimes our only weapon, against injustice. And there's injustice aplenty to laugh and cry about in the education of all children, including exceptional children. *But laugh first.*

General and special education: both tragicomic

Most children receive general education—which is intended for typical children. We assume that general education is appropriate for the students it serves, but often it isn't. Too often it isn't really good for any child, which is maddening and shameful. We need to make it better, so that it better serves the needs of children and society.

Special education is designed for students who are atypical—not like most in ways that are important for their education. Exceptional children need a different, special education. By definition, their educational needs are not those of the typical child. The tragicomedy of their miseducation is a national disgrace and a professional embarrassment. Our children with special needs deserve better. Their education must be taken seriously and made what it should be—teaching that makes maximum use of their abilities and will help them acquire the skills they need to prosper to the full extent that they can as adults.



Special education is mentioned often in this book. This is because more children with exceptionalities—either disabilities or special gifts and talents or both—are being educated in the mainstream of public education. They’re “included” in general education for a significant part of their time in school. Therefore, I can’t focus *solely* on either general or special education. Special education has to be seen in the context of general education—as something that often occurs in neighborhood schools and in classrooms where most children are taught.

Too many general education teachers give little or no acknowledgment to special education or to the exceptional children it’s designed to serve. Their assumption seems to be that all children are special, so none of their students really has a special (significantly different instructional) need. For example, award-winning general education teacher Rafe Esquith makes no mention whatsoever of special education or students with disabilities in his popular book, *Teach Like Your Hair’s on Fire*.¹ I suppose you could assume that if the teacher teaches well, then children with disabilities are just like everyone else in the class, so no one needs to mention them. Or you might assume that some teachers don’t recognize exceptional children when they see them. They might recognize them and just choose to ignore them. Probably the assumption that exceptional children are often unrecognized or ignored in general education is safer. Treating exceptional children just like all the other students might help teachers and administrators, and it might even help some exceptional children, but it won’t help them all. And the very idea that general and special education aren’t really different is laughable.

We get the joke when someone says, “I’m special, just like everyone else.” That kind of nonsense at least makes us smile, if not laugh. Why don’t we get the joke and laugh people out of leadership positions when they say that *all* children should be getting special education? We shouldn’t take nonsense seriously, yet we too often do when people intone nonsense about education. Why don’t we laugh at politicians who demand that every child become proficient in reading when that is simply not feasible? We too often let such craven pandering go, or respond as if it’s a serious proposal.

Comedians' use of tragicomedy

Our most endearing comics and social critics have often used tragic events or absurdities as the basic material for their commentaries that make us laugh. They've understood that we should laugh at absurdity regardless of who or what created it—regardless of religion, creed, social standing, or personal characteristic, even if it's our own. They get the comic side of tragedy; it's in their job description. Often they make us want to laugh and cry at the same time. Special and general education are both like that—absurd and silly but pitiful and heartbreaking, too.

Mark Twain understood tragicomedy, perhaps more keenly than all but a few. Having grown up in Hannibal, Missouri, his boyhood town, I have an unusual affection for his humor, which was frequently directed at the everyday lunacies of the social order. Many people know that he said, "Clothes make the man." Few know the rest of the quote: "Naked people have little or no influence in society."²

Mark Twain made us laugh at the funny side of social injustice, absurd statements, natural catastrophes, and personal failings. He saw tragicomedy where others saw only tragedy or comedy. A topic might be serious, but that didn't stop him from poking fun. He might say something in jest, but that didn't mean the underlying issue wasn't serious. He understood that laughter is the only really effective weapon we have when it comes to the mess people make of things. Consider his send-up of the pompous yet dense and ultimately inane language of nineteenth-century medical science in his story "Those Extraordinary Twins":

Without going too much into detail, madam—for you would probably not understand it anyway—I concede that great care is going to be necessary here; otherwise exudation of the oesophagus is nearly sure to ensue, and this will be followed by ossification and extradition of the maxillaris superioris, which must decompose the granular surfaces of the great infusorial ganglionic system, thus obstructing the action of the posterior varioloid arteries, and precipitating compound strangulated sorosis of the valvular tissues, and ending unavoidably in the dispersion and combustion of the marsupial fluxes and the consequent embrocation of the bicuspid populo redax referendum rotulorum.³

Mark Twain saw the humor in such language, which was intended to be unintelligible. We realize that he throws real words together with

neologisms (made up words) to provide a pastiche of knowledge (a jumble of words that imitates a style but reflects silliness rather than knowledge). His ability to make us laugh in the face of a serious problem is part of the charm and humor of the story. He had great fun with incomprehensibility, regardless of its source. Laughter is, after all, the response we should have to things that don't make sense, whether they're found in medicine, religion, politics, or education.

Twain made fun of all religions, and his comments about Christian Science are typical. He noted that the basic tenets of the religion are, in his words, "strange . . . frantic, and incomprehensible" and that in the book describing it (*Divine Science*) often "the words do not seem to have any traceable meaning." He noted also that many people claim to understand it and claim "that there [are] no such things as pain, sickness and death, and no realities in the world; nothing actually existent but Mind." He concluded his check-up of Christian Science by dryly noting, "[This] seems to me to modify the value of their testimony."⁴

In the 1860s, Twain wrote in letters from Hawaii, "I have seen a number of legislatures, and there was a comfortable majority in each of them that knew just about enough to come in when it rained, and that was all."⁵ He recorded the fact that one Hawaiian legislator suggested building a suspension bridge from Oahu to Hawaii, a distance of about 150 miles over open ocean. This legislator made his proposal in all seriousness, not intending to be funny, while ignoring the engineering realities. He was funny without intending to be, and Twain didn't let him get away with it unscathed. Twain also observed that in the Wisconsin legislature of the era, "a member got up and seriously suggested that when a man committed the damning crime of arson they ought either to hang him or make him marry the girl!" Twain concluded in his inimitable style, "To my mind the suspension-bridge man was a Solomon compared to this idiot."⁶

Too bad that Mark Twain's mind is gone from this world. At least his wit has been preserved in writing. But we admire him for more than his wit. He also had a more finely tuned sense of social justice than most of his contemporaries, including a sense of shame about slavery and racial discrimination. Roy Blount, Jr., quoted Mark Twain's observation that "The skin of every human being contains a slave," adding his own comment: "He could at least make America flinch before it laughed."⁷

In our own era, Garrison Keillor understands the humor in absurdity. With his radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, he makes us smile, if



not laugh aloud, at preposterous commercials for things like biscuits and catsup and duct tape and at the absurd ideas that in the mythical Lake Wobegon (or in any real town) *all* of the women can be strong, *all* of the men can be good looking, and *all* of the children can be above average. In Lake Wobegon, we can also assume that all children are very, very “special.”

A tragicomic education

Which brings me back to the topic of this book—the tragicomedy of special and general education. In some ways, the story of education in the United States is inspiring. In other ways it’s tragic, almost beyond belief. The tragic aspects of special and general education make a lot of people who really care about it want to cry, and they make no one happy. While they also have their comic aspects, it’s the kind of dark humor about which you laugh to keep from crying. It’s good for us to laugh at some of the more obvious mistakes and the silliness of the sad story that education has become, because the alternatives—tears or rage—are less satisfying.

We love our schools; we hate what’s happening to them. “We” includes people regardless of ethnic origins, color, or gender. It includes students with disabilities and their families. It includes typical students and their families and gifted students and theirs. It includes the political left and right. We’re all in this together—all concerned about education’s improvement, its fairness, its future. We need to laugh and cry with each other because our collective futures are at stake.

The tragedy is that we don’t have the schools we want and need. Adults need better schools to prepare students for productive lives. Children need better schools to make their lives happier and their futures brighter. The heartbreak of schools is that they’re so often not what they should be. The comedy is that people so often make absurd analyses of educational problems and propose cockeyed solutions to these problems. Poor thinking about education, special and general, and schools, neighborhood and special, too often results in high comedy.

If we care about our schools and education, then we must think about how to make them what we want them to be. And in thinking about this, we need to understand why education is tragicomic—why, in the middle of all the care and concern people have about educating children, we have to be able to see the ridiculous for what it is, to see the comical side of the tragedy.

We may laugh about education, whether special or general, but we also want very much to avoid adding to its tragic features. Thank goodness we can avoid making things worse if we're willing to look at education with renewed emphasis on clear and careful thinking and if we're able to see the comedy in the tragically flawed statements and proposals that educators, government officials, business leaders, journalists, and others make about education. Remember Twain's send-up of pompous, unintelligible language? Imagine his reaction to the following commentary from an education professional's book. It's as silly as Twain's fictional nineteenth-century physician's advice to Aunt Polly, and it's longer!

The reduction of possible interpretations to the demands of "basic language" or the increased surveillance of unauthorized interpretations through the imposition of a metalanguage create [sic] definitively favorable conditions for "consensus." In other words, once we learn the right use of language (as put forth through the performativity principle of capitalist technoscience or a universal normativity), the "true" meaning behind the proliferation of second-order meanings will shine forth. With only "correct" meanings in circulation, consensus would be "natural." . . . In order for the discussion to go further, to take different directions, to open it up to "the event," dissensus or paralogy must be introduced. However, within the domain of performativity (which both "basic language" and metaprescriptive norms enforce), paralogy would be reduced to mere innovation of contents within the ordained form. If paralogy is understood as the invention of new, imaginative moves not prescribed by the norms, then paralogy is directed at the forms themselves. The intent of paralogy is the creation of new idioms (forms and expressions) for thought. Paralogical moves ensure that any metanarratives do not terminally congeal into totalitarian imperatives . . .⁸

Regardless of the author's intention, this kind of pomposity is funny. So are illogic and unintelligibility. All of these—pomposity, illogic, and unintelligibility—can also be tragic, but only if they're taken seriously. Unfortunately, these kinds of discussions are taken seriously by educators. Too few poke fun at them or see the humor in silly statements about serious things.

Take note that the tragicomedy of the following quotation is amplified by its presence in an official journal of the American Educational Research Association. Note also that, like Twain's story about the nineteenth-century physician, this brimming nonsense that follows,



that seems to go on forever, is but a single sentence. It's funny in its own way, but unfortunately it wasn't *intended* to be funny, like Mark Twain's fictional physician's mumbo jumbo.

Because of the cultural studies [sic] emphases on working on the cutting edge of theory and theorizing; taking the popular seriously; doing not only interdisciplinary but anti-disciplinary and even post-disciplinary work; undertaking praxis rather than theory or practice, and so forth, we are likely to see (indeed we are already seeing) a greater emphasis on curriculum theorizing that employs cutting edge theory and juxtaposes a number of theoretical discourses; deals with popular culture, the new media (taking up television and the World Wide Web rather differently than current dominant approaches), and a very expanded notion of pedagogy and pedagogical spaces; and utilizes an inter/anti/post-disciplinary approach.⁹

But, if this doesn't tickle your funny bone, try any of many other articles published by the American Educational Research Association,¹⁰ including this gem: "To this end, I believe that our responsibility is to keep educational research in play, increasingly unintelligible to itself, in order to produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently as we work for social justice in the human sciences."¹¹ When I read such things as the examples I've given from the literature on education by educators, I can't help recalling Twain's pithy aside: "(It is very curious, the effect which Christian Science has upon the verbal bowels. Particularly the Third Degree; it makes one think of a dictionary with the cholera. But I only thought this; I did not say it.)"¹²

Tragicomic statements of noneducators

Unfortunately, the tragicomedy isn't just a matter of what educators say and write about education. This hyper-gibberish has escaped the campus and is spreading virally into the public sector. Remember what Mark Twain said about the legislator who misunderstood (or, at least, misused) the word "arson"? Twain wasn't particularly kind in his comments about that guy, but his description made us laugh by pointing out the absurdity of the legislator's misunderstanding. Consider the misuse of the word "elite" in the following statement by a group of business leaders. With italics used to emphasize its nonsense, the writers at the National Center on Education and the Economy said, "The challenge is to provide *an elite education for everyone*."¹³

I read this and said to myself, "Whoa, Nelly!" Did these people mean to use hyperbole to make a point? After all, what does "elite" mean?

I think it refers to a small group of people who have more of something (like power or social standing or wealth) than most. It indicates high rank, a hierarchy, which in turn implies there are lower ranks. Everyone being high-ranked is as illogical as everyone being above average or “special.” I think these business leaders could’ve said “better” or “good” or “acceptable” or “decent” and it would make sense. We know that hyperbole is used in fairy tales and in sales pitches and other things that aren’t quite real. But, really, “elite for everyone?” Trust me, we’re adults; we’re ready for real-world statements about education, whether special or general, not things written for children or commercials. If business leaders want the public to believe that if everyone buys their product then everyone will be elite, that’s fine. That’s business. Education isn’t exactly a business, and it isn’t improved by commercial slogans. In fact, the call for an elite education for everyone isn’t just preposterous. It’s certain to fail because it’s—well, just impossible!

Or think about the plain meaning of the word “behind” and its misuse in the George W. Bush administration’s signature legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Ordinarily, “left behind” might be taken as a figure of speech, meaning forgotten or neglected. But it’s clear from the legislation itself that that’s not what it means. It refers to test scores and an expectation of universal proficiency, the kind of test score comparisons that are absurd and that demand we take “left behind” literally, not figuratively. In the context of test scores—something I take up in later chapters—“behind” means someone else is in front or ahead. It doesn’t mean forgotten. It doesn’t mean neglected. It implies an order, like 1, 2, 3, or first, second, third. G. W. Bush’s first secretary of education (well, yes, an educator) stated, “If I’m honored to be confirmed by the Senate, I will dedicate myself every day to the task of assuring that no child in America will be left behind.”¹⁴ Twain would have had fun with this. Keillor could have. We should.

And we should understand this: Regardless of who supports the Lake Wobegon-like ideas of NCLB, they are deserving of ridicule. The outright silliness of NCLB is not a matter of political affiliation, as it received strong bipartisan support. NCLB may well be replaced by another equally absurd law under a different name, but if its assumptions about testing are not changed, it will still be ridiculous. More on this later. President Barack Obama’s secretary of education, Arnie Duncan, “said he will not back away from testing and accountability,”¹⁵ but if he doesn’t back away from universal



proficiency and other absurd ideas in what is now NCLB, he will have fallen into the same irrationality as his predecessors. Irrationality isn't peculiar to a political party.

We should start by laughing at silly uses of words that can't mean what they say, titles or slogans or combinations of words or statements reflecting ludicrous thinking. Here's why. Laughing at something funny is an appropriate first response. However, some funny events also have dangerous consequences, and besides laughing we need to respond to them. Too often we neither laugh nor take appropriate action. We then fail in two ways: first, by not laughing at funny things; second, by not trying to stop something dangerous. Our failure even to laugh demonstrates our willingness to ignore reality.

Why the tragicomedy?

A reasonable question is, "Why do people say things about special or general education that are nonsensical?" Perhaps they believe what they say sounds good or is likely to get them votes or public approval, and nobody will think carefully about what they've said. As Nicholas Lemann wrote in *The New Yorker* about President Bush's education policy initiatives, "The whole world will not be watching. The whole world will be too confused to follow the action."¹⁶ If no one understands, no one will get too upset about the consequences of talking fantasy about real-world issues. What someone says may be the stuff of high comedy, but the tragedy is that many don't recognize it as such. They take nonsense about education seriously.

Too often, any statement about education or its reform goes unchallenged, regardless of how funny or off base it is in its failure to conform to the real world. Consequently, the improvement of education remains stymied while we pursue imaginary solutions. As a society we've not only allowed but supported and sometimes even enshrined in law preposterous propositions about education. Silly talk and pretense have too often been allowed to dominate talk about education. This produces babble, not constructive conversation. It contributes to the tragicomedy of public education.

One misguided response is the suggestion that the language people use is trivial if their *intention*—what they're really after—is honorable. So, the argument goes, we shouldn't pick on the language of the No Child Left Behind policy because, actually, its intention is to improve education, general and special. But, as George Orwell pointed out in the middle of the twentieth century, our language reveals much

about how we think about things, and our thinking is reflected in our language. He wrote:


But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take a drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible.¹⁷

The Orwell quotation says to us that a careful analysis of language reveals a great deal about how people think. In fact, we know a lot about what people think by listening carefully to what they say or paying careful attention to what they write. He also described how language is used for political purposes and wrote, “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”¹⁸ But mumbo jumbo is used not just in politics and education. Dense, confusing language is sometimes used to fool stockholders in business reports when companies are doing poorly.¹⁹ We’re in dangerous territory, indeed, if we assume that what people say has little relationship to what they think and vice versa. But Orwell’s last sentence also gives us hope. It says that what we say and think about education can be made better—certainly more accurate, perhaps less ugly as well. We could start by doing what comes naturally when we see an absurdity—laughing about it.

The consequences of silly words

We may conclude that when people use words that don’t make sense, or words that have to be redefined to make sense, or use language that’s impenetrable, unnecessarily confusing, or otherwise misleading about the true nature of their intention, an event, or a condition, then they are either clueless or up to no good. Writing that can’t be deciphered logically or that isn’t simple and straightforward isn’t helpful. Writers and speakers who can’t be easily understood, especially when their topic is the everyday world, probably have either nothing worthwhile to say or, worse, something to hide. We need clearer, less confusing, simpler, more interpretable, and more accurate language in communication about education. When our language and our thinking about it become clearer and more rational, education will become less a tragicomedy and more of what we want it to be.





Nobody who knows schools, teachers, and education believes that things are perfect the way they are. And no one, as far as I know, suggests this. Some people see our schools as catastrophic failures, while others think they're doing a pretty good job, all things considered. The truth is probably somewhere between the most positive and negative appraisals. Our schools certainly aren't total failures, but they need a lot more improvement than the most optimistic views of them suggest. And special education, in particular, needs a lot of improvement. Language that's detached from reality doesn't help us improve schools or education. What's tragic is that people can say comical things about education, whether it's general or special, but not be met with guffaws or, at least, chuckles.

We can and must do better

Education isn't a hopeless case. We can have happier days in both special and general education, days in which things make sense, kids learn more, kids are happier, and we waste less money and time. But having happier days requires changes in the way we talk, think, and act. We have to be more realistic about what education is, what can and can't be done. We have to be able to distinguish fantasy from reality, bad language from language that communicates effectively, good thinking from poor, justifiable conclusions from those that aren't trustworthy.

But our *first* response to absurdity, regardless of its source or its topic, should be bemusement—seeing the laughable in spite of the tragedy. After we have a good laugh, crying is okay. But, ultimately, we must think better and figure out how to fix things.

Notes for Chapter One

¹ Esquith (2007)

² Mark Twain Foundation (1976, p. 942)

³ Twain (1894/1969, p. 288)

⁴ Clemens (1899 [1976], p. 383)

⁵ Day (1966, p. 109)

⁶ Day (1966, p. 112)

⁷ Blount (2001, p. 81)

⁸ Bain (1995, pp. 7–8)

⁹ Wright (2000, p. 7)

¹⁰ See, for example, Erickson & Gutierrez (2002), Pillow (2000), and St. Pierre (2000)

¹¹ St. Pierre (2000, p. 27)

¹² Clemens (1899 [1976], p. 378)

¹³ National Center on Education and the Economy (1989, p. 9, italics in original)

¹⁴ Slevin (2000, p. A6)

¹⁵ Glod (2009, p. A2)

¹⁶ Lemann (2001, p. 34)

¹⁷ Orwell (1954, p. 163)

¹⁸ Orwell (1954, p. 174)

¹⁹ Tong (2006)

