

Preface

I was seventy-seven years old when I started writing this book, so I thought I'd better hurry. Besides, you'd think a pair of lucky sevens would augur well for any book's success.

But longevity qualms and lucky numbers aside, what finally pushed me into beginning the book was a simple case of exasperation. Having been a public school educator for well over a half-century, I finally became fed up with seeing today's educators making precisely the same sorts of mistakes I'd seen educators make, again and again, in earlier years. If there's any truth in the saying, "Those who don't learn from their mistakes are destined to repeat them," why is it that today's educators seem almost compelled to replicate their predecessors' blunders?

I realize that we sometimes find it satisfying to see individuals who, unable to profit from their earlier missteps, continue to make the same mistakes. After all, we surmise, if they aren't smart enough to learn from their errors, then they richly deserve whatever flows their way. Unfortunately, however, when educators make mistakes, they rarely err in isolation, and those who lose out are almost always students. This is why I find it so exasperating when educators repeat their predecessors' mistakes. Repeat mistakes are bad enough; repeat mistakes made by educators are inexcusable.

Mistakes, of course, happen. Educators, like all human beings, will make errors as they carry out their work. A teacher, for instance, may try out a brand-new technique that, despite the teacher's best hopes, flops rather than flies. The new technique was simply ineffective. When such mistakes occur, however, any sensible teacher simply figures out what went wrong, corrects this shortcoming, then teaches differently when next year's students roll in.

I've spent many years teaching and, as a consequence, I've made hundreds of instructional mistakes that required fixing. Accordingly, I definitely don't get upset about any teacher's fumble-and-fix approach to classroom instruction. Instructional mistakes in the classroom are certain to be made—and most of them are readily correctable.

What distresses me, however, are the sorts of mistakes that have a negative impact on a large number of classrooms. The kinds of educational errors I'm referring to are policy decisions—typically rules or regulations made by authorities at the federal, state, and district levels—that have a negative impact on the way many teachers are trying to teach many students. These mistaken policy decisions are the kinds of mistakes I've chosen to write about in this book.

SIX UNLEARNED LESSONS

In the book's first six chapters, I'll describe a half-dozen *unlearned lessons*, that is, six specific mistakes educators persist in making—repeat mistakes that harm students educationally. I've *not* selected these six unlearned lessons because they represent the most significant problems we need to address in education but, rather, because they're serious mistakes I've encountered “up close and personal” during my own career. Putting it differently, I've chosen to deal with these particular mistakes because I'm intimately familiar with all six of them—either having made the mistake myself or having observed, first-hand, others making a particular mistake. I'll be dealing with both *errors of commission* and *errors of omission*. Either of those kinds of mistakes can be costly.

In education, an error of commission occurs when someone's action has an adverse effect on educational quality—for example, if a school board establishes a new test-analysis procedure that is so time-consuming that teachers literally have no time left for instructional planning. Errors of commission are fairly easy to spot, especially once their adverse effects become apparent.

Errors of omission can also have a negative impact on schooling, such as when someone's failure to act or respond has a damaging effect on educational quality—for example, if a school principal refuses to orient new teachers to the school's classroom-management policies and it leads to a flock of serious disciplinary flare-ups in their classrooms.

For each of these six unlearned lessons, I'll first describe the nature of the mistake and its negative impact on schooling. Then I'll toss in a sidebar or two that details a personal run-in with this specific mistake. Finally, before leaving each lesson, I'll close with a recommended way of rectifying this mistake.

I want to reiterate that there are ways to bring about more profound improvement in our schools than by fixing the six problems I'll be addressing. For example, suppose we were able to massively increase the dollars we spend on education so that, as a consequence, we could bump up the salaries of public school teachers by, say, 50 percent—we'd surely be able to recruit a host of talented people into the teaching profession. And if we had more talented teachers, it would certainly improve the caliber of instruction our students receive. I'm not suggesting that there aren't tons of talented teachers currently staffing our schools. Many of today's teachers are of course terrifically skilled, but dramatically higher salaries would entice many capable new people to become teachers, and a continuing influx of such individuals would surely have a positive and long-lasting impact on educational quality.

But what's the likelihood of our seeing enough of an increase in the level of school funding to lead to a strengthened teaching force? I've been hearing people call for higher teacher salaries most of my life—I first heard such pleas way back when I was still a student in high school. Therefore, I've listened to those "more-money" requests off and on for well over sixty years but I've never seen any meaningful action taken in response to them.

Certain profound shortcomings in education are simply so costly to rectify that they're unlikely to be remedied. Other educational problems are so deeply engrained that they'll take a very long time to address successfully. Those sorts of mistakes represent targets too elusive for my taste. I want to tackle a more tangible set of mistakes that can be fixed affordably, realistically, and quickly—like those reflected in the six unlearned lessons, which can be remedied in short order if we tackle them head on.

If the mistakes I'll be discussing were all to be remedied in the next few years, would America's public schools suddenly become pedagogical paradises? Of course not! But I'm convinced that if one or more of the six mistakes were actually fixed, there would be a clear, discernible improvement in our schools—one of our own making that would definitely benefit kids.

This book is not intended to be merely "an interesting read." Oh, of course I'll not be offended if you find it somewhat interesting. But if the book fails to generate the kind of actions intended to remedy one or

more of the six mistakes it identifies, then it will surely be a failure. The mistakes to be treated, I assure you, are eminently fixable, and the people reading this book can have a hand in mending them. Clearly, the book was written with a mission in mind. I want to see at least some of the book's six repeat-mistakes remedied. If one or more of these mistakes are fixed, then some of our children will receive a better education.

Just a few paragraphs ago, I indicated that most of the mistakes I'll be dealing with in the book were made by "authorities at the federal, state, and district levels." For instance, the mistake-makers might be legislators, appointed officials such as state education commissioners, or the elected members of local or state school boards. Suppose, therefore, that you are not one of these "authorities," but a teacher, a school administrator, a parent of a school-age child, or an everyday citizen. Does this mean that you can't play a role in fixing these mistakes? On the contrary—you can most definitely participate if you decide to do so. Are you personally obliged to take some sort of action? Of course you aren't, but I do hope some readers will take action after finishing the book.

In chapter 7, the book's final chapter, I'll try to entice some readers into tackling one or more of the problems treated in the foregoing six chapters. I hope you'll take a serious look at the suggestions in that chapter, because the longer we allow our schools to suffer from the six unlearned lessons, the more children there are who will get a lower quality education than they deserve.

Now, just before dipping into the first of education's unlearned lessons, I need to get a bit personal. You may wonder what led me to a career in teaching and then in assessment, and how I came to write this book. My college major was in Aristotelian philosophy, and because there was zero demand for Aristotelian philosophers in the mid-fifties job market, I decided to become a high school teacher. Although I taught for two years in a high school in eastern Oregon and loved it, it was clear that my teacher-education program had been completely ineffectual. Thus I decided to become a teacher educator so I could do a better job of preparing prospective teachers. I earned a doctorate at Indiana University and then taught in teacher-education programs at two colleges (Kansas State College of Pittsburg, Kansas, and San Francisco State College) before becoming a faculty member at the UCLA Graduate School of Education,

where I taught for twenty-nine years. The first half of those nearly three decades at UCLA was focused on teacher education, but the last half centered on educational assessment because I'd learned by then that in a high-stakes testing environment, those who control the assessments have an enormous influence on what goes on instructionally in classrooms. In 1991, having discovered that emeritus (retired) professors received free campus parking, I took early retirement from UCLA. Since then, and because I have been released from all publish-or-perish shackles, I've been spending a good deal of time working with teachers to improve the instructional relevance of their classroom tests and with state-level officials to improve the caliber of their statewide accountability tests.

When I was young, I often sneered at experience, thinking that when a colleague invoked "my experience" in any sort of disagreement, it was often a sort of last-resort argument. Now, older and far more experienced, I realize that a lifetime of experiences—often laden with ample wrong turns—can put you in a position to share insights that are simply not apparent to less seasoned folks. And that's why I am writing this book. I've seen some serious mistakes made once and I'm seeing them made again. I now want those mistakes to be fixed, because it is high time for students to benefit from all six of the unlearned lessons to be treated in this book.

Let's get underway, then, with chapter 1 and the first unlearned lesson.

W. J. P.
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