

A Parable of Past Scribes and Present Possibilities

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[This article is a parable on the twenty-year, billion-dollar American education research effort called *Project Follow Through*, the outcomes of which the American education establishment continues to ignore, to the detriment of students, teachers, schools, and communities across the country and even around the world.—Ed.]

A parable is usually an orally told story, with lots of repetitious phrasing to enable easier remembering, that illustrates a moral lesson. While they are typically timeless, my own familiarity with parables originates with those set in another time and place—2000 years ago in the “middle” East. The present parable, however, is set much closer to the present. The “scribes” of the title refers to writings or to those who write. Another shorter story of mine sets the stage for this parable, along with a short reading from a leading educational behaviorologist, Glenn Latham. Here is the shorter story, titled *Jamie’s Lesson*:

Ask yourself:

Do you go to school?

Do you see other kids doing mean things?

And do you see others doing nice things?

Well, this is a story about Jamie, and about an early lesson she had on helping others learn to do nice things.

Jamie and her classmates were out on the playground. It was the middle of winter, with a cold sun in the bright blue sky, and a thin glaze of ice on the ground. However their teacher, Mr. Glenn, saw Jamie off to one side, sniffing. Going over to her, he asked, “Jamie? Are you okay?”

“I don’t like Freddy!” she replied. “He’s so mean. He said I was clumsy, just because I slipped on the ice...”

“I can understand why you are upset,” Mr. Glenn calmly said. “It’s hard when other people do things that hurt your feelings.”

“And everyone laughed, too,” Jamie added.

“It’s even harder when others give attention to bad things,” Mr. Glenn continued pleasantly. “We have talked in class about a better way to handle these things. What is that better way?”

With a little hesitation, Jamie replied, “We said it’s better to pay attention when people do good things.” Af-

ter a pause, she continued. “But Freddy doesn’t do any good things!”

“Well,” Mr. Glenn said, “at times like these, it is hard to see good things. But tell me just one thing Freddy has done recently that was good.”

“Well,” Jamie said, deep in thought. Then, beaming, she said, “yesterday I saw him go right over to a little kid who fell off the slide, to see if he was okay. And, this morning he helped pick up a box of spilled pencils—and he wasn’t even the one who spilled them. That was nice of him.”

“Wow!” said Mr. Glenn. “That’s great. That’s two things! Did you tell him you thought that was nice of him?”

“...Oops,” said Jamie.

“You can still tell him, if you want to,” said Mr. Glenn. “That can still help him do more good things, and become a better person.”

“That would be good,” Jamie replied. “I will!” And off she went to do so.

And you can do that too. Just once today, try to notice something good that someone does, and tell them it was nice. Do that every day, and you will surely make a better world.

Now, though, let us consider an even shorter story, this one by a leading educational behaviorologist, Dr. Glenn Latham. He was a professor of education at Utah State University in Logan. And as the Research Director of the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center, he spent much of his career helping schools all over the Western half of the USA. In his book, *Behind the Schoolhouse Door: Eight Skills Every Teacher Should Have*, he reports some of that research. He begins with this story (which I quote in its entirety; see Latham, 1997):

A boy was seen searching frantically for a coin he had lost. It was dark. The boy was down on his hands and knees beneath the corner street light looking for his coin. He was very intent. A man happened by and asked the boy what he was looking for. It went like this:

Boy: “I dropped a coin and I’m trying to find it.”

Man: “Where did you drop the coin?”

Boy: “Oh, I dropped it over there,” as he pointed to a spot well beyond the area illuminated by the street light.

Man: “If you dropped the coin over there, why are you looking for it over here?”

Boy: “Because it’s lighter over here.”

[Prof. Latham continues:] Like that little boy, the education decision makers of America, over the centuries, have spent their time and energies—wasted their time and energies—looking in all the wrong places for the answers to education’s most compelling

and perplexing problems. Rather than looking for the answers where the problems are, that is, in the classroom where education takes place, they have been looking elsewhere. In fact, they have been looking almost *everywhere* else. With what effect? Nothing of substance has changed...

[In the next paragraph, Dr. Latham continues:] In 1993, Dr. David Britt, President of the Children's Television Workshop [well-known creators of the *Sesame Street* TV series], noted, "Schools today are one of the few workplaces in our society that our grandparents would easily recognize." (p. 1)

Now, after those stage-setting stories, here is the parable:

And it came to pass in those days that the rulers of the citizens were prompted to act. They were prompted to act because the citizens were worried about what went on in the rooms where the young spent their days. For in those rooms, the young were to be instructed. As was expected, and as had been expected, of and by their parents before them, the young were to be instructed in how to scribe. And they were also to be instructed in how to read what they had scribed, and in how to read what others had scribed before them. And in this way they were to be instructed, and so learn, how to care for each other and how to care for their world. And this was good, and it was seen to be good by the citizens.

Now in the rooms where the young spent their days, they were to practice scribing, and reading what they scribed, and what others scribed too. They were also to learn to test what was scribed, and to apply that which was scribed which was found by the tests to be effective. For as they grew older, they were to so test, and to so apply, in many areas, such that their world would be a better place in which to live. They were to so test, and to so apply, so that their world would be a more just and compassionate place. And this too was good, and it too was seen to be good by the citizens.

Yet the citizens were worried about what went on in the rooms where the young spent their days. They were worried because the young were not being taught so well, and were not learning so well, to scribe and to read. And they were worried because the young were thus also not being taught, or learning, to test for, and to apply, that which was effective to make their world, the world of young and old alike, into a better place. And this was *not* good, and it was seen to be *not* good by the citizens.

And *thus* it came to pass that the rulers of the citizens were prompted to act. They were prompted to act, as they had learned when they were young, to test, and to

apply, to benefit all. They were prompted to act to test what had been scribed about what should go on in the rooms where the young spent their days. And they were prompted to act to apply what was found by the test to be effective. For they wanted to so test, and to so apply, such that what went on in the rooms where the young spent their days would be effective. For they indeed wanted the young, and so also the old, and so also the world, to benefit from what the young were taught, and learned, in the rooms where they spent their days. They wanted all to benefit from the young learning to scribe, and learning to read what they and others had scribed, and learning to test and also to apply. And this was good, and it was seen to be good by the citizens.

And so it came to pass that the rulers of the citizens gathered their tax collectors, and sent them out. Out they sent them, to all corners of the land, to collect lots of taxes. And these taxes were to be spent on the grandest test of the widest range of what had been scribed about what *should* go on in the rooms where the young spent their days.

And a mighty sum it was that they collected to spend on this grand test. Some ten billion pieces—as they counted their money—did they collect for this grand test. They collected it to test to find out and to apply what was effective in the rooms where the young spent their days being taught, and trying to learn, to scribe, and to read, and so on, and so forth, etc., etc... (Well, I shouldn't *always* provide the parable pattern perfectly, or you will still be reading this next week!)

And thus it came to pass that the rulers of the citizens began to act. With so much of their mighty tax money in hand, they began to act. They acted by gathering together all those who had scribed the many major views of what should go on in the rooms where the young spent their days. They gathered them all, and there were ultimately nine who stayed. They gathered them all, and had them begin the grand test. They began the grand test by beginning to apply what they had scribed. And they applied what they had scribed in many districts, each with several large places, with each large place having many rooms where the young spent their days.

Each of the nine views of the grand test had its own separate districts. And the districts of the nine were spread all across the land of the citizens who paid the taxes to make the grand test possible. What each of the nine had scribed is what each applied, each in its own districts, for many, many years. And this may *not* have been good. But it was at least interesting. And it was seen to be interesting by the citizens, at least the citizens who knew about the existence of the grand test (which was not that many—but that is perhaps a story for yet another parable someday).

And so it came to pass that the rulers of the citizens had much relevant data collected in each of those districts, each with several places with rooms where the young spent their days. They collected data for those many years in which the nine major views were applied in the grand test, and the tax money lasted. And the outcomes of each of the nine views were compared. They were compared with the general outcomes from all the other districts of the land with places with rooms where the young spent their days where data were also collected. The outcomes of the nine views were compared *with the outcomes of all the other districts which partook not* of any particular one of the nine views. With all of these were the outcomes of the nine views compared. And this was reasonable. And it was seen to be reasonable by the citizens who knew about it.

And thus it came to pass that the results of the grand test became clear. And there was bad in the results of the grand test. And yet there was also good in the results of the grand test.

It came to pass that three of the nine major views were responsible for the young under their charge doing more poorly, *and sometimes much worse*, than the young across the land who were not under any of the nine. They did more poorly than these on most all of the measures that were maintained in the records, the records of the data of the grand test.

And it also came to pass that three others of the nine major views were responsible for the young under their charge doing *the same* as the young across the land who were not under any of the nine. They did the same—neither better nor worse—on most all of the measures that were maintained in the records, the records of the data of the grand test.

Yet it also came to pass that the outcomes were better for the remaining three of the nine major views. It came to pass that the three remaining views were responsible for the young under their charge doing better, *sometimes much better*, than the young across the land who were not under any of the nine. They did better than these on most all of the measures that were maintained in the records, the records of the data of the grand test.

Now, just knowing all these outcomes was good. And the citizens who knew of these outcomes, knew that knowing of them was good (even if not all the outcomes were good). But some, who actually held the credentials of educators, and who knew of these outcomes, refused to acknowledge this good. They were the powerful, supposed educators who were associated with the six views that were unable to demonstrate improvements benefiting the young. And *therein* rests a tale of woe that continues to plague the citizens of that land down unto this very day. Yet they still struggle to make the three beneficial views available to and for their young. And we should learn from their efforts.

What *should* have happened? And what happened instead? Listen, and understand, and take action!

And then, *it should have come to pass* that these results of the grand test should have been made known to all the citizens of the land. For knowing these results of the grand test could have brought great joy into the hearts of the citizens of the land. For now they had good reason to apply, emphasize, and support those three of the nine views that were effective in helping the young become better able to scribe and read and test and apply and so on. And they also had good reason to set aside the other six of the nine views, the six that either had little impact, or had a negative impact, on the outcomes of the efforts of the young and of those who work with the young.

Now, *that* is how it should have come to pass, so that the young could do better, could do well. And the world of the young and old alike *could* be a better place. But it did not come to so pass. This was not good.

It should have come to pass that the views that led to little outcome change were little recommended, and little supported, *and little taught* to those who teach in the rooms where the young spend their days. This would have been good. And the citizens would have seen this to be good, as well as to have been a good use of their taxes. And the world would have been better off. But alas, this did not come to pass, which was not good.

And it should have come to pass, even more surely, that the views that led to *poorer* outcomes were recommended against, and were no longer supported, *and were not taught* to those who teach in the rooms where the young spend their days—just as physicians do not continue to recommend or teach treatments that are shown to be ineffective. And this would have been good. And the citizens would have seen this to be good, as well as to have been a better use of their taxes. And the world would have been better off. But alas, this too did not come to pass. This too was not good.

And it should also have come to pass that the views that led to *effective, positive* outcomes *were* recommended, and *were* supported, *and were thoroughly and comprehensively taught* to those who teach in the rooms where the young spend their days. And this too would have been good. And the citizens would have seen this also to be good, as well as to have been the best use of their taxes. And the world would have been much better off. But alas, this also did not come to pass. This also, and more so, of all these, was not good.

Since these things did not come to pass, the citizens of the land have now seen a whole generation of their young sacrificed. They have been sacrificed to a scientifically and morally unsupportable preference for the views with the middling and negative outcomes. For those who scribed, espouse, and prefer these views (those that led to

the middling and negative outcomes) are the ones who maintain the programs to teach the teachers who teach the young in that land. But the teachers are not taught; they are victims also. They were kept in the dark about the results of the grand test. And so the positive–outcome views have been ignored, and the citizens who are aware of this mess have begun to speak of “Academic Child Abuse.” This indeed is not good!

So, just what did come to pass in the land of these citizens? What did lead to this great sacrifice of a generation of their young?

Here are some details:

Instead, it came to pass that those who scribed and espoused the three views that led to the young doing more poorly—and even many of those who scribed and espoused the three other views that had little effect—(these) were all also the darlings of those who were chiefly responsible for the training, throughout that land, of those who work with the young in the rooms where the young spend their days.

And it came to pass that they used their influence with the rulers to keep the rulers from applying the *substantive* results of the grand test. It came to pass that when the rulers finally acted on these results, the best they did was to continue to fund *all* nine views until the tax funds finally ran out after about twenty years after the grand test had begun. The funds finally ran out near the end of what the citizens called their twentieth century.

In that time the rulers continued to fund even those three of the nine views that had a demonstrably negative effect on the young. This was not good. Citizens could see it was neither good nor a good use of their tax dollars.

Needless to say, those among the citizens who were aware of these developments were, are, and continue to be outraged. And they also were, are, and continue to be active against what they see as an immoral contradiction of all and everything that the young were to be taught in the rooms where they spend their days...

And so, what will come to pass next? What will happen to the education of the children of that land? That remains to be seen. What happens next depends on the citizens of that land, and how well they are able to bring about restitution and application of the best results of the grand test. Thusly will they help bring about a more just and compassionate world for themselves and their young to live in.

The future depends on them, as indeed it depends on us, you and I, and how well we do those same things. For this has really been a parable about ourselves (i.e., about those in the USA).

Actually, I wish I could tell you that this parable was just that, a mere parable, a fable with moral lessons. I wish I could tell you that this parable had been merely made up to help us avoid some problem that had not yet occurred. But it is so much more than that. It is real, all too real. It really happened [and I provide some references at the end so you can delve more deeply into the depths of this reality].

The fact is, you and I and our parents (in the USA) all contributed our tax dollars to run a grand test like the one in the parable. That test is officially called “Project Follow Through.” It was the most extensive, expensive, federally supported educational research project in the history of this country, and perhaps in the world (and a fairly extensive literature is available on it, although few seem aware of it, not even teachers). Here are some brief details:

The names of the approaches to education that were evaluated by this project—and organized here by outcome from best to worst (and not always in the conveniently equal numbers as in the parable)—are these:

The *three* approaches that brought about *better* outcomes are:

- ✧ Direct Instruction (which showed the best outcomes of all);

- ✧ Parent Education; and

- ✧ Behavior Analysis.

(And these three approaches are among the best foundation stones for building what some call “Quality Education.”)

The *single* approach that evidenced little or no effect is:

- ✧ Southwest Lab (SEDL, a bi–lingual approach).

And the *five* approaches that caused the *poorer* outcomes are:

- ✧ Bank Street (College of Education);

- ✧ Responsive Education;

- ✧ Tuscon Early Education Model (TEEM, Arizona, a whole–language approach);

- ✧ Cognitive Curriculum; and

- ✧ Open Education.

For all nine approaches, measures of the produced outcomes were taken in the affective/self concept area, in the cognitive/conceptual area, and in the area of basics (including language, reading, math, and spelling).

Those are a sample of details about the grand test, a grand test on which we Americans *actually spent about one billion dollars*. And yet *now we ignore the results!* And that is to the detriment of our children, our teachers, our society, and ourselves. It remains so, unless and until we move to implement the better–outcome approaches.

Will others around the world avoid our mistake of ignoring the results? Will they implement the better–outcome approaches, and so benefit from them? Will we join them? I sincerely hope all this happens.

And consider this: *Project Follow Through* was really only on the instructional and pedagogy side of educa-

tional concerns. What about classroom behavior concerns, and the relation of these to school violence? The discipline of natural-science explanations of behavior, behaviorology, which informs the positive-outcome approaches of *Project Follow Through*, also informs successful practices in the classroom. (The discipline that informs the middling-outcome and negative-outcome approaches of *Project Follow Through*, and which has done so for decades, is the discipline of fundamentally mystical explanations of behavior.) The extension of behaviorological principles to education shows that the positive, pro-active, non-coercive practices and skills summed up by the phrase “management, not discipline” (Latham, 1999) provide the *best practices* for handling classroom behavior concerns and maintaining the sanctity of the learning environment (another foundation stone for building Quality Education). For example, it shows how half of instruction time is typically lost to non-instructional disruptions, and by returning even half of *that* time to instruction—by implementing classroom management, rather than discipline, procedures—we would be essentially extending the school year by 40 days, without actually adding any days (see Latham, 1998). Perhaps more importantly, these procedures are also a major means of helping to prevent all levels of violence in the schools by removing the very basis of school violence (Sidman, 2001).

Now, is that not the kind of practical, demonstrated solution we should be actively, morally, even insistently supporting and demanding, for the sake of our children, our teachers, our society, ourselves? I am compelled to think so. And I suspect that you agree. Then, we might also work with the many other related, and already tested and validated, solutions that are and have been available, but which have been similarly ignored, as the grand test results have been ignored. Let us work well with all of these effective practices.

If you and I, the citizens, think and act accordingly, then we *shall* soon see real improvements in what goes on in the rooms where the young spend their days. We *will* soon see more education in education.✻

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