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**AN INVITED ISSUE DEDICATED TO
JOHN G. RICHARDSON**

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DEDICATION

Volume 11: Is “Best Practices” Research in Education Insufficient or even Misdirected?

AN ISSUE DEDICATED TO JOHN G. RICHARDSON

Lorraine Kasprisin
Editor

This special issue of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* is dedicated to the life and work of John G. Richardson in recognition of a lifetime of scholarly contributions to our understanding of the sociological and historical origins of common schooling in the United States with recent emphasis on the institutional expansion of special education from a global, comparative and historical perspective. John is professor emeritus in the field of sociology of education at Western Washington University, and associate editor of this journal since its beginning in 2006.

This issue is somewhat different from our other issues. The issue not only attempts to break new ground, but it is also a personal expression, on behalf of this journal, of John’s commitment to both the journal and to the world of scholarship.

Dr. Richardson has conceptualized the theme for this issue and has invited four scholars to join him on a journey that will bring cutting edge research to a critical re-examination of our current educational and social science methodology. His introductory essay places the articles within a conceptual framework that raises deeper questions about what it means to make claims to understand something – a question that I particularly appreciate as a philosopher. For me, John is one of those rare scholars who can bring a larger philosophical and historical perspective to his solid empirical research agenda. To the scholars whom he has invited to contribute to this issue, it was one of those rare moments, as one put it, to “recognize the shoulders we stand on.”

We hope that this issue will initiate a wide discussion around some pivotal and fundamental questions about the ways we conduct the research that shapes our understanding of schooling in America.

Because John has invited our authors to partake in this pursuit of new understandings, I asked our authors for their insights on the significance of the questions John has raised in this issue and in his lifetime of scholarship.

Below are comments from the contributors who share their insights on the significance of John’s ideas and lifetime work, followed by a compilation of his scholarly work.

Comments from the Invited Contributors to this Issue of the Journal on the Significance of John Richardson’s Life and Scholarly Work

BERNADETTE BAKER:

In the 21st century changes are occurring so rapidly that the educational field barely has time to process what has already come down the pike, let alone what is coming. It takes a scholar of courage, with both historical awareness and foresight, to raise important, salient and far-reaching questions about what has come, is on the horizon and might be on the way. This is especially the case in an academic context that appears to be narrowing in its toleration for asking difficult questions and generating meaningful dialogue around them. The *Journal of Educational Controversy* is to be congratulated for keeping open this space that is so important to the sustenance of a democracy, so integral to honouring epistemological diversity and so central to offering a site for the wide variety of gifts that people have to be thoughtfully shared. To this end, I want to underscore here just some of the many gifts that I believe John Richardson has given the educational field, both in this special edition and in his prior remarkable oeuvre.

Among the many theoretical, historiographical and epistemological reorientations of the field that John has generated, three stand out in regard to providing springboards for contemporary debates in curriculum studies and in this special edition. One is his insight, meticulously documented, that special education as it used to be labeled played the role of enabling and 'purifying' the space that public schools then took up in many western contexts. John was the first scholar to ask about and then to document how the chronological founding of asylums and schools and centres for children labeled blind, deaf or delinquent preceded and then helped to constitute the nature of what and who could count as 'the public' in public schooling. This is a game-changing insight, for to understand public schooling as less than universal, as outside the usual celebratory narrative of generic child rescue, and as part of a different 'demographic' moralisation challenges much received wisdom. Second, John's intricate understanding of the links between history and sociology, between institutionalism, practices of governance and 'making people up' has changed the way the field sees not just institutions-as-bureaucracies but the idea of nation itself. In his analysis of the different versions of 'frontier' mentalities - the east coast, the south, the midwest and the west coast and Pacific northwest, John has sensitised us to how debates over the scientific versus the humanistic curriculum concerned a far broader impulse - the struggles over which region of the nation was to be THE nation's image, to represent the USA of the early 20th century. This innovation changes forever how one understands the value sets pedagogically inscribed in different regional policies. It again de-universalises those terms, phrases or concepts that might otherwise so easily roll off the tongue as unvariegated entities. Last, but not least, is John's work on understanding the historic impact of different kinds of (religious) forms of benevolence as they structured the possibilities for schooling and its different modes. Historically, it may seem banal to note but potent to realise: not every culture has found it necessary to invent something called asylums, schools and universities, nor has every culture forced children by law to attend institutions outside of family life. The historical trajectories that inform that move in some places and not others, far from being seen automatically as progress and 'civilisation' remains an open question - one about the mentalities and practices that 'made sense' to certain groups of people at certain times - and not without contestation by other of their peers. John's unearthing of the religious heritages entailed in secular inventions is of such quality that it was awarded an AERA Outstanding Book Award in Curriculum Studies. One cannot understand nationalism after Richardson without understanding now

the integral role of special education around a dis/ability line, around benevolence and around assumptions about humanity at large. The qualitative and quantitative evidence he marshals to careful, rigorous and patient arguments is a worthy model and deserving of such an honour.

ANNE E. CRAMPTON

I have only recently become acquainted with John Richardson and his work, and I feel very fortunate indeed to have benefitted from exposure to his scholarship, and to his incisiveness and generosity as an editor. Reading the introduction for this special issue, I am drawn to his discussion of Smith's "invisible hand" with some hope--at this moment when the so-called leaders of the country are undoubtedly pursuing their own interests—to think that there is a possibility and maybe even a likelihood that out of their self-promotion will emerge an unintended consequence: the "promotion of the society" as a whole, perhaps in the form of resistance. Further, Richardson asserts that this emergence is to be expected, despite all efforts to manage and control outcomes through the application of best practices. This is a far more powerful claim than the best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley. The concept of emergence, as developed in Richardson's introduction, is potentially discouraging for teachers or other authority figures, and thrilling for students, or citizens. It was also a thrill for me; Richardson's conceptual history links ideas and whole lineages in compulsory schooling, and offers an emergent and therefore "irreducible," newness, that helps me think differently about classrooms and students, about power and possibilities for agency. I feel like we need work like Richardson's more than ever right now.

TRACEY PYSCHER

John Richardson's work and his editorial influence fits the much needed intention of the *Journal of Educational Controversy*, a space where those not so very popular arguments about educational inequity find a home. I am honored to write along with John as well as the topic he poses for this special issue and has posed in his scholarly work for decades. He foreruns the work I hope to continue. The continuation of his courageous and critical work is especially needed now as we move into an even more dangerous Trump era where even factual truth is questionable. Critical scholars like John, now carry a double burden of unearthing deficit in education and fighting back fabricated realities. This special call especially captures Dr. Richardson's life work as he asks us to consider both the insufficient and misdirected intentions of educational "best practices." As an emergent critical scholar advocating for different school practices affecting the lives of marginalized youth, I am honored to continue this tradition he has laid in front of us.

While these three pivotal innovations have changed not only where we look but what we saw after having engaged with Richardson's work I want to conclude here with something of equal import about John's contributions. John's generosity, kindness to his colleagues, his selfless mentoring and support for younger scholars and the high standards he has always set for himself reveal the erudite gentleman that he is. It can sometimes seem that in academe in general there are few senior scholars whose behaviour and daily interactions are governed by humility, but John is such a one. John's modesty lies in inverse proportion to his intellectual sharpness, perspicuity, clarity and big picture vision coupled with rigorous

attention to detail. It is a rare combination intellectually and personally and our field is now better off for having had both the academic contributions of his lifetime and the compassionate contributions of his life force.

JINTING WU

Poignant, philosophical, and multi-everything, John's work opens many paths in sociology and education. When I first met him in an AERA's pre-conference seminar five years ago, John described himself as actively retired, and I soon learned why. For the last four years, our scholarly kinship revolved around a project on the global convergence of vocational and special education. Through ongoing conversations, John nurtured us with the brilliance of his ideas and guided us to dive deeper into uncommon questions and untangle the complex linkages between history, theology, law, disability, education, and the "multiple publics of marginality". John shows how one can bridge the most unlikely realms and turn the promises of each into a gift for sociological writing. Always with a keen analytical eye to see the peculiar in the mundane, a deft sociological imagination to break new grounds, John has inspired me beyond words could describe. To me, he is not only a mentor and colleague, but also a charismatic family member who offers affirmation and advice rich with humor and goodwill. With affection and gratitude, I thank him for his unfailing support and his shining yet unassuming exemplar of scholarship.

Works by John G. Richardson

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