

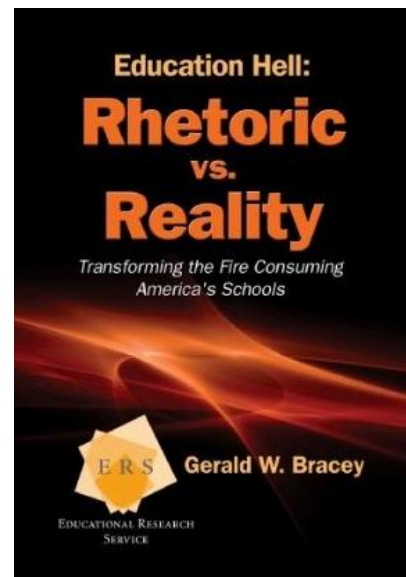
Bracey, Gerald W. (2009) *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs. Reality*.  
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Reviewed by Susan Ohanian

January 8, 2010

Whether it involved the SAT, NAEP, PISA, PIRILS, or Arne Duncan's latest mendacity, Jerry Bracey was famous for checking the facts. "Not really. Look it up," he'd tell people on EDDRA (Education Disinformation Detection and Reporting Agency), the discussion list he founded and ruled over with strong opinions and dedication to empirical proof. He had no tolerance for loosey-goosey claims that could not be substantiated by facts. And then he'd e-mail the long list of reporters in his e-mail directory, asking why *they* didn't try looking up a few facts. No question: when a new study came out Jerry was our go-to guy. We knew he'd tell us if it delivered the goods. Or not.

The appearance of a new book by Gerald W. Bracey is always a treat, and I felt honored to be able to review *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs. Reality*. That's what I was doing in October 2009 when he left us so unexpectedly. And then, knowing there would be no other books, I



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couldn't come to grips with talking about this one. But now I'm ready to give it a try.

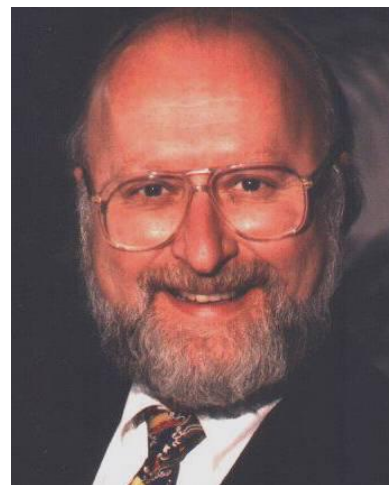
On June 22, at 8:36 p.m.—Left Coast (as he liked to call his new home) time, Jerry wrote to EDDRA, “On page 183 of my new book, *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs Reality: Transforming the Fire Consuming America's Schools*, (hint, hint) I quote one of Dewey's most famous and, I think, accurate, pronouncements: ‘Democracy must be reborn with each generation and education is its midwife.’ ” Through the years, Gerald Bracey, in his stalwart defense of public schools, has stood at the side of the midwife, always aware of what is at stake and ready to render aid when needed. Here's how he put it on the welcoming page to the EDDRA website:

Welcome to the Education Disinformation Detection and Reporting Agency (EDDRA). EDDRA is dedicated to analyzing reports, dispelling rumors, rebutting lies about public education in the United States. It represents an on-line version of the work I have been doing since 1991.

And in *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs Reality*, he continues this work, remarking that he can't decide whether we're living in Orwell's world or Lewis Carroll's but whatever the case may be, it's a world turned upside-down. He declares that “When teachers are forced, against their better judgment, to focus on teaching test content to the exclusion of almost everything else, I can only conclude that the high-stakes testing movement nourishes totalitarian regimes.”

Bracey sets the tone in the Introduction—specific, passionate, idealistic—ending with an international study to clinch the argument: “Get it through your head now: In the long run, test scores don't count.” And then he lists the personal qualities that tests don't—and can't—measure: Creativity, Critical thinking, Resilience, Motivation, Persistence, Curiosity, Inquisitiveness, Endurance, Reliability, Enthusiasm, Civic-mindedness, Self-awareness, Self-discipline, Leadership, Compassion, Empathy,

Gerald W. Bracey died in his sleep during the night of October 20, 2009. He was a fellow at the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University and a fellow at the Education and the Public Interest Center at the University of Colorado, Boulder. For years, he maintained a website, the Education Disinformation Detection and Reporting Agency, dedicated to debunking dis- and mis-information about public schools. He wrote a blog on Education for the Huffington Post. Bracey was a native of Williamsburg, Virginia, and attended the College of William & Mary before going on to obtain a PhD in psychology from Stanford University.



Courage, Imagination, Sense of humor, Resourcefulness, Humility. Bracey notes:

These are qualities that people can exhibit on an almost daily basis. And at the risk of diminishing my own profession, I note that none of them *require* schools. ... You want global competitiveness? Set up Situations where kids can develop their creative skills. The World Economic Forum Global Competiveness Report for 2007-2008 ranks the US as number one in creativity among 131 nations.

The book is in two parts, Part 1 includes four short chapters, Part 2 seven.

Believing that people who worry about the current assault on public education, “the burning ruins left in schools over the last 8 years,” need to know how we got to this low state, Bracey provides the history: *Chapter 1: Pre-Sputnik: Non-Test-Based Criticism of Schools*, begins with Thomas Jefferson, moving quickly to Horace Mann and Walter Hines Page and then to 20<sup>th</sup> Century criticism, noting that a Carnegie report found that in 1908, 49% of Harvard freshmen had “conditions,” Yale 58%. Today, we would call students with “conditions,” students in need of remedial courses. Then there was CIA director Allen Dulles claiming that the Soviet Union would produce 1.2 million scientists and engineers between 1950 and 1960, while a meager 90,000 would emerge from American institutions of higher education. His survey shows the reader that the business community has been trying to control public education since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “It wants schools to prepare students to work so it won’t have to pay to train them. The business community makes no distinction between education and training.”

In Chapter 2: *Post-Sputnik: Criticisms and the Descent Into Test Mania*, Bracey notes that “Media blamed the schools for Sputnik and the schools never recovered,” that “People will believe anything you say about public schools as long as it’s bad.” As he wrote to *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, “It is still amazing to me how people who are wise and insightful on most topics under the sun go all goofy when it comes to education.” (p. 39)

By 2007, Bracey tell us, people who know nothing about tests were using them as policy devices, and so we get such seemingly strange bedfellows as the U. S. Chamber of Commerce and the Center for American Progress (CAP) teaming up to produce the study *Leaders and Laggards*. Podesta, former Clinton chief of staff, executive director of CAP, and co-chair of President Obama's transition team finds it "unconscionable that there's not a single state in the country where a majority of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are proficient in math and reading." Bracey explains that's because he doesn't know what "proficient" means. He devotes chapter 3 to explaining that proficiency levels on NAEP tests were set deliberately unrealistically high "to sustain the sense of crisis."

*Chapter 3: Tests: Descriptions and Trends—How Do We Measure Up?* begins with a provocative Braceyism:

Evaluating schools with standardized test scores is like evaluating prospective defensive football tackles only on how fast they can run the 40-yard dash. Actually it's closer to evaluating them on how fast they can run the 100-yard dash. That's something they will never have to do in a real game and thus is not a valid measure of how well they can play the game. Once people leave educational institutions, they don't usually have to take any test that looks like what they suffered through in school. (p. 73)

Bracey makes the point that tests are even worse than that because people make false assumptions about tests. They think tests are linked in some meaningful way to the nation's economic competitiveness; they believe that test scores are falling and that American kids are falling ever farther below other nations. Then he sets out to demolish these false assumptions, not with emotion but with facts. In his words, "It would be one thing if all of this testing could be linked to what happens later in life or the health of the economy, but it can't. No research shows anything other than test scores predict grades and other test scores." (p. 105)

In Chapter 4: *No Child Left Behind: "The Beatings Will Continue Until Morale Improves"*, Jerry notes that he wrote his first anti-NCLB article in 2001, a full year before what was then a nameless plan became law. Truth in disclosure: Jerry gives high praise to my little anti-NCLB book *When Childhood Collides with NCLB*, recommending that readers give it to NCLB supporters. (See [www.book-smarts.net/spring08/Hinchey-on-Ohanian.htm](http://www.book-smarts.net/spring08/Hinchey-on-Ohanian.htm))

In introducing Part II, Jerry comments that he presents some old research, as in the Eight-Year Study and some new research such as biogenetic research, some "exciting notions that would lift people off their fannies" and stop "the stupefying ideas" that dominate education discussion these days: national standards, exit exams, algebra for all, competition in the global economy, and getting kids ready for jobs.

Chapter 5: *Science, Engineering, and Economic Competitiveness* uses the reaction to *A Nation at Risk* to debunk the myth that the U. S. is trailing the world in science, mathematics, and engineering.

Chapter 6: *The Real Meaning of Competition* presents a discussion of the World Economic Forum's "12 Pillars of Competitiveness," showing where the U. S. ranks on each pillar.

Chapter 7: *Poverty is Poison* centers on recent biogenetic research resolving the debate of nature vs. nurture. The chapter summarizes Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman's 15 issues of how poverty impacts children and youth.

Chapter 8: *A Few Words About Learning—Eureka!* discusses recent research on insight and Howard Gardner's exposition of multiple intelligences, with a look at the Key School in Indianapolis Indiana.

Chapter 9: *The Goals of Public Education* presents John Goodlad's 12 goals from 1979, along with commentary on how they apply today.

Chapter 10: *The Lost Lessons of the Eight-Year Study* offers highlights from an often misrepresented study, and presents ideas on how we can use the lessons from this study to move past current criticism of U. S. schools.

Chapter 11: *Democracy in Education* offers three essays from the September issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*. Richard Gibboney, Nel Noddings, and Deborah Meier offer ideas about how schools should support democracy and how democracy should support schools.

The book is packed with good lines, good lines followed up by evidence offered in astute discussion. Below are quotations from each chapter--plus three from Chapter 11.

- “Teaching will *never* be a science. Behavioral science deals with groups; teachers deal (or should deal) with individual kids; nothing works for everyone.” (p. 13)
- People will believe anything you say about public schools as long as it's bad.... (pp. 39-40)
- [T]he descent into test mania that we have witnessed in this country is an ineffectual (at best) way to reform schools. (p. 99)
- NCLB uses the phrase “scientifically based research” 111 times in its 1,100 pages, but there is no research whatsoever that undergirds the law's approach to school reform. If anything, the research argues *against* NCLB. (p. 110)
- America churns out about three scientists and engineers for every one new position in those fields.... (p. 125)
- Still we can see, given the complexity of competitiveness as conceptualized by either the IMD or WEF and visible

to all in the ruins of the global economy, those who would lay the burden of competitiveness on the schools are fools and liars.(p. 141)

- Poverty is not an excuse. Poverty is a condition. It is like gravity, affecting everything you do on the planet. (p. 153)
- For me, whether or not Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory accurately describes the brain and how it functions is not in the end all that crucial. Whatever its ultimate fate one thing it does is indisputable: It throws a bright light on the stark, dreadful sterility of recent math-and-science obsessions emanating from policy makers and so-called reformers. (pp. 164-5)
- I cannot offhand imagine anything dumber than the recent California mandate that all eighth-graders take algebra. One of three things will happen: a) algebra will get dumbed down, b) the dropout rate will increase, or c) both. (p. 176)
- Here’s why education can never be a science: education deals with sentient beings and each is different. Recall Haber’s explanation for the popularity of multiple intelligences and Alan Rosen’s speech explaining that most drugs don’t work on most people. (p. 205)
- The guardians of democracy—the leaders of our government and public institutions—have not been zealous in pursuing democratic goals. (p. 224)
- The message “Go to college” is sent with good intentions; it is meant to inform students that they can all “make it” if they work hard. But it is a nasty, antidemocratic message. (p. 249)
- If inequality in test scores is bad for the economy. . . what about inequality of medical care? Where does the corporate elite stand on that? Or inequality in housing? Or inequality in preschool child care, summer experiences for children, or prison sentencing? . . .

Citizens in a more robust democracy would be asking such questions. (p. 258)

#### NOTE:

The Bracey Memorial Fellowship, given to a doctoral student with a research-based, hard-nosed commitment to further truth, equity, and social justice, has been established at the University of Colorado, home of EPIC, with which Jerry was long affiliated, the publishers of the final Bracey Report.

Please visit <http://tinyurl.com/yjx62r3>

Don't click the "in memorial of" option since you probably don't have the info requested about his next of kin (his wife, Iris). Instead, just write "In memory of Jerry Bracey" in the box. You may also mail checks, made out to "CU Foundation" with "EPIC - Jerry Bracey" in the memo line, directly to the School's Development Officer, Margot Neufeld, at:

University of Colorado at Boulder  
School of Education  
Margot Neufeld  
249 UCB, room 116  
Boulder, CO 80309

The Foundation has no fees for memorial gifts—all the money goes to the gift purpose (student support in Jerry's name).

#### About the Reviewer

Susan Ohanian is a longtime teacher and prolific author on education topics. She has maintained a website of resistance since the passage of NCLB and does not see any reason to take it down.



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