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A Reply to Mr. Hodas

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Abstract:

David Monk offers arguments in rebuttal of the article by Steven Hodas (Problems with the Production Function Model in Education) which was published in this journal as Issue 12 of Volume 1.

I feel compelled to respond to Steven Hodas's intemperate outburst about the education production function because it spreads misinformation and distorts my view of what the production function formulation offers students as well as practitioners of education policy (see Hodas, 1993 reacting to Monk, 1992). Mr. Hodas raises three issues; I respond to each in turn.

First, there is the suggestion that a production function formulation is inherently imbued with authoritarian effects on education decision making. This is nonsense. A production function is quite simply a summary of whatever regularities can be associated with a production process. It is nothing more and nothing less.

Production functions do not prescribe regularities; rather, they describe them. The fundamental empirical question that most production function analyses attempt to answer is focused around the nature and extent of the regularities that can be discerned. The answer to this question might point in decidedly nonauthoritarian directions for policy. For example, in an education context, we might find that what succeeds dependably for a wide range of students under a wide range of circumstances is a highly decentralized decision making structure where considerable emphasis is placed on collegial consensus building. Indeed, some recent productivity research in education is pointing in precisely this direction (e.g., Bryk and Driscoll, 1988).

Second, Mr. Hodas seems to think of the education production function as an immutable set of relationships that is handed down from a great external power. Again, this is nonsense. Production functions themselves are the outcomes of production processes. How we go about

transforming resources into educational outcomes is not fixed. Students can be taught how to learn in different ways. Moreover, our knowledge of technology evolves.

If there are morally acceptable means of learning that are more efficient than others, are there not compelling reasons for moving in the direction of greater efficiency? The answer has to be, "yes." It is, after all, better to be moral and efficient than moral and inefficient. Are these reasons, however compelling, in and of themselves decisive? The answer is, "No." A production function inspired research program does not hold up efficiency as the sole criterion by which to judge a social policy. Much more is at stake, and only a utilitarian zealot would suggest otherwise.

If efficiency is a relevant social concern, and if production function research attempts to offer insight into what contributes to efficient operation, perhaps Mr. Hodas's fear about production function analysts abetting growth in unwarranted authoritarianism has merit. But for this argument to work we must blur the distinction between the tool and the use to which the tool is put. Can the production function tool be put to nefarious use? Of course. Indeed, one of the more serious public policy problems in education today involves educators claiming to know more about the properties of the education production function than the actual research base warrants. Here is where authoritarianism can flourish under false pretense with potentially disastrous results. However, unlike Mr. Hodas, I do not single out administrators as the sole culprits here. It is sad to say that there are some teachers as well as some administrators who make unwarranted use of production function research to justify questionable and even regrettable practice.

But does it follow from this that those who do production function research are responsible for the misuses to which the tool might be put? Or, does it follow that the approach ought to be abandoned, if not outlawed, for the same reason? For these conclusions to follow, I would need to be convinced that the misuses are unavoidable and that the magnitude of the resulting harms in some real sense overshadow the potential benefits the approach offers. Mr. Hodas slides over these points and leaves me unconvinced.

Third, Mr. Hodas seems to believe that it is evil to attempt to discern regularities in educational phenomena. He assures us that, "Learning is . . . a messy, tumultuous human process with all the shocks that flesh is heir to." He goes on to note that "(learning) is fantastically complex, multivariate, and in a real sense irreducible." Certainly, learning is complex, fantastic or not. Certainly, it can be messy and tumultuous. But how does it follow that we dare not attempt to identify regularities?

There is nothing evil about searching for whatever regularities can be found within educational phenomena; indeed, there are real benefits to be had. Modern production function studies in education are built upon past efforts. The production function studies being conducted today are very different and much improved compared with their predecessors. The quality of data on both the process and outcome side has improved dramatically. There have also been important theoretical developments that offer better guidance about what to look at and when. And, there have been impressive advances in the use of alternative investigative strategies, including experimental designs. I discuss all of this in considerable detail in my original article. I also devote the latter portion of that article to my vision of what enlightened production function research offers for the future. Mr. Hodas prefers to focus on the kind of research that was conducted 30 years ago. I think this is misleading and I hope readers will balance his assessment with where this research is today and where it is heading in the future.

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