

RECENT EDUCATIONAL REPORTS VS. BACK TO BASICS

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One can go back over the rounds of rejections and reversals comprising educational reform and view them like those long lists of "begats" in the Bible: The Committee of Ten begat the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education 25 years later. The Child-Centered Progressives begat the Society-Centered Progressives. The extreme cognitivism of the early 1960s begat the Humanism and anti-cognitivism of the later 1960s. The hubris of the 1960s begat the 'no confidence' votes of the 1970s and 1980s. And the lack of confidence blossomed into the demand for basics and minimum competencies — which in their turn begat the pursuit of excellence. It almost appears we'd rather switch than fight. In what follows, I will discuss both the substance and the politics of the most recent switches — of the strategies by which we are pursuing excellence, as well as of the nature of the excellence pursued.

As others have noted, it is not simply that our educational reform fads proceed as cycles: they proceed as pendular swings in which the excesses of one era are "corrected" by equal and opposite excesses in the next. John Dewey warned us about this, of course: education is too complicated, he said, to attack with "either/or's." And the group that wants only to throw the rascals out and reverse what the current Establishment has wrought is clearly under the sway of that Establishment — it is still dictating directions. But we persist.

There's nothing novel, then, about the current path being trod to educational reform. As my reversals list was intended to show, it's been going on for at least a century. What does seem to have changed, though, is the time it takes to complete a full swing of the pendulum. The fashion pace has become faster — even though the implementation pace has not always kept up, so that even before implementation occurs in some districts, the fashion has already moved on. Since what is 'in' is so largely a denial of what was 'in' — and what will be 'in' next is a reversal of what's 'in' now — delayed implementation can prove a dis-

tinct embarrassment or educational statesmanship. It can be a real predicament for an ambitious administrator. Or, on the other hand, if one can tough it out — stonewall it, or talk dedication to principle, or keep the locals in the dark for long enough — one's 'out' will be back 'in.'

But this is getting much harder to do because the locals everywhere have grown restive. It's getting harder to keep them in the dark. To put it differently, education is not only back on the national agenda, as the President has told us, his Administration has placed it at the top of that agenda.¹ A lot of people have been pleased about that. I have heard members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education note proudly that it was a major accomplishment of the Commission's effort, quite apart from its recommendations. I'm not quite sure I agree. I wonder what the reformers of the early 20th Century, who thought education was too politicized then, would say about what we've got now. According to Secretary Bell, the Excellence Commission report has begotten task forces in 40 states trying to clean up the mess in education.² Whether or not the Secretary is entitled to claim all that parenthood, it certainly seems to be the case that an overwhelming number of states are working on school improvement recommendations — and that some notable similarities mark their conclusions about what will bring improvement.

Somewhat ironically for an Administration whose rhetoric has consistently called for the reduction of the Federal role in education, they have enlarged it. As one official has acknowledged, "The Reagan Administration has actually broadened the conception of the Federal role in education 'to include not only access and equity but 'standards and quality.'"³ So far, to a considerable extent the standards and quality have translated into basics and competencies tests. Concern about a national curriculum — as dictated by standardized tests administered nationwide, and by content recommendations for all of the nation's schools — has never appeared as reasonable.

In what may become known historically as the "more-is-better-movement," state-level activity has resulted largely in more and still more curricular requirements. A reported 40

states have already made such moves, or are in one or another stage of doing so.⁴ According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, state-level efforts to reform schools shifted in 1983 from the testing preoccupation of the last four or five years to a focus on adding curricular requirements.⁵ One major concomitant of the interest has been the growing political value of the topic. It appears that any governor seeking a fast route to national prominence today has a good prospect with an education reform plan, so hot has the topic become. And so hot is it at the state level that legislatures are vying with state education departments to see which is going to produce the excellence plan. Last year almost a third of the plans enacted came out of state legislatures. I think this ought to cause us considerable concern. In at least one state, where it looks like educators had done a highly creditable job of turning accountability demands into a professionally respectable evaluation program, the lead is being wrested away by the politicians. I refer to Pennsylvania where a bill was introduced into the legislature that would rescind the Educational Quality Assessment program which tests all the schools in relation to a carefully developed, balanced set of 12 goals. For the present program the bill would substitute a set of cognitive development and achievement tests to determine entitlement to a diploma. Again, back to the basics. I'm not sure whether the matter has been settled in Pennsylvania, but I suspect the struggle is one of many similar ones we are now begetting.

Just one of the several unfortunate consequences of the state-level interest is the centralized decision it imposes on all. Even if these state-level decisions were too diverse to look like a national curriculum — and they are not — we would still be in trouble. It may satisfy the requirements of the President's federalism to have similar action enacted in 50 states in preference to making one set of decisions in Washington — but so far as individual schools are concerned, it matters not at all whether the ropes that bind are tied in Washington or in the state capital. The school's prerogatives are equally limited, either way.

I think the effects are more likely to hinder than help educational improvement — and that this can be said even before looking at the substance of these curricular mandates.

But the substance is such as to beget its own problems. I don't think coercion is the best strategy for improving education. As a matter of fact, if one's interest is really in eliciting a top level performance — an individual's very best efforts — coercion seems a very poor strategy. Excellence is just not something you can force. Coercion seems inimical to the kind of commitment that generates excellence. That is why I am less than sanguine about the tendency to solve the quality problem in education by requiring more and more courses. One of the most immediate consequences of such plans will be to swell the proportions of unmotivated students in academic courses. But that problem might be only temporary, because it shouldn't take long for many of the unmotivated to leave. New York's current dropout rate of 34 percent could soon reach 54 percent or perhaps even 64 percent. We may start with the democratic commitment which Mortimer Adler insists requires us to treat all students identically; but it won't take long for such a policy to beget a fairly homogeneous high school of the relatively able.

What would be nice to see happen, of course, is a real move in the direction of excellence, and for all youngsters. But that's not what we seem to be doing. A major part of the problem lies in the way we see excellence. It is clearly what's currently 'in,' and what we are all seeking. Yet our usage of the term is almost as odd as Oceania's Newspeak in proclaiming "Ignorance is Strength." Surely there is something logically strange in operationalizing the pursuit of excellence with strategies that homogenize inputs for all and adjust performance floors. Wouldn't an intuitive notion of excellence link it to the extraordinary rather than to what is standard and common? — with stimulating high-level performance rather than with re-categorizing those at the bottom? Yet standards and standardization are by far the most prevalent strategies of today for pursuing excellence — and we just don't seem to be talking very much about other meanings of excellence and other ways to seek them.

We become accustomed to such paradoxical word usage and eventually it comes to direct the efforts even of those who initially found it strange. "Basics" and the move "Back

to Basics" provide a strong case in point, of course. Apparently intended initially to encourage a sharper focus on traditional content, the term seemed somehow to recommend a preoccupation with the "Fundamentals" — a word that came often to be used interchangeably with "Basics" and which attached to the rudimentary skills of reading, writing, and computation which dominate the early years of schooling.

Accordingly, teachers' attention was directed to these rudiments. And since at this point the behavioral objectives and performance-based goals movement had already sired the minimum competencies testing movement, teachers were compelled to focus here. Then the failure of their students to perform adequately on the minimum competencies tests mandated in more than three-fourths of the states became a personal indictment of teachers. One of the outcomes was, of course, to force teachers to focus on these "basics" so their students would be prepared for the tests. Another was to compel the teachers of underachieving, unsuccessful students to try to focus on such matters even more frequently and exclusively — to bludgeon or force-feed it in, if necessary. And since an educational treatment that fails the first time has very little chance of doing much better the second or third (state legislatures to the contrary notwithstanding), the predictable result of such a procedure is to increase resistance and sap what little motivation such youngsters have left. This is an extremely important consequence of competencies testing, since it is by and large only these marginal students the program is designed to catch. But if its effects are as counterproductive even with the target group as I suspect, it seems a strong case for reconsidering the whole thing.

With abler youngsters, the results of competency testing may be even more distressing. The evidence seems clear that although we managed during the 1970s to increase reading scores for young children — at the level where those rudimentary elements loom largest in success — the scores of older youngsters, where higher order comprehension and inferential skills are at a premium, did not increase. And in fact, over the same period there was evidence of decline in more demanding cognitive abilities. It showed up in both reading

and math scores.⁶ So, even among the students who excelled at the "Back-to-Basics" program, the success evidently came at considerable cost. The report of a history teacher in an affluent, suburban high school illustrates the predicament. He had to decimate his normally compressed two-week unit on American traditional values. The facts to be learned for the tests required him to reduce the two weeks to two days for dealing with the Agrarian Myth, Social Darwinism, the Frontier Thesis, and the Puritan Work Ethic.⁷ It seems worth noting that such values are just what a lot of folks think the schools ought to be concerned with transmitting. It's even more germane to our purposes today that exploring such ideas and their internal consistency and relations to other ideas and events might make a significant developmental contribution to cognitive maturation.

Perhaps the figures which ought to alarm us most are the reports on the disappointing number of people arriving at the stage of formal thought. Given the intellectual power of such capacity, and the extent to which it can be environmentally encouraged to emerge, this may be the real shame of the schools. And I gather there is evidence that this education-related score is also in decline. Who knows — if "Back to Basics" lasts long enough we may succeed in holding cognitive development levels to the concrete operational stage! A list of studies finds only half the adolescent and adult population have arrived at the stage of formal thought.⁸ There is also evidence to show that capacities associated with cognitive maturity can be summoned by environmental stimulation and that they are directly responsive to training. If we are sincerely interested in excellence for anybody but the most fortunate, it follows that we must concentrate effort on literally building intelligence and intellectual capacity. But that is, of course, time-consuming and not what those state-mandated tests measure. And the more we talk standards, the greater the determination seems to become to require the mastery of more facts — and the less the time available for the really important and distinctive contribution the schools could make.

I can't quite understand the rather systematic blindness of the current reports to this. Although Secretary Bell describes the goals of the Excellence Commission in terms such

as understanding and comprehension and the ability to perceive implications,⁹ it is by no means clear how the recommendations offered will serve such goals. Excellence becomes a matter of standards and standards are rendered in quantitative terms — the more the knowledge, the greater the excellence. Not only is this unproductive of higher intellectual abilities, it is absolutely inimical to them. Ted Sizer has put the case in its simplest, starkest form: less is more. The adding on of more and more material to be processed at the lowest intellectual levels denies the time to focus on any other levels. But if the tests keep demanding more superficial knowledge, and keep on emphasizing "The Basics," then teachers not only have a reason for avoiding the demanding and important developmental challenge; they are forced into doing so — by the tests which are, of course, intended to coerce teachers as well as students.

Much needs to be said explicitly about the coercion strategy itself and its relation to the pursuit of excellence. Some who became disillusioned in the effort to teacher-proof classrooms turned instead to trying to force teachers to attend to business and shape up. How? — via competency testing to expose how much of what should have been learned was learned. I would like to underscore just two of the several difficulties with the strategy. The first is the apparent assumption that teachers know how to teach with success and will do so if required. (Deny this assumption, and the tests make no sense at all.) But the assumption is not true, and it serves to obfuscate the real challenges to effective education, which have to do with how to accomplish what the tests seek to bring about by fiat and force. A second difficulty with the coercion strategy generally, and the way it has been pursued with competency tests and curricular requirements, is also highlighted by Sizer:

One wonders how good a law firm would be if it were given manuals on how to apply the law, were told precisely how to govern its internal affairs, and had no say whatever in who the partners were. Teaching often lacks a sense of ownership, a sense among the teachers working together that the school is theirs, and that its future and their reputation are indistinguishable. Hired hands own nothing, and are told what to do, and have little stake in their enterprises ... Not surprisingly, ... teachers ... often act like hired hands.¹⁰

In most of the above I have argued the inadequacy of today's most fashionable strategies for realizing cognitive goals in education. I cannot close without at least noting that the goals themselves seem comparably misguided. In the first place, even accepting the realm of the cognitive as the appropriate focus for the school, we err in viewing that realm as so narrow and constricted. As Howard Gardner has argued quite impressively, there are probably multiple intelligences, not just the one or two which preoccupy us.¹¹ Thus, there might well be multiple excellences as worthy of pursuit as the rather narrow one which propels current efforts to improve education. But more generally, the reduction of educational interest and preoccupation to cognitive goals, even broadly defined, is a mistake. I am convinced that one of the major reasons for the relative superiority of elementary education over secondary — superiority with respect to effectiveness and satisfaction — stems from our awareness that immature needs must be addressed and responded to. Aiding and abetting maturation is a prominent part of what elementary school is about. We realize that adolescence is a growth stage too — and often a very difficult and precarious one. We are well aware that adolescents are not adults. Yet in designing the high school, we make few attempts to respond to the particular needs of adolescents or to make allowances for their immaturity. According to one psychologist, four very different kinds of maturation processes are taking place within the adolescent, including cognitive growth. But so also are an emerging identity; an evolving pattern of relating to other human beings; and an emerging sense of autonomy and assumption of self-responsibility.¹² Yet if so, why the arbitrary limitation of the school to the aiding of cognitive maturation? It could be argued that society as a whole has as large a stake in some other kinds of development as in cognitive maturation (especially in light of current projections of job types to be available in the next several decades).¹³ However, I don't expect to get far with this case. The forces of excellence are too strong today and cognitivism is on a roll. But stick around. At current rates, it may soon give birth. Let's hope it can beget something that breaks the pendular pattern and makes a bit more sense.

FOOTNOTES

¹In the closing session of the National Forum on Excellence in Education, December 8, 1983, according to the School Board News, December 14, 1983.

²According to "Best Seller Influences Schools," American School Board Journal, December, 1983, p. 50.

³According to Under Secretary of Education Gary Jones, as quoted in "Top Objectives Elude Reagan as Education Policy Evolves," New York Times, December 27, 1983.

⁴"Best Seller Influences Schools," op. cit.

⁵"Reform Focus Shifts," School Board News, January 18, 1984.

⁶See "Elementary Reading Skills Improve," NAEP Newsletter, Spring, 1981, and Gene I. Maeroff, "Reading Skills: New Problems," New York Times, April 30, 1981.

⁷Cited by Joan P. Shapiro in "Back to Basics Versus Freedom," Forum for the Discussion of New Trends in Education, v. 22-23, 1979-81, p. 82.

⁸John Mergendoller, "To Facilitate or Impede? The Impact of Selected Organization Features of Secondary Schools on Adolescent Development," in Adolescent Development and Secondary Schooling, edited by Fred M. Newmann and Christine E. Sleeter (Madison: Conference Proceedings from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1982), p. 80.

⁹Terrell H. Bell, "Excellence Report: A Turning Point," School Board News, July 20, 1983.

¹⁰Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 184.

¹¹In Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (New York: Basic, 1983).

¹²Mergendoller, op. cit.

¹³See Henry M. Levin and Russell W. Rumberger, The Educational Implications of High Technology (Stanford: Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance Project Report, February, 1983).