Thoughts on the Failure of Curriculum Reform

B. J. Benham

Why have so many reforms embodied, for example, in “open education” failed? (a) The reforms themselves are grounded in a contemporary-relativistic world-view, which is alien, even threatening, to most teachers. (b) The reforms, often, were “installed”; that is, teachers were told to find ways of implementing change models grounded in philosophical assumptions which they found greatly at variance with their own beliefs.

“... with all of its noise, its millions of words, its dedicated activists, the school reform movement has faded into history with hardly a trace of evidence that it ever existed....” Daniel Selakovich. “The Failure of School Reform.” Educational Studies. Spring 1975.

American education has a split personality. In reviewing curriculum developments of the past quarter-century, it is possible to discern two fundamentally irreconcilable rationales underlying what has been said and done. The first is grounded in classical realism and idealism and finds its twentieth-century expression in essentialism and perennialism; the second combines a gestaltist world-view with elements of modern pragmatism and existentialism.

I have come to suspect the failure of the educational reforms the 1960s and early 1970s was due, at least in part, to a lack of understanding that there existed a fundamental philosophical difference between the reforms being proposed and the institution of public schooling in America for which they were being proposed. I am suggesting that schools and school people are operating very largely within the traditional-deterministic rationale; while the reforms of the 1960’s were largely reflective of the philosophy expressed by the contemporary-relativistic rationale. It was not simply a matter of “liberal” reforms and “conservative” educators, citizens, and school boards. The conflict was deeper than that: a basic but usually unarticulated philosophical disagreement about the proper role of schooling, the nature of education, the role of the teacher, and so forth.

Because of the way in which our culture has been shaped during the past 350 years, the traditional-deterministic world view has been the predominant social outlook for most of the present century.1 It is, therefore, the one out of which most teachers function. Not only was it the essence of their own experience as students, but it was also the essence of their training to be teachers and of their experiences and behavior as teachers themselves.

Let us pause for a moment and review some of the characteristics of the essentialist-perennialist classroom2:

- Highest status in the school is given to the traditional “academic” subjects that constitute the college-preparatory course.
- Disciplining the mind and cultivating the intellect is seen as more worthy than acquiring physical, manual, or even intuitive skills—however marketable these may be.
- Because intellectual abilities are highly valued, the better and more experienced teachers are often assigned to the “advanced” classes of “brighter” students, while average or new teachers are assigned to classes of average, slow, and “problem” students.
- The fine arts and some other “non-academic” areas of the curriculum are viewed by many as frills, and are the first to suffer cutbacks in times of austerity.
- There is a tendency to feel that there is a certain amount of knowledge that must be “covered” every semester, with no time allowed for

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What Price Consistency?

The second answer is this: School people have had little or no practice in thinking in terms of philosophy, or in being aware of their own value systems. Exposure to the Foundations of Education at the undergraduate level is often brief, with History, Philosophy, Psychology, and Sociology all shorn of complexity, reduced to essential facts, and packed into a single semester course. Only a superhuman teacher could rise above a syllabus like that and help the students-preparing-to-be-public-school-teachers develop any lasting insight into the culture within which they are embedded, the ways in which their own values have been shaped, and the ways in which each person can "do philosophy" or "make sense" for herself/himself. There simply is not enough time.

The third possible answer to the question of vulnerability is more subtle and has to do with confusion arising from the educational rhetoric of goal-setting. For example, when teachers are given the opportunity to participate in developing a set of goals for their school, or a "school philosophy," they come up with statements like "Learning is the individual's discovery of personal meaning" . . . "Learning promoted by the school should be appropriate to the learner's needs" . . . "One of the individual's most important tasks is to develop a sound set of values. . . ." (Texas ASCD Curriculum Rationale for the 1980s). Then, teachers take the illogical step of reducing these goals—which reflect a contemporary-relativistic philosophy. They state their goals as they do because they sound more humanistic. They shape their classroom behavior as they do because everything in their upbringing and training has shaped them within the predominant traditional world-view. But without the awareness to recognize this (see answer two), teachers proceed to behave traditionally in their classrooms while thinking they are actually implementing those fine-sounding humanistic goals. If you ask them what they are trying to do, they will list a number of those goals; but if you watch what they actually do, you are likely to observe much the same kind of teaching that has been the basic pattern of American education since the turn of the century.

My concluding argument is this: if your goals are stated in contemporary-relativistic terms, you cannot move toward the teacher-planned behavioral-objectives approach and remain consistent with your stated goals. You must move in some other direction, and it cannot be a deterministic, teacher-planned and controlled direction. Two possibilities come to mind, and there are probably others:

In other words, objectives must grow out of activities and classroom situations, rather than preceding them.

On the other hand (as is perfectly plausible) if you want teachers to use behavioral objectives; if you value (as, I have contended, most honest educators would admit they do) the traditional-deterministic assumptions and the school characteristics listed earlier; they you must help teachers to frame their goal statements in consistently traditional-deterministic language:

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This book provides some insights into the affective (the feeling and valuing) dimensions of education. The need for such an exploration, as interpreted by the writers, grows out of several alarming recent trends, such as: undue censorship of educational materials; reluctance of educators to examine any area that might be controversial; and emphasis upon narrowly defined programs that develop a limited range of skills. Such developments tend toward a "safe but bland" curriculum that fails to capture the imagination and feeling of children and young people and does not enlist the allegiance and enthusiasm of teachers and others responsible for instruction.

"Safeness" and "blandness" are the antithesis of the intentions of the writers of this volume. They turn to the affective domain as a strong ally in freeing and extending the curriculum in order to strengthen education.


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The only alternative is neurotic: to have humanistic goals and deterministic behavior is bound to be alienating—"I say this, but I do that." Philip Slater maintains that western society is already quite neurotic enough to exhibit this contradictory behavior without even recognizing the contradiction; perhaps so. At any rate, the educational institution does seem to function this way, and within this contradiction, I suspect, lies the answer to the failure of school reform. [4]

Figure 3. Graphic Summary of the Paper

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<tr>
<th>behaviorist world view</th>
<th>cognitive-gestalt world view</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>traditional-determinist philosophy</td>
<td>contemporary-relativist philosophy</td>
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<td>essentialist-perennialist curriculum rationale</td>
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<td>activities</td>
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<td>Point 1: You cannot begin with Point 2: &quot;Laying on&quot; contemporary philosophies on top of teachers who ground their behavior in traditional philosophies-failure of reforms and change programs</td>
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