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Back to Basics Now and 20 Years Ago — A Comparison of Two Movements

Robert Donmoyer

Current calls for a return to basic education may seem like a rerun from the 1950s and early 1960s, but there are important differences.

The image of a swinging pendulum is often used to characterize educational change in the United States. The current "back to basics" movement, therefore, is seen as paralleling the emphasis on subject matter and the intellectually rigorous curriculum of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both movements were spawned by dissatisfaction with what were perceived as nonrigorous, overly child-centered schools.

The conceptual clarity of the pendulum image may be purchased at a high price, however, because it tends to obscure differences in social, political, and economic forces at work during each period. For example, the earlier educational move-

ment arose in an era of new frontiers, an expanding economy, and primarily local control of education. The current era is quite different. Instead of journeying into unexplored regions, we are led by a country boy in a retreat to old values; instead of an era of economic expectations, we have an era of limits; in place of local control of schools, there is increasing centralization to state and federal levels.¹

¹For a detailed discussion of the movement of the educational policy making arena away from the local level, see: T. Van Geel. *Authority to Control the School Program*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1976.

Objectives

The movements also differ in their philosophy and objectives. The demand during the more optimistic 1950s and 1960s was for excellence. It was called for not only by elitist critics like John Gardner and Admiral Rickover, but by those who tried to disassociate themselves from elitism. Jerome Bruner said, "We may take as perhaps the most general objective of education that it cultivates excellence," adding that excellence "refers not only to schooling the better student but also helping each student achieve his optimum intellectual development."²

These earlier demands for excellence contrast sharply with current demands for adequacy. For example, U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer suggested the slogan "Access to Excellence" as the basis for the Carter administration's educational program, but when the program was revealed, it was characterized not by a Brunerian concern for the intellectual aims of education but by a concern for functional literacy.

The contrast between the general objectives of the two movements is particularly dramatic in states like Oregon where minimal graduation competencies are not limited to general reading, writing, and computational skills, but include items such as balancing a checkbook and filling out an income tax form. Such competencies show a life-adjustment orientation that reformers during the earlier period argued against with vehemence.³ One cannot help but think of Hutchins' entreaty, "The good school master is known by the number of valuable subjects he declines to teach." Even if driving a car, understanding plumbing, and behaving like a mature woman are valuable subjects, they can be, and therefore should be, learned outside the educational system."⁴

Justification

Different general objectives reflect the different reasons offered by advocates to justify each movement. The case for educational reform during the late 1950s and early 1960s most often rested on a concern for the national welfare and, after Sputnik, on a concern for national survival. Admiral Rickover summed up the position in his testimony before the House Appropriations Committee:

The one thing which I believe will be of the greatest importance for the future of our nation and of the free world, the one indispensable thing, is to bring all our children to markedly higher intellectual levels.⁵

In contrast, the current arguments for a return to basics are usually cast in individualistic terms. In California, for example, it was the court case of an illiterate San Francisco high school graduate and not the launching of a satellite by a rival nation that provided the impetus for passage of Assemblyman Gary Hart's legislation requiring the adoption of mandatory graduation competencies.

Accountability

A third difference between the two educational movements results in part from the different economic conditions and different patterns of school governance that characterize each period. Today's sluggish economy, together with the shifting of control of policy making to centers too far away from schools to permit informal assessment, creates a demand for a kind of accountability that did not exist during the earlier era. Although some critics in the 1950s and early 1960s emphasized testing and even called for the establishment of a national examination system,⁶ there was nothing comparable to today's "management by objectives," publication of test scores in local newspapers, and the requirements for evaluation that accompany federal and much state money.

Psychological Perspectives

Another way the two movements differ is in their psychologies. Cognitivism, the branch of psy-

² J. Bruner. *The Process of Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960. p. 9.

³ For a detailed discussion of this, see: L. Cremins. *The Transformation of the School*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961. pp. 338-47.

⁴ R. M. Hutchins. *The Conflict in Education in a Democratic Society*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1953. p. 29.

⁵ See, for example: H. Rickover. *American Education — A National Failure*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1963.

⁶ See, for example: *ibid.*, pp. 285-87.

chology that dominated the curriculum construction process during the early 1960s, seemed tailor-made for that era. The cognitivists' interest in the higher order cognitive processes fitted nicely with that era's concern for intellectual excellence. The less rigid accountability requirements during that era made it possible for cognitivists to indulge their interest in processes that resist direct measurement. To be sure, the researcher-evaluators' need for measurable outcomes did eventually impinge on the curriculum development process,⁷ but initially cognitivists were relatively free of the measurable outcome requirement, as is evident from the informal evaluation procedures they often used.

Behaviorism, the psychology that appears to dominate current educational theory and practice, is as appropriate for the present era as cognitivism was for the earlier period. Behaviorism's atomistic, reductionistic character is in harmony with the individualistic orientation of the current reform rhetoric. And current accountability requirements, which demand the sort of commitment to measurable outcomes characteristic of behaviorist psychology, would seem to make some version of the behaviorist approach inevitable. Even if there were no legal accountability requirements, behaviorism's focus on the tangible would likely appeal to those who have a "meat and potatoes" concern for adequacy. An educator or citizen concerned with ensuring adequate levels of performance would undoubtedly applaud B. F. Skinner's words:

It is true that the techniques which are emerging from the experimental study of learning are not designed to "develop the mind" or to further some vague "understanding" of mathematical relationships. They are designed, on the contrary, to establish the very behaviors which are taken to be the evidences of such mental states or processes.⁸

Pedagogy and Curriculum Content

Differences in objectives, rationale, and accountability requirements are reflected in each movement's different psychological perspective; different psychological perspectives lead to differences in pedagogy and curriculum content.

For example, Bruner's belief that any subject could be taught to anyone at any stage of development seems almost the antithesis of the current

preoccupation with basic skills. Even the university is being attacked for focusing on literature and ignoring basic reading and writing skills.⁹ To be sure, critics of the schools during the earlier period were concerned about skill development, but that was primarily so that students would have access to subject matter. The large-scale curriculum projects that their criticism helped generate did not concentrate on basic skills, especially not reading and writing. Even in mathematics, the emphasis was on helping students to think like mathematicians rather than on practical application of math skills.

Different curriculum content implies different teaching methods. The behaviorist approach of shaping behavior and the cognitivist's concern with discovery learning represent two ends of a pedagogical continuum; a teacher conducting an Elementary Science Study unit or a lesson from *Man: A Course of Study* behaves quite differently from a teacher using direct instruction to teach phonics.

Implications

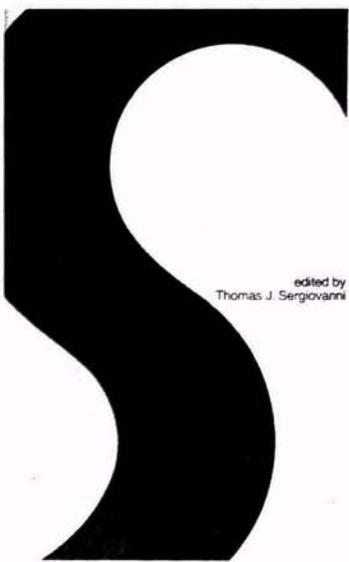
The above comparison points up important aspects of basic education that are often hidden by the objectives, rationale, accountability requirements, and psychological perspectives of the current back to basics movement. The current movement's concern for adequacy and functional literacy, for example, may lead to the ignoring of students who are already academically adequate and who may require the subject matter focus and the expectations of excellence that were central concerns of the earlier era.

Even when the emphasis is on reading, writing, and arithmetic, the current behaviorist perspective on curriculum and pedagogy may prove inadequate. Any competent teacher recognizes that there is a difference between students whose behavior has been sufficiently shaped so that they can supply rote answers to math problems requir-

⁷ See, for example: L. Shulman and E. Deisler, editors. *Learning by Discovery*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966.

⁸ B. F. Skinner. *The Technology of Teaching*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968. p. 26.

⁹ For a well argued polemic on this subject, see: G. Lyons. "The Higher Illiteracy." *Harper's* 33-40; September 1976.



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ing regrouping and one who understands the concept of place value and its relationship to such problems. Similarly, once decoding and encoding skills have been mastered, the development of language related skills is virtually identical with cognitive development.¹⁰ The limitations of behavioral objectives for development of cognitive ability have been outlined by Broudy,¹¹ and even Good, Biddle, and Brophy,¹² despite a strong commitment to process-product research and an accompanying commitment to measurable outcomes, acknowledge that behavioral objectives have limited utility for development of the higher, more complex levels of cognition. Kenneth Strike sums up the position nicely in his masterful discussion of the inadequacies of behaviorist language: "Even rather elementary cognitive skills are probably not susceptible to behavioral specification in principle and are clearly not susceptible to behavioral specification in practice. And the consequence of seriously attempting to make educational practice accord to the theory will most likely be to exert a bias against such generalizable cognitive goals (or to trivialize them) and to exert a bias in favor

of educational goals that are more plausibly supplied with behavioral analyses."¹³

Clearly the cognitivist perspective of the earlier movement is a much-needed supplement to the current "back to basics" movement's behaviorist perspective.

In addition to pointing up blind spots in the current educational perspective, this discussion has also illuminated certain cultural constraints with which educators must contend. The economic forecast and the emerging patterns of school governance will probably not be reversed in the foreseeable future, so it is unlikely that accountability requirements will be diminished. The earlier movement's concern for intellectual excellence will have to be recast into pedagogical and curricular forms appropriate for the current educational landscape. Pratt's¹⁴ attempt to forge a conceptual distinction between an objective, on the one hand, and behavioral criteria for evaluating whether the objective has been met, on the other, opens the possibility of making discussion about cognitive process acceptable to an accountability minded movement.¹⁵ If so, concern for intellectual excellence may yet be more than just an antique from an earlier movement.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the relationship of language and cognitive development, see: James Moffett. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

¹¹ H. Broudy. "Can Research Escape the Dogma of Behavioral Objectives?" *School Review* 79:43-56; 1970.

¹² T. Good, B. Biddle, and J. Brophy. *Teachers Make a Difference*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975. p. 158.

¹³ K. Strike. "On the Expressive Potential of Behaviorist Language." *American Educational Research Journal* 11(2):103-20; 1974.

¹⁴ D. Pratt. "Humanistic Goals and Behavioral Objectives: Towards a Synthesis." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 8(1):15-26; 1976.

¹⁵ Student manipulation of Dienes blocks, for example, might be used as a behavioral criteria for the kinds of place value understanding discussed earlier.



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