

THE “BACK TO THE BASICS” MOVEMENT

“One of the most striking phenomena to emerge in North American education in recent years,” Margaret Morgan and Norman Robinson observe, “is a strong demand on the part of many parents, school boards, and educators for schools to get back to the basics – in reading, writing, arithmetic, and standards of behavior; that is, for schools to give increased emphasis to the three R’s and to raise their disciplinary standard.¹ Styled the Genuine Education Movement (GEM), advocates complained poor curriculum, lack of discipline, difficulty of getting good teachers, lack of standards and objectives.² Surveys of Vancouver and Delta (a Vancouver suburb) revealed an “admixture of political, social, economic, and educational problems.”³ In the Gallup poll the public expressed concern over the “lack of discipline,” issues of “integration/segregation,” as well as the “lack of financial support, and use of drugs.”⁴ From Delta were expressed concerns over the “lack of discipline, size of school or of classes, use of drugs, and pupils’ lack of interest.”⁵ GEM members were especially worried over what they perceived to be a “poor curriculum, lack of standards and objectives,” as well as “attempts by schools to assume the role of other social institutions,” concerns “assigned little or no importance by the Delta and Gallup publics.”⁶

Among the requirements for an acceptable school system that GEM members listed were (1) “thorough grounding in English grammar and a competence in reading and writing and speaking the English language,” (2) a “thorough grounding in elementary mathematics,” (3) an “understanding of the basic sciences that will enable a child to understand the physical world in which he lives,” (4) “understanding of world history and geography,” and (5) “understanding of the public institutions and the political and economic foundations of Canadian life.”⁷ GEM’s manifesto matched that issued by “other ‘back to the basics’ movements in education in Canada and the United States.”⁸ Each emphasized “basic curricular standards and objectives, good teaching, firm discipline, and a controlled pace of change in education.”⁹

Writing in the midst of this movement, Morgan and Robinson wonder “whether GEM or similar ‘back to the basics’ groups will ever become as influential as was the Progressive Education Association.”¹⁰ Presciently they observe that:

There does seem to be some evidence to indicate that a new era of conservatism in education is emerging and considerable public support exists for school programs designed to improve pupil discipline and functional literacy. It is entirely possible, however, that “back to the basics” movements like GEM could prove to be ephemeral protests by small groups of dissatisfied, middle-class people. But “back to the basics” groups are commanding public support

throughout North America and school programs are being modified to meet the demands of such groups.¹¹

Indeed, the “big chill”¹² was setting in.¹³

COMMENTARY

This article not only registers a defining moment in the “back to basics” movement and its emplacement in metropolitan Vancouver, it anticipates the era to come, an era in which we are still embedded.

REFERENCES

- Christou, Theodore Michael. 2012. *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919-1942*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Morgan, Margaret T. and Robinson, Norman. 1976. The “Back to the Basics” Movement in Education. *Canadian Journal of Education* 1 (2), 1-11.
- Pinar, William F. 2015. *Educational Experience as Lived*. New York: Routledge.
- Pinar, William F. 2019. *What Is Curriculum Theory?* 3rd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Pinar, William F. and Grumet, Madeleine R. 2015 (1976). *Toward a Poor Curriculum*. Kingston, NY: Educator's International Press.

ENDNOTES

-
- ¹ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 1. The emphasis here is Vancouver and Delta (a suburb); for a description of the movement's history in the United States see Pinar 2019, 2, 107.
- ² Morgan and Robinson 1976, 6. *Towards a Poor Curriculum* is the title of a subjectively intensified curriculum, one “poor” in technological props and technical thinking (Pinar and Grumet 1976). In the United States, the “back to the basics” movement leads to demands for school reform emphasizing standards and accountability: see Pinar 2019.
- ³ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 6.
- ⁴ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 6.

-
- ⁵ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 6.
- ⁶ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 6. In fact, GEM members and the general public in both Vancouver and Delta seemed at odds on that last point, as drug use is not, strictly speaking, an educational issue.
- ⁷ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 7.
- ⁸ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 7.
- ⁹ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 7. “Firm discipline” can trigger unexpected consequences: see Pinar 2015, 164.
- ¹⁰ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 10. Regarding the Progressive Education see: <http://njdigitalhistory.org/1919/progressive-education-association-founded/> For its influence in Ontario: see Christou 2012.
- ¹¹ Morgan and Robinson 1976, 10.
- ¹² I borrow the phrase from the movie marking the end of the 1960s. For a summary and review: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-big-chill-1983>
- ¹³ It has turned out to be a fifty-year still ongoing era of “authoritarianism” (Pinar 2019, 2-3) in education, now enforced through standardized testing.