

Is This Just Another Swing of the Pendulum? That Depends...

Janet Kierstead

In the midst of a massive educational reform movement, skeptics point to the past and ask, "Is this just another swing of the pendulum?" Their question is well founded, and the answer depends on how well we understand where we've been, where we are now, and where we might be headed. Only by drawing upon a clear understanding of the past can we hope to make the decisions that will take us in the direction we want to go. But just what direction is that?

A vision of excellence within the California experience

National leaders call for a move from "back-to-basics" toward "excellence" in education, yet that term has not been well defined. So, while local practitioners agree on the need for change, they lack a vision of excellence to guide their planning. In California the state department of education is facilitating the process of defining that vision and helping educators translate it into classroom practice. I have been involved in this effort and describe it here as an example of what can be done.*

Under the leadership of Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, groups of practitioners from around the state have come together regularly over the

*The ideas expressed here have most recently become an integral part of training provided by the California State Department of Education's California School Leadership Academy. I wish to express my appreciation to Sally Mentor, Assistant Superintendent, Instructional Support Division, California State Department of Education, for her keen insights and leadership in these activities.

past several years to describe what they want for their students. Facilitated by state department of education staff, these various committees have created philosophy statements (Frameworks) and described standards (Model Curriculum Standards) in science, math, English/language arts, history/social science, foreign language, and fine arts.

Out of this effort a vision of excellence for California schools is emerging. In this vision, all students — regardless of incoming level of performance — have a common core curriculum which provides them with a sound academic background and promotes literacy in the various disciplines, which may also be integrated. For example, students may study literature, history/social science, and language arts together. Further, recognizing that each new generation of students is developing a set of values within their own peer culture, the curriculum is designed to foster a strong sense of traditional values. For instance, as they gain knowledge of the past, students discuss how personalities in literature and history dealt with such issues as honesty, responsibility, respect for human diversity. As they consider what course of action is appropriate within a present day situation, students are encouraged to temper their decisions with reasoned moral and ethical judgments.

Drawing upon all they have learned, students carry out projects in which they apply their skills and concepts to “real life” situations. For example, a young student studying nutrition may survey his classmates to develop a list of their favorite foods, design a balanced menu from that list, and present it to the staff in the school cafeteria. An older student may select a contemporary topic of special interest, perhaps an environmental issue, research the factors surrounding it, and search for a parallel from the past which may shed some light on it. Having gathered that information, he conducts an opinion survey regarding a possible course of action, perhaps video taping his interviews. He then presents a report to the appropriate audience, using flow charts, timelines, video tapes, etc., to illustrate his findings and to explain his recommendations. Such projects serve as evidence that

students are developing the ability to act as culturally literate adults, fully contributing members of society.

Since the vision initially was defined by a relatively small group of practitioners, the state department has now moved on to a necessary next step: sharing that vision with the much larger group of local leaders and decisionmakers and enlisting their help in refining and promoting it. This is being done through workshops throughout the state. These are not the usual "top-down" information sessions. Instead, facilitators "practice what they preach" by using strategies envisioned for excellent classrooms. They involve participants in large- and small-group, cooperative, learning activities to read, analyze, and discuss articles which explain the thinking behind the vision. They also use individual and small-group problem-solving strategies to devise examples of how that vision might look when translated into classroom practice in each of the subject areas. They create skits, murals, flow charts, etc., to present their ideas to one another. During the closing activity of the workshop, they help one another devise plans to provide similar experiences for practitioners and decisionmakers back home.

Most participants in these workshops enthusiastically embrace the vision. Once they have clarified the basic intent, they turn to the question of "how." Administrators ask how to get teachers to do this, and teachers ask how to get administrators to support them so they *can* do it!

A lesson from the past

Setting aside the example of the California experience for now, let's look at what we can learn from the past about how to bring about change in education. We have already been through several pendulum swings in thinking and practice over this century. For instance, we began with a swing from the established "traditional" methods of lecture and group recitation to "progressive education," with its emphasis on more actively engaging students in learning (Dewey, 1916). This was followed by a return to traditional practices. Next came a swing to the more experiential "open

education" (Holt, 1967; Silberman, 1973). Then finally, we went "back to basics," a trend with an emphasis on academic standards and discipline (Ravich, 1983).

Typically, teachers react to changes in thinking in a variety of ways. Some misunderstand the ideas or cannot work them out. These teachers go too far, so in many classrooms progressive education became laissez-faire, open education became "do-your-own-thing," and "back-to-basics" became watered down content and drill and practice of skills in isolation. Others seem to be unaffected. They are unaware of, ignore, or resist the call for change. Or, perhaps they experiment with the new ideas for awhile and then slip back into the usual routine. Still others seem to be working toward a vision within themselves. They do not see themselves as using *either* traditional methods *or* an experiential approach but rather, are striving to strike a balance between the two. They take something from each new point of view and use it to expand what they are already doing. Over the years these teachers have created approaches which represent a synthesis of traditional and experiential methods, a balance between extreme swings of the pendulum. In other words, the third group of teachers is approaching or has already reached the vision of excellence guiding the current reform movement, and as I will explain, become one of our most valuable resources.

Looking back, it seems a critical lesson can be drawn from this: *we need to more clearly define the vision, we must see that it reaches the general population of teachers, and we must support them as they work to translate it into classroom practice.*

Again using the California experience as an example, the Frameworks and Model Curriculum Standards clearly define the vision, and local school districts are now using them as a tool for curriculum planning. At the same time, an encouraging thing is beginning to happen. That "third group" of teachers mentioned earlier is beginning to step forward to share with other teachers the classroom strategies they have developed. So, the vision is much more clearly defined now than in any of the earlier reform movements and is beginning to

affect more and more classroom teachers. But this cannot be left to chance. More must be done to ensure widespread teacher involvement and to provide ongoing support for their efforts to change.

The present situation

In working with practitioners, I find that most of them currently stand in one of four fairly distinct positions in the movement from "back-to-basics" toward a middle ground between extremes. (1) Where they stand can be identified by their views regarding the purpose of schooling — whether they plan for relatively narrow or broad student outcomes — and by the classroom practice they employ. These four positions are outlined below. As you read through them, notice that they represent a process of expansion, that teachers moving through these positions over the years, as so many have done, have slowly been building upon previous practice to create a broader, richer experience for students.

Four positions in the movement from back-to-basics

The First Position. Here the teacher focuses on what students are to *know* and uses a test of information at the end of the course to assess learning. The course consists of a series of lessons, usually following a textbook: the teacher lectures and gives demonstrations, the students take a quiz, the teacher gives more input, another quiz, etc. After several lessons, students take an end-of-chapter test. This sequence is repeated until the course ends with the final test.

The Second Position. Here the teacher focuses on what students are to *know*, what *basic skills* they are to acquire, and what *understanding* they are to develop. Behavioral objectives guide planning. The assessment at the end of the course is a test of information, including essay and abstract problems. The course unfolds like the first approach but with a bit more active student participation as input is followed with guided and independent practice.

The Third Position. In addition to *knowledge* and *understanding*, here the teacher expresses concern for

developing the more affective student outcomes, such qualities as *independence, responsibility, creativity, enthusiasm, and a sense of values*. At the same time two changes begin to appear in the classroom.

— lessons are organized into units of study, each with a focus on a particular topic and ending with a culminating activity which applies and extends skills and concepts in a new situation. At the end of each unit, for instance, students demonstrate what they have learned by creating a mural, timeline, set of recommendations, skit, three-dimensional model, etc.
(2)

— the teacher still gives directed lessons as in the second position, but also uses other instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning, synectics, inquiry.

In addition to the usual test, the teacher assesses learning by observing and questioning students as they carry out their projects at the end of each unit. In this position, each unit stands alone. While some may be related to others, it occurs more by chance than by design.

The Fourth Position. Here student outcomes are expanded to include what students are to *know, understand, and be able to do in the "real world."* Thus, a literacy statement — what a literate adult is able to do in the discipline — guides planning, and students are expected to carry out an end-of-year project to serve as evidence that they have reached the long-term goal. Rather than a series of unrelated elements, the units are connected: the culminating activity in one is designed to incorporate and extend skills and concepts developed during the culminating activity of the others. Thus, what students are expected to do at the end of each unit becomes increasingly complex, so that by the end of the year/course they are able to carry out a relatively sophisticated project.

Expanding into the fourth approach

Many teachers have slowly been moving through these positions over the years. While I am not certain

that every teacher must go through these positions in sequence, I do find that using these positions as a framework for viewing classroom practice helps to see that we should value existing practice as a step in the right direction, as something upon which to build. This is critical, as too often individuals see reform movements as "either/or" questions. The framework makes it easier to view it as a process of expansion, a "yes/and-now-let's-add" situation.

Rather than urge teachers to leap too quickly into the fourth position, I find it more helpful to suggest the next step which will move them in that direction. The framework helps to see what the next step might be. For instance, a teacher in the first position who lectures skillfully is probably ready to incorporate guided and independent practice into that lecture format. But that teacher is probably not ready to try independent student projects, because that requires a much more complex system of management and organizational practices (Kierstead, 1986). Similarly, a teacher in the second position who feels comfortable allowing a measure of active student participation is probably ready to try incorporating one or two projects into a year's course of study. Experimenting with student projects will develop the management and organizational strategies needed to move on with confidence to the fourth position.

Once a teacher is able to give effective lessons and manage student projects, it is relatively easy to expand existing practice into the fourth approach. Following is an example of how to create a classroom curriculum plan by modifying an existing eighth grade history course.

1. *Define Literacy in the Discipline.* The first step is to define what the average citizen literate in history/social science should be able to do. It might read as follows:

A person literate in history/social science is able to apply the lessons from the past to a present situation, make recommendations tempered with reasoned moral and ethical judgments, and communicate them effectively to others.

2. *Describe a Corresponding Final Project.* The next step is to describe the *type* of project students might carry out to serve as evidence that they have reached the goal. This description is more specific than the literacy statements, yet allows students and teachers the latitude to design projects based on individual needs, strengths, and interests. It might state, for example, that the student should be able to carry out the following type of project:

- select a contemporary issue of special interest to the student;
- research events and arguments surrounding that issue;
- relate findings to a similar event in history;
- conduct opinion surveys regarding what should be done;
- write a report that describes the research, relates findings, and explains recommendations in light of moral and ethical considerations;
- present the report orally to the appropriate audience, using charts, diagrams, video tapes.

3. *Determine Skills and Concepts Needed.* The third step is to list what students must be able to do in order to carry out the project. In this example, they need to know how to conduct opinion surveys and carry out library research, give oral presentations, create visuals, and so forth.

4. *Expand Existing Topics of Study To Include Culminating "Benchmark" Projects.* Most teachers already follow a textbook or course outline, spending from two to six weeks developing a major topic. All they need to do here is pause at the end of each of these major topics and add a culminating activity, a project that will develop *a few* of the skills and concepts needed for the end-of-year project. At the end of the first major topic, students might conduct library research on the probable cause and effect of an event in history and write a brief written report. This takes them out of the textbook and gives them experience with finding, selecting, and interpreting trade books, journals, and newspapers.

At the end of the next major topic, they might research a contemporary issue similar to an event discussed in the textbook, write a brief report, and give it orally using flow charts, diagrams, timelines, etc. After studying the next major topic, they might research a contemporary issue, conduct opinion surveys, and present results using graphs, charts, video tape, etc. The course proceeds in this manner until students have developed the skills and concepts needed to carry out the final project.

The new history course expands on the original course in several ways. Instead of using only the textbook, students now also draw from primary source materials, including historical records, current newspapers and news magazines, and personal interviews. Instead of relying almost exclusively on teacher-centered lessons, the teacher also allows students to provide information for one another in small cooperative learning groups and to carry out independent research. In addition, instead of relying exclusively on paper-pencil tests, the teacher also assesses learning by observing and questioning students as they carry out their projects.

In the workshops for local leaders and decisionmakers mentioned earlier, participants experiment with this curriculum design process. Grouped according to subject areas of their choice, they create classroom curriculum plans, complete with a series of benchmark projects leading to a final, end-of-course project. They also present visual illustrations of their plan to the entire group. Having participants carry out a short-term project within the workshop setting allows the facilitator to model how a teacher manages students during project periods in the classroom. This experience gives participants strategies they can use to help teachers understand how to design and manage the more active curriculum envisioned in the reform movement.

Viewing the current reform movement as a process of expansion and having practitioners experience some of the techniques they will need to accomplish it is critical. It helps both teachers and administrators feel more comfortable about trying to change and helps them see

how it can be done. Where, then, does all this leave us in the question of how to move forward?

Moving forward

The vision of what we want for our students is getting clearer and clearer. Now the challenge is to help teachers translate that vision into classroom practice. We can approach them at the personal and at the policy level. On a personal level, we must recognize that the classroom is an extremely complex situation and that any attempt to change it is a problem-solving process of trial and error. Like the tide coming in at the beach, it is two steps forward and one step back, two forward and one back . . . We must be there with moral support and practical help for teachers as they work through both trial and error.

At the policy level, we must make a commitment to more fully involve teachers and to give them the opportunity to help one another work toward common goals through long-term staff development. This means involving teachers at the *beginning* of a district's efforts to strengthen curriculum, as goals are being established, and later, *sustaining their involvement* through an ongoing, group problem-solving process.

This represents an important departure from what we usually do. Typically when a new idea comes along, the local school district forms a committee, perhaps with teacher representatives, and the committee works out solutions to the problem of how to reach whatever the intent of that reform effort happens to be. Then experts "train" teachers to use the strategies that others have decided will move toward the vision of which they, the teachers, are never fully aware. This leaves the district committee knowledgeable and committed, but leaves most teachers relatively untouched. They return to their classroom, put committee recommendations on the shelf, shut the door, and continue to teach much as before. Those who do embrace the new ideas return to their classrooms with the best of intentions but with no follow-up to remind them and no support as they work out the changes, most of them eventually go back to business as usual.

We have failed to recognize that *it is engaging in the problem-solving process that is so valuable*. Only by defining the vision in operational terms and rolling up their sleeves to figure out how to translate it into classroom practice will teachers understand and “buy in” to the reform movement. All teachers must go through the process. Imposing answers to the problem instead of supporting teachers as they work out answers for themselves has created havoc within our educational system. As Dewey (1940, p. 67) has pointed out:

The system which makes no great demands upon originality, upon the continuous expression of individuality, works automatically to put and to keep the more incompetent teachers in the school . . . the best minds are drawn to the places where they can work most effectively. The best minds are not especially likely to be drawn where there is danger that they may have to submit to conditions which no self-respecting intelligence likes to put up with, where their time and energy are likely to be so occupied with details of external conformity that they have no opportunity for free and full play of their own vigor.

We have thus reached the crucial implementation stage in the California experience but have not yet fully come to grips with it, because most local administrators are still hoping to use the traditional top-down training methods to quickly convey to the general population of teachers what they should do.

A basic structure for the group problem-solving process has already been field tested in California with secondary teachers (Mohlman, Kierstead, and Gunlack, 1982). It consists of a series of working sessions held three weeks apart, with peers exchanging classroom visits between sessions to share ideas and give moral support. Coupling that with the curriculum design process described earlier, facilitators can take teachers through a three-phase process similar to the example that follows.

Phase I. The purpose of the first phase is to help teachers develop a common vision and to begin to feel that they are valued members in a team effort. Thinking

back to the design process for expanding an existing history course, it is during phase one that participants carry out the first two steps in that process. To accomplish this with middle-grade history/social science teachers, for instance, the facilitator uses cooperative learning techniques to engage them in a dialogue concerning the basic intent of the reform movement. Participants read and discuss articles and subject-specific materials and share their own expertise before writing literacy statements and describing final projects.

During the first phase teachers are outlining long-term goals for major segments of schooling. For example, middle-grade history teachers would establish a project for graduating eighth graders, primary teachers would describe one for exiting third graders, etc. These "performance expectations" are sent to the district for review, returned to them with suggestions for improvement, modified by the teachers, resubmitted to the district, and so forth. During the first round of this staff development program in a district, the teachers are actually helping to *establish* district level performance expectations for students. As subsequent groups submit their ideas, these are used to *modify* existing expectations.

Phase II. Once performance expectations are agreed upon for the major segments of schooling (third, sixth, eighth, and twelfth grades), the second phase of the process begins. The purpose here is for teachers to work together to establish the performance expectations for each course or grade level and then, individually but with feedback from the group, create individual classroom curriculum plans. Again referring to the example given for expanding the history course, teachers now help one another through all four steps of that process, creating a plan for their own course. At this point the group breaks into small groups by grade level or specific course. In a group of primary teachers, for example, kindergarten teachers describe the type of project their students will carry out at the end of the year, the first-grade teachers devise one for their students, etc. Then the entire group looks at what each grade level subgroup has devised to see if they fit

together to help students develop the skills and concepts they need to carry out the project envisioned for the end of third grade. Once end-of-year/ course goals are agreed upon, individual teachers or teachers grouped by grade level or course devise plans for benchmark projects and units of study.

Phase III. With classroom curriculum plans outlined, the third or implementation phase of the process begins. As individual teachers begin to modify classroom practice, they need to come together at least every three weeks or so for "working sessions," to compare notes and help one another devise new management and organizational strategies and acquire new instructional techniques. They may ask for help from "experts" who specialize in time management, cooperative learning techniques, etc. They will also find it helpful here to visit one another's classrooms between sessions, to exchange ideas, and give each other feedback as they begin to try new things.

Keep in mind that having teachers experience the process is what is important. A district committee could more quickly write literacy statements and outline final products. They could write classroom curriculum plans, complete with benchmark products and units of study. But by engaging teachers in group curriculum planning and problem solving processes, they are more likely to commit wholeheartedly to the reform effort and begin to develop the support system needed to sustain it.

Conclusion

As I work with parents and educators in the reform movement, they often ask whether this is just another swing of the pendulum. They ask in a rather detached, challenging way, as if they see it as something done to them by an outside force, something out of their control. It is as if they are waiting for someone else to do something about it, which is disturbing, for too much depends on it. The vitality and strength of our nation is at risk. We cannot afford to sit around and wait for "someone else" to act. We have a relatively brief window in time to make the reform movement count. We have more information than ever before about what

needs to be done and how to go about doing it. We have the attention and good will of business and community leaders and the somewhat wary support of society in general. We must recognize that it is within our control to make this movement count and that it all depends on us. The time has arrived, but it will pass. Each of us must act *now* on what we know.

REFERENCES

- Dewey, J. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916.
- Dewey, J. *Education Today*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940.
- Holt, J. *How Children Fail*. New York: Pitman, 1967.
- Kierstead, J. "Outstanding Effective Classrooms." In *Claremont Reading Conference, Forty-Eighth Yearbook*, Malcolm Douglass (ed.). Claremont, Calif.: Center for Developmental Studies, Claremont Graduate School, 1984.
- Kierstead, J. "Direct Instruction and Experiential Approaches: Are They Really Mutually Exclusive?" *Educational Leadership*, 42, (May 1985): 25-30.
- Kierstead, J. "How Teachers Manage Individual and Small-Group Work in Active Classrooms." *Educational Leadership*, 44, (October 1986): 22-25.
- Mohlman, G., Kierstead, J., and Gundlack, M. "A Research-Based Inservice Model for Secondary Teachers." *Educational Leadership*, (October; 1982): 16-19.
- Ravitch, D. "The Educational Pendulum." *Psychology Today*. (October; 1986): 63-71.
- Silberman, C. *The Open Classroom Reader*. New York: Random House, 1973.

NOTES

1. The positions outlined here represent a continuum from "back to basics" to the middle ground between extreme swings of the pendulum. Gradations of approaches used by the relatively few practitioners who stand between the middle and the extreme experiential position are not considered here. While it might be helpful to analyze their positions at some future date, I have focused on the traditional side of the pendulum swing, because that is where the vast majority of practitioners currently stand.
2. Units of study usually follow a similar pattern. Spanning a period of from two to six weeks, they begin with an introduction and a description of what students will be held accountable for at the end of the unit: what they are expected to know, understand, and be able to do. Next comes a series of "lessons," instructional sequences to develop the content of the unit and to introduce the skills students will need to carry out their projects. Some of these lessons may follow a traditional format, others will involve cooperative group learning, inquiry, discovery, and so forth. The input stage is followed by the culminating activity, the application and extension stage of the unit. This is the time when students will apply to a new situation what they have learned in this and previous units. The projects are followed by a summary of the unit and the unit usually ends with a written assessment, a test of facts, with essay questions and abstract problems included.