An Analysis of Educational Reforms and Authors From the Perspective of James Beane

An Invented Talk

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My name is James Beane. I have had the honor of working in a profession that can change the course of history. Any honest day's work is noble, but few professions have the possibility of impacting society in such a profound way. I proudly call myself an educator.

This nation made a deal with its citizens at its inception. We decided what and who we wanted to be. But for a couple hundred years we have struggled to achieve those ideals of freedom, justice, and democracy with successes and failures. As educators, we have been in virtually every battle, and that is as true today as it has ever been.

We are called by law and by our own conviction to teach, prepare, and shape impressionable minds into productive citizens. That has been our mission from the beginning. That seems simple, but if you were to spend one day in any classroom in the country you would see the complexity of the task. Some of our biggest questions are "Who are these young people? What are their needs? What are their wants? What do they know? What do they need to know?" I believe that without knowing whom our students are, we will fail in our mission to educate and prepare them to realize their dreams. Oh yes, they have dreams like each of us. We make a profound mistake by preparing them to live our dream instead of giving them the tools to realize their own.

If you were to read any of my work or follow me to the schools I work with, you would see some basic theories that I feel make for creating a successful learning and teaching environment. I believe learning and teaching are one and the same. I believe the most successful classroom is the one that has roles that are more fluid. The teacher often becomes the learner and the student becomes the teacher.

I have advocated a couple of methods that I believe make for a successful classroom. One is the Integrated Curriculum and the other is the Democratic School. Please allow me to share with you my rationale for these theories. They are rooted in the notion that as we take the time to understand these potential citizens, it is essential to have some idea of not only the finish line or what we want to help them accomplish, but we must understand the individual and stand with them at the starting line. We are in this journey together.

When people have ownership in something, they take much more pride in it. The goal of the democratic school is to develop student ownership in their education by giving them a say in the design of the curriculum, the planning of activities, and most important, the relevancy of subject matter. There are countless studies that support the theory that students not only learn more when they connect with educational material, but also retain that knowledge for a greater period of time.

If we want students to be active, productive citizens of this democracy, we must give them opportunities to experience what participatory citizenship and democracy means. John Dewey said in his book *Democracy and Education* (as cited in Apple & Beane, 1995), "If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led " (p.7). Our schools are the perfect venue to begin that process.

Let me tell you about the democratic school. A democratic school has (Apple & Beane, 1995):

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.

2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.

3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.

4. Concern for the welfare of others and the `common good.'

5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.

6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an ideal to be pursued as an idealized set of values that we must live and must guide our life as a people.

7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (pp.6,7).

I have tremendous respect for a great American named W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois (1906) said,

> The ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it and never forget that it is dealing with souls and not with dollars. (p. 82)

The second method of instruction I have advocated is the integrated curriculum. This method gives legs to the idea of democracy in the classroom. The central theme is that before any curriculum is finalized, it must go through the democratic process.

The curriculum starts with things the students already know or have a curiosity about. This requires knowing who the students are and what they are thinking about. The class is encouraged to find topics that are important to them in their community. The class collectively brainstorms big ideas set forth by in-class discussion. The class then

breaks into smaller groups to personalize the topics. Questions are raised and written down. The class comes back together and shares the questions. Over a period of time, the class decides on the topic or topics that will provide the central focus for their curriculum.

The class then decides what questions will be answered and plans activities that will help them find the answers and create projects to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic. I believe this creates an environment that empowers students, engages them, and assures them that we have faith in them. It also demonstrates that we have high expectations of them. We want them to start seeing themselves and their roles as individuals and citizens NOW and not something to be thrust on them after they leave school.

Good men and women can agree or disagree about how best to solve these problems. A huge problem that underlies this struggle is found in the statement (Bruner, 1960), "The first object of any act of learning, over and beyond the pleasure it may give, is that it should serve us in the future" (p. 17). The struggle or tension begins when we try to determine who will be served and how that service will be distributed. Political agendas have permeated the discussion, tainting the motives and therefore the results. Peter Filene coined the phrase in an article for the *American Quarterly* (as cited in Kliebard. 2004) "shifting coalitions" (p. 280). He was advancing the theory that progressive education, as a movement could not easily be defined. It seems every group has its own political agenda.

There have been profound struggles in the world of education. The overarching question has been "What is the purpose of education?" As we attempted to answer this basic question, each answer created a myriad of other questions such as who will we

educate, what will the schools look like, what do we want students to know, how do students learn, and of course, what will the curriculum contain?

The education field has a rich history. It is replete with tradition. Like any institution, tradition can eventually be challenged. Conventional wisdom becomes a millstone around the neck. Those questioning tradition desire to forge a new path. Education is most certainly no exception. The beliefs I have espoused in this essay make a hard turn off of the path of conventional teaching.

The great thinker and one the most influential individuals in the history of education, John Dewey, was able to look critically at each movement and at various reformers and divide the valuable from the useless. He was able to find some value in most every theory or movement. There are those that I vehemently disagree with in much of what they believe, but like Dewey, I see they have morsels of useful truth in their theories.

John Dewey reflects many ideas that align with my philosophies. In his "Pedagogic Creed" (Dewey, 1897) he said,

> I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs." (p. 77).

He also stated (Dewey, 1897),

> I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. I believe that all reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the

> threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements are transitory and futile. (p. 80).

These statements support both of my theories of the democratic school and integrated curriculum. They speak to the fact that the student can and should work as a member of his or her community and that the curriculum should work to tap into the "child's powers" and focus those powers to the betterment of the student's community and world. If there is one thing every educator and reform movement has in common, it is the desire to better our society through our school system. Though we may differ greatly on the best methods to do so, we still agree on the goal. When we as educators seek to understand the circumstances in which we find our students, we can make the curriculum relevant to their lives. Later in this paper, I will give specific methods of curriculum development I advocate using in schools to meet this goal.

As educators, we have taken a circuitous route to get where we are. Reformers offer some ideas that are useful while others such as the mental disciplinarians offer ideas that stifle growth. In 1828, James Kingsley and Jeremiah Day at Yale University authored a work (as cited in Kliebard, 2004) that advocated the "discipline and furniture of the mind" approach to teaching and learning (p.5). The discipline approach referred to the teaching style and the furniture referred to the content of the subject. The foundation of this method was flawed, in my estimation. It equated the brain to a muscle. It was thought that just as a muscle develops by repetitive motion, so too the brain strengthens by rote exercise. It sought to fill the mind with a narrow "classically" oriented content. In addition, this philosophy felt the will of the child would be bent to conform to strict, pre-

determined regulations. There is so much wrong with this theory that I hardly know where to begin.

The first flaw is that there is no consideration for the individual. There is no consideration for the variance in ability, strengths, weaknesses, interests, or needs of the student. Everything flows from above. Everything is in place before ever meeting a single student. This can only work for a precious few students and will miss the rest. In addition, this method creates no individual motivation. The students have little if any personal connection to the curriculum. The curriculum, the classroom, the school are all the fabrication of others who may have no understanding or empathy for the actual life of the individual child.

The mental discipline approach to teaching eventually ran its course. Teachers began to question its effectiveness. They also began to question its narrow focus of subject matter. Why not give the teachers more flexibility with content? If the teaching style were sound, wouldn't it work on any subject? A study by Thorndike and Woodward in 1924 found no empirical evidence that this method of teaching was effective. Soon, this method would give way to other phases of teaching and curricular design. A series of movements and counter-movements would follow and continue until present day.

There have been basically four reform movements since the inception of our American school system founded by people such as Horace Mann. The movements or so-called interest groups were humanist, developmentalist, social efficiency, and social meliorist.

Charles W. Eliot was the President of Harvard University and the chairman of the famous Committee of Ten. This committee was seeking to unify the curriculum of high

schools to provide a clear standard for college bound students. Though Eliot was at one time a mental disciplinarian, he recognized the flaws in that approach and began a shift in philosophy that helped create a new wave of reform that became known as the humanist interest group. Unfortunately, there were almost as many flaws in this movement as there were in the mental disciplinarian philosophy. It did recognize that it is better to encourage students to become "thinkers" and not just rote memorization style learners. The humanist approach to the curriculum usually contained 4 basic subjects with virtually no electives. Uniformity was essential.

The flaws, as I see them, are profound. Eliot advocated a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum that had one single focus. He believed all students should be funneled toward college. He said that to alter a program to give separate "tracts" for different students would separate them by social class and offer an unfair advantage to some and relegate others to the working class. There is a hint of compassion there but this presumes that college is always preferable to a different path. This flies in the face of all I stand for. Identifying the needs, wants, strengths, and weaknesses of the individual and adapting the curriculum to serve them is essential to the success of an educational institution. Fortunately, there were watchmen on the wall.

G. Stanley Hall was a very vocal critic of the Committee of Ten and the humanist approach. Hall made a valuable contribution by using his ability to see the flaws in the committee's recommendations and articulating them. He said there were 3 fallacies in the findings and they were: 1) all children should be taught the same even if they have different "probable destinies"; 2) all subjects had equal value if taught well; and 3) fitting for college was the same as fitting for life.

Hall was at the front of the next movement that displaced the humanists. Hall was a leader of the Child Study Movement, also known as developmentalism. This philosophy professed a belief in the science of human development and looked to this understanding to guide the development of schools and curriculum.

Developmentalists seek to understand the individual but this was only effective to a certain degree. Hall pointed out the base of knowledge for children. He sought to understand what they did and didn't know. This was a huge step in the right direction; however, we need to be careful here. We can categorize students' development by age. Students develop at very different paces and we need to be hyper-sensitive to that. The most useful element of developmentalism, as I see it, is that it acknowledges that to effectively teach students, we must know them. They still don't give the students a say in the development of the curriculum, but we are making progress!

What can I say about the social efficiency interest group? Though their goals were to improve education, the guiding force behind it, Frederick Winslow Taylor, was not even an educator. He was called the "father of scientific management". This is no personal slight on him or the others in this movement such as Edward Ross, Finney, Ellwood, Sneddin, and others; it simply points out that the impetus for change was more of a reaction to the prevailing mood of the country at that time than a pure desire to reform education. Many felt our society was devolving into chaotic behavior and it was necessary to address this chaos through our school systems. In a desire to be efficient, the schools were modeled after industry. A hierarchy of management was established and maintained (the principal being the CEO, teachers were managers, and students were employees). It was more dictatorial than democratic.

To be fair however, there was an effort to teach to students' capabilities and to teach them only what they needed to know for their lives. Society's needs were being considered in at least some fashion. Social scientist Susan Kingsbury was appointed to investigate the needs of schools as a part of the Commission on Industrial and Technical Education. Massachusetts Governor, Mr. Douglas, at the request of the State Senate, authorized the investigation. The commission recommended a move to "practical trade training." This trade schooling created a huge uproar among diverse groups such as developmentalists, trade unions, and another emerging interest group known as social meliorists.

Social meliorism was a movement that featured many of the ideals I endorse. Social meliorism had as its core values two basic beliefs. Its proponents would say, "All men are created equal." All races, ethnic groups, and social groups have equal capabilities (sounds like the foundations of democracy to me). Within all groups there will be differences as individuals. Their differences are not tied to their specific grouping but simply reflect the different characteristics of the individual. The other belief would be that the external hindrances imposed by social conditions were tangible obstacles to social mobility, growth, and progress for groups not having equal access to opportunity, capital, and other tangibles. This philosophy is fairly close to my belief that schools should understand and address societal issues and work toward democracy. Like virtually every educational reform movement, Social Meliorism saw the power to affect change socially through the education system. I would absolutely agree with this.

One advocate of the meliorist position was Lester Frank Ward. Another was Boyd H. Bode. Bode ushered in a view of curriculum by first assaulting the popular Social

efficiency proponents Bobbit, Charters, and Sneddin. Bobbit eventually changed his philosophical view of education to align himself more with the meliorist point of view. He earlier believed education and the design of curriculum was to prepare students for life. His thoughts changed on that point. Bobbitt was quoted in the National Society for the Study of Education's twenty-sixth yearbook (Bobbit, 1926). In speaking of the kind of changes in curriculum that needed to be made he said,

> Education is not primarily to prepare for life at some future time. Quite the reverse; it prepares to hold high the current living . . . life cannot be 'prepared for'. It can only be lived." (p. 43).

Several changes to curriculum were emerging. Bobbit believed in reorienting curriculum to prepare children for distinct adult roles. Subject matter was discarded in favor of creating the means for a curriculum where students realize their purposes. This is very much in line with my philosophy. Educational leaders, Rugg and Counts, in a clear meliorist view, insisted that curriculum be used as a vehicle for social change. There was a push for the reconstruction of curriculum to address injustices. Counts felt that only when "liberal ideas" take control of education, will there be a chance of "regeneration" of the individual and the reconstruction of society.

Many of the most vocal leaders were proposing new ideas for curriculum that reflected a need for societal change. These changes ushered in a wave of reforms that attempted to make quality education accessible to all socio-economic and ethnic groups. Counts argued the need for these reforms based on his belief that social efficiency, the movement he sought to counter, was creating a machine society. He felt that efficiency wasn't a true reform but saddled the system with curriculum that was actually harmful.

He said that the "uncritical fashioning of tents" within the current curriculum was archaic and based on flawed educational theories. Counts contended that to continue on this curriculum path would cause further societal drift. This was the meliorist position.

The social meliorist reforms are seen in some concrete forms today, but can also be seen in the philosophies of teaching professionals. Attitudes about our roles as teachers have evolved to that of mentors, advocates, facilitators, counselors, and encouragers. This can be seen as part of the meliorist legacy. My philosophies greatly align with the social meliorist philosophies. I agree that we need to make the education experience reflect the experiences the students have in their community. In addition, students need to be prepared for life in the present and not some distant time. Life is happening now. Our lives are not on hold until we complete our education.

There are other individuals whom I see as having a positive influence on the profession and the process of education. One such man is Ralph Tyler. He has accomplished so much in this field. One contribution was how he helped us rethink the use of tests. In 1923, while working on his master's thesis dealing with science tests, he saw the flaws in exams that evaluate memorization. Testing seemed merely a statistical look at students and didn't create an accurate picture of what they knew or learned.

Tyler believed strongly in creating objectives. He knew that these objectives could create a clear path to where students and teachers would go. The key reason I can identify with this strategy is that it causes educators to stop and assess the needs of the students, their current abilities, and the intended and expected outcomes of the curriculum.

A simple statement of his subtly makes a powerful point. He said (Tyler, 1949), "Information itself doesn't have value" (p.72). This would counter so much of the traditional thinking on education. The traditional top down approach gives all of the power to the subject matter as it is pounded into the heads of students. This teacher-centric, over-reliance on the content is debunked by that statement. Tyler, it seems, is saying that it is the people teaching, learning, and using the information that give it value. I second that.

I am impressed with his direction of the 8-year study. This study involved thirty high schools and three hundred universities. It was in response to concerns about the narrow focus and inflexibility of high school curriculum. At that time (the 1930s), curriculum was intended to strictly prepare students for college. Participants in the study experimented in curriculum design. The study concluded that curriculum needed to be and could be designed to foster student interest. It needed to be relatable to the students. It also showed that the curriculum could be designed for multiple purposes including college preparation.

Ralph Tyler and I are in complete agreement that we must tap into what the student already knows, what their interests are, and what is relevant to their current "experiences." We agree that we need to understand their circumstances and use those circumstances as learning opportunities. He said (Tyler, 1949),

> Learning objectives are general modes of reaction to be developed rather than highly specific habits to be acquired." (p. 42).
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> He also said (Tyler, 1949), "Objectives must be useful and functional connecting to the student's attack on problems." (p. 72).

Tyler believed that as we direct our curriculum at relevant issues in the lives of the students and guide them in ways to find solutions and answers to these situations, we are preparing them for future success in their world. I like the way he thinks.

I would like to conclude my thoughts on some of my colleagues and some of the reform movements I admire and question by discussing Jerome Bruner. Though he doesn't specifically advocate democratic principles or classrooms that resemble the integrated curriculum, the spirit and foundation of his theories have validity.

Based on my idea that our curriculum needs to be relevant to the lives of our students, I would agree with his statement (Bruner, 1982), "The first object of any act of learning, over and beyond the pleasure it may give, is that it should serve us in the future." (p. 17).

I have expressed that we need to have faith in our students. I think we routinely underestimate their abilities. Bruner is very clear that he believes students should be challenged to move beyond what Vgotsky called the zone of proximal development. This basically means that if presented properly, any subject could be successfully taught to students typically seen as not ready for that level of material. In his book, Bruner reacts to the question (Bruner, 1982),

> Do you *really* think the [sic] calculus can be taught to six-year olds? That is surely not the point. One can certainly get across the idea of limits to the six-year old, and that is an honest step en route to grasping a basic idea of calculus." (p.X).

Two other statements by Bruner that align well with my philosophies are (Bruner, 1982):

> We might ask, as a criterion for any subject taught in primary school, whether, when fully developed, it is worth an adult's knowing, and whether having known it as a child makes a person a better adult (p. 52).

He also said (Bruner, 1982),

> Students should know what it feels like to be completely absorbed in a problem. (p.50).

These statements relate to my beliefs that students need to feel that the curriculum is relevant to their lives. It is clear that when students connect to the activities and subjects being addressed, they will be absorbed into the solutions to the problems.

I have been fortunate enough to not only observe the work of other educators, but to see my theories and methods put into practice. As I stated in the introductory paragraphs of this paper, I believe in schools that are democratic and present curricula that are relevant to the lives of the student. I say this not to be popular with the students. I say this because it is clear to me that this is the most effective way of teaching. I go to doctors not to have them tell me what might make me happy or feel good; I want them to do what is necessary to cure me.

I would like to share with you some of the specifics of how I think students should be taught. The first approach is the multidisciplinary or multi-subject curriculum. It correlates two or more subjects with an organizing theme, idea, subject, or topic. The curriculum starts with selecting a theme. Then the question is asked, "What subject areas add to the lessons of the theme?" Two things are accomplished by addressing this question. First, by connecting subjects to the theme or topic, they become relevant to the students. Second, by looking at the topic from various perspectives, it becomes more

understandable. The various subjects continue with their own time slots in the daily schedule. They are not eradicated. The theme is used to unify the subjects not to segregate them.

Another of my methods in use today is curriculum integration. There are actually two versions of this method. One is the teacher-planned version and the other is the teacher-student planned version.

Teacher-planned curriculum promotes personal and social integration by focusing on problems and issues relevant to the students. Teachers and students select themes. Curriculum integration begins by organizing around a theme such as "garbage disposal" or "global warming." We then ask the question, "What activities might we do to concentrate on the theme?" Activities involve "integration" and the use of relevant facts in the understanding of the theme. Specific skills are taught, as they are needed to complete particular projects or activities. Traditional subjects are addressed, but students move from one activity to another or one project to the next, not from subject to subject throughout the school day. The emphasis is on real-life themes, practical application of information, and thematic learning. Curriculum integration helps students incorporate learning experiences into their own lives. This approach is often called “integrative.”

The other variation on the curriculum integration method is the student-teacher planned version. In this method, teachers and students work together in a collaborative process creating a thematic based curriculum centered on issues relevant to the students’ lives, communities, and concerns. Students become more responsible for the curriculum by turning their questions into themes and by working together to create activities and ways to measure achievement. Students are more willing to be accountable in this

democratic environment. Teachers must make sure that the proper skills are taught, learned, and applied as the various projects and activities are done.

There are so many great individuals that have come before me in this noble field of education. They have served as a foundation for people like me to build upon. I have seen that even those whom I take issue with often have something of value to add to the discussion. I hope that what I contribute will stand the test of time and as my life wanes, I leave a legacy of lives that have been fulfilled and enriched by my efforts to teach. I hope that would include students as well as fellow educators.

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