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ABSTRACT

The back-to-basics movement in part has resulted from public alarm over the increase in functional illiteracy--students' inability to solve everyday problems requiring basic language and mathematics skills. Although not all its adherents are politically and educationally conservative, those who support fundamentalist schools certainly are. These schools emphasize uniform authority-centered education, strict discipline, and respect for the values of the dominant culture, as well as the traditional "Three R's." These back-to-basics schools are growing in popularity, though many educators are critical of what they consider the regressive tendencies of fundamentalist education. The author summarizes the thinking of theorists, such as Alfred North Whitehead, who suggest that language and mathematic skills, as traditionally defined, do not constitute the true basics of education. Instead, the cognitive, affective, and developmental skills necessary for mature and effective communication are the proper educational goals. The author concludes that it would be regrettable if the pressing problem of illiteracy becomes rigidly linked with fundamentalist conservatism. (Author)

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DIGEST

Issues in Basic Education

Dee Schofield

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FOREWORD

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INTRODUCTION: FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

> "Written examinations could not be given because most of the students could not write well enough."
> The Dean of Harvard Medical School, 1870

As the quotation indicates, deficiencies in the basic skills are hardly unique to the twentieth century. Weingartner maintains that the majority of Americans have always been at best only semiliterate. Thomas Jefferson's ideal of an informed, educated populace never existed in reality. While these historical observations may be quite valid, the fact remains that Americans in the twentieth century have invested their faith, along with millions of tax dollars, in the goal of free public education for everyone.

That this goal has not been achieved, even among the relatively privileged middle class, has come as a recent, startling revelation to many. The public's realization that functional illiteracy is on the verge of becoming the norm, rather than the exception, has given rise to a grass roots demand for better education—the back-to-basics movement. Much of the impetus for this movement comes from the public's conclusion that the educational establishment, on which so many hopes were pinned, has failed to teach even minimal language and computational skills.

Functional illiteracy (the inability to solve even the simplest problems in daily life that entail language or mathematic skill) has become a familiar concept. Through publication of findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the results of such college admission tests as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), the public has been made aware of students' declining linguistic and mathematic abilities. Although some educators "blame the tests for the students' deteriorating scores," as Fiske states, most citizens regard the poor results as an indication of educational failure.

S.AT scores (both verbal and math) have steadily gone down over the last 12 years. And "the average test scores for 1975 high school graduates declined by 10 points on the verbal portion and by 8 points on the math portion since 1974," as Giamatti points out. The NAEP's findings indicate that "overall, America's 13- and 17-year-old students in 1974 were writing more incoherently and using a simpler vocabulary and a more 'primer-like' style than their counterparts four years earlier," according to the *NAEP Newsletter* ("Society 'Key' to Writing Decline").

Colleges and universities are finding it necessary to offer more and more courses in remedial composition—"bonehead English." Scully points out that college and university English department chairmen across the country are deeply concerned that "students are coming from high school with a far less firm grasp on fundamentals than before—middle-class as well as disadvantaged students." This decline in verbal skills is noticeable at the nation's best universities (such as Yale, which recently reinstated a basic composition course requirement for all students), as well as at colleges with open admission policies (such as City College of New York).

The publication in 1973 of *Why Johnny Can't Add* further raised the public's awareness of the deficiencies in students' computational skills—deficiencies (according to Kline, the author) caused by the teaching of the "new math," which emphasizes mathematical theory and deemphasizes basic computation. Articles in such popular magazines as *U.S. News & World Report* described the schools' failure to teach students to add, subtract, multiply, and divide.

Language skills received similar press exposure (and resulting public interest) when newspapers (such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post)* and magazines (such as *Newsweek* and *Time)* published "exposés" on students' inabilities to read and write. The *Newsweek* cover article ("Why Johnny Can't Write") concludes that "very little improvement in the writing skills of American students is likely unless the educational establishment recaptures the earlier conviction that the written language is important." Most of

the back-to-basics advocates would agree wholeheartedly.

The attention that declining math and verbal abilities have received in the popular press reflects laymen's opinions on these issues and in part encourages them to act on their opinions. As Amundson observes, the people "more or less disenchanted" with the schools' failure to teach language and math skills, as well as with the failure to instill a concept of discipline in students, are "the people who are providing the momentum to the 'Back to Basics' phenomenon."

Although there is no accurate count of the number of back-to-basics schools, Jones points out that the trend is spreading all over the country and that this growth has occurred in a very short time--since the first back-to-basics school opened in San Geronimo, California, in 1972. The literature reports that back-to-basics schools are in operation in at least 15 states. Districts in other states are in the process of setting up basics schools. The back-to-basics movement has become truly national.

POLITICAL WELLSPRINGS OF THE MOVEMENT

The back-to-basics movement has a distinctive grass roots aura, unlike the liberal education movements of the 1960s, which were primarily the products of educators. And because it in large part originated as the public's response to the illiteracy and discipline issues, it has a definite political cast. As Jones points out, the back-to-basics schools are a "political success."

Pressure on Boards

The creation of these schools has followed roughly the same pattern all over the country. Parents concerned that the schools have failed to teach their children the "basics" have organized to levy political pressure on school boards. As Divoky describes this process, parents are alarmed by what they perceive as "a strange and intolerable paradox." On the one hand, educators exert greater control over children, while on the other, the schools drift toward "increasingly permissive, sloppy and beside-the-point schooling." Parents (even those in the dominant middle class) feel increasingly unable to control their own children's education. They feel disenchanted and ill at ease with the last decade's innovations, over which they have had no say. These parents respond by "banding together to state their case" in the forum of public opinion and before the schools' political decision-making bodies.

These groups have sprung up in such widely diverse areas as Kenosha (Wisconsin), Phoenix (Arizona), and Palo Alto (California). In some cities, Houston (Texas) and Pasadena (California) for example, voters concerned with the back-to-basics issues have voted out liberal school board members, electing candidates who are more conservative. In other districts, such as San Geronimo (California), back-to-basics

supporters have pressured school boards into providing alternative schools that meet their demands for more restricted, basic skills-oriented curriculum and more stringent student discipline.

"Something for Everyone"

It is rather ironic that back-to-basics advocates in some districts have used the concept of alternative education to promote traditional, more conservative schooling. Alternative education, a liberal 1960s innovation intended to provide a variety of schools to meet pluralistic educational needs, originally meant in most districts that open, liberal alternative schools could be made available in addition to the already existing traditional ones. As Divoky states, "almost since it came into being, the alternative concept has been the domain of those wanting to free up or futurize conventional classrooms." However, it hasn't taken back-to-basics supporters long to figure out how to use the concept of pluralistic education to their own advantage.

For example, in Cupertino (California) back-to-basics supporters used the school board's policy of "something for everyone" as the basis for their proposal to create a conservative alternative school. These parents modeled their proposal on one for an open alternative kindergarten program already approved by the school board. As Pursell recalls, "Its [the proposal's] original wording was a sweetly open approach, but its form was good." So the parents reworded it and submitted it to the board under a cover letter that read in part, "It is our understanding that the Cupertino School District has embarked upon a philosophy of diversified education to meet the needs of the total community. Therefore, we are submitting the attached proposal for your consideration and approval." The board did approve the proposal.

Probasics groups in other districts have employed a similar approach with similar success. Amundson points out that their argument for educational diversity is politically palatable to most school boards and communities, "if school boards and professionals in education are willing to accept

the fact that we *are* an *open society*." Of course, to deny this "fact" would be politically disastrous in most districts. In some districts (in Virginia, Kansas, and Maryland, for example), back-to-basics advocates have had to set up "their own low-budget private schools" in the face of opposition from the school political establishment, according to Divoky. But most groups have been able to work within the public school system through regular political channels.

A 1975 poll conducted by *The American School Board Journal* indicates that school board members are jumping on the back-to-basics bandwagon. Jones notes that this poll shows that the board members questioned were "overwhelmingly (nine to one) in favor of establishing fundamental schools as alternatives to regular schools." And the 1975 Gallup Poll discovered that almost 60 percent of its respondents would like to send their children to "a special public school that had strict discipline, a strict dress code, and placed emphasis on the three Rs." This kind of public support has rarely been enjoyed by educational innovations and movements in the past.

THE IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS

What educational philosophy underlies the back-to-basics movement? How do its followers conceive of the nature and purpose of education? And how do they define "the basics"? Generally, a conservatism pervades the back-to-basics movement, though not all advocates of a return to the basics share this fundamentalist approach to education.

The list of characteristics of "fundamental," back-to-basics schools provided by *The American School Board Journal* ("What Makes a School 'Fundamental'?") indicates the conservative approach taken by these schools. In addition to teaching "the basic skills" of reading, writing, spelling, and computation, the goals of the fundamental schools include (1) teaching children "to know and understand one's history, heritage and governmental structure"; (2) encouraging a "competitive spirit," which is supposed "to foster in each child the desire to excel"; (3) ensuring "accountability," which means the utilization of examinations, grading, and report cards for parents; and (4) "reinforcing parental teaching of citizenship, respect, discipline and personal responsibility." In addition to emphasizing disciplined behavior, most fundamental schools also enforce strict dress codes and expect students to engage in various patriotic exercises, such as "character and patriotism" sessions.

Cultural Preservation

Since most back-to-basics schools share at least some of these conservative characteristics, it is useful to analyze the assumptions underlying the fundamentalist approach to education. The fundamentalists see education as the means of transmitting and preserving culture. The teaching of social and historical values (usually those of the dominant Anglo Saxon, middle-class culture, but not always) is the primary purpose of education and the foremost goal of the public

school system. According to the Let's Improve Today's Education (LITE), a basic education advocacy group based in Arizona, "the task of the schools is . . . augmenting and implementing the ideal of the home and of developing an appreciation of traditional values and ethics," as *The American School Board Journal* quotes LITE.

The content of this dominant culture, of course, shapes both curriculum and instructional methods. Thus, students should be taught to respect authority (teachers, parents, leaders) and to respect the sources of authority. These sources include the government (as rendered in traditional patriotic terms), the family structure, and, in many cases, the church. Education becomes a primary means of socializing students—of making them compatible with the institutions (familial, religious, governmental, economic) that affect their lives.

It is perhaps in this sense that *back*-to-basics advocates view their philosophy as a *return* to traditional American values. As Shermis notes, the American education system has, since the nineteenth century, been well suited to the task of training students to fit the social and economic structures of American culture.

The emphasis on procedure and acquiescence to authority that characterizes traditional education helps to prepare students to get along smoothly in the "real" world—an industrialized society influenced by the structures and values of business and technology. Indeed, the school system itself, according to Schultz, is organized according to a business/bureaucratic model that has its historical origins in nineteenth-century industrial experience. The uniform curricula, as well as the well-ordered, regimented means of teaching, reflect the efficiency and (to critics) the monotony of the factory, the ultimate expression of industrialization.

Discipline and Uniformity

Skills such as reading, writing, and computation are presented within this framework of respect for authority, cultural preservation, and uniformity. While students are taught grammar and the multiplication tables, they are also taught

to respond both to the teacher and to the subject matter in relatively set, uniform ways. Discipline is viewed not as the demands *inherent* in a body of knowledge, but as the structured authority-centered *approach* to subject matter. Learning linguistic and computational skills becomes an exercise in controlling behavior. Not only should students arrive at the "right" answer, they should do so in the "right" manner.

Ronald Reagan, perhaps one of the most prominent educational fundamentalists, indicates quite clearly the conjunction between skill acquisition and discipline (controlled behavior) that all traditionalists regard as basic. In a *Denver Post* editorial (quoted by Haley), Reagan calls for "rigorous drills," "compulsory courses," and "supervised" programs to teach what is commonly considered traditional curriculum: "readin', writin', and 'rithmetic." To illustrate his concept of the conjunction between these "basic" skills and behavioral discipline, he refers to his own school experience of "those endless grammar drills; stuffing your head with rules and exceptions-to-rules, . . . singsong recitations of 'Evangeline' or 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'." The emphasis here is on uniformity of both behavior and content. And the authority on both behavior and subject matter is the teacher. As *The American School Board Journal* ("What Makes . . .") states, "In fundamental schools, teachers are king. They are primarily teachers and authority figures, not facilitators, resource persons, social change agents, or social engineers."

Insofar as society and its institutions hold valuable these conservative notions of discipline and respect for authority, the schools should also reflect the same fundamentalist values, these back-to-basics advocates argue. That parts of society do indeed value strict discipline and respect for authority cannot be doubted. Not only did thousands of Americans flock to the polls to vote for Ronald Reagan in the presidential primaries, but the latest (1975) Gallup Poll revealed that the most important problem in education today, according to Gallup's respondents, is discipline, or rather, lack thereof. Wynne asserts that the general public defines discipline as the "attitudes and values" held by the dominant

social group—values that the schools and its authorities should actively perpetuate.

Political Conservatism

The fundamentalists' conservative education philosophy is frequently related to conservative political philosophy, as would be expected in this movement that draws so heavily on grass roots political support. The call for a return to the "basics" often implies a desire to reduce school spending, as well as a desire to minimize the role of the federal government in education.

Odell's brief list of the uses and abuses of the term "basics" includes its application in arguments for school budget cutting. The fundamentalists assert that "school taxes wouldn't have to be raised if only the schools would cut out the frills and nonsense and get back to teaching 'basics'." The assumption that education is based on a business/industrial model is inherent in such budget-cutting arguments. The economic goal of education is efficiency and standardization. Thus, as Odell paraphrases it, "Basics means those things that can be labelled and measured so unambiguously that a cost accountant for the school board will agree that something is really going on in the classroom."

The conjunction of traditionalist, conservative educational philosophy and conservative political philosophy is made explicit by Ronald Reagan (once again). In a *Los Angeles Times* article, quoted by Bergholz, Reagan states his desire to end all federal funding for education, giving all political and economic control of the schools to "the people" at the local level. Not only is Reagan's position here traditionally conservative politically, but it indicates his fundamentalist educational orientation as well. He states that "federal aid has undermined the fundamental values, the teaching of parents." The implicit correlation is clear between federal funding/control and liberal, permissive education. Conversely, local funding/control and traditional discipline and values are associated. The fundamentalists' concept of "basics" becomes, on closer examination, multilayered—a complex of

politically, economically, and socially conservative factors, of which "readin', writin', and 'rithmetic" are only small parts.

Needless to say, not all people who support the teaching of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills also support the political, economic, and social conservatism of the fundamentalists. As Brunner states, "After all, who would disagree with the notion that Johnny needs basic skills. . . . The problem arises when we attempt to ascertain *whose* list of basic skills children need, and in what sequence these skills should be presented, if any." To some, patriotism and strict discipline are not educational basics; indeed, these issues frequently serve to obfuscate the genuine academic issues brought to the fore by the back-to-basics movement.

A Longing for the Past

The Council for Basic Education (C.B.E.), an organization devoted to promoting the cause of literacy for all Americans, looks slightly askance at the fundamentalists' emphasis on authority and discipline, though it supports the push for improving basic language and computation skills. The council, first organized in 1956 and long the leader in the promotion of basic education, questions the educational validity of the longing for the past so frequently obvious among the fundamentalists. According to the *C.B.E. Bulletin* ("What Is the Future of the Back-To-Basics Movement?"), "The word *back* does suggest nostalgia." The *Bulletin* continues,

> For some . . . there is more to the whole business than academics. There is discipline, sometimes with a paddle; there is patriotism, with flag and ceremony and sometimes an attempt to root out all criticism of our country's past and present; there are dress codes; and there are moral values and religion. These nonacademic aspects of the back-to-basics movement and some of the aspects related to academics—letter-grades, homework, order, quiet, drill, and memorization—are linked in part with nostalgia. . . . If the back-to-basics movement is mere nostalgia, it will pass. Nostalgia is an emotion that cannot be long sustained.

A distinction must be drawn between "back to basics" and basic education, according to Weber, associate director of the C.B.E. He points out that "basic education does not necessarily mean corporal punishment, dress codes, or moralistic indoctrination; indeed, it would be better for [the back-to-basics schools] to confine themselves to curricular reform and reasonable changes in discipline."

Other critics do not approach the fundamentalists' concepts of discipline and "indoctrination" with as much equanimity as the C.B.E. These issues, as well as the very term *fundamentalist* seem to elicit unobjective, less-than-reasonable responses from some writers, who produce impassioned condemnations of the back-to-basics movement.

Haley, for example, believes that the means shape the ends and that the emphasis on discipline and uniformity somehow detracts from the learning of linguistic and mathematical skills. As she states, "Rules without reason, drills without meaning, writing and reading without imagination, mechanical expression without expression of self. These are 'basics'? Basics perhaps for turning out a nation of robots; certainly not for human beings."

Weingartner believes that the major motivation for the back-to-basics movement is the desire to recapture a past that never existed, and through reenacting this supposed "past," to achieve a degree of certainty about the present. The movement is characterized by "the kind of witless mentality that finds 'fundamentalism' of any kind a source of the kind of reassuring misconceptions that foster the illusion of certainty—about anything." According to this outspoken critic, the back-to-basics movement has absolutely nothing to do with education; instead it only reveals its followers' insecurity and regressiveness.

Dittmer takes issue with the fundamentalists' assumption "that the schools should be the guardian and transmitter of the prevailing values of the culture." Education so conceived becomes the means of "protecting the status quo and resisting change at all costs." The fundamentalists wish to approach new problems with old ideas, this critic asserts; they

are advocating "education for the past, not the future."

Like Weingartner, Dittmer is alarmed at what he sees as the regressive tendencies of the back-to-basics movement, which he calls "a national rush back to the womb." He states that the desire to "return" to the "past" means for the fundamentalists the desire to hang on to and preserve "the objects . . . the flavor" of that past. This process of seeking security in what no longer exists, except in memory and artifact, is the process of "looking at the present through a rear view mirror," as Dittmer paraphrases Marshall McLuhan. It is a process essentially destructive to education and ultimately to civilized society, according to Dittmer.

Defensiveness of Educators

It is interesting to note that Haley, Weingartner, and Dittmer are professional educators, though their negative attitudes toward the back-to-basics movement are hardly representative of all educators. Nevertheless, some education professionals regard the movement and its supporters with mistrust. As Divoky points out, "there is rising resentment of 'experts' who tend to regard [back-to-basics supporters, and especially the fundamentalists] as, at best, unenlightened." By way of example, she quotes "one educational consultant" who asserted that "conservatives" are "purely ignorant, very uninformed, illogical, inarticulate people from the 'other side of the tracks' who can't be convinced of their mistake."

Although this rather ludicrous (and definitely uninformed) assertion grossly overstates the case, the fact remains that educators have (quite understandably) become somewhat defensive at the criticism leveled against the schools by not only back-to-basics advocates, but by the general public as well. Pharis indicates this defensiveness when he labels the back-to-basics advocates as those "who would like to suggest that educators sabotaged literacy as a deliberate plot to nullify the sacrifices of our founding fathers."

Of course, back-to-basics supporters suggest nothing of the sort, though they do maintain that the liberal, open education innovations of the 1960s, which emphasized personal

creativity and experience, meant that less time could be devoted to traditional academic subjects. Whether this shift in educational priorities by itself brought about the decline in linguistic and mathematical abilities is open to heated debate. The point, however, is that excessive charges by either educators or back-to-basics advocates frequently serve to obscure the issues. It is no more correct or enlightening for educators to condemn fundamentalists as being ignorant and backward than it is for back-to-basics advocates to condemn educators for undermining and destroying the American way of life.

WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

Unlike the critics reviewed above, a few educators have managed to avoid the controversy over discipline and authority and have focused instead on the academic and curricular implications of the back-to-basics movement. To these educators, reading, writing, and arithmetic are absolutely essential skills. But they do not comprise the true basics of education, and they are not the ultimate goals of education, even though they may be the means to those goals.

Evans conceives of the basics of education as being analogous to "basic" scientific research, which "directs itself to understanding all sorts of phenomena, without reference to any specific application of whatever knowledge may be acquired by the research." Basic research is contrasted with applied research, which "directs itself toward specific ends." If applied science proceeded "with no grounding in basic scientific research," it would "soon simply run out of steam."

Evans is not advocating turning America's youth into fuzzy-minded intellectuals out of touch with "the real world." He is advocating a redefinition of educational relevance that will encompass "the skills and elements of knowledge which underlie and make further learning possible." Among these skills are the traditional linguistic and mathematical ones. But they should be presented as the means to expand educational horizons, not as ends in themselves.

The popular notion of "relevance" in education, held both by some liberal, open educators and by some back-to-basics advocates, defines relevant education as being concerned with the pragmatic application of knowledge to everyday life. The "relevantists," according to Evans, "concern themselves not with the central but with the peripheral. . . . They are less interested, for example, in teaching children *to read* as a basic skill, than in teaching them to read road signs." In other words, they value the end results of education over the

process and define those end results in very practical, even prosaic terms.

These results are for some the "basics" of education. To illustrate his point, Evans quotes a list of "basics" generated by one school district:

1. The ability to read, comprehend, and respond to regulations and directions
2. The ability to locate and use information
3. The development of . . . skills needed on the job
4. The ability to use basic math skills to solve everyday problems

While no one (Evans included) would disagree that these everyday skills are necessary, the student possessing only these abilities could hardly be considered well educated. The concern here is with "the peripheral," with "specific ends," not with the educational processes on which those ends depend. These "basics" are the basics of "applied education," which, without the rejuvenating influence of truly "basic" education, "will soon and inevitably lead us all to cultural barbarism and disaster," according to Evans.

The Basics of Mathematics

Evans's criticism of applied education is echoed by Kline in his critique of traditional mathematics curriculum. The focus in traditional mathematics is on getting the right answer, not on the reasons for that answer or the whole context of which that answer is only a small part. Traditional math, and algebra in particular, "presents mechanical processes and therefore forces the student to rely upon memorization rather than understanding," according to Kline. These processes do not allow the student to synthesize his knowledge; they are "disconnected" and "rarely have much to do with each other."

The memorization process that students must employ and the drills and repetition that traditional instruction utilize do not teach students to think, Kline argues. They encourage them to view mathematics as discrete packages of information that have no meaningful relationship either to each other

or to other areas of knowledge (science, for example).

While Kline acknowledges the importance of "the arithmetic of daily needs," he points out that the vitality and ultimate value of mathematics is that it "is the key to our understanding of the physical world." Mathematics "is not an isolated, self-sufficient body of knowledge," as traditional curriculum suggests. But rather, it is intimately tied to the arts and sciences of our culture, past and present. To teach mathematics as though it were unrelated to culture and society and as though it could be mastered simply through rote memorization, as some of the back-to-basics advocates suggest, is to violate the very nature of this essential discipline.

The basics of mathematics, according to Alfred North Whitehead, consist of "a set of fundamental ideas" that have immediate relevance "to the concrete universe." Writing in 1912, Whitehead criticized what was the traditional curriculum of that time—"The fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum. . . . We offer children Algebra, from which nothing follows; Geometry, from which nothing follows." He is describing what Evans calls applied education, divorced from its source of "basic" education.

Then Whitehead makes clear the connection between the basic and the applied. He poses the question of why children should be taught quadratic equations and answers: "Quadratic equations are part of algebra and algebra is the intellectual instrument for rendering clear the quantitative aspects of the world." What can be more basic than teaching students to comprehend "the quantitative aspects of the world." Such a "basic" transcends all others in mathematics, and certainly takes precedence over " 'rithmetic" as the fundamentalists define it—drills and memorization exercises.

The Basics of Language

If mathematics and the comprehension of the quantitative aspects of the world cannot be legitimately divorced from other disciplines or from experience, then neither can language. Language is the medium of thought and communication. And written language is absolutely essential to the

exercise of reason and the advancement of civilization. As *Newsweek* ("Why Johnny Can't Write") quotes Carlos Baker, "Learning to write is learning to think. Learning to write is the hardest, most important thing any child does."

While mathematics deals with the quantitative, language deals with the qualitative. Odell points out that language is the primary means by which we know each other—the medium of interpersonal interaction. He states that "we can make reasonable inferences about the way people's minds work when they use language; we can gain insight into some of the mental processes people use in formulating and expressing ideas and feelings." Language is the means of knowing human beings and their cultural, social, and historical accomplishments. Therefore, the "basics" of language are cognitive, affective, and developmental. They are the underlying processes that make language function successfully as thought.

Drawing on the theories of Wayne Booth, Kenneth Pike, and Jean Piaget, Odell outlines some of these basic processes, which children must acquire in order to communicate and think effectively. Booth's concepts of speaker, subject, and audience "are basic to *every* languaging situation," whether it be casual conversation or formal essay writing or poetry reading. An awareness of how these concepts function can help students not only to improve their own communication ability, but also to analyze others' uses (and misuses) of language.

Booth's rhetorical theory fits nicely with Pike's "mental activities" that characterize the thinking process. Segmenting and focusing, contrasting and classifying, noting change and defining time sequence—and finally, viewing phenomena within a specific context—these are some of the major processes that constitute thinking, according to Pike. Odell maintains that students can be taught to productively engage in these processes as they learn to use language.

Piaget's concept of development, which is a progressive process of "decentering"—that is, of becoming increasingly aware of different perspectives and realms of experience—is

basic to teaching students to "think critically and imaginatively about a subject and understand others' efforts to think about a subject," as Odell states. Decentering and education go hand in hand; each is concerned with heightening the individual's awareness of ideas and experience beyond his own self-centered, restricted realm.

Although the limited scope of his article does not allow Odell to present specific teaching methods and curriculum that would encourage the development of these processes, he does point out that such curriculum would be easy to devise, since it is predicated on the essential unity of all language manifestations—literature, film, television, conversation. And such curriculum would be truly relevant, since it "lets us relate the study of English to what goes on in the rest of students' lives." This approach would mean that educators could finally "get away from the narrow, simple-minded pursuit of relevance that leads us to assimilate every passing fad into our classes"—the kind of false relevance that Evans condemns.

Odell's notion of basics obviously differs from the fundamentalists' idea of "endless grammar drills; . . . rules and exceptions-to-rules, . . . singsong recitations of 'Evangeline' or 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'." As he states, "I do mean to argue that conscious knowledge of the rules and terminology of grammar is not basic. It does not help students engage in the intellectual and emotional processes that are prerequisite to effective, mature communication." He continues,

> My argument is that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are not the basics of a language arts program or of the languaging process. They are manifestations of a set of intellectual processes described by Booth, Pike, and Piaget. These processes are the basics that students must master. Specific language assignments are means of working toward that mastery.

CONCLUSION

Some fundamentalists would like to see their form of back-to-basics education become the norm, rather than the exception or merely one alternative among many. They see fundamentalist education as a way to reverse what they consider alarming trends in American society, and they support their views with what Shaw calls "a missionary fervor." For example, one member of the Pasadena, California, school board "believes that he and other educational conservatives are engaged in a 'life-and-death struggle' between fundamental and permissive education—a struggle to preserve American values and knowledge," according to Shaw. Hechinger sees the possibility of political backlash inherent in this sort of missionary zeal. He asserts that "strongholds of educational reaction also tend to become bastions of political reaction."

It is probable, however, that such a conservative backlash will not occur on a large scale, reducing the chances that fundamentalist back-to-basics education will become the dominant form of education in America. Fundamentalist philosophy simply does not sit well with many parents and educators, who are not prepared to throw out all the educational innovations of the past decade, nor to embrace an authoritarian, indoctrination approach to education.

And it would be most regrettable for the pressing problem of illiteracy to become rigidly linked with fundamentalist conservatism—educational and political. Such an association could, in the eyes of the public, lead to decreasing attention to the problem, along with rejection of the solution offered by the fundamentalists. But the general public and educators can hardly afford to be unconcerned about language and math deficiencies. This illiteracy is the basic *educational* issue, and the fundamentalists, as well as some of their critics, have obscured this issue. It must be the responsibility of educational leaders to rescue this very important educational

issue from the morass of political conflict that currently surrounds it.

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