

# Back To Complexity: The Right Answer for Education

In recent years citizens of our nation have demanded that schools place more emphasis on teaching the basics — the so-called three R's. Their efforts, however well intentioned, are misguided. Though problems do exist (i.e., declining test scores, graduating functional illiterates, etc.), evidence<sup>1</sup> suggests that the difficulty rests not in the teaching of basic skills, but in our schools' inability or unwillingness to teach complex reasoning skills. Although an explanation of the motivations supporting the "back-to-basics" movement is presented, along with a composite description of what "back to basics" means, this paper focuses on the fourth R — reasoning. It is with this complex skill that our schools should be concerned, and, as is argued in this paper, Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children program is an appropriate vehicle for moving us in that direction.

The "back-to-basics" movement has not cured and cannot cure the malaise which afflicts contemporary education. Still its popularity is beyond question and must be understood if, as educators, we are to redirect American education toward more meaningful pursuits. In short, we need to understand the problems which spawned this genuine social movement if we hope to slow its progress and mediate its effects.

Many educators oppose the "back-to-basics" movement, though some were unwitting abettors in its development. During the 1960's and early 1970's, educators, like most Americans, lost faith in traditional values. In succumbing to the demand that everything be relevant, educators too readily abandoned the life of mind for a kind of mindless egalitarianism. If everything is relative, what, if anything, is essential? If one idea is as good as another, why study the humanities, the sciences, — why study anything at all? When bombarded with these kinds of questions from both parents and students, too many educators uncritically embraced one innovative idea after another. As this trend continued, parents became more involved in their children's education and frequently were not pleased with the results. Many of them realized that educators did not always have a clear idea of where they were heading and became increasingly critical of educators' willingness to experiment. To many parents, schooling was like a revolving door with this year's bold new idea replacing last year's trend. Perceiving schools to be overly permissive, more concerned with fostering a positive self-concept than in teaching skills many deemed essential, parents took the lead in demanding that schools return to a more traditional curriculum. Such dissatisfaction, when coupled with a financial crunch brought on by our nation's economic woes, created widespread support for a bare-bones, no-nonsense curriculum. The conservative businessman, the concerned parent, and the wary politician all joined ranks under a banner demanding that schools abandon the tasks formerly performed by the church and family and return to teaching basic skills.

Despite widespread support, no commonly agreed upon back-to-basics platform exists. At different times and at various places, those identifying with the back-to-basics approach demand that the elementary school emphasize the three R's, reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic, while the traditional disciplines of English, science, math, and history should dominate the high school curriculum. At both levels "clean" textbooks, "free of notions that violate traditional family and national values"<sup>2</sup> should be used. Proponents of a back-to-basics approach are critical of the mental slovenliness that permeates our schools and propose as a remedy "drill, recitation, daily homework, and frequent testing."<sup>3</sup> Strict discipline is to be maintained with corporal punishment allowed and occasionally encouraged. Teachers must reestablish themselves as masters of the classroom and accept the responsibility for serving as appropriate role models for the young. For this reason jeans or even pantsuits are often deemed inappropriate attire for female teachers, while males in the profession should always wear coat and tie. In turn students must learn that proper grooming is important and must abide by established dress and hair codes. Social promotion and graduations based upon matriculation are out. Success and advancement in school are to be determined by performance on tests designed to measure mastery of basic skills and knowledge. Most back-to-basics advocates favor abolishing most or all electives, arguing that such courses as sex education, driver education, drug education, etc., distract schools and students from the essentials. All frills must go to be replaced by a revived sense of patriotism supporting traditional American values.<sup>4</sup>

Few, if any, schools would subscribe to all of the characteristics of this composite sketch, but together they provide us with a sense of what back to basics means. Though the sincerity of those advocating a return to the basics is beyond reproach, the validity of their assumptions is not. Educators cannot deny and must not avoid the fact that scores on numerous standardized tests have declined, but neither should they panic to "the sky is falling" rhetoric that has fueled the back-to-basics movement in recent years. Though tests scores have declined, it does not logically follow that our schools are failing to teach the basics. A careful examination of the evidence suggests that children today are performing far better on basic skills than their counterparts did a few years back. The problem lies not in the teaching of basic skills but in teaching complex skills, lending credence to Christopher Jencks' suggestion that "if schools need to do anything today, — and it is doubtful that schools alone can solve the problem — it is to get back to complexity, not to basics."<sup>5</sup>

To support his conclusion, Jencks notes that nine year olds examined in 1974 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress performed better on both reading and writing skills than a similar group tested in 1970. Similar results were registered using McGraw-Hill's Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and Iowa's Comprehensive State-wide Testing Program. As Jencks notes, though there are students who need help in mastering basics, "there are proportionately fewer of them in today's primary schools than any other time in the past."<sup>6</sup>



If our elementary schools are teaching the basics as well, if not better, than ever before, the assertion that our high schools are graduating functional illiterates becomes suspect. Again, though there is a problem, it is not with teaching basic skills. Today's high school students know as many words as did their predecessors of a few years back, but they have trouble drawing correct inferences from what they read. They understand what a paragraph says, but they experience difficulty deriving meaning from the passage. When writing, they make no more grammatical errors, but their thoughts are not as coherently expressed as those of their counterparts of a decade ago.<sup>7</sup> Today's students possess less information and cannot reason as well as did their predecessors, due not to a deficiency in basic skills, but resulting from students' unwillingness and inability to deal with complexity.

Many of today's students see no value in mastering the art of clear thinking. Though the exact cause or causes for this attitude cannot be pinpointed, the common consensus is that the impact of television, though not easily measured, cannot be denied. Since most television programming is aimed at a mental age of 12, it is likely to expand the horizon of younger children while simultaneously stunting or impeding the intellectual growth of students in their teens. Jencks points out that the data, which show a rise in test scores among elementary school students and a decline among secondary school students, support this interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

While today's television offers the viewer an expanded world view, it does little to assist our children in coping with this complex world. If the influence of television is as pervasive as it seems, then it is no longer surprising that students have little patience with activities requiring sustained, complex thought. Nurtured on such a diet of inane programming, all too often students reject anything, including school activities, that is not immediately entertaining.

Whatever its faults, television is clearly entertaining while schools usually are not. Perhaps our schools' failure to provide meaningful experiences for our children contributes to television's impact. Though the meaning to be derived from much of today's popular entertainment is clearly superficial, it is, argues Matthew Lipman, "presented in the form of dramatic wholes."<sup>9</sup> In contrast much of the information provided in schools is transmitted piecemeal with little or no concern given to assisting students in making sense out of what is, to many, a fragmented puzzle. Students, like everyone else, discover meaning as they come to understand how the part relates to the whole. Television programming, however inane, is meaningful, because shows are almost always presented as integrative wholes. Ironically, a return to the teaching of basic skills in isolation, reinforces the negative impact that the media have upon today's youth. When school experiences are not related to other aspects of students' lives, they are meaningless and have no lasting value. As a consequence, students, unable to make sense out of such empty educational experiences, look elsewhere for meaning in their lives.

If education is to regain some of the ground it seems to have lost in recent years, ways must be found of making it meaningful. Though, as adults, we easily understand the connection that mastery of certain skills has to future success, we must not assume that children readily understand this relationship. Children need to understand how things relate to the present and are poorly served by well-meaning adults who refuse, laugh at, or avoid treating their questions seriously. All too often information packaged in the form of a didactic textbook functions in this manner. Students, through no fault of their own, fail to understand how they are to be enlightened by it. To them it has no context, which in turn makes it meaningless.<sup>10</sup>

Matthew Lipman, director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, argues that it

need not be this way. He believes that a textbook can be meaningful even to children. A textbook should, he tells us, "be an adventure filled with discoveries, indeed it should be paradigm of discovery in practice."<sup>11</sup> Adventure, rather than routine, should characterize the school day. In developing philosophical novels for children, Lipman has succeeded in developing text material that children not only find enjoyable, but which, when used by a skilled teacher, enables the child to relate his school experiences to other aspects of his life.

Lipman's Philosophy for Children program seeks to encourage and assist children in paying attention to their own and to others' ideas. Using characters in the novels as models, children in the classroom are encouraged to discover and use rules of thought. Though the program has other positive side effects, the main thrust of the program is to encourage children to think clearly.

To think clearly is to think in a logical manner, and the program seeks to develop logical thinking in two ways. First of all, in the novel *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, Harry, a fifth grader, constantly struggles to figure things out. He is joined in this adventure by friends, parents, and teachers, and together they begin to unravel the mysteries of thought. In this novel and its sequels, Harry and friends model the discovery of formal rules of thought and demonstrate ways which their discoveries assist them in making sense out of their world. Since children readily identify with the adventures of Harry and his friends, they begin to appreciate the value of clear thinking and become motivated to master the art.

The second and perhaps more important approach used in the program to foster clear thinking is the good reasons approach. Unlike formal logic, definitive conclusions cannot be arrived at using this approach, but it can enable students to determine and evaluate, on certain grounds and in various situations, whether theirs or the reasons of others are appropriate. In our attempt to distinguish good reasons from bad, we are largely dependent upon our intuitive sense of what is appropriate, but the search for good reasons is not without guidelines. As is modeled in *Harry*, it is desirable, when looking for and evaluating "good" reasons, to strive for objectivity and impartiality. Though absolute right or wrongs may not be possible, better reasons are more likely to be discovered if preconceptions and prejudices are left behind.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that in exposing children to both the good reasons approach and to formal logic, technical or philosophical jargon is never used. In the novel *Harry*, numerous examples of inductive, analogical, and explanatory inferences are provided, but these terms never appear. Though the technical vocabulary is omitted, sophisticated philosophical concepts are seriously treated in a way that is meaningful to children. By focusing upon both formal and informal rules of thought, Lipman's Philosophy for Children program aids students in moving beyond the basics toward developing complex thinking skills.

Lipman's Philosophy for Children curriculum is primarily a thinking skills program, but it has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to improve students' basic skills. The ability to read is one of the main objectives of the back-to-basics movement, but

reading well means more than just knowing the words printed on a page. The meaning of the written word, passage, or paragraph has to be discovered. In discovering meaning, the reader must infer, or draw out from what is literally given, the meaning that is suggested or implied. It is in this way that we gain meaning from what we read; but if the skill to infer meaning is lacking, students cannot read well.

The teaching of reading has received considerable attention in recent years. As a specialized subject, it has become the darling of those advocating back to basics. Once considered an essential step in the path leading toward clear thinking, reading is no longer thought of as a means to this end but as an end in and of itself. In contrast, though Lipman's program seeks to enhance the more inclusive fourth R — reasoning, empirical research indicates that the IAPC program when properly taught, produces significant improvement in children's reading skills.<sup>13</sup>

Whether used in an attempt to improve verbal and math skills of disadvantaged children or as part of an enriched curriculum for the gifted child, the aim of the program remains the same. It seeks to convert the classroom into a community of inquiry where respect for the rules of thought and human reason reigns. Though no easy task, the program has been successfully implemented in all 50 states and internationally. To think clearly is a worthy educational goal, and the success of the IAPC program to date suggests that children can learn these complex skills. Undeniably, students today must be well grounded in the three R's, but this can be best accomplished by focusing upon a more inclusive and complex fourth R — reasoning. Hence, complexity, not the basics, is the right answer for today's education.

#### NOTES

1. See Christopher Jencks, "The Wrong Answer for School Is: (b) Back to Basics," *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1978, p. C1+ and George F. Madaus, "NIE Clarification Hearing: The Negative Team's Case," *Phi Delta Kappan* 63 (October 1981): 92.
2. Ben Brodinsky, "Back to the Basics: The Movement and Its Meaning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 58 (March 1977): 522.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Jencks, "The Wrong Answer for School Is: (b) Back to Basics."
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 8.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-146.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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