

Research Notes

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“Back to Basics”: Rethinking What is Basic to Education Through an Interpretive Study of the Work of Teachers and Students in Elementary School Classrooms

Introduction

There is a long-standing allure to the idea of “back to basics” in educational theory and practice. It drives reactionary school reform movements (Berk, 1985; Holt, 1996) and critiques or defenses of “liberal” or “progressivist” education (Grumet, 1993). It also subtly underwrites how curriculum guides are conceived and organized; how disciplinary knowledge is envisaged and delivered; what the work of the classroom is understood to be; how children are thought of regarding their participation in and necessity to the work of the classroom; what teachers are expected to know and to do; and how teaching and the assessment of teachers’ and children’s work is organized and evaluated. Even more subtle, but far more pervasive, powerful, and diffuse is the use of *basics* as an often unexamined, incendiary clarion in public discourse and the public press (Freedman, 1993).

In our ongoing SSHRCC research project we have been engaged in a rethinking of the idea of “basicness” in education in order:

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1. to unearth and critique the philosophical underpinnings, hidden histories, and appearances of the idea of basics in contemporary educational theory and practice;
2. to provide an alternative version of basicness and to test the effectiveness of this alternative in educational theory and practice. We have been systematically documenting the work of children, teachers, and researchers in various elementary school settings to see what sorts of work, conversations, thinking, creation, and controversy arise through orienting to this alternative;
3. to show how and the extent to which what currently counts as basic education is not lost in this alternative version, but is rather revived and strengthened by it;
4. to link educational ideas of basicness more directly to the ideas of basicness that inform the disciplines we are entrusted to teach;
5. specifically to explore the discipline of mathematics and the practice of elementary mathematics education as the central case of how these traditional and alternative ideas of basicness manifest themselves and what differences they make in the work of teachers and students.

Background and Rationale for the Study

In our previous research work (under SSHRCC grant # 410-95-0380, which ended April 1998), we explored classroom, disciplinary, and intellectual community as it appears in mathematics education (Jardine, 1994; Jardine with Friesen, 1997), language arts education (Jardine & Field, 1996), environmental education (Jardine, 1995a, 1995b, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b), ideas of curriculum integration (Jardine, 1995a, 1997a; Jardine, LaGrange & Everest, 1998), developmental theories (Jardine, in press; Jardine with Friesen, 1997), and the character of the teaching profession (Jardine, 1996a). That work demonstrated that it is possible to conceive of the classroom and the disciplines we teach as living communities and that such a conception can lead to quality work being done in the classroom by teachers and children alike (Jardine & Field, 1996).

Through an interpretive investigation of specific classroom conversations, projects, and events, our current study demonstrates that education is being driven by an analytic idea of basicness that has been inherited from a limited, literal-minded, and outdated version of the empirical sciences. This idea can be simply stated: that which is most real or most basic to any discipline we might teach are its smallest, most clearly and distinctly isolatable, testable, and assessable bits and pieces. In the area of language arts, for example, phonemes and graphemes are clearly and definitively distinguishable from each other, and a child's mastery of sound-symbol relationships can be equally clearly and definitively tracked, tested, and assessed. Children's abilities regarding such masteries (and through provincial testing scores the accountability of classrooms and schools) can be then unambiguously rank-ordered. Analytically isolatable features of language such as graphemes and phonemes are in this sense understood as somehow basic to the teaching and learning of language. A similar line of thought occurs in mathematics, where isolatable and testable math facts are considered more basic than, for example, the complex fields of relations that knit together numeracy, addition, subtraction, and the operation-

al character of mathematical work and all the difficult conversations that might go into opening and exploring such matters with children.

Our study has demonstrated (e.g., thus far in the areas of mathematics education, Friesen, Clifford, & Jardine, 1998, 1999; art education, Jardine, Graham, LaGrange, & Kisling-Saunders 2000; environmental education, Jardine, 2000; Abram & Jardine 2000) that such basics are in fact abstractions that are the outcomes of a highly complex, theoretical, analytic process. What are in fact abstract and arcane products of analysis are believed to be what must be taught chronologically first to the youngest of children, because they are considered (analytically) basic.

In our project we have been exploring images, ideas, and practices of ancestry, memory, generativity, community, relationship, intergenerationalness, and conversation as fundamental and basic to what can be considered a “living discipline” entrusted to children and teachers in schools. We are exploring how the basics of a discipline constitute it as an open, generous, living field of relations and “real work” (Snyder, 1990). We are also exploring how in the light of such an image of basics, the work of education is to draw children into the real, complex, interrelated, often ambiguous, often contested work of a discipline, and not to fragment it into static, established structures, but in the living conversations that constitute their being passed on in ways that are healthy, whole, and sustainable.

In our study we have refused to enter into the war of polarities that is all too common in educational discourse. We do not wish to reject or disdain the results of analytic work in educational theory and practice. Fragmentation and the isolation of “skills” and “facts” may be occasionally precisely what is required in the day-to-day work of schooling or in dealing with specific difficulties of particular children. However, we contend that such a judgment as to the appropriateness of fragmentation requires an understanding of something more basic than such fragments: a knowledge of the living discipline in which such fragments gain their place and meaning. It is only in this wider, more difficult, more ambiguous realm of a living discipline that a sound pedagogical judgment can emerge. In fact, as the Corporate Council on Education reported to the Conference Board of Canada (n.d.), it is precisely this sort of deeper, more difficult understanding that the world for which we are educating our children demands.

We believe that our project will help open a new conversation about the basics in education beyond its current narrow, often overheated confines. We believe as well that the alternative we will be exploring allows for the possibility of recovering a deeper, more sustaining, and more intellectually pleasurable understanding of the world for which we are educating our children.

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