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Different Approaches to Educational Change: Choosing a Route that Makes Sense

Amy Gerstein
December 1996

A Paper for the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education
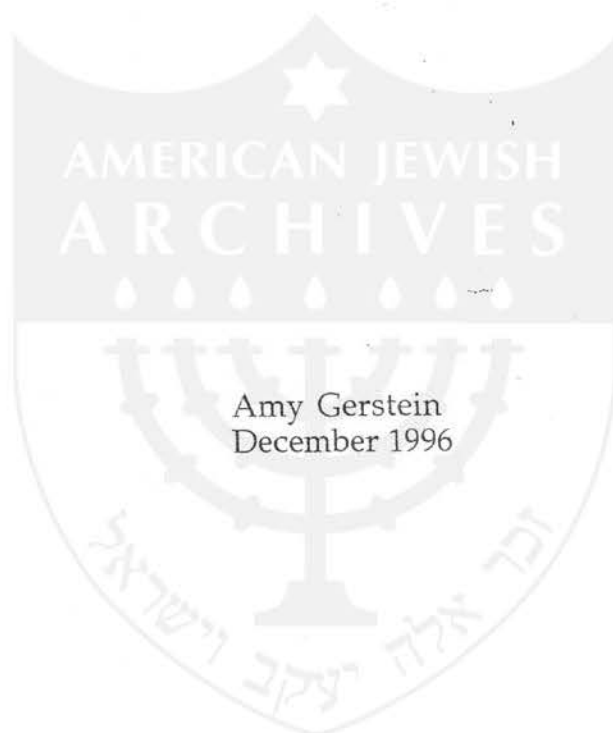
Different Approaches to Educational Change: Choosing a Route that Makes Sense

Moving to the San Francisco Bay Area from the East Coast in 1990 has involved a long-term transition process which has touched many different dimensions of my life. The pace is different--it is slower. The food is different--it is healthier. The people are different--they are more diverse. The geology is different--there are earthquakes. The norms are different--people worry a lot about traffic. Since I arrived in California I have learned to consider carefully the route I travel from point "A" to point "B." There are always multiple routes, and there are always multiple opportunities to get tangled in traffic. Every smart driver in the Bay Area chooses a route that has options. And most of us have opinions about the best way to reach our destinations. Some rely on freeways. Others rely solely on forms of public transportation. Still others use a combination of modes of travel. This paper on different approaches to educational change reminds me a bit of the ways in which Bay Area drivers talk about ways to avoid traffic. There are multiple routes to a given destination. Not everyone agrees on the roads and not everyone agrees on the destination. But everyone agrees that there are multiple paths to educational change.

I begin this paper by outlining a few of my assumptions and biases about educational reform. Then, I describe several categories of different approaches to change and a few common critiques of each approach. I will briefly outline some lessons derived from the last decade of educational reform. Finally, I will give a set of considerations to use when crafting an approach to educational change in a variety of settings.

My beliefs and assumptions

Through 10 years of working in educational reform I have developed a set of assumptions and biases, or lenses through which I view the field. I outline these lenses as a means of identifying my perspectives as I describe the different routes to educational reform.

I assume that the primary goals of educational reform involve increasing student achievement and providing a safe, healthy and caring learning environment for adults and for students. I define successful reforms as those which have demonstrated impact on student performance through improving skills, qualities and habits of mind in academic and affective areas and have also created a vibrant learning community for adults.

I further define a chief goal of education as teaching *all* students not just the easiest ones. I delineate this assumption explicitly because it exists in

contrast to traditional assumptions that underlie the current system in public schools. Public schools were historically designed, in part, to sort students not to truly serve all students (Cuban, 1990; Fine, 1989; McNeil, 1986; Parish & Aquila, 1996; Powell, Farrar & Cohen, 1985, ; Tyack, 1974; Weis, 1983). We continue to see explicit sorting practices: tracking by "ability groups" as early as age 6, differential educational and counseling services (vocational vs. college bound), separate classes for those with special needs, etc. I am not describing the extreme cases of separate classes for students with severe disabilities, rather those cases where students are identified as different from the mainstream and are labeled and treated as such. There are many historical reasons for a sorting design principle which grow out of the societal context in which schools were previously situated and which reflect historical values. The current population of students is far more complex than the population of students that schools were historically designed to serve. The societal context in which schools work is also increasingly complex and troubled. All reform efforts address or confront this value explicitly or implicitly.

THE WHOLE SCHOOL CHANGE APPROACH

What follows is a brief description of a set of well known and successful whole school reform efforts. Included are a number of questions and concerns that have been raised regarding each effort and systemic reform efforts in general. These efforts vary in their philosophies, targeted age groups, the amount of technical and material assistance provided to schools, and the degree of local interpretation of the programs. Most of these initiatives are designed as a network of schools.

The Coalition of Essential Schools, founded by Ted Sizer at Brown University in 1984, is a network of schools which share as their goal implementing the nine Common Principles. The Common Principles are a set of ideas about teaching, learning and the organization of schools. Comprehensive in nature, the principles were designed to be interpreted at the school level. The main focus of the Common Principles is to teach students to use their minds well. Principles also encourage the organization and practice of schools which value knowing students well in order to teach them well. Working mostly with secondary schools, CES questions the fundamental assumptions that undergird a school and the compromises that teachers are forced to make in the current design of schools. Assistance is provided by regional centers, a national office staff, and a large body of resources (thoughtful newsletters, research articles, and books.) CES relies on "conversation" as the main vehicle for change. Concerns have been raised about the lack of resources and support for teachers (e.g.. there are no CES curriculum materials) and an over-reliance on assisting schools with governance and cultural issues. This concern is due, in part, to the way CES

values local wisdom and interpretation over a centralized model. Questions have also been raised about the degree of significant change in classroom practice and lack of clear and compelling data that students are performing better.

The Accelerated Schools Program, started by Hank Levin at Stanford University, has been designed to work with elementary schools (and has gradually included middle schools) who serve "at risk" low socio-economic populations. The basic premise is that schools tend to remediate students who are not achieving and that they need, instead, to accelerate learning opportunities for students. Holding students to high expectations is at the center of this effort. Emphasis is placed on a year-long "taking stock" process in which schools assess current practice and are closely assisted by ASP staff. Then school-wide committees are established to address some of the findings in the "taking stock" process. Schools are encouraged to include parents every step of the way. Ultimate value is paced on the belief that all students can achieve and that by increasing resources to those who typically underachieve students will perform better. Criticisms about the ASP approach have included a concern about schools not "owning" the work due to having developed dependency on ASP in the early phases of the effort and having trouble in later stages when they are not provided with enough assistance later. In addition, questions have been raised about indicators of success.

Working almost exclusively in urban elementary schools, the School Development Program aims to include multiple stakeholders in the lives of children. Started by James Comer, a psychiatrist at Yale University, the project seeks to improve the overall school ecology by refocussing adults' attention to students needs and issues. The project values the psychological development of students and increases the role of social service agents and the larger community in the life of the school. Value is placed on the relationships developed between students and adults as a vehicle for improving student achievement. Schools engaged in this process undergo an initial school-wide training, followed by on-going coaching and in-service professional development. Changes focus on developing school-wide goals, re-configuring the governance and decision making process to reflect the representation of various stakeholders in the work of the school, and establishing school-wide committees which focus on different aspects of reform (curriculum and instruction, assessment, technology, planning and management, etc.). Concerns have included a lack of focus on and demonstrated success in the classroom (curriculum, assessment, and instruction.)

The Child Development Project, founded by Eric Schaps, was originally conceived as a research and development effort with a very small group of elementary schools. CDP focuses on fostering students' ethical and

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prosocial behavior and understanding through attention to the intellectual, ethical and social development of children. Intensive work has been done with a limited number of schools. Schools have been provided with fairly close technical assistance consisting of an intensive three year training, comprehensive curriculum materials, and in-house study groups. This effort resembles a model in which outside experts provide the program to the schools. Research conducted by CDP has shown this work to be very successful in improving student achievement and developing social and ethical growth in children. Questions include the size and scope of the effort, the difficulty of implementation of the model without close facilitation, and the lack of clear standards for all students.

League of Professional Schools. This network of schools was started by Carl Glickman. It represents a school-university partnership effort (like CES and ASP) between k-12 public schools and the University of Georgia. The schools in this network share a commitment to improving teaching and learning by working on three priorities. First, schools are asked to craft a "covenant" which defines the educational focus for the school. The covenant serves as the collective vision for the school. Second, schools develop a "charter" for shared governance of the school. These are the rules the school agrees to follow to enact the covenant. The charter refers directly to the covenant. Finally, the schools agree to participate in a "critical study process" by engaging in school-wide action research about how the school assesses its work toward achieving the covenant. Emphasis is place on the value of democracy both for adult decision making and for student learning. School to school collaboration is promoted to create learning across sites. The League does not focus on student assessment as one of its goals and therefore may not encourage teachers to truly transform their teaching. High Schools in the League are not as successful as elementary schools.

One common critique of all of these efforts is that because the changes are comprehensive by design and long term in nature, it is difficult to detect improvements in the short term. Each of these efforts aims to change the culture, policies, practices, and structures of a school. It is challenging for any school to simultaneously address all of these dimensions. Since the work is long term, changes in the environment of the schools (new leadership, state and district policies, funding crises, increased immigration, etc.) impact progress toward reform goals. These environmental shifts are inevitable. Each of these reform efforts vary to the degree that they understand and are able to support schools to cope with environmental flux.

THE CHANGE IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE APPROACH

Another set of reforms focus on the governance and management of schools. These reforms are not always formal initiatives or a network of schools and are often encouraged at the local school district level. The main

goal of school governance reforms involves providing more decision making power to the people who are closest to the children. Several assumptions underlie this set of strategies. One such assumption involves the belief that teachers and school site administrators are best able to determine resource allocation (time, money, and human) in order to best serve students. Another is that fundamentally schools are hierarchical organizations in which teachers and students are disenfranchised and this creates a moral dilemma. "Teachers have to be part of the educational decision making process not only as recognition of or incentive to professional status, but also because the daily lives of teachers are influenced by decisions in which they have no voice." (Sarason, 1990, p.52) Many proponents of these reforms believe that until the basic power relationships in schools change, no substantive change will be achieved.

Often under the umbrella of "site-based management" (SBM) or "shared decision making" (SDM) these reforms stress teacher empowerment. School districts which provide sites with the power to allocate resources, hire personnel, and set school policy are engaging in site-based management. Schools which simply share decision-making power among teachers, administrators and sometimes parents typically call their effort shared decision making.

There are formal "democratic schools" networks which share an ideological base and are informed by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, Paulo Freire, Carl Glickman and others. Other initiatives have been launched and supported by teachers' unions and associations (Rochester, NY and Dade County, Florida are the most famous of these efforts) as a way of promoting teacher empowerment.

Most of the whole school change efforts include a governance component. What distinguished these efforts from whole school change is that these reforms are often not coupled with a focus which includes attention to school culture, structure curriculum, instruction, student assessment, etc.

The success of these efforts have varied widely. One common concern has involved a lack of explicit (or sometimes even implicit) connections between changing the governance of the schools and improved opportunities for student learning. Critics have been known to eschew SBM/SDM because the indicators of success typically promote change in teacher satisfaction rather than improved student achievement. In addition, many districts and schools have moved into SBM or SDM without providing sufficient support for teachers to develop the new skills, or to adjust to the new school culture that results from these reforms. Another common pitfall with SBM and SDM has involved a lack of clarity about what type of decisions are truly important for teachers to make. Distinctions have often not been made about

which type of decisions are most critical for teacher voice. For example, many schools have engaged in long meetings in which teachers debate the amount of paper each teacher is allocated, or debate the process for repairing the photo-copy machine. These examples stand in contrast to schools in which teachers decide which text books to use or design, plan and facilitate their professional development opportunities for the year.

STANDARDS BASED REFORMS

Another set of reforms which occur at a local, district, state, and national level involve the development and use of standards. These reforms share a belief that teachers need to <u>use</u> a set of standards to insure equity, to promote high expectations, to inform decision making about both classroom and school level issues, and to encourage work toward common goals. Standards are designed to express what students know and are able to do.

In general, there are two types of standards which educators espouse: content standards and performance standards. Content standards are typically a set of agreements about what students should know and do within a given curricular area. For example, Project 2061: Science for All Americans, run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, has compiled a set of content standards for science. Another content standard might be: students should be able to describe the major forces which precipitated World War II. Content standards are promoted by school districts, states, and even national initiatives. Performance standards are designed to capture how well a student demonstrates a given skill or area of knowledge. Defining how well a student ought to write a persuasive essay, or how well a student can design and conduct a scientific experiment are examples of performance standards. Performance standards are often written in the form of a developmental rubric which describes the different ways in which a given skill appears. These rubrics are used for assessing the performance of a student given the standard. (See the recent issue December 1996 <u>Educational Leadership</u> devoted to "Teaching for Authentic Student Performance." 5(4).

Standards reforms are often, but not always, tied to developing assessments which can assess student performance relative to the standards. Authentic assessments are typically discussed in this light. Assessments of performance are *authentic* when they refer to the ability to perform things that are valued in the adult world (Wiggins, 1993). Performance assessments typically refer to ways in which students demonstrate their relative mastery of a standard or assessment.

This shift in thinking about student assessment has tremendous implications for how teachers design their pedagogy and curriculum. When

working toward a set of standards teachers must consider what is important for students to learn and the nature of assistance students need in order to develop the necessary skills to meet the standards. Furthermore, assessment data relative to a set of standards can guide decisions about school-wide programs as well as classroom programs.

Harvard Project Zero, founded by Howard Gardner, is one effort specifically designed to help schools use curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment tools in order improve student performance. While not rooted in standards reform, the assessment work that Project Zero does is closely associated with much of standards work. Other key leaders in the field include Grant Wiggins, Richard Stiggins, Lauren Resnick, and Ruth Mitchell.

Critiques of standards based assessment range from pedagogical to ideological. In many State standards programs tests are closely tied to the standards. These tests are often not well developed and may not work in concert with other policies (state approved curriculum, etc.) Results often impact funding levels, status, and personnel decisions.

Insufficient support is usually provided for teachers to teach to the standards. Major assumptions are made about the use of standards. Schools often underestimate the value and implications of developing standards. Efforts are focused on development without consideration of implementation issues: professional development, necessary changes in school policies, inevitable changes in school culture, structural issues, etc. Teaching to standards and performance assessments requires a new way of approaching the classroom for most educators.

Many critics argue that standards must be developed locally to respond to the priorities and needs of the local communities. If they are developed more remotely, critics argue, then the process is fundamentally undemocratic. Others argue that standards ought to be developed at a national level to promote a common base of knowledge for all Americans.

While proponents argue that standards will help insure high quality education for all students, unless explicit attention is paid to help those students who are typically underserved in schools then standards will be one more reform that passes them by. This means teachers will need to understand how to teach to all students and that current practices of tracking (using multiple sets of standards for different students) will need to be reassessed. In order to fundamentally change this cycle, schools will need to shift from lowering standards (or having multiple sets of standards) to increasing support to meet the standards. This approach requires fundamental shifts in the ways in which students are viewed: all are capable of learning at high levels rather than just some.

CHANGING ONE SLICE OF A SCHOOL

Many reforms aim at a "slice" of the school. They are not intended to impact all students nor all adults. Rather, these efforts are designed to provide support to more narrow dimensions of the school. I have grouped a number of these efforts into three categories: curricular reforms, skill building reforms, and instructional strategy reforms.

Curriculum reforms are a good example of this type of change strategy. Typically designed to provide curriculum to teachers who aim to improve their current materials or strategies. These materials range in scope and degree of specificity. One lens with which to analyze these strategies involves the way in which the curriculum developers view teachers or the ways in which the purposes are conceived. The purpose of the reforms may be to provide resources to teachers or it may be a way to try to combat what is perceived as poor classroom practice. Some curriculum efforts are designed to provide broad guidance and ample resources. In these efforts teachers are encouraged to be creative and augment with their own ideas, materials, and adapt to the population of students they teach. Examples of this type of curriculum reform include: Facing History in Ourselves, the Algebra Project, Teachers' Curriculum Institute, and Interactive Math Project. Other curricular reforms follow a more prescribed or "teacher proof curriculum." Teachers are expected to follow the programs exactly to achieve the desired results. Examples include Success for All (an early literacy program), FAST (Foundational Approaches to Science Teaching) and Math Power.

Curricular reform efforts serve important purposes. They provide useful resources for teachers. Many demonstrate success but show limited impact when viewed across all students or the whole school. These efforts do not intend to impact all students or all dimensions of the school. Some of these efforts have structural components, that is they may recommend increased instructional time for literacy or extended planning time for teachers. Critics describe the vast history of curricular reforms in which the changes in approach and materials disappear over time without a trace.

Another category of narrow reform efforts are the skill building initiatives. These efforts are designed to help students develop skills that are deemed important and are typically removed from a curricular context. Two examples of these efforts are the HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) program developed by Stanley Pogrow at the University of Arizona and Kumon Math which was adopted out of methods made popular in Japan. HOTS works with students for 25 minutes per day. The lessons are scripted for teachers to use. "At risk" students are pulled out of traditional classes to participate in HOTS. Kumon Math also has scripts for teachers and involves intensive timed drills of math skills. Emphasis is placed on skills and swiftness not on conceptual learning.

A third category might include those reforms which target instructional strategies. A related skill building reform, this approach targets teachers not students. The most well known model was devised by Madeline Hunter from UCLA. Her model, "Instructional Theory Into Practice" involved a multi-step instruction process designed to work at any grade level and with any content area. Popular in the 1980's, these programs were taught largely in a staff development inservice model. Techniques involved giving students an "anticipatory set" or agenda for a given lesson and "checking for understanding." These strategies did not appear to impact teaching techniques nor improve student achievement over time.

Another popular instructional reform involved "cooperative learning." Teachers were taught theories, formulas, and strategies for encouraging students to work in groups. Proponents include Elizabeth Cohen, Robert Slavin, David Johnson, and many others. While the theories and strategies differed, the purpose was to provide opportunities for social learning and promote the practice of working together.

These types of programs have demonstrated marginalized success. There is little evidence, over time, that any of these strategies remained and improved student achievement. These strategies are also not intended to impact all children. In programs like HOTS, there is very little evidence of carry over or transfer to other dimensions of the student's learning. Similarly, Kumon Math skills are limited to Kumon Math.

POLICY REFORMS PROMOTED AT DISTRICT, STATE, NATIONAL LEVEL

Several of the reforms described above (curricular, SDM, SBM, standards, etc.) have been promoted or even mandated at one or more of these policy levels. Reforms initiated outside of the school building by those in policy positions have not tended to be very successful. The California State Curriculum Frameworks are a well documented example. Teachers were asked to teach math, for example, in a way that fostered understanding and not rote memorization. They were provided with textbooks tied to the new Framework, and other curricular materials (manipulatives, etc.). But they were also provided with little support and professional development to understand how to teach with the materials in a new way. Researchers found that teachers did not understand the new Framework and used the textbooks and materials to support the old way they had been teaching (Ball, 1990a; Ball, 1990b; Cohen, 1990; Wilson, 1990). What changes do result maybe what Larry Cuban would call "incremental" rather than more fundamental second order changes (Cuban, 1990; Cuban, 1993). One reason for the limited success may be that these reforms are too remote from the context in which teachers are teaching (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993).

EMERGING LESSONS FROM EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Reformers and scholars will not always agree about the essential lessons that emerge from different approaches to change. The perspective of the critic shapes the lessons. My perspective is shaped by my experiences as a reformer and as a researcher focused on whole school change. I am interested in understanding the conditions that support and impede comprehensive and lasting changes that have "authentic pedagogy"* at the center. The brief lessons, or generalizations, that follow are intended to help illuminate these conditions.

Making significant educational change is long term work. To change deeply rooted traditions, practices, beliefs, and structures may take a generation (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Sizer, 1992). Many working toward comprehensive change of this nature have already discovered the necessity of including all stakeholders in the process, anticipating the swinging pendulum of imperatives directed toward educators, and the challenge of trying to change a system while working within it.

Most people are unprepared for the political and personal dimensions of the work. Challenging assumptions that have existed for years evokes deeply charged responses. The work becomes personalized and highly political. Teachers and administrators have to work harder than they had previously worked. The potential for burn-out, always present, intensifies in a reform context.

Change is not fun. Adults resist changing. Professionals who have grown into proficiency do not enjoy losing competency when faced with adopting new habits, skills, and challenging their belief systems. (Evans, 1996)

Inquiry, conversation and relationships are essential vehicles for change. Creating opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn from their practice, to learn together and to commiserate is absolutely critical to any change process. The work is too hard to sustain without colleagues, friends, and intellectual stimulation. CES and others rely on critical friends to provide both support and hard questions to challenge the work. Networks are proving to be invaluable for schools by providing like-minded colleagues engaged in similar efforts and yet the context differs enough to provide necessary perspective.

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* Authentic pedagogy is a construct developed by Newmann and Wehlage which emphasizes teaching that requires students to think, deveelop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important, realistic problems (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

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To achieve successful reform, changes need to occur on a school-wide (or institution-wide) scale. This view is consistent with one which views organizations as ecological systems which function much like an organic system (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993) Ecological balance is always sought. If one aspect of the school is impacted, other aspects will necessarily be effected. For example, if a high school community chooses to adopt a new set of curricular materials and instructional methods in mathematics, other departments and aspects of the school will experience the shift. For example, increased professional development resources may be devoted to mathematics and subsequently diminish the resources for other teachers. Mathematics teachers may work more closely as they try new methods --they might eat lunch in their classrooms, they might travel to conferences together and develop private jokes, they might be tired and unavailable to participate in other committees, they might even develop disdain for their colleagues who still teach in the old way. Inadvertently cliques, factions, and even hostilities develop. A typical elementary school example might evolve from a focus on Early Literacy which typically includes K-3rd grade teachers. Teachers at the upper primary or intermediate levels are "left out" in a variety of ways. Only some teachers are learning skills that would apply to the teaching of reading at all levels. The upper primary teachers might be under the false impression that their instructional methods don't need to change. Exciting professional development which creates camaraderie and collegial learning is available to only a subset of the school. Again, unintentional groupings develop and create a dysfunctional school community and inhibit the development of a school-wide learning organization.

The people who currently work in schools have the ability to accomplish the work of reform (improve teaching and learning, write curriculum, re-design the structure and culture of the institution) but they will need support to build their capacity (Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Miles & Louis, May 1990; Sarason, 1990; Wasley, 1994). Reform efforts vary in their commitment to this value. On one end of the spectrum models are provided to schools with very specific implementation strategies and on the other end of the spectrum, schools are provided with a set of ideas to consider how to implement. Providing high levels of support is essential. The best kind of professional development is highly contextual, usually site based, and ongoing.

Reform strategies and efforts are highly contextual (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). What plays in Peoria may not play in Palo Alto. Because reform work is ultimately shaped by those who are doing the work (teachers and students) the strategies will be interpreted by those people. Additionally, every community is different. Reform strategies that support this kind of variation is essential for success.

High expectations (for students and for adults) are essential to success (Meier, 1995). A reform which ultimately does not target all children may foster prejudices and develop biases which will have pernicious effects later (McDermott, 1987). Successful reforms include all children and expect the most of them.

Teachers have to want to change what they do. No one can mandate what is really important (Weatherley & Lipskey, 1977). Fundamentally, teachers are in control of much that happens inside their classrooms. This means that reforms that they don't believe in and are not interested in implementing will not likely come to fruition.

The environment which surrounds educational institutions is always in flux. Changes in leadership, in the community, in the political stream, and in funding mean that nothing in the environment is ever stable. Schools need to be flexible enough to adapt and planful enough to anticipate change.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING YOUR ROUTE AND YOUR DESTINATION

The lessons and descriptions above suggest a number of considerations when planning a route to reform. I briefly outline a few areas and key questions to think about when embarking on a journey toward educational change. Just like travel in the Bay Area, educational change requires careful thought about the means of reform as well as the ultimate destination.

1. *Consider your goals.* What are you hoping to achieve. Are you targeting all students? Are you interested in transforming the entire institution or just a part? Does the culture of the institution need to change? What is your vision of educational change? What are your goals? What are your goals based on? How widely shared is the vision for change?

2. *Consider your resources.* What human and financial resources are required to pursue your goals? What resources are available? How can you leverage current resources? Who else can contribute? What type of ongoing support have you considered providing to the participants of reform?

3. *Consider the readiness of your institution.* Have conversations even begun about what needs to change? What percentage of the community is currently involved in thinking and planning for change? Would your community benefit from a few small highly prescribed innovations before tackling the larger dimensions of your institution? (Slavin, 1995) Have you surveyed the faculty to ascertain their personal and professional needs to participated?

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4. *Consider your community.* Have you conducted a needs assessment (however formal) of your local community? Are you aware of community concerns and interests? Have you included all the stakeholders in the conversation? Have you waited too long to consider the stakeholders?

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VISION AND EDUCATION

Daniel Pekarsky

Introduction

While virtually nobody challenges the assumption that
education, both general and Jewish, is in need of reform,
controversy surrounds the question, "What does an adequate
education look like - and what do we need to do to make it a
reality?" Among the many responses to this question is one that
gives pride of place to the concept of vision. "Vision", it is
argued, operates as a kind of Aristotelian telos: not only does
it specify the right direction of reform, it also, if taken
seriously, pulls practice in this direction. But while the case
for taking vision seriously is, as I argue in the first part of
this paper, very strong, its power as a tool for enhancing the
quality of education depends on understandings and distinctions
which are often ignored in favor of more simplistic
understandings of what vision is, how it arises, and the role it
can play in the life of an educating institution.[1]

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[1] At the outset I want to acknowledge that my thinking on
these matters has been richly influenced by ideas articulated
over many years by Professor Seymour Fox in varied venues that
include his course on Jewish education at the Jerusalem Fellows
Program and various other talks and papers. Other ideas emerged
in my deliberations both with him and his associate, Daniel
Marom. See, for example, Seymour Fox, "Toward a General Theory
of Jewish Education," in David Sidorsky, ed., THE FUTURE OF THE
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Seymour
Fox, "The Educated Jew: A Guiding Principle for Jewish Education"
(Internal Mandel Institute Document, 1991); Seymour Fox and
Israel Scheffler, "Jewish Education and Jewish Continuity:
Prospects and Limitations," (Jerusalem: Mandel Institute, 1996)

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Locating vision in educational planning and practice

In more than one of the early Platonic Dialogues, Socrates is mocked by his interlocutors for his and other philosophers' preoccupation with ideas. Similarly, in THE CLOUDS, Euripides portrays philosophers as useless human beings engaged in reflections that have little to do with the real world in which people strive to survive and flourish. Careful attention to ideas, it is suggested, has little to contribute to our quest for a better life down here.

Certainly this idea resonates strongly with modern, Western sensibilities. Today progress is associated not with philosophical reflection but with the practical know-how that has produced tools and ways of doing things that have transformed the face of the earth. Like many of Socrates' contemporaries, many of us, too, tend to be impatient with philosophical types who ask us to step back and think in a detached way about the why's and wherefore's of what we do. It seems like a distraction from the so-called important things that need to get done. Certainly, this tendency is very pronounced among educators. Bombarded by many more demands than they can reasonably respond to and faced with daily challenges that often feel impossible, they are

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typically hungry for new techniques that will enhance their ability to teach this or that, to manage a group of students, to create a sense of community in a classroom or a school, or to increase their students' SAT scores; but limited energy and skepticism conspire to make them far less eager to step back and reflect on the basic aims of the enterprise they are engaged in.

That this is a serious mistake has been affirmed by a growing chorus of voices that recognize that there is much more to organizational inefficiency than simply a failure to adopt powerful management techniques, and that poor teaching is often more than a failure to adopt the latest pedagogical wisdom. This deeper source of waste, I want to suggest, is often the failure to have developed a powerful vision, a clear conception, of what it is one is trying to accomplish. In the absence of such a vision, organizational patterns, curriculum, and other critical dimensions of an educating institution's life are dictated by tradition, by fad, or by the idiosyncratic ideas of particular players. Under such circumstances, it is predictable that the result will be a kind of hodge-podge of practices, many of which may be at cross-purposes with each other. In contrast, the educator who possesses a clear vision of what he or she is trying to achieve has the benefit of an invaluable tool for deciding how best to allocate scarce resources and how to shape the physical and social environment of his or her institution in a systematic way.

A superb example of the way clarity of vision can enhance effectiveness comes from a recent study of the phenomenal growth of Willow Creek Church outside Chicago.[2] Deeply committed to the church's religious mission, and concerned about the many individuals who were reluctant to come through the church's doors, the leaders of this church decided to do everything they could, consistent with the church's religious mission, to bring these outsiders into their fold. They began by inquiring carefully into why people stayed away from their church, and then they set about systematically -- and, it turned out, very effectively --adapting church practices to what they had learned. Of particular interest is the following: when the research suggested that the symbol of the Cross made potential attendees uncomfortable, the leadership decided to remove the symbol of the Cross from Sanctuary in which religious services were held. It would be a mistake to view this move as either pandering or manipulation. Rather, it illustrates how the leadership's clarity of vision enabled them to distinguish between what is essential for their institution and what is inessential, between basic purposes and strategy. For the leadership of the Willow Creek Church, the essence of the Christian message is not the Cross but the ideas which the Cross points to and, in some communities, calls forth. But where the symbol, which is ultimately a tool for invoking the message, interferes with

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[2]   James Mellado. Harvard Business School Case entitled "Willow Creek Community Church", Harvard College, 1991.

receiving the message, it can reasonably be cast aside -- even though, for people not wholly clear on what the essence of Christianity is (or who subscribe to a different conception of Christianity), this might seem to border on sacrilege.[3]

As this example illustrates, clarity of vision can prove an indispensable tool in educational planning; and recent attention to the importance of vision in education is salutary. At the same time, some of what has been said and written on this subject is contaminated by serious misconceptions and by a failure to make a number of essential distinctions; in what follows I draw attention to some of these important matters.

1. Institutional visions and existential visions.

Discussions of vision are often weakened by a failure to distinguish between what I shall call existential and

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[3] As my colleague Barry Holtz points out, while instructive, this example maps imperfectly onto Jewish religious life. The reason for this is that, at least within traditional Judaism, the relationship between religious ritual and symbolism, on the one hand, and religious insight and experience, on the other cannot be reduced to means/end or strategy/mission; on the contrary, qua Halacha, the ritualistic acts and the objects they involve are themselves invested with and express religious significance and cannot simply be cast aside if they don't seem "to work". While Holtz's point is important, it does not entirely undermine the applicability of the Willow Creek example to Jewish contexts; for it is not uncommon for practices which do not have the status of Halacha to be treated as though they were sacred and inviolable even when they may subvert rather than help realize institutional purposes.

institutional visions. An institutional vision is a conception of what, at its best, an institution is like. When someone describes an educational environment as "a learning community" or a "caring community", or a "community dedicated to Tikkun Olam", this person is identifying an institutional vision. An existential vision, on the other hand, is a conception of the kind of human being an educational institution is hoping to cultivate, a conception of its ideal graduate.

The distinction between institutional and existential visions needs to be drawn because, I submit, in an educational context institutional visions need to be (although they often are not) driven by existential visions. As Fred Newmann has argued[4], educational reformers sometimes talk as though there are institutional forms that are inherently worthwhile, whereas in fact educational forms need themselves to be evaluated against a higher standard -- namely, the kind of human being an institution hopes to cultivate through the process of education. The question ought not to be, "What is an exemplary educational environment?", but, rather, "What is an exemplary educational environment in view of our aspiration to cultivate certain kinds of human beings?"

By this I do not intend to suggest that it is necessarily a

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[4] Fred Newmann, "Linking Restructuring to Authentic Student Achievement," PHI DELTA KAPPAN, February 1991, Volume 72, Number 6, pp. 458 - 463.

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mistake to approach the question of vision in an educating community by starting with the question, "What would the educational environment of our dreams look like?", for it may be that this question concerning institutional vision will have the power to elicit imaginative responses that will ultimately lead to thoughtful reflection concerning the institution's guiding existential vision. What I do mean to suggest is that, insofar as we are talking about education, the justification of a particular kind of environment (or institutional vision) ultimately needs to be anchored in a conception of the kind of human being that institution is trying to cultivate.

2. A vision is not a statement but an informing idea that is shared, clear, and compelling.

As is well known, typically what are called "visions" turn out to be statements written down on paper which are then ignored, except perhaps on ceremonial occasions or in public relations efforts. But it is a misnomer to call such statements "visions". At best, such statements are capsule summaries, or records, of visions that are at work in the institutions with which they are associated. The real visions are those ideas or conceptions, that suffuse the lives of different institutions, giving each of them its distinctive coherence, direction, and meaning.

A vision in this sense has three characteristics: first, it is shared by critical stake holders.[5] Second, these stake holders find the vision compelling: a vision that does not call forth the enthusiasm of the participants and stimulate them to action is not, at least for these participants, a genuine vision. Finally, an adequate vision must be clear and concrete enough to offer genuine guidance in making educational decisions -- for this, after all, is a substantial part of the raison d'etre for having an informing vision. To say, for example, that an institution is committed to an ideal of "life-long learning" will not give its critical stake holders much practical guidance until they have specified the kind of learning they have in mind: is it the kind of "learning from experience" that Dewey has in mind, or a life-long love affair with "the Great Books" understood as particular kind of encounter, or some other specific kind of learning? Only if they provide themselves with this kind of specificity, will they be in a position to identify the kinds of skills, sensibilities, attitudes, and understandings they should be cultivating and the kinds of experiential or literary texts that will prove apt vehicles for this cultivation.[6]

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[5] While this paper's limited focus precludes attention to questions concerning the basis for designating "the critical stake holders", this is a very important matter.

[6] While essential, this point concerning the need for clarity of vision should not be taken to imply that such clarity alone suffices to determine educational arrangements. It does so only in conjunction with a host of other assumptions concerning

Before leaving the subject of visions that are "shared, clear, and compelling", it needs to be stressed that the fact that these three adjectives can live happily together within two quotation marks does not mean that they always live happily together in the real world. While the probability of a happy marriage is quite high to the extent that the major constituencies that make up the institution represent a community of outlook and aspiration, the more heterogeneous these constituencies are the more difficult it will be to achieve a vision that is at one and the same time shared, compelling, and clear. Typically, the tendency is to sacrifice clarity and concreteness for a form of rhetoric that is so general that everyone can assent to it. While this has the advantage of circumventing divisive disagreements, it has the disadvantage of leaving the institution with a vision that is too vague to offer much concrete guidance or to call forth much enthusiasm.[7]

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such varied matters as the nature of human growth and motivation, available resources, and the nature of the community in which the institution and its clientele are situated.

My understanding of this point - and, more generally, of the relationship between vision and educational practice - has been immensely deepened by Seymour Fox's identification of several distinct levels that mediate the interplay between vision and educational practice. See, for example, Seymour Fox with William Novak, VISION AT THE HEART (Mandel Institute and the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1997).

[7] This should not be heard as a recommendation that an institution at this stage of vagueness should immediately proceed to specify its vision more concretely. To recommend this would betray lack of sensitivity to the delicate balance that exists among the various groups that make up an institution and of the

3. A commitment to the importance of vision is not reducible to a commitment to a specific set of activities called "visioning".

When it is urged that educating institutions need to be informed by compelling visions, it is often assumed that this entails guided activities, sometimes referred to as "visioning", which lead to having a vision. This visioning-process is sometimes viewed as an intensive set of activities requiring a day or two of serious work, and sometimes as a more long-term process. Either way, the assumption is that it is made up of a series of activities that in the end give rise to a vision which will then both communicate to external constituencies what the institution is about and guide future efforts to educate.

While activities expressly designed to arrive at a shared vision may sometimes contribute to its achievement, it needs to be stressed that the link between "visioning" and "vision" is much weaker than is often thought. In the first place, some institutions may have a compelling vision without ever having gone through a process of visioning. In the second place, it is

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role sometimes played by vagueness in enabling them to share in a common life. To force clarification of an institution's guiding vision at the wrong time and in the wrong way could prove devastating. On the other hand, normal anxiety concerning the possible dangers of pushing for greater clarity is pathological to the extent that it shuts off in advance the possibility of discovering a well-timed, well-conceived, and fruitful way to reduce vagueness to a point where it is less crippling to the process of education.

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far from clear that any such set of activities will always or even usually suffice to give rise to a vision in the strong sense I have specified. In the third place, it may be that the best way for an institution to arrive at a clear, shared, and compelling vision is through a process that is much more indirect than what is typically associated with visioning. As Michael Fullan has observed, an institution needs to be in a particular readiness-state to tackle the problem of vision explicitly and frontally, a state that presupposes a set of cultural norms that themselves only arise over a period of time; often, the best way for an institution to move towards a compelling existential or institutional vision may simply be to begin with addressing a variety of less daunting problems in ways that bring colleagues to work and think together in new ways.[8]

There are, incidentally, some who would offer a more radical objection to the suggestion that educating institutions work towards a powerful vision through any kind of visioning-exercises. Their objection is grounded not just in beliefs about the ineffectiveness of such exercises, but in a deeper pessimism concerning our ability - through any recognized interventions - to stimulate greater vision-drivenness in problematic institutions. Some of those holding this view might well argue that the way for a community to achieve vision-driven

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[8] See Michael Fullan, CHANGE FORCES, (New York: Falmer Press, 1993), especially pp. 28 ff.

institutions is to give up the effort to change its existing institutions, and, instead, to establish two mechanisms: the first, a mechanism that encourages the emergence of a variety of institutions, each organized around a different vision; and the second, a mechanism that allows educators and students to self-select into these institutions based on the appeal of a particular vision.

4. **Informed** values-clarification.

While, as I just suggested, the process of becoming more vision-driven cannot be reduced to a set of activities associated with "visioning", it is fair to say that the process of becoming more vision-driven does involve efforts to reflect on the institution's why's and wherefore's. Certainly the hope is that over time the institution's members will grow increasing clear concerning what they are committed to. It is therefore critical that an institution struggling to become more fully vision-driven provide its members, both individually and collectively, with opportunities to step back and clarify what it is they think they are committed to.

It is, however, important to add that this process of clarifying the stake holders' commitments should go beyond exercises designed to surface their existing, if as yet

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unarticulated, beliefs. Two additional inputs will enrich the
process of individual and institutional self-clarification. One
of these inputs is critical questioning. As even a cursory look
at Socratic dialogues will suggest, the success of Socrates in
stimulating his interlocutors to develop more adequate views
depends not just on his ability to elicit their existing systems
of beliefs but also on his posing questions which stimulate
internal doubt concerning the credibility, implications, and
internal consistency of these articulated belief-systems. Those
who would help an educating institution strive for a more
adequate vision could learn much from his example: there may be
many occasions on which an individual charged with helping an
institution develop or refine its vision can fruitfully play the
role of a Socratic gadfly.[9]

A second way of turning the process of values-clarification
into a more deeply informed process is through infusing it with
the views of individuals who have ruminated long and hard about
the questions at hand; for the encounter with such views has the
potential to raise the participants' understanding of what is at
stake.[10] This point is actually a presupposition of much that

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[9] I am indebted to Professor Israel Scheffler for the
suggestion, voiced in the context of a Mandel Institute/CIJE
consultation, that the individual facilitating an institution's
efforts to become more vision-driven sometimes plays the role of
a Socratic gadfly.

[10] This is one of the seminal insights that inspired the
Mandel Institute to encourage a range of leading Jewish thinkers
to articulate powerful and competing visions of an educated Jew,

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goes on in teaching. As an example, if I am interested in my students developing a rich understanding of what is entailed by a commitment to cultivate autonomous persons, I certainly will encourage them to unearth their existing views on what it means to be autonomous. But I will also insist that they encounter the views of a range of thinkers (including Plato, Kant, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, A.S. Neill, and John Dewey) who can illuminate the question at hand. In insisting on this, my working assumption is not that their own views need to resemble the position of any one of these thinkers, but that the encounter with the ideas of such thinkers will challenge and deepen their own thinking.

Analogous considerations apply to an institution seeking to clarify its own identity. Through the encounter with a range of powerful but very different perspectives on fundamental questions that bear on the institution's self-definition and mission, the deliberations of its stake holders may be deepened in important ways. If, for example, they are struggling to better understand their institution's declared commitment to pluralism, these stake holders will benefit from an encounter with powerful extant

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visions which can be used to stimulate deep reflection among a variety of constituencies concerning the aims of Jewish education. These writings will be published in Seymour Fox and Israel Scheffler, with the assistance of Daniel Marom, eds., VISIONS OF LEARNING: VARIANT CONCEPTIONS OF AN IDEAL JEWISH EDUCATION, op. cit.

perspectives on pluralism that identify critical questions and
that articulate the moral and practical implications of different
understandings of pluralism's nature, importance, and limits.
Such perspectives offer the deliberators a richer understanding
of what is at stake in their discussions than would be available
to them through exclusive reliance on their seat-of-the-pants
views on pluralism; and they are thereby empowered to make a
more thoughtful and informed decision.   It goes without saying
that finding ways - contexts, strategies, formulations - to
introduce external intellectual inputs so that they awaken
thought rather than occasion either slavish acceptance or the
feeling that attending to them is a distraction from serious
business is a difficult challenge. [11]

5. The dialectic of vision and practice.

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[11]   Those familiar with the educational movement that goes
by the name of "Values Clarification", a movement dedicated to
helping individuals clarify their values, will recognize that my
discussion is tacitly if not explicitly critical of the approach
to values-education at work in this movement; and the basis for
this criticism is that this approach does not, in my opinion, go
very far in the direction of helping its clients deepen their
understanding of their value-commitments. To be fair, however, it
should be noted that leaders of this movement urge educators to
do more than elicit from their students or clients a superficial
account of what they already believe. Their questions are
designed to encourage their clients to reflect on the
implications of their declared moral values and on the
genuineness of their commitment to them; but this process stops
far short of the kind of critical questioning encouraged by a
more Socratic guide; and it does not require introducing their
clients to new ideas that have
promise of deepening their understanding of what is at stake in
the selection or interpretation of a particular value. See Louis
Raths, et. al., VALUES AND TEACHING (Columbus, OH: Charles E.
Merrill Publishing Co., 1978).

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There is a dangerous tendency to think of a vision as something which, once developed, becomes a fixed template used to make all decisions, large or small. Like any set of principles, the ideas at work in an educational vision evolve - are re-interpreted, qualified, and revised in various ways - in the course of trying to apply them to ever-changing situations that offer new challenges and opportunities. A living vision can perhaps best be compared to the U.S. Constitution: over more than two centuries the vision articulated there has been shaped and reshaped in numerous ways, in part by the Congress (in framing new Amendments) and largely by the Courts, which have been charged with having to interpret the language of the original vision under circumstances sometimes unimagined by the original framers. There is thus an on-going interaction between vision and practice: whereas the vision gives direction to practice, practice serves to interpret the vision. Through this process, both vision and practice continue to be enriched and remain living.

6. The continuum of means and ends.

In speaking of a continuum of means and ends, John Dewey sought to caution his readers against a simplistic and therefore dangerous interpretation of the means-end distinction. While it may be useful in some contexts to draw this distinction, it is in his view essential to remember that the relationship between them

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is dialectical.   While this is not the occasion to recall Dewey's account in its totality, it is pertinent to remember his suggestion that, in thinking about the relationship between the vision we hope to realize, on the one hand, and present realities (including the students, environing social conditions, and available resources), on the other hand, we should avoid viewing this present as a mere means in the service of achieving the end-state designated by the vision; for this perspective can readily lead to emptying the present of significance and vitality in the name of the future.   As important as it may be to ask whether the way we propose to organize the educational environment and the experiences of students in the present is congruent with our vision of the kind of future which we hope to bring into being through education, it is also critical to ask whether this vision is functioning to lend significance, order, and vitality to what we do in the present.   More generally, as much as what we do in the present can be viewed as a means in the service of some desirable future end-state, it is also important to remember that this vision of the future can and should be used as a tool for rendering present activity rich with significance.   A vision that is incapable of enlisting the energies and resources at our disposal in a pattern of activity that the participants find energizing and meaningful in the present is problematic as a guiding vision.

7. Visions are not necessarily systematically articulated.

A corollary of the preceding points is that an institution's informing vision need not have been explicitly articulated to be effective. To believe otherwise is to confuse the presence of a belief or conception with its articulation. Language provides an instructive example. Our speech is informed by and conforms to a variety of grammatical rules even though we have never stopped to articulate them and, more strongly, even though we may be incapable of articulating them. Similarly, in institutional life, various principles and convictions may be shaping day-to-life and decisions without anybody having stopped to systematically articulate what these informing ideas are.[12] Borrowing from a tradition in the field of curriculum, we might describe such a vision as "a vision-in-use" to distinguish it from the institution's "official vision".

Some of the most interesting educating institutions the world has known have had a strong vision-in-use but no official or explicit vision. Certain fundamental ideas concerning the character of an educated person were tacitly accepted and taken for granted by the institution's supporting constituencies, and

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[12]   The writings of Michael Oakeshott (for example, RATIONALISM IN POLITICS (New York: Basic Books, 1962) and Michael Polanyi (for example, PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) offer numerous examples of this point in a variety of fields. It is noteworthy, as Haim Marantz reminds me, that Oakeshott and Polanyi go substantially beyond the assertion that institutions are often informed by visions that have not been systematically articulated; in their view, visions inevitably are richer and more complex than our ability to state them explicitly.

these provided them with criteria for determining educational priorities and other educational decisions. Attention to visions-in-use or tacit visions serves to remind us that explicitly formulated visions do not necessarily arise and are not necessarily useful, except under certain social circumstances. Perhaps it is only when an institution has lost its sense of direction, and all that remains is a miscellany of practices not tied together by anything of larger significance, that it becomes important to work towards an articulated vision.

8. "Vision-driven" is not equivalent to "totalitarian" or "indoctrinatory".

Phrases like "vision-driven institution" suggest something sinister to some people. Is not, so the concern gets expressed, an institution systematically organized down to its very details around a particular conception of what is important or of what human beings at their best are like a totalitarian or indoctrinatory institution?

The answer to this question is that there is no necessary relationship between an institution's being vision-driven and its being indoctrinatory.[13] For one thing, one can readily imagine an

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[13] Of course, much depends here on what one means by "indoctrination", a subject about which much has been written. See, for example, I. Snook, ed., THE CONCEPT OF INDOCTRINATION (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). Those concerned with the indoctrinatory character of vision-driven institutions seemed

educating institution organized around a vision of human beings as autonomous, or self-determining individuals. Social forms, physical organization, norms, hiring and admissions policies, etc. would all be shaped with an eye towards nurturing human beings who are open-minded and who think for themselves in both theoretical and practical matters.

Secondly, whether a vision-driven institution is indoctrinatory depends substantially on the social context in which it is embedded. For children growing up in families and communities that are actively Jewish in only a very attenuated way, a Jewish summer camp or a Day School that is systematically organized around a particular vision of Jewish life does not indoctrinate students in that way of life; rather, it allows them to experience a way of life that is very different from what they have known, a taste that would be impossible were the camp or school not organized in this way.[14] Under such circumstances, the vision-driven character of the institution serves not to indoctrinate its clientele but -- the very opposite!! - to enrich the living options from which they will make life-choices.

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to be troubled by their sense that such institutions aim to induct their members into a particular way of life in ways that by-pass their rationality. As I suggest in the main body of the paper, there is nothing intrinsic to vision-driven institutions which makes them especially vulnerable to this charge. But this is a matter that may merit more attention.

[14] For an excellent discussion of the genesis and character of Camp Ramah as a vision-driven institution, see Seymour Fox with William Novak, VISION AT THE HEART, op. cit.

Conclusion

Quality education is the product of a multitude of elements, some of which are potentially under our control and many of which are not. What I have been referring to as a guiding existential vision is one of those elements which, potentially at least, is substantially under our control. But attention to vision is likely to bear fruit only to the extent that it is accompanied by a subtle and differentiated understanding of what vision is and how it figures in the educational process, as well as by the kind of critical thinking and sound judgment that will illuminate the content and implications of particular visions. The importance of such judgment and thinking points us to one of many reasons why those seeking to reform existing educating institutions or to establish new ones will always need people like Ackie. Unfortunately, they are all-too-rare.