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Reflections on The Goals Project Conception of Vision
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The Goals Project Conception of Vision
As I understand the Goals Project conception of vision it is one deeply rooted in a philosophical approach to vision as a picture of a particular kind of person. This conception involves both a substantive and content-based approach to describing human nature. Once a school holds this conception/definition of a vision, then they can develop strategies for employing this vision and assessing efforts to achieve that vision. Below I describe my initial understanding the dimensions of this conception of vision delineated in the five levels described by Danny Morom.

Level 1: Philosophy
This level is characterized by such questions: What is a human being? What is a Jew?
Level 2: Philosophy of education/Philosophy of Jewish education
What is an educated person or an educated Jew? Here, habits of mind and habits of heart would be articulated. Also, the larger aims of the community are involved at this level.
Level 3: Translation
This level describes moving from philosophical assumptions to a theory of practice in education.
Level 4: Implementation
At this level, the philosophy becomes very practical for education. Goals are defined and are used to create concrete structures and practice. For example, teacher training and curriculum development occurs at this level.
Level 5: Evaluation of Goals
Once the goals are explicit, authentic assessment of progress toward the goals becomes possible.

How the Goals Project conception differs from conceptions of vision within the field of school reform

My reflections regarding the Goals Project conception of vision and other conceptions of vision grow mostly out of my work in school reform. I will draw upon my experience in the field, my understanding of multiple reform initiatives, and a few key authors in this area. I am defining school reform as those initiatives which aim to fundamentally change the whole school. By whole school, I include structures, policies, practice, school culture and vision. These descriptions are broad brush strokes and are not meant to be comprehensive and specific. I describe how the current field of school reform defines vision, uses vision, derives vision, and regards vision as a strategy for change.

The Goals Project conception of vision significantly differs from other conceptions of vision in that the Goals Project conception is much more complex and finely described than ones that are traditionally described and used in reform. For example, vision is often talked about in general terms. What *is your vision? What are the qualities of students you are trying to achieve?* These questions are linked to levels one and two.

Sources and Uses of Vision
Within the field of school reform visions are typically developed out of a variety of sources which include:
1. Research on learning
2. Organizational theory and development
3. Beliefs, values, and assumptions about learning and the purposes of school
4. Experiential or practical wisdom

These cuts on vision are described often in strategic terms: as a lever for change, as a tool for designing curriculum, as a support for guiding the direction of change. These conceptions of vision differ from the Goals Project conception in that they are not mainly rooted in philosophical conception of the substance and content of human existence. They have many different sources: psychology, anthropology, sociology, and practice.

Reformers, inside and outside of schools, talk about the importance of shared vision in order for schools to change. This definition usually implies a strategic use of vision statements. Defining what is meant by a vision apart from a strategy is not typically a commonplace in practice or discourse in reform circles. Peter Senge, author of the Fifth Discipline, suggests that learning organizations need to have a shared vision:

> ...in order to create a sense of purpose that binds people together and propels them to fulfill their deepest aspirations. Catalyzing people's aspirations doesn't happen by accident; it requires time, care, and strategy. Thus the discipline of building shared vision is centered around a never-ending process, whereby people in an organization articulate their common stories--around vision, purpose, values, why their work matters, and how it fits in the larger world. (Senge, et al, 1994, p.298)

Senge is a proponent of vision as a strategy for reinforcing the development of a learning organization (one which is constantly renewing itself.) Yet the source of vision for Senge and others comes not from philosophical deliberation and examination of texts, but rather from peoples' values and experiences. Creating these shared visions involves continual work and attention to eliciting these values.

[A]t the heart of building shared vision is the task of designing and evolving ongoing processes in which people at every level of the organization, in every role, can speak from the heart about what really matters to them and be heard. (Senge, et al, 1994, p.299)

Many schools engaged in comprehensive reform engage members of the school community to ask the question: "What do we want our students to know and be able to do when they graduate?" It is this question that supports and guides their work. In the Coalition of Essential Schools members call it "planning backwards." Once a teacher begins with a conception of what type of student the school is aiming for, then he or she can design curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment accordingly. The answer to this essential question is derived from individuals' beliefs, values, and assumptions about learning. Again, the Goals Project approach to vision suggests that teachers would need to be more deeply grounded in philosophy and a set of essential texts to develop the beginnings of a vision. A long term process of developing goals would ultimately result in implementation.

Providing guide posts
Some reform initiatives provide a broad vision (set of principles or beliefs) that schools are encouraged to use to inform their own vision development process. These general statements are used as a set of guide posts for school communities to develop programs and even vision statements that support the larger goals. Initiative-wide vision statements are also meant to inform policy and practice at the school and sometimes district level. Examples include the Coalition of Essential Schools (Ted Sizer), the Accelerated Schools Project (Hank Levin), the School Development Program (James Comer), Harvard Project Zero (Howard Gardner), Paideia Schools (Mortimer Adler).

These initiatives provide direction, establish a set of core values worthy of pursuit and a set of strategies which range from prescriptive to ideological. For example, the Accelerated Schools Project requires schools to engage in a specific set of activities (Taking Stock) as a means of beginning the reform process that will enable a school to embrace the ASP vision. The School Development Program also has a set of activities and even clear guidelines about which role groups and the number of each type that need to participate in any given committee. The Coalition of Essential Schools encourages schools to interpret the nine Common Principles to address the needs and particular strengths of their particular communities without providing these schools with a concrete process to engage in the interpretation.

These initiatives have blurred the 5 levels of vision described by the Goals Project. For some, the derivation of their vision statements is indeed philosophy. For most, however, these vision statements grow out of research and a set of theories about learning.

A skeptical view of the value of vision for reform
Thinking about vision as a strategy for change has been critiqued by Joseph McDonald and by Michael Fullan, two researchers in the field of school reform. McDonald reminds us of the lessons of history and of the complexity of school systems.

> Of course, vision alone is never enough to create change. And there is always the chance that this vision-- like its predecessors of the 1960s and 1930s--will float above most American schools and never come to ground. If so, the fault will likely lie in the folly that Seymour Sarason identifies, namely, that most proponents of good educational ideas consider schools the mere nodes of a complex system rather than complex systems in their own right. Whether school reform is launched from the outside or the inside of schools, it typically follows a linear strategy; hence, the effectiveness of some intervention is presumed to be intrinsic to the intervention itself, rather than a function of whether its impact is managed to good effect inside a turbulent world. (McDonald, 1993, p. 1)

Michael Fullan's view of visions is characterized by his conceptions of schools as dynamic systems. He describes having observed too many "pre-mature visions" which are not used in a compelling way to inspire and support reform. He believes visions should grow over time and be derived from action. These visions ought to be considered provisional after more action causes reflection on the vision: "Ready, Fire, Aim." Like Senge, Fullan believes visions ought to be shared and that schools should engage in a long-term process to develop this shared vision. He cautions:

> Reliance on vision perpetuates cultures of dependence and conformity that obstruct the questioning and complex learning necessary for innovative leadership. (Fullan, 1993, p. 33)

> The critical question is not where visions are important, but <u>how</u> they can be shaped and reshaped given the complexity of change. (Fullan, 1993, p.30)

Both McDonald and Fullan point to the dynamic and complex nature of schools and the complex and multi-dimensional nature of change. They call for a conception of vision that is adaptable to this climate. The Goals Project asserts a type of vision that may be more stable and would withstand the ever-changing nature of schools. Alternatively, a conception of vision as stable may be too rigid to withstand the dynamism.

<u>The opportunities inherent in the Goals Project approach to vision</u>

• A complex conception of vision may connect well with the complex nature of educational institutions.

• A multi-level approach to vision allows for more entry points and more opportunities for deep learning along the way.

• In what ways is the inquiry process involved in understanding a school's vision a model for teaching and learning strategies inside of classrooms?

• The power of this conception of vision may be compelling enough to weather the storms of resistance to change.

• The reliance on developing a vision through consulting texts and through including the larger community ought to create conditions that will promote the use and acceptance of this process.

<u>The challenges inherent in the Goals Project approach to vision</u>

• If every school/institution has multiple sets of goals operating at any given time (individual/personal, organizational, curricular, grade level, etc.) which level is appropriate for interrogation and intervention?

• How will an individual teacher, team, students, parents, experience the transition from multiple sets of goals to a more unified approach?

• Since the multiple levels of the Goals Project conception of vision require long-term and deep work, how will interest and support for the initiative be maintained?

• If there are a set of "readiness conditions" necessary for piloting this approach to vision, how can the Goals Project support the development and sustenance of these conditions?
• In what ways is the inquiry process involved in understanding a school's vision a model for teaching and learning strategies inside of classrooms?

• Since any "new" reform effort encounters pre-existing efforts at improvement, how will the pursuit of a vision-driven reform initiative interact with and take account of the current terrain?

• What is the current problem statement that Jewish educational institutions are suffering from? Would they define their problem in terms of vision? If not, how will they come to understand this critique and the power of it as a solution?

References

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