

The “Back to the Basics” Movement in Education

Margaret T. Morgan
college park elementary school

Norman Robinson
simon fraser university

Au cours des dernières années, est apparu un mouvement pédagogique dont la portée sociale est grande: le mouvement du “retour aux connaissances de base”. Cet article fait l’analyse du développement d’un mouvement de cette nature, le Genuine Education Movement (GEM) qui a fait son apparition à Vancouver, en Colombie britannique, en 1974. On étudie le GEM en fonction de certaines caractéristiques générales des mouvements sociaux.

L’étude démontre que les membres du GEM considéraient que le système scolaire ne dispensait pas un enseignement de qualité; c’était pour eux un problème social extrêmement important. Sur le plan idéologique, les membres de ce mouvement valorisent un programme axé sur les connaissances de base, un système d’évaluation des élèves et une discipline stricte. Ses activités lui ont attiré le soutien de la population de Vancouver. Un des objectifs principaux que le GEM a fait sien est l’abandon du système actuel que l’on identifie au courant de l’éducation progressiste et permissive et le retour “aux connaissances de base” dans l’enseignement.

One of the most striking phenomena to emerge in North American education in recent years is a strong demand on the part of many parents, school boards, and educators for schools to get back to the basics — in reading, writing, arithmetic, and standards of behavior; that is, for schools to give increased emphasis to the three R’s and to raise their disciplinary standards. To date, the main response of school districts to the “back to the basics” call has been the establishment of “fundamental” or “value” schools as an alternative choice within the public school system. These “fundamental” schools are offering tradition-oriented education programs which emphasize computational arithmetic, phonic drill in reading, rigorous homework assignments, and above all, codes of pupil behavior based on order, quiet, and control.

In spite of the fact that the “back to the basics” movement has been the subject of comment by many writers in education and by the popular press, little systematic attention has been given to its study as an important social movement in North America. In order to better understand the development and characteristics of the “back to the basics” social movement in

education, a study was recently undertaken of a typical “back to the basics” movement, the Genuine Education Movement, which emerged in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1974 (1).

ORIGINS OF GEM AS A “BACK TO THE BASICS” SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN EDUCATION

From 1937 to 1968, control of the nine-member Vancouver School Board was in the hands of the Non-Partisan Association (NPA), a municipal party which held that “politics” were not necessary in municipal and school board affairs. Instead, what was more important were the principles of honesty, efficiency, sound fiscal practice, and anti-socialism (2, p. 110). To insure that no one “free enterprise” political party gained a predominant position in school board affairs in Vancouver, care was taken to balance Liberals, Conservatives, and Social Credit members when drawing up the slate of candidates for elective office (3, pp. 6–7). In 1968, NPA was challenged by the Electors Action Movement (TEAM), an organization of left-wing Liberals and right-wing New Democrats. TEAM was committed to a program of more innovation in schools and greater citizen participation in school affairs. Specifically, it was proposed that open school board meetings should be held in various schools throughout the city and that there should be a public question period at the meetings.

From 1968 to 1972, TEAM members were a strong influential minority on the NPA-dominated school board. They were successful in gaining the support of certain sympathetic NPA members and effecting a coalition of progressive views. This coalition asked for and got a far-reaching examination (4) of the Vancouver school system which resulted in the adoption of many new programs and practices. In the 1972 school board election, TEAM swept into control, winning eight of the nine seats. The pace of change and innovation in the system quickened.

Early in 1974 a reaction to TEAM policies on school affairs began to develop. School board meetings were attended by an increasing number of people who asked questions about low standards in the schools. A series of newspaper columns accused the TEAM-dominated board of attempting to suppress English scholarship examination results that revealed a 27% failure rate in Vancouver schools. Mrs. Freda Pryce, the wife of a university professor, published a letter in the *Vancouver Province* deploring the state of education in the public schools (5, p. 4). She stated that the current emphasis on methods in the teacher-training institutions did not produce teachers who were well trained in a discipline. She also called for a return to structure as a means of providing students with a good knowledge of basic subjects before they left high school.

The letter struck a responsive chord and Mrs. Pryce organized a meeting of similarly concerned people to discuss what could be done about the

perceived poor state of education in Vancouver. This meeting gave birth to the Genuine Education Movement, a movement committed to a "back to the basics" position in education. The movement's initial act was the preparation of a petition for presentation to the Minister of Education. The preparation of the petition served to unify the group, inasmuch as it required agreement on wording. The petition emphasized the need for "basic instruction necessary to ensure literacy." The petition was placed in libraries and community centres, and in addition was circulated by members of the group. Public response to the petition was, however, less than enthusiastic.

Soon after the founding meeting of GEM, Mr. Peter Westlake, a TEAM school board member, defected to GEM. By August 1974, GEM members became convinced that if changes were to be made in school board policies, political action had to be undertaken: GEM members would have to run candidates for school board and attempt to gain control of the Board. A concerted effort was made to find suitable candidates to contest the November 1974 school board election. GEM members, aware of the expenses incurred in the printing and circulation of the petition, were faced with further expenses in seeking to elect their candidates. A pragmatic decision was made to accept an offer of backing from the Non-Partisan Association. Members felt that without financial support they had little chance of success.

In the ensuing election, GEM ran nine candidates, as did TEAM. The election attracted considerable public interest. Extensive newspaper, radio, and television coverage of school board affairs during the preceding year had served to focus public attention on the ideological conflict in education that had been developing in Vancouver. A newspaper article, appearing just prior to the election, stated the conflict in these terms:

For the first time in a school board election in Vancouver, voters next Wednesday are being offered clear philosophical choices by the two dominant parties (TEAM and GEM).

TEAM says, "Diversify the school system, keeping in mind that teachers' professional judgment can be trusted in providing the best possible education alternatives."

GEM says, "Tighten up the system, leaning on teachers and principals to ensure student competence in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic."

This ideological conflict reflects a struggle in education circles throughout North America. (6, p. 6)

When the election results were in, TEAM had elected six members with 43.0% of the popular vote, while GEM had elected three members with 36.8% of the popular vote. The election of the three GEM members and the large popular vote accorded to GEM revealed wide support for the GEM platform of "back to basics" and dissatisfaction with the TEAM policies of innovation and change.

In view of the fact that “back to the basics” movements like GEM are emerging in many school districts in Canada and the United States, more knowledge on the nature of the “back to basics” movements in education seems desirable. For this reason GEM, as a “back to the basics” movement, was carefully studied in terms of the characteristics of a social movement. In addition, an analysis of the political and socio-economic characteristics of GEM membership was made.

Data for the study were obtained from structured interviews and responses to questionnaires obtained from forty-three (67%) of the GEM members.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GEM MEMBERS

GEM can be described in general terms as a middle- or upper-middle-class movement. Its members are predominantly professional people with incomes of over \$20,000 a year. Most are married, are middle-aged, and have children in the public school system. They tend to be active politically, with over twenty-five per cent holding membership in a “free enterprise” federal or provincial political party. Of special interest is the large number of educators in the movement. Both active and retired educators, at the public school and university level, are involved.

GEM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN EDUCATION

A social movement can be defined in general terms as a particular kind of organized collectivity which seeks change in some aspect of the social order. A social movement (1) has a socially defined “problem”, (2) has an ideology, (3) implies collective action, and (4) consciously and purposively seeks change in the social order (7, p. 183).

THE SOCIALLY DEFINED “PROBLEM” OF GEM

In analyzing GEM as a “back to the basics” movement in education, an attempt was made to determine what GEM members felt was the “problem” with education today. An effort was also made to ascertain whether the GEM members’ responses on various problematic issues could be considered typical of public response in the United States and Canada. Comparisons were therefore made between the GEM responses and the responses obtained in the United States from the Annual Gallup Polls of Public Attitudes Toward Education (8) and responses, from a replication (9) of parts of the Gallup surveys, obtained in Delta School District in British Columbia in 1975. Delta is a suburb of the Vancouver conurbation and is probably a fairly typical Canadian suburban school district.

GEM members were first asked, “As you look on your own elementary and high school education, is your impression that children today get a better —or worse — education than you did?”

Table 1 / Is Education Today Better or Worse?

| Opinion | GEM respondents (n = 43) | Delta respondents (n = 204) | Gallup respondents (1973) (n = 1627) |
|---------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Better | 14% | 65% | 61% |
| Worse | 64% | 22% | 20% |
| No difference | 20% | — | 11% |
| No opinion | 2% | 13% | 8% |

Table 1 reveals clearly that a majority (64%) of GEM members feel that the education their children are receiving is worse than the education they themselves received. In contrast, a majority of both the American Gallup respondents and the Canadian Delta respondents think it is better.

A comparison was made between GEM, Delta, and Gallup respondents on what they perceived to be the major problems facing schools today (Table 2). All three groups of respondents ranked "lack of discipline" as either the first or second most important problem facing schools today.

Table 2 / Ranking of Nine Major Problems Confronting Schools

| Problem | GEM rank (n = 43) | Delta rank (n = 204) | Gallup rank (1974) (n = 1702) |
|--|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Poor curriculum | 1 | 9 | 9 |
| Lack of Discipline | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Difficulty of getting good teachers | 3 | No mention | 5 |
| Lack of standards and objectives | 4 | No mention | No mention |
| Parents' lack of interest | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| School and provincial/state government policies | 6 | No mention | 8 |
| Pupils' lack of interest | 7 | 4 | No mention |
| Size of school classes | 8 | 2 | 6 |
| Attempt by schools to assume role of other social institutions | 9 | No mention | No mention |
| Integration/segregation | No mention | No mention | 2 |
| Lack of financial support | No mention | 5 | 3 |
| Use of drugs | No mention | 3 | 4 |
| Poor communication | No mention | 7 | No mention |
| Lack of facilities | No mention | 8 | No mention |

Note: "No mention" indicates that the problem was not ranked as one of the nine major problems.

Outside of this issue, there was little similarity in the GEM rankings and the Delta and Gallup rankings. The first four major GEM concerns related exclusively to educational problems (poor curriculum, lack of discipline, difficulty of getting good teachers, lack of standards and objectives). The first four major concerns of the Delta and Gallup publics were more an admixture of political, social, economic, and educational problems: for example, the Gallup public's first major concerns were lack of discipline, integration/segregation, lack of financial support, and use of drugs; the Delta public's first four major concerns were lack of discipline, size of school or of classes, use of drugs, and pupils' lack of interest.

Special note should be made of the concerns GEM members had for poor curriculum, lack of standards and objectives, and attempts by schools to assume the role of other social institutions. These concerns were assigned little or no importance by the Delta and Gallup publics.

In spite of the fact that the GEM, Delta, and Gallup respondents all agree on the importance of "lack of discipline" as a major problem in schools, the feeling of the GEM group on this question is much more intense than that of the other two groups.

Table 3 shows that although a majority of all three groups say that discipline is not strict enough in schools, an overwhelming 92% of GEM respondents feel discipline is not strict enough as compared to 65% for the Delta respondents and 48% for the Gallup respondents.

Table 3 / Discipline in Schools: Is It Too Strict or Not Strict Enough?

| Opinion | GEM respondents (<i>n</i> = 43) | Delta respondents (<i>n</i> = 204) | Gallup respondents (<i>n</i> = 1562) |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| Not strict enough | 92% | 65% | 48% |
| About right | 8% | 29% | 33% |
| Too strict | 0% | 2% | 3% |
| Don't know | 0% | 4% | 16% |

In summary, the members of GEM feel that schools are not doing as good a job of educating as they formerly did. They share the view of the larger publics sampled in Canada and U.S.A. that lack of discipline in schools is a major problem; but their views on this question are much stronger than those of the sampled Canadian and American publics. In addition, GEM members express certain educational concerns that are felt either weakly or not at all by the Delta and Gallup publics. Such concerns related to poor curriculum, lack of standards and objectives, and attempts by schools to assume the role of other social institutions.

THE IDEOLOGY OF GEM

Ideology provides the justification for a social movement's existence. It is the statement of what the members of the movement are trying to achieve as a group and what they wish to be known for publicly. At the founding meeting of GEM, a brief statement of the new movement's ideology was developed. This statement formed the substance of the petition forwarded to the Minister of Education. When GEM decided to run candidates for school board, a more comprehensive ideological statement was developed. It served as the movement's platform in the election and it read in part:

We of the Genuine Education Movement do not subscribe to any one political philosophy or to the policy of any one political party. We are united in wanting the children of British Columbia to have equal opportunity to the best education possible. We believe the following necessary to a good school system.

- 1) Teachers must be well-qualified in the subjects they teach, and students should look to their teachers for instruction. . . . High educational standards are indispensable and must never be sacrificed to experiment. On the basis of these guidelines, good teachers must be encouraged to remain in the system, and educators at all levels who prove unsuitable must be replaced or retired.
- 2) *Curriculum* should include as a *minimum basic* requirement:
 - (a) A thorough grounding in English grammar and a competence in reading and writing and speaking the English language
 - (b) A thorough grounding in elementary mathematics
 - (c) An understanding of the basic sciences that will enable a child to understand the physical world in which he lives
 - (d) An understanding of world history and geography
 - (e) An understanding of the public institutions and the political and economic foundations of Canadian life
- 3) *Evaluation* is vital to the child and to the whole system. We shall institute a regular series of tests and examinations; these will where possible require answers in English sentences rather than selection from multiple choices. Periodic reports will be made to the parents so that the student's progress may be judged in terms of his own potential and the achievements of his peers.
- 4) *Discipline* should be firm but fair. While we do not advocate physical punishment, or any atmosphere demeaning to the human dignity of student or teacher, we believe that a child learns best where the teacher has authority to ensure an orderly atmosphere. We shall insist that the staff and school administration be given, and should exercise, the necessary authority to achieve this aim.

In summary we believe that an educational system must encourage change where change is desirable, but changes must be gradual and carefully assessed for their immediate and long-range effects. We support thoughtful progress, building on what was effective in earlier systems and helping children to understand the past while preparing for the future.

The ideological statement of GEM closely matches the ideological statements of other "back to the basics" movements in education in Canada and the United States. It has a clear emphasis on basic curricular standards and objectives, good teaching, firm discipline, and a controlled pace of change in education.

COLLECTIVE ACTION BY GEM

Social movements develop when diffuse, passive discontent among a particular segment of the population gives way to organized collective behavior designed to change the status quo. Of critical importance in the change from diffuse, passive discontent to organized collective behavior is the emergence of a figure who provides the “incipient leadership” (10, p. 367) for the movement. In the case of the GEM movement, this “incipient leadership” was provided by Mrs. Pryce, author of the letter to the editor of the *Province*.

As noted earlier, a large number of people wrote or phoned Mrs. Pryce supporting her point of view. Among the callers and writers were a substantial number of people who had been attending school board meetings on a fairly regular basis. The TEAM-instituted policy of holding school board meetings in varying locations in the city, along with the practice of having a public question period at the meetings, had served to develop considerable citizen interest and participation in school affairs. At the same time, it had also served to increase citizen frustration because of the seeming lack of attention board members paid to the views expressed at the meetings.

Mrs. Pryce thus played a critical role in providing the necessary “incipient leadership” to change existing diffuse, unorganized discontent into organized collective action. The culmination of this collective action was the November 1974 election, which saw GEM attract support from over one-third of Vancouver’s voters and elect three school board members.

The key to understanding the success of GEM lies in an understanding of the nature of social movements. Most social movements are quite small. Like GEM, they usually have less than one hundred members. But their message is such that they have the potential to grow to a membership of thousands if not millions (11, p. 9). The relatively small-scale initial actions of the GEM members (attending school board meetings, asking questions, circulating a petition) were not important in affecting the actions of the incumbent school board. Once the GEM activities were noticed by radio, press, and television, however, the audience reached by GEM was vastly increased. The media thus played a critical role in increasing public awareness of the ideological conflict represented by GEM as a “back to the basics” movement and by TEAM as a “progressive/permissive” movement.

In summary, the Genuine Education Movement illustrates how a social movement with a small membership can grow rapidly to a position of strong societal influence. “Incipient leadership” is necessary, as is mass-media coverage. What is more important, however, is that the social movement have an ideological message that has vast potential appeal among the public. The “back to the basics” message of the GEM seems to have been such a message.

GEM AND CHANGE IN THE SOCIAL ORDER

All social movements deliberately and consciously seek to bring about changes in the social order. In the GEM social movement, the changes are related specifically to the field of education. The scope of changes that are called for in education are, however, broad and far reaching. An official statement from a GEM spokesman put it this way:

What we are advocating is a major change of direction for education. The progressive/permissive philosophy is now the established, even traditional thought. The Genuine Education Movement is a revolution against these ideas.

Thus, like all revolutionist organizations, GEM must inform the public of the ills of the present system which means that GEM members must be zealous in becoming themselves, well informed and knowledgeable of the intricacies of the education system.

If we establish in the public conscience that all is not well, then it will become relatively simple to convince the electorate that our answers to the problems are creditable and ultimately to receive the trust of the voters so that we can make the changes that are essential to build a healthy system throughout British Columbia. (2)

This statement reveals the ambitious objective of the GEM group — a complete transformation of the educational system. What is wanted is a change from the presently perceived progressive/permissive educational system to a new educational system which would feature a basic curriculum, firm discipline, pupil evaluation, and good teaching. Having as its objective the complete transformation of the educational system is certainly an immodestly ambitious objective for a group with under a hundred members. Nevertheless, social movements are characterized by their immodest objectives. Earlier in this century, a small group of people interested in making schools less repressive institutions founded the Progressive Education Association. Cremin, in describing the origins of the Association, tells how Stanwood Cobb had "become interested in educational reform and had taken the lead, along with a number of like-minded Washington ladies, in forming an organization to advance the cause" (13, p. 241).

Soon thereafter a name was chosen for the movement. Cremin relates how in April 1919,

"upward of a hundred people" launched the new association on its historic career. The participants left with the fires of reform burning brightly; and from that time forward — for better or worse, as the preachers say — the cause of progressive education was inextricably wedded to the fortunes of the Progressive Education Association. (13, p. 241)

Like GEM, the Progressive Education Association had high ambitions. Its leader, Cobb, said, "Our main aim from the very beginning had in it little of modesty. We aimed at nothing short of reforming the entire school system of America" (13, p. 241).

The Progressive Education Association went on to become a powerful

organization which had, over some fifty years, a decided effect on the policies of the United States and Canada.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Social movements as conscious, collective, organized attempts to bring about or resist change in the social order are not new to North America. Past decades have seen the rise and fall of such diverse movements as the Anti-Saloon League, the Progressive Education Movement, Technocracy, and McCarthyism. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s have witnessed, however, a substantial expansion in the number and variety of social movements, for example the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam-war movement, the students' rights movement, and the women's rights movement. Furthermore, a wider spectrum of society has become involved in social movements. Social protest has become respectable. Miller, writing about today's middle-class protesters, says: "By the standards of the Sixties, they are unrecognizable as protesters; their dress is neat, their tone moderate, their battlegrounds indoors, not out" (14, pp. 12-16).

Some movements are abortive — so short-lived that none except their immediate participants are aware of their existence. Other movements are more successful — at least sufficiently so that they attract new adherents and continue over a period of time, even though they may never achieve their objectives.

The question as to whether GEM or similar "back to the basics" groups will ever become as influential as was the Progressive Education Association is a moot question. There does seem to be some evidence to indicate that a new era of conservatism in education is emerging and considerable public support exists for school programs designed to improve pupil discipline and functional literacy. It is entirely possible, however, that "back to the basics" movements like GEM could prove to be ephemeral protests by small groups of dissatisfied, middle-class people. But "back to the basics" groups are commanding public support throughout North America and school programs are being modified to meet the demands of such groups.

At this time it is perhaps premature to decide whether the "progressive/ permissive" era in education that apexed in the 1960s is over. It is possible to say, however, that a reaction is taking the form of a strong call for a return to the basics in education. Schools are increasingly being asked to concern themselves more with teaching children to read, to write, and to compute in a disciplined manner. In other words, schools are being asked to re-emphasize their skill-training function and to concern themselves less with the health, social, and welfare services (for children) that have incrementally become part of schools' delivery systems.

REFERENCES

1. Margaret T. Morgan. The Genuine Education Movement: The characteristics and development of a reform movement in education. Unpublished Master's project, Simon Fraser University, 1975.
2. Robert Easton & Paul Tennant. Vancouver Civic Party leadership: Backgrounds, attitudes and non-Civic Party affiliations. In Jack K. Masson and James D. Anderson (Eds.), *Emerging party politics in urban Canada*. Edmonton: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1972.
3. Fern Miller. Vancouver civic political parties: Developing a model of party-system change and stabilization. Research paper prepared as part of a PhD comprehensive examination, Department of Political Science, Yale University, March 1972.
4. D. A. Erickson, R. J. Hill, & N. Robinson. *Educational flexibility in an urban school district*. Vancouver Educational Research Institute of B.C., 1970.
5. *Vancouver Province*, January 17, 1974.
6. *Vancouver Sun*, November 16, 1974.
7. Gary B. Rush. Social movements as emergent realities. In Gary B. Rush & R. Serge Denisoff, *Social and Political Movements*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971.
8. George Gallup. The third annual survey of the public's attitudes toward the public school. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 53 (September 1971), 33-48;
George Gallup. Fourth annual Gallup poll of public attitudes toward education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 54 (September 1972), 33-46;
George Gallup. Fifth annual Gallup poll of public attitudes toward education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 55 (September 1973);
George Gallup. Sixth annual Gallup poll of public attitudes toward education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 56 (September 1974), 20-32.
9. Arnold A. Backer. A survey of public attitudes toward education in School District No. 37 (Delta). Unpublished master's project. Simon Fraser University, 1975.
10. David L. Sills. Voluntary associations: Sociological aspects. In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 16. New York: Random House, 1968.
11. John Wilson. *Introduction to social movements*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
12. Peter Westlake. The lesson of '74. Unpublished report to meeting of the Genuine Education Movement, January 1975.
13. Lawrence A. Cremin. *The transformation of the school*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.
14. Roger M. Williams. The rise of middle class activism: Fighting "City Hall." *Saturday Review*, March 8, 1975.