

Recently, in one of my weekend pursuits for interesting articles and research in education, I came upon one with the banner headline “What keeps principals up at night?” It wasn’t as good as I had hoped. Almost nothing ever is anymore because there are so many sites begging for attention that ‘headline inflation’ has arrived with a vengeance. Plus, there was no accompanying article on what keeps superintendents up at night. I suspect here isn’t one because if the nocturnal anxieties of principals are boring, those of superintendents would leave you in a drooling coma.

And since no one could possibly find such a topic of the least interest, here goes...

Long ago, I wrote my dissertation on the topics of school reform and educational paradigms. ‘Paradigm’ was a catchphrase back then and it was used and overused and misused so much that it was quickly bleached of any actual meaning. The need to reform schools was an even more urgent quest than it is today in part due to the scathing report on America’s schools, *A Nation at Risk*, which included a truly enthralling conclusion:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

At the time, I certainly wasn’t disputing the need for school reform. I was arguing that, consistent with the seminal work of Thomas Kuhn on scientific paradigms, it was difficult to know where to go with reforms if we didn’t have a shared idea of what we wanted out of schools. At that time—and still today—4 paradigm candidates competed for pre-eminence:

Perennialism—the classic vision of schooling including the study of the Great Books and the highest intellectual pursuits regardless of their ‘practical’ value

Essentialism—the back-to-basics movement of teaching computation in math, phonics in reading, facts and figures in everything, and a shared set of cultural content

Progressivism—the educational vision of John Dewey, held by a large majority (but not all) of educators today, which emphasizes teaching exclusively what will have direct bearing and meaning in the lives of children now and in their perceived futures

Social Reconstructionism—the use of schools less to educate children in some content or skill set than to change society for the better by imbuing them with a new world view

That progressivism still ‘holds the field’ today, as it did in the late 80’s when I was laboring over my dissertation, was demonstrated recently by a study entitled *Fostering exploration and excellence in 21st Century Schools*. In it, the authors revealed that 81% of surveyed educators felt it was imperative to teach students in anticipation of the changing labor market they will encounter in adulthood.

That makes total sense and it is even a very successful technique for postsecondary programs like MTI and even high school programs like MCTEA when the time span between education and job placement is just a couple years or even as little as a couple of months. But

what does it mean to educate children with an eye on the shifting sands of the eventual job market when those children are in elementary or middle school? It is the very nature of the issue—fast change—that makes it impossible.

Education is steeped in progressivism yet in a time of such economic change the best possible means of pursuing progressivist goals may very well be a perennialist approach, teaching children broadly and deeply in the fundamental skills of literacy, numeracy, cultural understanding, and scientific analysis, among others. In other words, education is entangled in the same Gordian Knot that ensnarled it 30 years ago. We don't really, fully know where we are going and, even to the extent we do, we don't really, fully know how to get there.

And that is what keeps me up at night.