

# Fifty Years of Considering Education: Looking Back and Looking Forward

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When *Educational Considerations* launched at Kansas State University 50 years ago, it was a transitional time, one that was forming deep lines of change in American culture that would unfold through the decades to follow. It was a time of bold departures from established norms. In the popular culture, television was continuing its transition from black and white to color, and new shows took on younger, edgier, and more urban flavors. *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza* made way for *M\*A\*S\*H* and *All in the Family*. *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family* offered up new visions of the American family that stood in contrast to previous idyllic worlds like *Mayberry* and *Petticoat Junction*. The prior era's commercials featuring "The Marlboro Man" gave way to the soft edges of "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke."

It was a time of shag carpeting and leisure suits.

McDonald's sold its first Quarter Pounder.

Disneyland opened "The Happiest Place on Earth" to its first guests.

Exceptionally brave cinema fans gathered up their courage to watch *The Exorcist* (some theaters had cots available in the lobby and even nurses standing by to attend to those overcome by the deeply troubling story and images). Amtrak and National Public Radio came into existence, as did Federal Express, the company that would transform the shipping industry on the slogan, "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight."

As the decade began, Richard Nixon was president, and the Watergate scandal would capture the nation's attention. The Vietnam War was moving toward its final concluding images of Vietnamese people scrambling up the staircase in the U.S. embassy desperately seeking evacuation by helicopter and of American sailors later pushing some of those same helicopters off the sides of aircraft carriers to clear deck space for scores of refugees fleeing the fall of Saigon.

Helen Reddy's 1972 release of "I Am Woman" would top pop music charts and become an anthem for the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Rock and roll would soon move aside to make room for disco.

Cigarette smoke was everywhere, and it was so pervasive we didn't even realize it was there.

The world of education, as it always does, mirrored the manic pace of the cultural changes of the time. At the close of the 1970s, Ben Brodinsky published a retrospective piece on the transformative forces of the decade in *Phi Delta Kappan*. Brodinsky (1979) outlined a series of structural changes in the enterprise of education that influence our practice to this day: The

Tinker decision at the dawn of the 1970s provided due process rights to students. P.L. 94-142 forever changed the way schools deal with special needs students. The “Back to Basics” movement shifted pedagogy from the student-centered reforms of the previous decade toward content and skills. Affirmative Action (in both education and the business world) would serve as a national Rorschach Test for the next half century, one in which citizens looked at the same policies but reached very different conclusions.

Career education traces its place in American education to this time period (Steiner, 1974), and while it has risen and fallen in emphasis several times over the decades, it remains a signature component of American education.

Large sectors of the nation’s teaching force were integrated into the labor union movement.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began in 1970, and it has served as the gold standard, for better and for worse, as an indicator of the progress of students and schools since that time.

The Supreme Court, in 1971, ruled in favor of busing students across neighborhood boundaries for the purpose of desegregating the nation’s schools.

Speaking personally, I began the 1970s as a student in what was then called a junior high school, and I ended the decade ready to begin my student teaching experience in the spring of 1980. Naturally, I had no idea I was moving through adolescence and into young adulthood in such transformative times. It was all just a blurry period set to a Bee Gees soundtrack.

*Educational Considerations* was born during that decade of seismic change. Think for a minute about how many of the novel educational trends—cataloged above—are reflected in the table of contents of the first issue of the journal, published in 1973:

“Career Education as an Educational Ideal,” by Philip L. Smith

“The Learning Handicapped Child: With ‘Friends’ Like These . . .” by Sarah M. Sanderson

“Women in the Public School: A Problem in Discrimination and Motivation,” by Laura J. Heinrich

“The Louisville Urban Center: An Experiment in Facilitation,” by Herbert K. Heger

“A Plausible Competency/Curriculum Approach to Improved Educational Program,” by Arnold J. Moore

With this 50th anniversary issue, we examine the body of work that has crossed the pages of the journal since that first issue half a century ago. It is not unreasonable to suggest the period of time covering the first 50 years of the journal’s existence will be viewed by historians as a process of identity formation, a time of trial and error as the world’s dominant superpower nation

of the time attempted to define what universal education should become. Quite naturally, we can look back through the issues of the journal and trace the fits and starts, bold ideas and resistance, experimentation and course corrections. To speak personally again, I experienced that half century as a student, a teacher, a graduate student, a teacher educator, and a higher education administrator. Looking back across my life in schools, it is clear to me the only real constant was change, and change causes both excitement and stress. I confess that more than once over the years, I wished we could just settle on what we were going to do professionally, and do it, rather than forever sitting through the next round of in-service programming bringing down on us the New Thing to replace the Old Thing that was now declared *verboten*. Together with my colleagues at the time, we grouched that it wasn't so long ago that the Old Thing was the New Thing, and we wished the unseen forces driving all of this change would just go away for a bit, and let us do our work in peace.

It is always tempting to haul out the pendulum analogy (e.g., Throne, 1994) to describe patterns of change in education. This is a dangerously simplistic analogy, because it implies that the same things keep happening again and again. Long ago, I lost faith in that truism. I think it is much more complicated than a simple pendulum swinging back and forth between two recognizable poles. In order to combat the criticism from teachers that the New Thing was really just the Thing Before, the Old Thing returning in new clothes, some speakers on the professional development circuit began making a point of discounting the pendulum metaphor and claiming instead that educational reform was better described as successive waves of change crashing on the shore. This, quite naturally, was an effort to dismiss the suspicions of teachers. Each wave of reform was building on what came before, the argument went. Schools were going to get better and better, but only when teachers got with the program and changed their practice to align with the incoming waves: the New Thing.

Those two metaphors suggest different visions of educational reform. The pendulum is ultimately cynical and dismissive, implying that a few contradictory ideas return to replace each other every few years. Nothing ever really changes. Policy makers just cycle back and forth between competing trends, leaving teachers to insulate themselves and their classrooms from those outside distractions by documenting compliance while trying to not really change anything substantive. The pendulum metaphor equates reform with passing fashion and other light fancies. Consultants, publishers, and in-service presenters all just make money recycling things from the past. Nothing is really new.

The waves metaphor is—in a very real sense—the opposite, as it rests on a series of assumptions: schools are broken, teachers and administrators will resist change, change is good, and the reforms will keep coming until they penetrate the resistance. The waves metaphor rather arrogantly assumes that change must come from outside schools and be mandated by whatever sanctions are necessary. Often this is justified by references to educational research as the arbiter of what should be happening, but while the waves of reforms are often research based, they are almost never researched, and this is a critical distinction.

Personally, I think we need to take the changes flowing around us much more seriously than the pendulum would have us do, and I also don't believe we should blindly accept whatever crashes onto our shores simply because it is shiny and new.

I believe if we look closely at the patterns of educational change over the last half century, those patterns are much more complicated than pendulums or waves. Yes, core tensions return and depart again and again. We can never quite decide if we are more concerned about the students' well-being or about the knowledge and skills we want to cultivate, and we never seem able to carve out a vision that integrates the two.

Rinse. Repeat.

Yes. It is easy to see why the pendulum metaphor persists. As we look at the basic areas of deep change identified from the early 1970s by Brodinsky (1979), and echoed in the 1973 table of contents of the first issue of *Educational Considerations*, and then we reflect on the corpus of published work over the 50 years that followed, we can see rippling across the decades some back-and-forth that is pendulum-like. We can, however, also see a thread of change building momentum over the decades that is wave-like.

Perhaps a better way of visualizing the patterns from a historical perspective is that we have very few deep, ideological divisions that gain and lose favor repeatedly over time. Each time they gain ascendancy, they are in a slightly different form, and they tend to come back with more urgency each time. So, perhaps what we have is competing waves.

Here we are, 50 years later, and I submit that most of the sensitive and vexing challenges to public education are embodied in the seismic reforms of the 1970s. They opened doors previously closed in American education and attempted to address knotty issues of race, gender, class, student exceptionalities, teacher professionalism, assessment of learning, and the preparation of students for meaningful careers. I would argue, for example, that today's literacy crisis is part of an ongoing push and pull of competing visions of meaningful learning that were staked out 50 years ago. The "Back to Basics" movement was a precursor to today's "Science of Reading." The current emphasis on social-emotional learning echoes a desire to address the lived experiences of students.

Surrounding these deep impulses of public education are two realities that will be with us always. The first is that we are constantly emotionally invested in the education of our children, and those who would govern in a society in which leaders are chosen through elections long ago learned that schooling can be weaponized through emotional language in attempts to gain and hold power. The second fundamental truth is that if we combine all the resources invested in the enterprise of education, it is probably the second largest industry in America, trailing only national defense. As such, there is a lot of money to be made packaging the next New Thing, whether that New Thing is coming by way of a pendulum, a wave, or something with characteristics of both. It has taken half a century for me to understand that these two, deep truths are the primary reasons why teachers will never be left alone to do their work. The business of education is a public business, and the classroom will always be a contested field on which the methods of teachers serve as proxies for the deeper issues of the on-going national debate. Through this lens, the 50-year portfolio of our journal takes on both a powerful, historical record and a living primer to help us understand our contemporary educational debates.

Toward that end, and in recognition of 50 years of publication of *Educational Considerations* by the College of Education at Kansas State University, we invited submissions that examined the scholarship from those 50 years, and we invited forward-looking scholarship that anticipated the next 50 years. I am delighted with the contributions to this issue. We have an analysis of the theme of social justice as it manifested itself across the five decades of the journal's existence. We have an overview of the representations of school-university partnerships, and we have a contribution focused on the presence of scholarship addressing African education. Finally, we have that forward-facing manuscript that places a post-pandemic lens over the issue of student engagement as we move forward into the next half century.

At the end of the day, I would hope we take a positive vision from this issue and the 50 years of scholarship that serves as its foundation. The journal's title claimed that space all those years ago because "educational" is an adjective, a modification of the noun "considerations." The pages of the journal have always injected the consideration, the contemplation of the enterprise of education. For 50 years, our considerations of education have proven educational, and I'm honored and humbled to carry forward the work began by Charles Litz and Warren Paul a half century ago.

## References

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