Twilight Conversations with A. W. Foshay

Jennifer Deets
University of Central Florida

In July, 1997, I spent four days interviewing Wells Foshay at his home in Rowe, Massachusetts. In April, 1998, he participated with me and four others on a panel presentation about his Curriculum Matrix at the annual American Educational Research Association meeting in San Diego, California. Ten days after the meeting, on April 28, 1998, Arthur Wellesley Foshay died of a respiratory infection. He was 85 years old.

This paper looks at the curriculum field throughout the past 80 years through the eyes, experiences, and words of A. W. Foshay as spoken during the four-day interview in 1997 several months before his death. Without remorse or regret, Foshay quite pragmatically noted that he was at the end of his life, in the twilight years, and could see things with a different sort of clarity than he had been able to in his younger years. He recounted his early experiences with education, both as student and as teacher. He told about how he became involved in higher education. He laughed, thought quietly, offered advice, and asked searching questions – he engaged me in conversation much more than he sat for an interview. Frequently, the most illuminative and fascinating of the conversations were in the twilight hours in the mountains of little Rowe, when we took the time to let the breeze stir our thoughts and the crickets fill the silences between words.

This paper records Foshay's twilight recollections. More than that, I hope that listeners and readers will draw connections from his past to the more expansive past of the field, through the murky present, to the possible future. In this way, it resembles Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's concern that research "depict motion and stopped time, history, and anticipated future" (1983, p. 6). Further, as O.L. Davis, Jr. asserts that historical research should, this "story transports incidents and interpretations though time against the fabric of context" (1991, p. 78). Foshay's vivid tales and range of tales provided for me a living context to what before had been mere words in books. He knew and worked with people about whom I had only read. He discussed issues with words a participant would use, not the words of a critic who could only see from the outside, years down the road. He readily acknowledged that today's new ideas sounded awfully similar to ideas he had heard about in his younger years, but he commented that, as you get older, "You don't get trapped into taking the same words to mean the same things fifty years later." [1]

New ideas inevitably are connected to the past. Understanding of the past provides an anchoring point as well as providing point(s) of departure. The past also provides the necessary disequilibriums that impel change. People live amidst these disequilibriums, responding to them with wonder, challenges, and by tinkering – sometimes intentionally, sometimes by happenstance. Dissatisfied with the state of curriculum, Foshay tinkered with his concerns about curriculum for numerous years. His Curriculum Matrix resulted from these personal, individual efforts. Thus, the story of the Matrix, which I pursued for my dissertation, is as much the story of Foshay. He commented during our interview, "You make me think back on my own career more than I have for a long time." His recollections in the twilight hours of those July days, in the twilight months of his life were an invitation to listen, and listening, Foshay claimed, is part of the art of growing old.

Arthur Wellesley Foshay was born on July 23, 1912, in Oakland, California. When I met him in July, 1997, he and his wife, Angela Fraley Foshay, were preparing for his 85th birthday party. The entire 350 townsfolk of Rowe, Massachusetts, were invited to celebrate with other friends and family at the Foshays' home. Foshay commented to his wife, "I can't believe I'm still here!" His strength and health carried him through nearly another entire year.

Throughout his long life, Foshay pursued knowledge. As a five-year-old child, he was stricken with the flu during the epidemic of 1918. He and his mother were very sick. His father, who was a physician, made 75 calls a day and said that he lost his youth during that epidemic. Because of complications from the flu, Foshay stayed home from school for six months. With no radio at the time, Foshay rummaged around and found books in the house. His favorite one was a comic book about a grandfather.

> It was placed in San Francisco Bay, and that's where I lived. Here was this fascinating, to me, interesting book. I had nothing else to do, and I asked people what these words were. Of course, in six months, I had taught myself to read.

Foshay noted that ten to 20 percent of young children are self-taught readers, but when he returned to school in 1919, they didn't know what to do about that.

> Here I was reading and I was in kindergarten, so they put me in first grade. From that point forward, I was the youngest kid in my class, which was a disaster…

At the end of his life he looked back on this early "achievement" and called it a "big mistake all around."

Foshay moved quickly through the school grades, graduating from high school at the age of 16. After high school, Foshay attended the University of California at Berkeley. He graduated in 1934 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a minor in French. Along the way, he played piano in jazz clubs. He said that he was a "two bit player," but he nevertheless enjoyed music and continued to play into his later years, when he acquired a harpsichord and played 17th and 18th century music.

Foshay mentioned his music playing in contrast to his teaching. As an undergraduate student, Foshay did a semester of "practice teaching." He said, "I did well, though. I discovered something I could do well. At that point in my life, I needed badly to discover something I could do well." Indeed, Foshay said, "I guess the things I remember most frequently are my days as a junior high school teacher. It was only three years of it, but that's what I remember most...I think because I was successful."

During the period 1936-1946, Foshay was married to Finette Partridge Foshay. They had three children. Their first child was Constance Foshay Row, their second did not survive birth, and their third was Wellesley Robinson, who followed his father into education. In 1981, Finette died after a lengthy illness. During this period also, Foshay taught in the Oakland, California, schools at the junior high and high school levels and later served as an elementary school principal. He related an example of the kinds of activities he used to engage students in learning.

> You take a bowl, put some water in it, put a candle in it and light the candle, and put a beaker, glass or something over it...The candle burns up the oxygen in the water and the water will rise up like this to take the place of the oxygen, you see. So, you do this little physical thing and then you say, "What happened?" And you say, "Why did it happen?" And you supply whatever information will help, but you don't answer the question why, you just supply the information. That's my way. Then somebody else would say, "I'm going to demonstrate that the atmosphere, that 1/5 of the atmosphere is oxygen. See, I'll demonstrate it. Notice how the water rises 1/5 of the distance when the oxygen gets used up." And you learn it just was well. But you don't dig it out yourself; you don't get puzzled and get involved. And I like to get the kids, you know, almost muscularly involved. So that's the idea. I've done the same thing at college level with teaching problems.

"That was fun," he concluded.

During this period, the nation was involved in World War II and I asked him about the day after Pearl Harbor, in particular, and the War in general. The morning after Pearl Harbor, with no prior coordination, the teachers all showed up to school an hour or so earlier than usual. "We obviously had to get together... to talk to one another about what we should do next. Well, we didn't know what to do next; we would just watch it. But one of the things we were sure we ought to do was get out on the playground to receive the children. So we did."

A Japanese girl attended the sixth grade at Foshay's school. He and the other teachers worried about her. "We needn't have," he said.

> What happened was, she came to school and the other children flocked around her. A teacher right away listened in on this. What the children said was, "Look at what these nutty adults have done." So she had no problem.

Just as the children had settled in for the day, Foshay went back to his office and received a telephone call from downtown. The caller told him that Los Angeles had been bombed and that he was to dismiss school. As he went around to the classes, beginning with the Kindergartners, he noticed that as he got into the upper grades, the children became increasingly "panicky." He remained with the oldest children, told them how to get home safely, sent the "traffic kids" out, and rang a bell for dismissal. Because the teachers went home at the same time as the children, Foshay and the janitor were the only people who remained in the building. They sat together in his office and stared out the window at a "great big" gas tank not far from the school. "Gonna be bombed, you see." He paused in the story and continued, "It developed, of course, that the whole thing was a false alarm," but the possibilities obviously had been frightening.

About the War in general, he recalled that this wife, Finette, had noticed people's window shades. During the depression, families had "let things like that go." So when the War struck and people had jobs, "the window shades were all of a sudden in good shape...[because] you could see that from the street." Another change was that the children of the working class people in the part of Oakland where he taught were getting dental care for the first time.

Also, Foshay remembered D-Day very clearly.

> It was a very dramatic event. I convened the school. I wrote a prayer and read it to the children and then dismissed them. It only took a few minutes. I'd go to jail if I did that now. You can't pray in school. But I wrote a prayer...I wanted to impress the day on these children's memories. I wanted them to have something memorable and I imagine a good many of them do remember being brought together for that purpose.

Foshay, with a good friend, also wrote a patriotic song for the children. They wrote it simply, in one octave for the children's voices. The very same tune, with different words, is now used for the town song of Rowe, where Foshay lived. Other than this one day and the song, Foshay said that the War did not have an impact on what things were taught in his school or how. In fact, "We took the attitude, without any thought about it at all,...that we'd keep things as normal as we could. So we had a normal school. The only thing that as different was that we had air raid drills...That was the total impact of the War. There was nothing said about the War."

As the War was drawing to a close, however, Foshay's wife, Finette, said to him that he should have "his chance." They decided that he should seek his doctorate. He reviewed the possibilities.

> Stanford was not a possibility. The Stanford education department was very weak at that time; it had been decimated by the Depression. Cal was not a possibility;

> the education department there was poor, just very poor. Well, if I was going to leave town, it didn't matter where I went. So what were the other possibilities? They were Chicago, at the time, and Michigan, and Teachers College. And I thought about them, looked up what I could find out about who was at these places. I had already concluded...that I was interested in teaching and curriculum, much less interested in management, money, and all that stuff – politics – and so the leading person was Caswell and he was at Teachers College.

Furthermore, Foshay received an invitation from Caswell to visit the campus. So the Foshays drove east to New York for a summer to look Teachers College over and for the faculty to look him over. When he arrived, Foshay had a conference with Caswell.

> I met the great man, you see, in this large office, as large as this room almost. And he said, formally, to take these courses, take this examination, which I did. At the end of the summer, I came back to see him. I've always done well on these kind of examinations, so I did on this one, and his whole manner changed. Out came the red carpet. And I did well in the courses, too. I had all As – A+. I had never heard of an A+. I got an A+ in elementary statistics. I didn't think there was such a grade, but I got not only the A+, but a cup of tea with the instructor, who was a very prominent person in the field; he was a superb teacher.

Little did Foshay realize it at the time, but Caswell had selected him as much as he had selected Caswell. He learned how this system of recruitment worked through a friend in school administration from whom he had taken a seminar. This man, named Ellsbree, had been in Oakland at one point and inquired about Foshay. Apparently, Foshay had a good reputation in Oakland and Ellsbree took that back to Teachers College. All along Caswell knew who Foshay was, but he never revealed it. Others were brought to Teachers College in similar manner, including Alice Miel. However he got there, Foshay was emphatic about the influence Caswell exerted on his thinking. Most of what he learned directly from Caswell was as his assistant in a course he taught in the summer of 1946. In all that he learned about curriculum thinking and curriculum theory, "and it was full of substance...Caswell was in the middle of it."

So this is how, after ten years in California's public schools, he moved with his family to New York City where he began his doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, with Professor Hollis Caswell. While he was taking his doctoral coursework and writing his dissertation, Foshay became Assistant Principal of the Horace Mann-Lincoln School. After finishing his Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree, he worked as a Research Associate at the school, although by 1949, the College had renamed it the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation. Simultaneously, he became an Assistant Professor, then Associate Professor, at Teachers College during the 1949-1952 years.

Next, Foshay was offered and accepted the post of Director, Bureau of Educational Research, The Ohio State University. This was the first of several times that he "broke tenure" during his career. It also marked a shift in his professional focus from classroom teaching to research administration and consulting, and the beginning of what he called "collecting titles." After spending five years at Ohio State, Foshay returned to New York and to Teachers College in order to head the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute as its Executive Officer. During the 11 years that he served in this capacity in New York, Foshay traveled widely as a consultant on education. He said, "Oh, I've been around."

With assignments in Saudi Arabia, Japan, Germany, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Iran among others, Foshay experienced many diverse systems of education. While he was in France for a month to study the schools in that nation, he took the opportunity to see other parts of Europe. He realized that

> we and the Europeans had a lot in common and we didn't know much about each other. So we could benefit from on another, and we ought to get together. The easiest way to do that was to do a study of school achievement at the elementary level . . . . And I came back and talked about this and was advised that the thing to do was to propose it to the UNESCO institute for education . . . . And I learned that Ben Bloom of Chicago had done exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. We were friends, so we got together and formed this thing.

"This thing" that Foshay and Bloom formed was called the IEA, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Attainment. The IEA began with 12 participating countries and had grown by 1997 to include 45 nations. Foshay believed this enduring project to be a major accomplishment in his career.

He was also proud of his leadership of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development as President from 1960-1961. Additionally, in his retirement years, he was President of the John Dewey Society from 1988-1989. The plaque thanking him for his John Dewey Society service hung in an obscure corner of his room, but he took care to remove it from the wall and to show it to me. "Dewey's *Experience and Education* struck me between the eyes. His concept, sense, of experience was of basic importance." Thus, it was fitting that Foshay should lead a group named after Dewey.

Foshay's involvement in administrative and consulting activities stemmed, he believed, from a desire

> to be valued and recognized. I think I had a more than usual need for that when I came out of adolescence. And so, when jobs were offered to me that had a title, I took them without paying any attention to me, so I wound up administering things. I don't think I was

> very good at it. In any case, my heart was not in it. That's the story. So I became director of this and president of that, you know, and all the time I should have been writing a big book. And I didn't.

Foshay had long since retired from Teachers College (1976) when I interviewed him. I was a stranger to this man, and yet, he was compelled to tell me in what ways he believed that he had made poor choices, or at least choices for the wrong reasons. "I was attracted by these titles," he said gravely, "Don't you let that happen to you. Do something productive." He later added, "It's a highly personal affair, but what it says, of course, is something highly confessional. Which is that you oughtn't define yourself early. Pursue your own star and not be lured away from it by recognition."

At age 85, here was Foshay, sitting in his country home, mulling over vexing curriculum and educational issues, writing his thoughts for others to consider, and compiling his "big book," which will be published in the near future by Teachers College Press. Additionally, he continued to make his ideas public by traveling to national conferences, such as at the AERA meeting in San Diego, California, in April, 1998, just two weeks before his death.

Whether as teacher, principal, consultant, professor, mentor, or retired scholar, Foshay was driven by the challenges of education. "We deal with inert facts, you know, and we want to bring them to life, and that's how you do it," you ask the question "why?" He wanted to reach teachers with his ideas, but said

> I don't know how to talk to teachers in such a way as to influence their work. I am so impressed with the complexity of that. There are so many different teaching styles that work. So as a teacher myself, I have applied ideas. I took the idea that was theoretical and made an application of it myself, and that's the only way I know to work. So I put an idea out, illustrate it as well as I can, and hope that somebody like you or somebody else will say, "Well, I think I'll try that."

My dissertation (Deets, 1998) which critiqued one of Foshay's last ideas on curriculum, was one way of responding to Foshay's hope that others take seriously his proffered ideas. Regardless of his own misgivings about his career path, Foshay's later work, the inquiry that resulted in the fascinatingly intricate Matrix, has been a major contribution to the field of curriculum, a contribution that is enriched by some understanding of the events and people who influenced him throughout his life.

Notes

The majority of the quotes and information in this section are drawn from four days of interviews with A. W. Foshay in Rowe, Massachusetts, in July, 1997. The transcripts and audio tapes are in the Oral History in Education Collection at The University of Texas at Austin, College of Education. Unless a different citation follows a quote, it has been taken from the interview.

References

Davis, O. L., Jr. (1991). Historical inquiry: Telling real stories. In E. C. Short (Ed.), *Forms of curriculum inquiry* (pp. 77-88). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Deets, J. (1998). *Russian language in schools: A conceptual critique of the Foshay Curriculum Matrix.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (1983). *The good high school.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Short, E. C. (Ed.). (1991). *Forms of curriculum inquiry.* Albany, NY: State University of New