The KEY: A Nationally Recommended Postmodern Makeover of Low-Performing Schools Based in the Realms of Meaning

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ABSTRACT

The need to makeover low-performing schools is urgent! Educational reports show that specific student populations are consistently low-performing academically. A postmodern model of school reform integrated with the realms of meaning will assist to close the educational gap in schools and society. According to postmodern guru, Fenwick English (2003), perspectives enable individuals to construct truths that may be tested through logic and intuition and modified over and over again, hence continued learning and understanding.

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Introduction

Imagine a school where economically challenged populations and low academic performance are not synonymous. A school where all students exceed academic expectations in preparation for post secondary instruction; a school where all students are taught as if they were gifted and talented; a school where all teachers are passionate and purposeful; a school where students are well rounded in enrichment opportunities, independent research, problem solving, conflict resolution, science, math, art, music, and foreign languages; a school where all stakeholders are a part of the learning community where collaboration is the key to decision making and instruction; a school that is safe, inviting, and caring; a school where teachers are happy to have other teachers or administrators visit their classroom to observe instruction; a school where the last row of seats are empty during professional development sessions; a school where enhancing student learning is the primary focus of team meetings, and best practices for enhancing instruction is the hot topic; a school not categorized by the ethnicity or socio-economic

makeup of the student body; a school where students become career minded from kindergarten to twelfth grade.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to share the KEY (Knowledge Empowered Youth) model for reforming low-performing schools using several key components of postmodern theory coupled with the six realms of meaning. The KEY model can be adapted to fit several educational settings. The example used in this article will include a school-to-work integration type format.

Fenwich English (2003) summarized the work of several postmodernists where a comparison was made between modernity and postmodernity. Several areas are salient for the purposes of the reform model. In a postmodern approach plurality is practiced vs. conformity; collapse of boundaries vs. erection of boundaries; non-hierarchical vs. hierarchy/subordination; and pursuit of differences vs. suppression of differences. Similar to curriculum development suggestions in William Kritsonis' book, *Ways of Knowing through the Realms of Meaning* (2007), this reform model is planned so as to "counteract destructive skepticism, depersonalization and fragmentation, overabundance, and transience" (p. 10).

Dr. Kritsonis (2007) shares that there are six fundamental patterns of meaning to a well-rounded individual: use of speech, symbol, and gesture (symbolics), factually well informed (empirics), capable of creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics), endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics), able to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (ethics), and possessed of an integral outlook (synoptics).

Discovering Knowledge (Empirics) and
Expressing Meaning (Symbolics) through Plurality

The apprenticeship based program where students and teachers are immersed into real-world/school based corporations like financial institutions, retail stores, graphic design, and video production will be used as an example to share a suggested route to school reform by meeting the requirements of education policy supported by career exploration all based on the needs of students. Exposure to extensive learning options for school and society allows students to express themselves via experience and reflective self-awareness. According to Kritsonis (2007), a student's use of speech, symbols, and gestures ensures their understanding.

The leadership department focuses on providing on-going training to leaders of learning and those students and teachers who aspire to be leaders. It emphasizes the need

for good communication. Formal language is used throughout the day by the staff and is expected from the students. Students are not allowed to speak in slang during school hours and are taught how to "code switch" depending on their surroundings and purpose of conversation. All leaders must be able to communicate clearly and consistently the purpose of the organization, the primary clients it serves, the future it is creating, the indicators of progress it will track and the specific actions members can take immediately to achieve its long-term purpose and short-term goals. Leaders must realize that the most important element in communicating is congruency between their actions and their words. It is not essential that leaders are eloquent or clever; it is imperative, however, that they demonstrate consistency between what they say and what they do (Dufour, 2006). Leaders are expected to "walk the talk." They are to lead by example. Each leader from administrators to curriculum specialists teaches at least one class period. With so much to do in the organization, everyone takes on at least one leadership role. This not only assists with the school's mission, but it is a time-tested strategy of retaining good employees because they are key contributors to the learning community.

International, national and state reports repeatedly show that U. S. schools are not preparing students to meet and succeed in the world of work and to ultimately be able to provide a good life for self and to become a positive contributor to the world. The nature of education is changing internationally. "The United States is falling behind on critical international comparisons of educational performance, particularly when it comes to higher level thinking and problem-solving skills" (Partnership, 2006, p. 6). A marriage between best practices in the classroom and the world of work is a postmodernistic approach based on student's perspectives as the truths that will close the educational gap in schools.   According to Fenwich English (2003), perspectives enable individuals to construct truths that may be tested through logic and intuition and modified over and over again, hence continued learning and understanding. There is no one proven way for all students to achieve, therefore conforming to modern or traditional teaching and learning practices does not suit all.

The KEY Model requires that schools provide ample opportunities and experiences that lead to self discovering facts and truths that will guide learning and deep understandings. Teachers are facilitators of learning. They are not allowed to force certain types of learning styles and activities on students. Students are given foundational skills, metacognitive strategies and assignments. They are to find the best approach and strategies to accomplish tasks. Students must be immersed in the realm of empirics whereas students are factually well informed through logical discovery and analysis. "The order of discovery refers to creation and synthesis. The order of analysis refers to dissection and critical evaluation" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 601).

Creating and Appreciating the Beauty of Differences

Using an apprenticeship theme from Pre-K to 12th grade benefits the education system and the corporate world by producing individuals who are knowledgeable in both

content and practical application, moreover individuals who are able to construct truths based on their perspectives and cultural background coupled with new knowledge. This collaborative effort focuses on: learning and development, service, and leadership. It also purports the theory that everything is relative to the group of people who are being served from strategies used to teach, understand, react, retain, and produce. According to Fenwich English (2003), the objective world is therefore intimately bound to the eyes of the beholder and his or her politics, culture, language, and conceptual-affective awareness state, i.e., consciousness.

The well-rounded individual is capable of creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics), endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics) (Kritsonis, 2007). Being culturally proficient, as leaders of learning and as students, compliments the entire search for deep understandings. The KEY model contends that creating and appreciating differences cultivates individuals who have a purposeful life for self and others.

The model also creates a culture of service and support for each other while promoting character development and ethical decision making. The people who change the world – their companies, communities, and families – rarely act out of a sense of oppressive obligation. They act out of a sense of incredible opportunity. "They don't change the world because they have to; they change the world because they want to" (Sanborn, 2006, p.14). This type of school norm doesn't cost one cent in the budget and is the most influential strategy used – everyone says hello to everyone and smile at each other regularly. This adds to the culture of community and team spirit.

The school simulates a corporation where each classroom takes on a corporate theme and apprentice-type opportunities are built into daily activities. The three major focus areas throughout the school and in each classroom are taken directly from the operations of successful corporations: learning and development, service, and leadership. The school believes in having high expectations for all stakeholders and for holding them accountable for being part of the team to support and empower the targeted group of youth being served in the school. It also believes that knowledge is gained and retained by helping others; it grounds itself in service to others. Most important is internal reward, but external benefits are built into the entire structure and culture of the school. Stakeholders benefit from contributing to the campus' goals and vision.

Ethics-Yes, Hierarchies-No

Essential to the KEY model is a commitment to ethical values by all. Ethics can be defined as the ability to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (Kritsonis, 2007). The vision of the leaders of learning is to provide the optimal conditions for every teacher and student and to have their best interest at heart. The goal is that each teacher and student will grow exponentially in knowledge each year while making learning fun and practical for all.

THE KEY model principal philosophy is that education provides an avenue for all children to learn and become self-sustaining contributors to society by becoming employable and knowledge empowered. The school's goal is to produce critical thinkers and problem solvers who are always creating new ways to understand. It is inherent in the organization that there is no one "right way" of thinking, doing, questioning, or understanding. Educators are facilitators of the learning process and are results driven. Educators and students are members of the learning community. They receive employee benefits that are proven to attract and retain quality leaders of learning and promote understanding and production by students. Educators and students are accountable for student understanding of curriculum standards, for creativity in lesson design embedded with critical thinking and problem solving, and for incorporating career skills. Educator benefits include competitive salaries, on-site childcare, on-site fitness center, flexible schedules, and leadership development. For example, the work schedule would allow each educator to have one Friday off each quarter.

The leadership team of the school that properly implements the KEY model moves beyond the notion of an "administrative science" (English, 2003). In order to eliminate rigid bureaucracies, leaders reflect on all of the facets affecting the school. They don't depend on one leadership style to fit all situations, therefore they may be considered to be a combination of situational and transformational leaders. The leaders who emphasize a situational style are practical, easy to understand, sensible, and applicable to varying situations. The major strength of using this style is the administrators' knowledge of their faculty and staff's strengths and weaknesses. The administrative team leads with flexibility when dealing with each individual. They promote training that will help teachers feel confident and effective in their work. Teachers feel like individuals and not another product of the cookie cutter approach. This could involve directing, coaching, supporting or delegating. This continuum moves from a high directive and low supportive nature to a high supportive and low directive approach for teachers.

The KEY model motivates followers to use their self-interests for the good of the team, organization, and community. This approach is used during the Campus Based Leadership Team (CBLT). This team meets monthly to review the progress of the school improvement plan. Their major role is to assist the principal by making suggestions for improvement. This team consists of the principal and another campus administrator, faculty representatives from each grade level, subject area, and teams, parents, students, community representative, and administrators from the district office personnel.

The leadership team shares the decision making with other members of the staff. Flexibility ensues throughout the school year by different members of the leadership team to accommodate for shifts in behaviors and activities. For example: additional benefits are used when the staff has completed a job well. Each of the administrators manages and makes decisions in their area of responsibility with input from stakeholders. The campus leader has a charismatic appeal that makes the staff feel very comfortable with an open door policy. Each administrator has been assigned to an area of expertise to provide staff development, monitor school behavior, mentor, and to support instruction. They are able to guide good decisions because of their knowledge in that specific area. All staff is accountable for their responsibilities. Everyone is passionate and purposeful in their

roles. They thrive on the idea that they can use their own creativeness and flexibility. They are well aware of the consequences of inappropriate actions and behaviors.

High staff retention rates are mostly affected by teacher involvement in campus decision making, leadership, and their contribution to adding value to student's knowledge base.

Connectedness without Boundaries

The atmosphere of a reformed school emphasizes critical thinking for the leaders, students, and staff. It promotes a "no boundaries" approach to cognition and understanding. It empowers learners to use their own culture and perceptions to move beyond what is required to what is inquired. The teaching-learning process is collaborative in nature. The process connects each persons own story, individuality, and curriculum into relevant deep understandings for all. Having an integral outlook by each individual is essential for personal growth. In other words, individuals have united meanings, unified perspectives which provide a single vision or synopsis of meaning (Kritsonis, 2007). There is a constant dialogue among and between campus groups, the family, and the community on campus wide improvements for the whole child including academics, extra-curricular, character development, leadership, future goals, and career.

It is incumbent upon the school system to take the raw resources from the environment such as children, information, and money and change them into outputs that are valuable and can impact the environment in a meaningful way. The KEY model provides a sense of stability and flexibility. It is dependent upon external environmental factors such as the community, parents, and district, state, and federal policies. The school as an organization is able to adapt to changes when necessary to meet the needs of its students and staff.

Due to the school's postmodern flare highly trained personnel are given professional autonomy with a high commitment to students and to the teaching profession. They are given flexibility as long as they meet standards and guide students toward future empowerment. They must be able to justify their actions.

Recruiting practices include having potential teachers take a personality inventory, participate in a group interview, and conduct a mini-lesson. One essential characteristic of potential teachers is the ability to be creative in a flexible autonomous environment. A new teacher support group meets monthly to reflect on progress toward student success. Motivated employees help organizations survive. Motivated employees are more productive. After subscribing to the KEY model, most staff sees the job itself as being challenging, interesting, and enjoyable which encourages continuous school improvement.

In order to enhance student learning and career skills growth, the KEY model's philosophy endorses a personal approach to working with students. Student and employee ratios are kept to a minimum. Most special needs students are in the mainstream. All classrooms have an inclusion teacher present for either part or all of the

day to assist with classroom instruction. Moreover, the business community is constantly on campus sharing knowledge and other material resources. They are essential in the development and maintenance of the business/apprenticeship theme.

Cooperative learning/collaborative planning time is built into the master schedule. Administrators provide regularly scheduled meeting times to support teacher autonomy and professionalism. Teachers are able to exchange information, schedule meetings, share experiences, and provide teacher education and training at pre-service and in-service levels. Each subject-area department has a common planning period where teachers plan instruction using common standards. Team teachers also have a common planning period to plan for instruction across the curriculum to discuss the needs of individual students who are on their team. "Professional learning communities create an intensive focus on learning by clarifying exactly what students are to learn and by monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis" (Dufour, et al, 2006, p. 43).

Teachers are encouraged to use a constructivist approach to instruction and planning. Cooperative learning, higher level thinking, differentiation of instruction, inclusion and the backwards design approach to planning is the focus of campus staff development and the teacher performance and assessment system. When administrators conduct classroom walk-throughs, observations, and appraisals, they look specifically for evidence that teachers are using the skills that were embedded in professional development sessions. Teachers are involved in the process of children growing into intellectual individuals. In order to do so, the school staff models what is expected of students. In essence, practicing what is preached. Teachers are encouraged to teach out of the box, creating their own style based on their student's learning needs. They are allowed to be creative in the design of their room. For example, one teacher may design his room as if it is a café while another one looks like a cozy den. Each must focus on a type of service industry in order to embed and practice the skills needed to operate a successful business. All teachers and students are expected to communicate in a professional manner.

Teachers are required to give benchmark assessments often. These assessments are scored and the results are use for planning in collaborative group meetings. After the assessment data has been studied to determine mastery or a need for remediation, teams become creative in meeting the various needs of the students. The team may rearrange the schedule and shuffle around students to either do re-teaching or enrichment. Teachers have the flexibility to provide lessons as they see fit, because every decision made is to be in the best interest of the student. Teachers must be prepared to justify their actions.

In order to transform high expectations into knowledge empowered youth, the campus must purge itself of all preconceived notions of the population that is being served. The culture of the school is based on trust for each other. It must transform the building into an appealing place to spend nearly the entire day. Sofas and bookshelves filled with books are placed throughout the halls to encourage reading. Murals and motivational words are painted all over the walls. Each classroom is painted in lively colors. Teacher and student bathrooms are clean and pleasant to use. Morning news is broadcast to each classroom through distributive television which includes daily motivational words of wisdom, vocabulary of the day, student and teacher highlights, career goals, etc. Healthy snacks are brought to the classrooms on a regular basis. Brain

teasers are always used in the building to encourage critical thought. Problem solving is integrated into all aspects of the curriculum and campus activities. A student center is the heart of the commons area where students can socialize; do homework; access the internet; network; and read.

Students are also held to high expectations. They are responsible for curriculum content through practical application. They become result oriented. Results are not cookie-cutter. Children will be allowed to express their understanding of learning standards in the most effective and efficient way possible with their touch of creativity. They create their own theories to explain things based on their perspectives and truths. The bottom line is student's deep understandings of key concepts, creating knowledge, and the application of those ideas combined into an integral outlook.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the community, parents, students, administration, faculty, and staff at consistently low-performing schools can implement the KEY model to elicit school improvement. The model enforces togetherness in collaborative teams that engage in collective inquiry into both best practices for accomplishing their aims and the current reality of the conditions in their organization. Any discrepancy between best practice and the reality of their school spurs them to take action to reduce the discrepancy. The entire organization is designed to engage teams in a cycle of continuous improvement by discovering knowledge (empirics) and expressing meaning (symbolics) through plurality; by creating and appreciating (esthetics) the beauty of differences in all activities and individuals (synnoetics); by being ethical (ethics) in all acts while eliminating hierarchies; by connecting all aspects of successful learning into an integral outlook (synoptics) for all stakeholders. This combination of postmodernism integrated with the realms of meaning ensures school achievement.

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