Without Limits: Breaking the Rules with Postmodernism to Improve Educational Practices in Order to Best Serve Students

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended to aggressively stimulate provocative ideas about educational practices. In a time when the status quo is easier and more cost effective to maintain in public schools, Dr. Fenwick English attacks these views with a postmodern challenge. It is time for school leaders to consider more than one solution to the problems they face, and find the courage to solve them. The future of our world rests in our children. The time is now to capture our youth and give them the best and most creative education we can and which they deserve.

Introduction

Everyday we ask our students to reach within themselves and do the best they can. We ask them to stretch their abilities in order to discover their individual potential. As educators, can we say that we are professionally doing the same? Are we thinking outside the box in order to serve our students as best we can? Is it possible that we are not providing our students the best education has to offer?

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discover ways to improve educational practices by implementing postmodernism according to Fenwick W. English (2003) in his text *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration.* A postmodern approach requires educational leaders to reverse the contradictions that exist in schools, and make decisions that are appropriate for the situation at hand. For example, many times there is not enough funding for specific curriculum but there is enough funding to increase a coach's salary or to create another administrative position.

Modernist Theory

Modernist Theory is currently what dominates public school; it is about conformity, security, and boundaries. Modernism is absolute truth based on rationality and science. "Modernism can be characterized as a pursuit of grand theories or grand narratives (metanarratives) which, following the principle of parsimony, attempt to explain the greatest number of phenomena in the smallest set of laws, axioms, or theories" (English, 2003, p. 248). Modernist theory is concerned with being right at all costs. To be "right" must mean that there is only one answer. Over time as things do not improve, the modernist will not change course because "the modernist is only concerned about being 'right' no matter what the context may be over time" (English, 2003, p. 5). If a solution is perpetuating the symptoms, or maintaining the status quo, is it working? So again, the "right" answer may not be compatible with the situation of the school.

Education needs to adapt with the changing student population. "Current methods in education have not solved the major sociopolitical and instructional problems of race or class, and they have not reduced the gap between the socioeconomic haves and have-nots" (English, 2003, p. 60). If we need to make a change, what is it? From a modernist point of view, this is difficult because modernist believe in certitude, that there is only one answer to a question, a perceived universal truth. Change is a slow process in a modernist world. It is difficult for a modernist to change quickly because there must be research to support the option. A modernist is not going to be the first to venture out and try something new, something that no one else has tried. The modernist does not want to take a risk because a risk might mean failure.

In a school setting, from a modernist view, there is only one view; there is only one knowledge base to work from. English (2003) emphasizes that postmodernists would deny the concept of one knowledge base to avoid having knowledge overpower alternative perspectives. When schools originally came into existence, it served a very minute population of children. "Modernism was an attempt to create and legitimize educational administration in the newly emerging schools of education at the turn of the last century" (English, 2003, p. 36). Schools are still running in the same fashion as they did when they came into existence. As the school system is continuing to fail our students

and society, it is clear that the modernist theory be abolished. The theory is just reinforcing the status quo, "and we have paid too little attention to improving practice by changing the nature of our theories" (English, 2003, pg. 244). The status quo is not a viable option and it must come to an end. Educational leaders are still making decisions in a bureaucratic style, from the top down. Top down management is not always in the best interest of the school. School achievement and success gets lost in bureaucratic policies.

Postmodernist Theory

Postmodernism is an open theoretical framework, understanding that there is more than one answer to a question. "It is about challenging and opening up the central premise that only one set of borders are possible to define and support professional practice" (English, 2003, p. 3). There are a multitude of responses and ways to be successful in a school setting one just needs to be open to them. This mindset challenges the foundation of the modernist theory. Postmodernism is able to accept that there are multiple views of reality. Possibilities are abundant in the postmodern world, and all options should be explored to find what works best in a particular school. Not all schools are the same; therefore, there is not one solution to make a school better.

An educational leader from the postmodern school of thought will "open up the whole area of leadership to a broader perspective than has usually been the case" (English, 2003, p. 26). The educational leader is willing to consider all options in order to best serve students. This willingness is not based upon what has worked at other schools, but what could potentially work at the school in question. As schools have progressed to a more inclusive group of children, the public school system must step back and find a way to best serve its population. English (2003) posits that postmodernism frames questions that cut to the heart of the educational field, its intellectual borders and territorial claims as a special place in schools. Postmodernism is the cornerstone of futuristic thinking.

The ultimate question in schools that should be considered is: How can educational leaders best serve and support students? In these times, this question encompasses the family units as well as the surrounding community. Educational leaders are needed that are able to break the bureaucratic tape and lead schools into the future. "The postmodern position challenges the modernistic conceptual box and its continued efficacy for theory and practice" (English, 2003, pp. 236-237). Education needs someone that can think outside the box and go against the grain. Clearly, what has always been done is not working. Postmodern leadership demands revolutionary ideas and strategies.

Educational leaders need to smash the modernist views and practices to bring schools into current times and prepare them to propel into the future. "There is plenty of evidence that what is going on in schools now is not adequate and that we don't need better schools, we need *different* schools" (English, 2003, p. 239). Our society is changing, and our students are much different than in the past, such as: having both

parents that work, an influx of different cultures, and access to drugs and alcohol. It is time for schools to change. "Postmodernism is the first step in removing the constraints of both current theory and practice in educational administration" (English, 2003, pp. 244-245). Educational practices must break free from current methods and go beyond the limits of traditional thoughts.

There is more than one way to skin a cat, but the cat never likes it. There is more than one way to run public schools, but the modernist never likes it. "If we keep on using the same old theories we will continue to get the same old results" (English, 2003, p. 239). New ideas are crucial to our world, including educational practices. We must allow professionals to use their thinking and leadership abilities to solve problems. In a modernistic educational system our end goal is for all students to learn at the same rate and level. Is this rational? Is this fair to our students? Is this assumption based on scientific evidence? Is it realistic for us to put all children on a path that gets to the same place? In high school the big picture is college. Is every child capable and willing to pursue higher education? Is it right for us to force them in that direction, even if they do not want to go? Some students want to pursue more laborious and technical avenues. Should we not esteem and appreciate these technical skills abilities?

One "knowledge base" is not applicable to students or teachers. Doing the same thing over and over does not impact improvement, especially if it is not working. It is time for something new in education. Educators must be willing to explore new ideas because it is ridiculous to believe that there is only one practice. It is ridiculous to believe that there is one catchall remedy for all problems. It is time to move into the 21st century and realize that there are many problems with schools, and there are a plethora of potential solutions.

There are some educational techniques based on business models. Schools should not be run based on business models. "Business has very little to offer educational management and even less as it pertains to educational leadership" (English, 2003, p. 241). We need flexible models that can adapt to the changing population of schools. We need models that allow for risk taking. Schools deal with children and their families, they need to be humanized. Families and community members must feel welcome and comfortable with coming into a school. School administration must cater to families, and all that encompasses. Education is about children; and therefore, should be student focused and oriented.

Postmodern Theory Three Perspectives: Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Axiology

The postmodern theory comes from three perspectives: metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology. Metaphysics are based on reality and provides a theory for everything that exists and how one perceives things. Epistemology is knowledge and how people gain an understanding of knowledge, this includes sharing knowledge. Epistemology is demonstrated in how stakeholders think and act within a school system. Axiology is values that are imparted by educators and defines proper conduct and is

influenced by culture. Axiology is extremely important with adults that are modeling behaviors for young people. Reality, knowledge, and values are the core of postmodern theory.

Recommendations to Implement Postmodernism into our Modernistic Schools

Recommendation 1:
State testing should not be used for high-stakes assessment, such as graduation.

Do gains in student test scores determine the success of teaching and learning? A modernist believes so. Is state mandated testing the best way to determine our students' progress and learning? Are state tests appropriate for determining whether or not an individual would make a good school leader? I propose that the answer to these questions is a definite NO. Tests are unable to evaluate an individual's ability to work with people or determine an individual's work ethic. America has become the melting pot of the world; so it is impossible for one test to effectively determine the growth of individual's from different backgrounds. "Tests are so incredibly one dimensional measures with a long history of racial, gender and class biases that to use them in the creation of a management culture centered on test score gains is to engage in a recidivism that is anti-democratic, punitive to the poor, and persons of color, and morally reprehensible" (English, 2003, p. 241). It is very possible for bright and imaginative students to fail tests created to test for expectations set by stereotypical, upper to middle class, white Americans. Not all students are white, middle-class Americans. These expectations are hard to change and mold for modernists because this is the way things have always been done.

Testing promotes conformity, "there has been a steady movement toward results-based reform that includes standards for what students should know and be able to do and high–stakes assessments linked to school sanctions and rewards" (English, 2003, p. 119). Grade promotion is the intended carrot for students to pass state mandated testing; this enables the states to expect cloned knowledge of all study, which takes away originality and resourcefulness from the schools. If students are not the same, do not have the same backgrounds, do not learn the same, and do not have the same post-high school goals, then why would we expect them to have the same knowledge? "The result will be the continued inability of American schools to deal with issues of social justice, economic inequity and closing the gaps between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' which threaten the very existence of the republic" (English, 2003, p. 120). At this point in time, schools do not have a bright future. While schools are not changing, the student population continues to become more diversified. We owe our children better, they deserve for us to be more adaptive and flexible to meet their needs, than to expect them to conform to our ideals and goals.

Recommendation 2: Schedule courses throughout the school day that is flexible and conducive to learning and teaching.

In Texas, the legislature recently passed a law. Starting with the class of 2012 students must graduate with four mathematic and science courses. To accommodate this mandate, schools on seven period days will have to potentially reconfigure the school day to accommodate another math and science. The current schedule will not give flexibility for students that fail, resulting in ineligibility and mandatory summer school. This new condition adds two more credits to graduation requirements. To graduate from high school, in Texas, students will need to earn 26 credits, versus the previous 24 credits.

Why do we want our students to sit through classes all day? When is the best time for students to learn? Block scheduling will allow students to earn eight credits a year, and give a little flexibility for extracurricular eligibility if a student were to fail. This also creates a schedule that has students sitting in classes for approximately 90 minutes, as opposed to the traditional 50 minutes. When taking state exams into consideration, students could potentially be double blocked in core classes and those courses could be schedule for the morning "when research shows they learn best" (Childers & Ireland, 2005, p. 47). With block scheduling students will have less homework each night because of a lighter course load and students will attend four periods each semester compared to the traditional six to seven periods. This information is extremely crucial to consider when choosing block scheduling in regards to the at-risk student population. Many of these students often times go home to take care of a younger sibling or older family member while a parent is at work, or the student may in fact have to go to work. Block scheduling also reduces the load of the teacher and gives them more instructional time with their students per class meeting. The decision to switch to block scheduling should be made with respect as to what is in the best interest of the teachers and students, not what is cheaper and easier for administration.

Recommendation 3:
Not all high school graduates will attend college; so arm interested students with a vocational skill to enable them to be productive in society.

Is every student the same? Of course not, so why do we enforce the same requirements with very little flexibility? Why do middle class, white Americans assume that going to college determines self worth? "Approximately 25% of high school students are enrolled in vocational education programs and more than 90% of today's graduates have completed at least one vocational course. Sixty-three percent of the 20 million students enrolled in vocational education programs are in programs at public secondary schools" (Kritsonis, 2002, p. 213). Clearly there is a need for schools to support students in learning a trade, just as schools support students to go to college. Students have a desire for vocational programs on high school campuses.

Vocational education provides and prepares students with valuable skills. It offers hands-on experience preparing students to go straight to work after graduation, aides in integrating students from a lower socioeconomic status, and provides "an appropriate curriculum for approximately half of the student body not suited for a more academic

program" (Kritsonis, 2002, p. 213). Schools have the opportunity to prepare students with proficiencies for a career path. Vocational educational tracks also expose students to difficult trades that are available to them. Postmodernists are able to consider vocational education as a respectable option they are willing to support.

Recommendation 4:
Measures must be taken to ensure safe schools for all stakeholders.

The school's physical environment and leadership must support teachers and address specific challenges that students face. The school "environment must be conducive to teaching and learning" (Kritsonis, 2002, p. 11). In order for learning to thrive, staff and students must feel safe. The school environment should be virtually free of drugs, violence, sexual harassment, bullying, etc. Dress code ought to be enforced and consistent discipline to inappropriate behaviors is a must.

Paying attention to certain behaviors will help detect signs of potential violence. Kritsonis (2002) lists several warning signs that cause alarm: students that are withdrawn are bullied, have dropping grades, aggressive writings and/or drawings, uncontrolled anger, impulsive hitting or intimidation behaviors, discipline problems, drug and/or alcohol abuse, affiliation with gangs, and making serious threats of violence. From the custodial staff to the students, all must learn to respect the rights and dignity of each human being learn to work through conflicts without violence, allow all individuals to learn, and provide social equality. There should also be well-systemized measures for people coming onto the campus from the community, whether it is parents or deliverymen. Procedures must absolutely be in place in case of an evacuation, lock down, tornado, fire, etc are required.

Unfortunately, with the happenings of Columbine, Jonesboro, and most recently Virginia Tech, schools have developed a heightened sense of possible school violence. Although it is impossible to predict a violent act in a school, it is essential to take the necessary precautions in case something was to happen. Having a plan of action, such as a lockdown, is an obligatory safeguard to have in place if there were an emergency. Keeping a school safe is much more involved than just organizing a lockdown. A safe school also consists of nurturing a welcoming environment that all staff and students are proud of and appreciate.

Recommendation 5:
Teaching requires individuality and creativity; therefore, take your time to hire the best.

You want your school to be thriving, hire staff that is intelligent, inventive, and reliable, possess strong morals and values, and have a heart for children. "Educators must be aware of the past trends and maintain efforts to improve students' scores" (Kritsonis, 2002, p. 213). The one size fits all lesson plans is not appropriate in a postmodern school because not all teachers are the same, just as not all students are the same. Students should not be expected to learn the same; similarly, teachers should not be expected to teach the same. Every teacher has his or her own personality and style to bring to the

classroom and to the curriculum. All administration and staff should support this individualism.

Those on the hiring committee are obligated to take precise steps in hiring high-quality staff. People are needed that have a enjoy working with children, are creative, hard working, and dedicated to success. When a team of people works together with the same goal in mind, the odds of success increase greatly. All the people in the school must work together for a collective achievement, and it is the responsibility of the leaders to get those people working in the building.

Recommendation 6:
An inviting school culture boosts morale and learning; make everyone that walks through the front door apart of something special.

If every type of learner is welcomed, students will be proud of the school. "School cultures need to emphasize respect and acceptance of others" (Ediger, 1997, ¶ 2). Character building, acknowledging and promoting differences, positive interactions need to be fostered inside and outside the classroom. A way to bond the school population is to celebrate differences; examples of this are: Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo. Unique characteristics of cultures can be celebrated through curriculum that penetrates all school staff. Acknowledging people allows for a sense of pride and accomplishment.

It is also vital that staff feels connected to the school. Staff appreciation luncheons, staff input on decisions and public acknowledgement of staff are a few examples of ways for staff to feel valued and respected. Educators do not get into the profession for prestige and money, but all people feel good when they are patted on the back for a job well done. When people feel good about where they spend a third of their day, morale cannot be anything but high. When teachers enjoy their jobs it extends into the classroom. Happy teachers equate to happy students.

Recommendation 7:
Many people are invested in our children's education since they are the future; involve all stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Schools have different student population; therefore, decisions should be based on the context of the situation. From the school leaders to the custodial staff to parents and to the community, all these adults have an invested interest in the success of the school system. When decisions are made, all stakeholders should be involved. Stakeholders are valuable members of the educational system, and their voice is just as important as the educational leaders. Parents are the ones responsible for reinforcing at home, what is going on at school, so the parents should definitely be supportive of what the school is teaching.

Decisions on curriculum should not be based solely on test scores. According to English (2003) he speculates that data-driven decision making is irrational because it does not represent the data field nor is it objective since it exists to support a theory, and that the data contains unambiguous signals regarding meaning which requires subjective interpretation and requires other information to establish context, motivation, and intent.

Adults having relationships with students must become a component of the decision making process. "In short, the concept of *data-driven decision making* 'dumbs down' the entire decision making process by blinding the human mind to information which is direct and complex and which deals with the human side of the organization" (English, 2003, p. 209). Is there something wrong with trying something inventive and new?

Recommendation 8:
Give enough support to the student population in order to prevent dropouts.

Preventing students from dropping out is a difficult challenge. According to Kritsonis (2002), ways to help prevent student dropouts is to provide support and alternative classes and programs, encourage co-curricular activities and positive group interactions, and work with families. Many of these students have a history of academic failure and truancy issues. Learning how to support the characteristics and needs of at-risk students involves a change in school processes. Many of these students have emotional problems, are involved in drug use, and deal with abusive situations at home. Understanding and support must be given.

Often at-risk students feel isolated from their peers inhibiting them from building supportive relationships. Schools must create opportunities for these students to have bonding experiences. School policies should also be considered when it comes to dealing with these students. Is suspension for truancy the best solution? If a student has missed many days, does it make sense to not allow them to make up work or exams, and give them detention? A postmodernist will find a way to promote caring, concern, and a way to respond to the needs and problems of these students. Small alternative campuses can be a successful answer. With a smaller setting, these students get more one on one attention. "A tremendous amount of time and effort are required from all school personnel and family members to keep dropouts in school" (Kritsonis, 2002, p. 210). These students must realize that the school system cares for them, and the school must find ways to prove that caring.

Recommendation 9:
Extracurricular activities give students a way to connect to the school and bring pride to the establishment.

All students deserve to have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities. They should be encouraged and supported to try new things. Transportation is sometimes an issue for schools, but it needs to become a non-issue. Transportation should be provided not only for extracurricular activities such as athletics, but for other activities such as tutoring. (Support is a necessity to give to students when they miss school.)

Students should also be acknowledged publicly to encourage the community to also be supportive. When the students are involved, and acknowledged, for representing their school and district it gives them a sense of ownership. They need to have the opportunity to participate in something outside of their educational dwelling.

Recommendation 10: Appropriate staff development is a necessity that equips staff with tools to work with the changing student population.

Educators want to strive to be the best they can. Staff development must give educators tools so they improve their craft. "Staff development should be consistent with a school and district's goals, mission statements, and long-range plans, and the emerging needs of its students and teachers" (Hannon, 2003, ¶ 5). Building on existing knowledge and skills is also an important fact to consider when choosing staff development. Ask teachers and staff what they want, what they need, and if it is not what you were thinking, be flexible. Staff members want to attend trainings that are meaningful and beneficial to them. "Staff should feel that opportunities to improve are worthwhile" (Hannon, 2003, ¶ 10). Their time is just as important as the principal's.

Faculty need staff development to learn how to handle the influx of students. The school population is becoming more and more diversified, and it is imperative staff know how to make connections. Staff development should be more encompassing than just classroom issues; it should also address non-curricular matters. Today more and more students come to school pregnant, abused, hungry, poor, on drugs, homeless, mentally ill, etc. Developing relationships with students sends the message of caring. Not all adults have the skills to build relationships, but all can learn some techniques that make communication easier.

Enabling professionals to give students coping skills, may in turn impact curriculum. "The knowledge and improved teaching skills gained through staff development make teaching and learning more interesting and result in increased student achievement" (Hannon, 2003, ¶ 1). If students are able to focus on schoolwork, they will be more successful. Give the staff a voice in how to better nurture students and aid them in attaining their basic needs. Staff need help and support for gaining skills that will improve their relationships with their students. Strategies must be developed, which means there must be funding, to find ways to support these students. Campus principals should be constantly seeking ways to advance conditions in the classroom and on their campuses.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, implementing postmodernism forces schools and its stakeholders to accept more than one solution to its problems. Adjustments are necessary to creative, positive, and successful change. According to English (2003) there are no ideas and standards that are absolute. Educational leaders must look at their schools and its population. Decisions must be made that are best for individual campuses, and not copycat what the school down the street is doing. "There can be no one 'right' meaning and whatever meaning is discerned is temporary and not likely to be infinitely stable" (English, 2003, p. 13). Leaders need to do, what they need to do in their own way. New

thoughts, ideas, and attitudes should be explored and put into practice. The postmodern theory allows leaders to make decisions without limits.

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