A National Perspective: Utilizing the Postmodern Theoretical Paradigm to Close the Achievement Gap and Increase Student Success in Public Education America

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ABSTRACT

The belief that there is one right way or method of inquiry to pursue truth as it is constructed has been rejected by postmodernism. Postmodernism challenges and opens up the central idea that only one set of limits are possible in supporting professional practice. Postmodernism designs a way to look at concepts through the context of meaning. The postmodern paradigm considers human endeavors to be connected with the natural world rather separate from nature.

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Introduction

All students, regardless of race, are entitled to an education that enables them to achieve to their highest ability. However, there are discrepancies between the academic achievement of various ethnic and socio-economic groups. Reasons for the achievement gap can be associated with not understanding different ethnic groups, lowered

expectations, and a curriculum that does not address the needs of all learners. In order for change to occur, there must be a shift in our way of thinking. *The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration* by Dr. Fenwick English (2003) is a guide for this change.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss the strategies to guide the postmodern theoretical paradigm that will allow educational leaders to close the academic gap and promote student success. Educational leaders must begin to investigate new practices in solving old problems. English (2003) states, "The challenge of postmodernism to the prevailing theories in educational administration is that it is athoretical, that is, it proffers no theory to center any specific practice, but rather is open to consider all claims and the theories which may define and support them" (p.3). Metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, futurism, constructivism, and diverse curriculum, and will be examined.

Postmodernist Views

The postmodernist challenge the claims of several modernistic myths. The modernist believes that there is one reality. The postmodernist insists that there are multiple views of reality. According to English (2003), "There can be no one right meaning and whatever meaning is discerned is temporary and not like to be infinitely stable" (p.13). Another myth challenged by postmodernist is that the process of knowing and what becomes known are separate. The views of postmodernism believe that the person observing cannot be separated from what is being observed.

The third myth challenged by postmodernism is that reality is testable. Postmodernists are worried about power. Theory is the true language of power. Theories explain and set the importance of events and facts. Theories are used to reinforce relationships with power. Truth is discovered and is context free is another modernistic myth. The view of postmodernism is that truth is constructed and embedded in systems of power. Another modernistic myth is that science is a rational self-correcting process. Postmodernists believe that science is a human activity subject to human prejudice. Science steps outside accepted limitations and facts are theory dependent. The last modernistic myth that is challenged it that science is the ultimate authority. The postmodernist believe that science is not an authority, because it is a kind of tradition itself. Postmodernism believes that the logic that scientists admit to follow is not necessarily the steps they follow in doing their work.

Cooperation is another feature of postmodernity. Connectedness and cooperation pursue the postmodern belief that problems can be resolved through negotiation.

Postmodernism views the world as an organism rather than as a machine. Postmodernism is more than just a philosophical movement. It is found in architecture, graphic arts, dance, music, and literature. Postmodernism has features such as challenging of convention, mixing of styles, tolerance of uncertainty, emphasis on diversity, and acceptance of innovation.

Metaphysics

In the study of postmodernism, metaphysics must be explored. Metaphysics is "reality" that the external world exists independent of man's consciousness, independent of any observer's knowledge, beliefs, feelings, desires, or fears. Meaning that A is A, that facts are facts, and that things are what they are, and the task of man's consciousness is to perceive reality, not to created or invent it. "One constructs theory or a theoretical framework in which to see reality" (English, 2003, p.15).

Postmodernism is often seen as bringing an end to metaphysics. Due to the fact that we live in a changing "postmodern" world, stability is needed. What we value do not always end to be pursued, nor is it an object possessing a metaphysical property of intrinsic values. It is a mistake to assume that the only alternative to metaphysical values is that human beings create the values of natural phenomena as opposed to their being valuable. The ordinary expressions of good in itself and value for its own sake, which are applied to nonhuman natural phenomena, are placed into metaphysical categories that few would recognize. Expressions such as good in itself typically make a contrast with another kind of evaluation that becomes clear in context (Hill, 2006). When one say that something is valuable, it means to convey the idea about the reason one has for doing, thinking, or feeling something, but what is implied varies with the expression and context.

Metaphysics is concerned with questions about the nature of reality. Kritsonis (2007, p. 548) states that "metaphysical positions fall into such categories as monism (reality is ultimately of one kind or substance), dualism (there are two kinds of reality), and pluralism (reality is a manifold of different but interdependent entities)." Postmodernists believe they have ended metaphysics, but their writings contain assumptions about culture, human nature, values, and inquiry. Postmodernist insights necessitate a shift regarding inquiry. There should not be a pre-existing reality; instead there should be an interactive process of knowledge creation (Kritsonis, 2007).

Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. The epistemological anarchist believes there is no view, however absurd or immoral he refused to consider or to act upon, and no

method he regards as indispensable" (English, 2003, p. 242). Epistemology differentiates the manner in which one can individually translate perceptions which are acquired through the senses and into concept that one can store in one's mind. Properly formed concepts must be the product of reason.

In viewing epistemology, man's reason is fully competent to know the fact of reality. Reality is molded in accordance with one's needs, interests, prejudices, and cultural traditions. The conceptual power is reason. It is the power that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. Reason is man's only means of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge is the result of dealing with our intertwining of one's experiences of the world and ideas about the world.

Axiology

Axiology is the study of value or quality. According to Kritsonis (2002, p. 100), "it is an attempt to examine the rules of proper conduct. The essence of ethical meaning, or of moral knowledge, is right deliberate action, that is, what a person ought voluntarily to do" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 443). The foundation of culture and civilization is the belief about what is right or wrong. The development of ethical theory dates back to Plato and Aristotle. The word ethic has its roots in the Greek word ethos. Ethos is the perceived degree of character or credibility that a person believes exists in another person or object (Haskins, 2000). The amount of trust and belief one has in another will have an important impact in how persuasive one will be.

According to Kritsonis (2007), the value of ethical theory is in guiding teaching and learning. In the ethical realm, emphasis should be on ethical understanding and how it may be improved. A person who has knowledge of ethical theory is as moral as a person who lacks such knowledge. Moral conduct pertains to one's actions in certain situations. To solve a problem, one should be clear of the choices for the given situation. Kritsonis (2007) emphasizes that before a person can know where to go, he needs to understand where he is starting from. There must be a mission in order to fulfill a vision. Moral decisions require a set of values to serve as a form of reference inn evaluating the consequences.

Futurism

In examining postmodernism and closing the achievement gap to increase students' success, we must also regard the future of education. Kritsonis (2002, p. 328) states, "Futurism is a philosophical position and a movement in education design to shift emphasis from the current era needs that will emerge in a period of rapid change." Futurism should be studied so that people will not let history repeat itself. People can

learn form their failures and prevent them from recurring. The educational system can change to meet the needs of future learning. There should be a move to the center or societal interaction by implementing crossing –generalization, nonformal, location-free social service programs. The educational system should form a new concept of information based on interdependence and cooperation. Present values about change in the educational system should also be altered (Kritsonis, 2002).

Diverse Curriculum

According to Kritsonis (2007, p.593), "The ideal curriculum is one in which the maximum coherence is achieved, and segmentation is minimized". The curriculum should provide for learning in all realms of meanings including symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics, and synoptics. To close the achievement gap and increase student success, there must be a diverse curriculum. There is not one curriculum that is best for all students. The course of study should depend upon the circumstances of the case. Traditions, history of the community, and predispositions of the students should be considered in the development of the curriculum (Kritsonis, 2007).

The post modern paradigm considers human endeavors to be connected with the natural world rather than separate from nature (Lewis, 2004). Diversity brings richness. Different parts of the curriculum should be connected to each other and connected to the learner. Most schools focus on standardized testing, and knowledge is imposed on students rather than constructed by them. Some think that education is rigid and unchanging. With the postmodernist thinking, values and traditions of diverse populations are being embraced. Students are being taught to be active learners, high level thinkers, and problem solvers. Postmodernism appreciates difference and abnormality.

Today's postmodern curriculum is found in subjects such as biology, chemistry, and philosophy. These subjects have content that is integrated and cross into different content areas.

Postmodern curriculum values the process of learning as much as it values the product (Lewis, 2004). For example, attaining the right answers for math problems are not the end result, but the process of working through the problem is an important step.

Investigation relies on students and their questions. Curriculum is more meaningful when students investigate questions they have constructed. Lessons do not have to end with the right answer; instead the answer can be extended as the learner continues to ask questions. Postmodernism has high value on students' thoughts. Students develop their own meaning instead of the teacher transferring knowledge. Emphasis is placed on critical thinking rather than factual information. Learning can proceed through multiple connections, and the Postmodernist thinking is more concerned with the journey of learning, and not just the destination.

Learning activities should be meaningful and interesting to children. Children should be allowed to construct, develop, and apply additional knowledge or skills.

Children should be provided with choices and opportunities that suggest opportunities to function as planners and decision makers. Activities should be created that allow children to make use of their knowledge in new situations. Children should be encouraged to find answers to their own questions using analysis. Curriculum goals which promote different aspects of development should be encouraged.

According to Kritsonis (2007, p. 677), "The special position of the teacher in the work of general education is to mediate the knowledge of the specialist in the disciplines of as to reveal the general human relevance of this knowledge. The teacher is to be humanizer of knowledge". This means that that the teacher does not act as an authority, but as one whose job is to provide understanding within each subject area. The beliefs of teachers provide a policy for curriculum. One way that beliefs impact curriculum is through classroom environment. The foundations in the classroom environment are the beliefs about teaching and learning to which the teacher values.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the postmodern theoretical paradigm is about investigating and accepting new practices in solving old problems. In order for change to occur there must be a shift in our thinking. Accepting and applying new views will lead the way for educators to close the academic gap and promote student success. Applying new views regarding different ethnic groups and raising higher expectations for all students will assist in closing the achievement gap for all groups. Developing and utilizing a curriculum that addresses the needs of all learners is also imperative in achieving this goal. The challenge of educators is to abandon old concepts and values. The strategies and concepts presented by Fenwick English are essential in exploring the challenges of Postmodernism.

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