

**IMPLEMENTING POSTMODERNISM IN CHANGING THE ROLE OF  
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the impact of post-modernism on school transformation. Moving away from rigid paradigms of structural reform, the postmodern approach suggests a fluid acceptance of discordant voices and diversity, as necessary ingredients in the construction of meaningful change. Transformation implies interconnectedness, which by itself is inconsistent with the notion that the process of change can be truncated to convenient and easily identifiable compartments. The article suggests that a vision for reform that is inspired, or at least influenced by a postmodernist approach will consider learning and instruction as part of an undivided process. However, success will be measured not on the basis of how efficiently instruction was delivered, but by how much learning occurred.

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School administrators' role has changed dramatically in the past decade as public schooling systems have endured increased political scrutiny and policy intervention. Gone are the days when school administrators merely functioned as principals or head teachers who are revered and feared at the same time by their subordinates. Today, the work of administrators has moved away from leadership and towards management and has continually posed problems so challenging and

daunting enough to erode the very core administrative values that they were trained to embrace in the first place.

The purpose of this article is to discuss implementing postmodernism in changing the role of school administrators in America's schools. Several major points will emerge concerning postmodernism and their effect on educational change, school, and administration.

For an initial characterization of its basic premises, consider anthropological critic Melford Spiro's excellent synopsis of the basic tenets of postmodernism:

"The postmodernist critique of science consists of two interrelated arguments, epistemological and ideological. Both are based on subjectivity. First, because of the subjectivity of the human object, anthropology, according to the epistemological argument cannot be science; and in any event the subjectivity of the human subject precludes the possibility of science discovering objective truth. Second, since objectivity is an illusion, science according to the ideological argument, subverts oppressed groups, females, ethnics, third-world peoples" (Spiro, 1996).

Logically postmodernism literally means "after modernity. It refers to the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity" (Sarup, 1993).

There is a sense in which if one sees modernism as the culture of modernity, postmodernism is the culture of post modernity" (Sarup, 1993).

"Modern, overloaded individuals, desperately trying to maintain rootedness and integrity...ultimately are pushed to the point where there is little reason not to believe that all value-orientations are equally well-founded. Therefore, increasingly, choice becomes meaningless. According to Baudrillard (1984:38-9), we must now come to terms with the second revolution, "that of the Twentieth Century, of post modernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. Whoever lives by meaning dies by meaning" (Ashley, 1990).

One response to this postmodern position would be to surrender, concluding that no effort is worth the effort because no one can depend on planning or on progress. An alternative position, however, is to recognize possibility. This option is reasonable because "change" seems

to be something that one can count on in these postmodern times. For instance, as Flax has commended, “profound yet little comprehended change, uncertainty, and ambivalence seem pervasive in the contemporary West” (Flax, 1990). Lather observes that she is “a constantly moving subjectivity,” (Lather, 1991) and Hargreaves refers to a “moving mosaic” of school structures (Hargreaves, 1993). These concepts of change are part of the postmodern condition. Therefore, a consideration of school change does not seem out of the question. The postmodern condition demands, however, that such change take a different form.

Postmodern theorists have elaborated several overlapping strategies that seem relevant to the postmodern consideration of school change:

1. Recognize difference (Tierney, 1993): Replace the quest for sameness in school practices, values, and beliefs with recognition that difference cannot be eliminated; seek for members of school communities to work together in full recognition and even celebration of this difference.
2. Pay attention to margins (Lather, 1991) Look beyond sites of power and commonly accepted discourse in schools (represented, for example, by the principal’s office, middleclass parents of European descent, and classroom teachers) to find the “spaces” of individuals and ideas that are underrepresented.
3. Heed postmodern voices (Flax, 1990): Hear that the voices of difference, the voice at the margins, will include knowledge, sources of authority, and ways-of-doing that are unfamiliar to and unrecognized by the mainstream.
4. Resist metanarratives: seek the local and contextual (Seidman, 1994): Challenge assumptions about how all schools work, what all teachers do, or what every parent wants, recognizing that in the multiplicity of voices and spaces found in any school situation there are myriad ways to conceptualize problem and solutions.
5. Recognize discursiveness (Lather, 1991): Perceive that discourse—how individuals talk, act, and represent themselves in any situation (Seidman, 1994)—determines what is considered “normal” and who has power in schools; help others to see that “how things are” in schools is a creation of discourse and not a statement of the only reality possible.

6. Consider power (Seidman, 1994): develop awareness that the preceding strategies will challenge existing power relations in schools and school districts, and use these very strategies to confront and overcome this resistance.

Proposals for change focus on all aspects of school life—from the curriculum to assessment to teacher preparation to school calendar and institutional structure (Boyer, 1991, 1995; NCREL, 1997; Slattery, 1995). Each of these components is interconnected. Behind the discussion among educators about systemic changes needed, is a phenomena called postmodernism. Postmodern philosophy constitutes a paradigm shift manifested in a new worldview: “This postmodern shift involves rethinking some very sacred beliefs and structures that have been firmly entrenched in human consciousness for at least the past five hundred years...humanity is moving to a new zone of cognition with an expanded concept of the self-in-relation” (Slattery, 1995, p.17).

Postmodernism offers an explanation for the breakdown in the meta-narrative of history, to make room for non-mainstream viewpoints from multi-cultural perspectives. The shift, from a mono-cultural approach to education, to a multi-cultural approach carries with it curricular approaches in which learners are encouraged to construct meaning grounded in relationships of self to others, self to knowledge, and self to nature. Emerging curriculum models emphasize interdisciplinary courses, open-ended systems, intergenerational and interprofessional relationships, Socratic dialogue, multi-dimensional assessments, and multiculturalism (Boyer, 1991, 1995; Slattery, 1995).

“Now is the time to have a proper burial for the antiquated and dysfunctional role of principals. Let us put to rest the notion that school-leadership is synonymous with charismatic, top-down, autocratic leadership. After we have paid our respects to the old way of school leadership, we must begin to embrace a vibrant new kind of leadership that is generated from inside out and bottom up. The real work of principals becomes that of supervising learning versus supervising teaching. The viability of future generations of teachers and students to thrive is largely dependent on principals making this shift” (Childs-Bowen, 2005).

Childs-Bowen (2005) further states that “leader of leaders, chief instructional officer, and chief learning officer is the new job description of the principal’s roles. This role requires a new set of assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills of leadership. Skills include analyzing and interpreting data, setting vision, and facilitating systems that support professional learning. Instructional leadership is accelerated when the leadership is distributed through an organizational culture and

infrastructure that supports teaching and learning for both students and teachers. This requires skillful balancing in autonomy, support, and accountability of staff for student learning. If we seek to raise the standards of our students, we need to work harder at raising our standards of staff development, starting with principal learning.”

Administrators facilitate the development of vision and direction, orchestrate the change process, allocate resources in ways that help realize the vision, and create new opportunities for teacher and community leadership to emerge. These administrators see themselves as one node in a network that extends beyond the school itself. They seek to help direct the flow of energy throughout the network (David Conley, 1991; Sharon Conley, 1991).

In this emerging vision, governance decisions are made with broad-based input. New governance structures emerge to meet new needs; old ones change to achieve new purposes. How decisions are made depends on the situation and varies from consultative to participatory.

Teacher leadership is a crucial dimension in this new vision. Teachers are serving in new decision-making roles, and are taking more control over the conditions of instruction in schools. The roles are highly varied, often being specific to the school and the unique strengths and interests present among faculty (Devaney, 1987).

In the new 21<sup>st</sup> Century school, “teachers and parents are encouraged to become mentors and guides who will inspire students to seek wisdom and understanding as part of a community of learners” (Slattery, 1995). Learning is no longer predominantly teacher-led, but rather is student-centered. The distinction is an important one. Schools need a commitment to professional development to provide teachers with the tools and know-how to implement and support the systemic educational reform efforts (Conley, 1992).

Distinctions between subject areas in the curriculum are being reexamined. There are numerous attempts to redesign curriculum so that learners can be actively involved in constructing meaning (Brooks, 1990), rather than having the structure determined solely by the teacher (or the textbook publishing company). Information from around the world, available to teachers and students via technology, serves as the framework within which local issues can be understood and examined, creating curriculum that allows students to understand global events in relation to the world in which they live (Beane, 1991).

When observing superficially, it appears that educators, when examining the curriculum framework, should include a sampling of

those elements based upon the realms of meaning (Phenix, 1986). Realms of meaning when orchestrated simultaneously, these elements form the “basic ingredients in all meaning to order the learning process.” However, theoretically this seems plausible, but it is in the implementation of this process that a break-down occurs. This break-down is evidenced in the academic, social, economic, political, and religious lag of one specific group. If one group is not moved toward competency, then it must be surmised that a systems (process) error is occurring. Philosophically, the general education curriculum is faulty. So, what do educators do? Curriculum writers, specialists, educators, and parents must have a basic understanding of the philosophy of the curriculum for general education. There are four elements which should be included: comprehensive outlook; corresponding organic quality; comprehensive design for learning; and, a comprehensive concept of the structure of learning. Though it is important that the intelligent selection of course subjects to be taught is necessary and desirous of rationale for its selection, personal growth, and valuing the relationship one has to another subject though maintaining its own distinctiveness; it is vital that the curriculum serve to sustain and cultivate a community.

There is resurgence in attempts to individualize instruction, although it might be more accurate to say “personalize” instruction. The emphasis is on developing meaningful learning experiences in partnership with others. Teams are one means by which this is accomplished. Students set individual and group learning goals and are held accountable for them (Conley, 1991). Learning can be achieved by helping others, tutoring, providing advice, and by studying new material independently. Team learning is personal and interactive, developed in relation to goals, has utility, and leads to demonstrable outcomes (Newman, 1991).

Assessment is becoming an integral part of the teaching/learning process as opposed to evaluation, which stands apart from it. Assessment provides larger amounts of feedback to students, allowing them to improve their performance continuously, rather than simply to judge performance at some arbitrary ending point. If students can master and apply certain identified skills, it is not necessary for some to fail in order to create a “normal distribution.” In fact, it is cause for celebration if all students can meet challenging standards (Wiggins, 1991).

In the new vision of education, technology is an integral component. Technology is used to provide basic skills support, interface with information sources outside of the school, support individual student creativity, manage information about student performance and achievement, assist teachers in their dual roles as instructors and clerks,

and provide students with greater control over their own learning (Conley, 1992). Technology is almost an icon in some school restructuring plans. In other settings, technology is emerging as an extension of the interaction between teacher and student. In almost all visions for restructured schools, it holds an important, if still indeterminate, place (Collins, 1991).

In conclusion, the purpose of this article was to discuss implementing postmodernism in changing the role of school administrators in America's schools. And as was pointed out, the role of the administrator is not that of a top down leader of do as I say and not as I do, but one of sharing with the many facets of the "total team" concept. In other words, just as the old African proverb says: "It takes a whole village to raise a child," it takes an entire team to make a post modernistic change in America's schools.

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