

The Pragmatic Path and the Influence of Standardization

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Abstract

Standardized accountability represents the use of numbers culled from standardized assessments and devoid of cultural or social context in an effort to “grade” a school’s educational efforts. To integrate this accountability, organizations such as the Texas Education Agency (TEA) have developed a set of teachable objectives for schools to correlate to the standardized tests goals. Administrators of schools are faced with juggling the mutually exclusive ideas of vulgar number production and aesthetic education, which will be discussed shortly. The purpose of this study was to illustrate a case for the possibility of a pragmatic path. As a theoretical construct, the path does not require measurable, tangible proof. The leader on the pragmatic path would recognize that administrators struggle with the dual roles of aesthetics and standardized accountability on a daily basis. The particular problem they face is integrating the number’s requirements into the human elements of education.

Rhetoric echoes throughout a vast preponderance of treatises purported to guide education. A rapid scan of several Internet book sources reveals a wide variety of experts armed with panaceas to cure education’s ills. Many of these sources try to tie educational goals to business models where monetary success has been enjoyed (Schlechty, 2001). Marketplace concerns take priority over concerns for individual student needs and learning processes (Giroux, 1993). These sources ignore the drive of education, the cultivating of human minds, and easily call for systematic steps toward some more so-called efficient end. These guides are attractive to the public, which cannot understand why

schools cannot be run like businesses (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Eisner (2001) explains, "Schools are likened to businesses, and the survival of the fittest is the principal that determines which ones survive. If schools don't produce effective results on tests, they go out of business" (p. 368). Linked with the nature of funding for education, educational aims have aimlessly drifted back to the factory models reflected from a more structured, less post-formal, representation that is comfortably familiar to the public. Unfortunately, this drifting has little to do with the education of students.

Perhaps the most egregious offense toward students in the name of change has been the over-reliance upon standardization and accountability. Standardized accountability represents the use of numbers culled from standardized assessments and devoid of cultural or social context in an effort to "grade" a school's educational efforts (Kincheloe, 2001). In Texas, and in proposed accountabilities from the federal government, these numbers are evaluated on a somewhat strict (somewhat floating) scale. Schools not meeting the often moving target can suffer negative consequences. Giroux (1993) explains that "testing has become the new ideological weapon in developing standardized curricula; a weapon that ignores how schools can serve populations of students that differ vastly with respect to cultural diversity, academic and economic resources, and classroom opportunities" (p. 16). One particular weapon, a "reductionist fetish for empirical verification" (Giroux, 1992, p. 99), emanates from Texas as espoused by former President G. W. Bush. This plan, developed at least 10 years before then-Governor Bush could claim its ownership, holds schools and districts responsible for student outcomes on a series of decontextualized standardized tests.

To further integrate this accountability, organizations such as the Texas Education Agency (TEA) have developed a set of teachable objectives for schools to correlate to the standardized tests goals. Local determination of coursework begins to disappear, followed closely by teacher autonomy. Starratt (2001) explains this disappearance as "a criticism of how schools trivialize learning, and waste so much of the time of youngsters" (p. 334). The "new" objectives, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), as measured by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS; soon to be replaced by another entertaining acronym—STAARS [State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness]), are clearly designed to be taught toward. Students who do not pass the tests are not promoted or are not matriculated; schools that do poorly can be sanctioned. Under the moniker of "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), President Bush developed a system, as Fries (2003) explains, "echoing W.'s policy of naming policies for the exact opposite of their true function, and using the language of rights and choice to erode both" (p. 5). Children who cannot carry the politically designed educational banner are indeed left behind.

In tow is a new Texan meaning to the term social justice. The particular strain practiced in Texas is a warping of the concept of social justice when applied to the educational accountability system. Texan social justice is achieved when

equal results are expected from each different socio-economic group equally, increasing the awareness of the inequities amongst ethnic groups (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschorek, 2001) without actually addressing the issue. This is in contrast to the Deweyan (1938) concept of equal opportunity. When data from any group can be directly compared with another without concern for cultural differences (Kincheloe, 2001), then Texan social justice has been achieved. This phenomenon is reflected in the accountability results.

Administrators of schools are faced with juggling the mutually exclusive ideas of vulgar number production and aesthetic education. Vulgar is used in the sense that results justify any means at attaining them, ignoring a more aesthetic or ethical path (Cherryholmes, 1999). Management-oriented administrators tend to prefer focusing on the numbers. This devotion simplifies the job into achievable tasks with measurable outcomes. Success is simply measured by the numerical results, without challenging or examining the contexts. As Kincheloe (2001) explains, "What has particularly caught the national attention is the 'objective' proof of educational improvement—higher achievement test scores, specifically, higher scores on Texas's student assessment instruments. Americans, Texans in particular, have always been impressed by quantitative data" (p. 4). Educational leaders, on the other hand, are naturally predisposed to consider the aesthetic nature of education. These leaders are aware of the human nature of education and realize that molding individual minds builds a stronger democracy. Requirements from the state and federal governments bring an element which seems to work counter to research on caring education.

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To help with this tightrope walk, educational leaders can be mindful of the pragmatic path and constantly re-evaluate practice and search for power constructs hindering democratic progress, searching for positive consequences while making the journey worth the effort. Doing so reminds the leader that the pathway is not necessarily a linear one (Sergiovanni, 1996), but subject to the influences of internal and external sources (Strauss, 1993). In this way, if mistakes are made and an incorrect path is taken at first, aesthetic aims along the way increase learning and growth until another path is chosen through reflection. Correct or incorrect paths are both arenas for growth and learning.

Pragmatic Considerations

Pragmatic considerations can bring back the human element (Cherryholmes, 1999; Walcott, 2001). With an eye on aesthetic ethics and fallibility, critical pragmatism has the forgiveness to allow schools to make change fluidly for the students' greatest needs. Dewey called this an allowance for "continuous

readjustment” (cited in Gribov, 2001). Instead of being perceived as a weakness with an absence of a plan, critical pragmatism gives the ability to evaluate, reflect, and adjust. Rorty (1982) called pragmatism a theory for action and not one for study room discussions. Cherryholmes (1988) further defines the more post-modern branch of critical pragmatism, where “post-structural insights are brought into our social and professional lives” (p. 151). These insights include use of deconstructions and discourse analysis to find the roots of power behind actions. With these influences firmly in mind, a leader then looks for a tool to combat inequities in power structures in order to help design democracy.

One tool involves focusing on the pragmatic path, giving schools a direction and framework in aiding critically pragmatic decision making. By following a pragmatic path, a school gains a commitment to reflection and evaluation. A school is reminded of pragmatic commitments to democracy, ethics, and aesthetics (Dewey, 1916), while being mindful of power issues, overt or hidden, which could damage democracy and divert the path from an aesthetic consequence. The path does not give systematic instructions such as a recipe provided by many of the business model change-oriented books, but reminds of the human element in schools. By following the path, substantive educational growth can be determined. This element of critical pragmatism provides the strength to combat the spreading of standardized accountability systems and reinforcing the human element of education (Kincheloe, 2001).

Aesthetic concerns in education add the depth, the extra dimension to action on the pragmatic path. Cherryholmes (1999) explains that the “pragmatic task of tracing conceivable consequences leads to questions about whether their conceptions, actions, and imagined consequences are in fact desirable, pleasurable, satisfying, and beautiful” (p. 29). This element of critical pragmatism holds an important position in the determining of direction along the pragmatic path. Beyond simple considerations of art or artistic endeavors, aesthetics springs from the affective sense, the personal evaluation of beauty. Aesthetics concerns could be said to represent the metaphorical “soul” of critical pragmatism.

Standardization in Texas

Post-formal developments within schools are being thwarted by an insistence on relying upon standardized assessments. While testing for diagnostic purposes is not necessarily a cardinal sin, the over-reliance upon this data for evaluation purposes can lead to vulgar ends. More specifically, judging schools and districts solely upon the quality of their standardized data can create discordance in areas of aesthetic educating, particularly in areas of poorer economic classes (Cherryholmes, 1988). The hidden issues of whose values are being tested cannot be ignored when considering the democratic nature of the program. Lower socio-economic group values tend to not be held as the model for test skill reproduction. Additionally, testing numbers can tend to mask possible surfeits of aesthetics in more wealthy areas.

Even more disturbing is the possible mutually exclusive relationship between aesthetics and standardization accountability. While a statistician can manipulate numbers many ways to tell various stories, an innate beauty does not seem to rise from standardized data. Items from tests successfully answered are discarded because they show insufficient distinctions between students. Ornstein (2003) states, "If teachers are doing a good job and teaching the content that everyone else is teaching, it is less likely to show up on a standardized test" (p. 257). The theoretical disconnect of teaching information not tested and representing humans with numbers ignores the students and their needs (Giroux, 1992). This reliance upon numbers is a strong remnant from positivistic times when efficiency was represented through deft handling of numbers, not upon a plan for the individual. The factory model of operation relied upon the efforts of the many in the organization, even to the exclusion of the needs of the individual. This model heavily influenced schools throughout most of the 20th century and is currently manifested through the slavish insistence of many schools to have all classes of the same grade or subject level to be on the "same page at the same time," ignoring the individual needs of the students or classes.

Ironically, now, schools are increasingly mandated to consider the needs of the individual, such as designing individual educational plans in Texas for all high school students who do not pass a section of the TAKS (TEA, 2003), while at the same time forced to produce mass successful passing numbers reflecting the school as a whole. Aesthetics are left with little influence as standardized testing results are used for ranking and sorting, assigning random values for certain achievements. Aesthetics encompasses far more than simply ideals of beauty or pleasing consequences. Applied to leadership, aesthetics represent the affective domain of the leader, the realm of what he chooses to attain a pleasing consequence. While some leaders can view the standardized accountability system as aesthetic, and certainly Dewey (1916) would not be against it, aesthetic ideals tend to encompass the areas of education not necessarily tested for value. Programs not essential to the production of numbers are de-emphasized or eliminated.

Critical Pragmatism Concerns

Pragmatism as an active process calls for a devotion to democracy, aesthetics, and ethical concerns (Cherryholmes, 1999). This devotion keeps in mind the human element of students in order to create an environment of substantive education. When a state organization attempts to dictate its ideology, in Texas' case the standardized accountability system, then democracy concerns have often been ignored (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). When local control of aspects of student needs is taken away, community choice is sacrificed and personal choice is lost. Additionally, standardized assessment accountability provides a decontextualized environment that is devoid of ethical concerns (Horn, 2001). An educational leader aware of caring paradigms can be insulted by a single-minded devotion to numbers without consciousness of ethical concerns. Furthermore, a

marriage to numbers and the ranking that results reveals no beauty, no aesthetics. Education is as much an art form as it is a science; Strauss (1993) referred to it as a “proper style” (p. 60). Ignorance of the art gives undue strength to the science.

The Pragmatic Path

The pragmatic path is a construct developed to help focus critical pragmatic ideals into action and additionally add the concept of continual evaluation of aesthetics, ethics, and democracy. The pragmatic path reminds one to not only focus upon a desirable consequence but to also aim for a desirable journey as well. Growth and learning are found along the path, not at the end of it. The pragmatic path reflects primary influences from Cherryholmes (1999), Strauss (1993), and Gardner (1999).

The pragmatic path affects leadership decisions in two primary directions. First, the path guides the leader to a classical pragmatically pleasing consequence. Dewey (1916) characterizes this knowledge as “that which has been organized into our disposition so as to enable us to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live” (p. 344). Additionally, the path builds a complex context by reminding the leader in a critical fashion that value is gathered from the process along the route to the target consequence. The primary value and source of aesthetic consequences comes from evaluation during the process, not necessarily from crossing a finishing point. The major tenet of the path is reflection and the admission of fallibility (Cherryholmes, 1999). By continual reevaluation, a leader can flexibly adjust a school’s momentum and plan. A strict adherence to a systematic recipe would not allow such flexibility. Experimentation in searching for the most meaningful route to a consequence lends the path power. A leader who adheres to the path, continually adjusting and checking for power conflicts, will see substantive growth and change in the school organization. Bullying threats from numbers cannot bring a similar holistic change.

However, and conversely, conscientious following of the pragmatic path cannot help but affect standardized numbers. This should not sound groundbreaking, for aesthetically, educators should often hope that quality education should positively affect accountability results. By following the pragmatic path, educational leaders place the horse back in front of the cart by having policy aim for achievement instead of having achievement dictate policy.

Leadership along the Path

Educational leaders need to be mindful of the necessities brought by the requiring of accountability standards. Certain numbers must be achieved in order to satisfy governmental mandates representing some form of quality, such as the devilishly complex indicator of “yearly improvement” as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (TEA, 2002), referred to hereafter as NCLB, over and above the indicators of individual, school, and district passing rates.

Additionally, educational leaders need to be cognizant of improving student growth. Regardless of accountability pressures, the ethical leader aims for student educational growth (Kincheloe, 2001). Without growth, the *raison d'être* of a school disappears. While carefully balancing these two concerns, an educational leader must also weigh the democratic needs of the community and the chance that democratic notions are not without risk (Starratt, 2001). Students represent the community and the community has a vested interest in preserving its particular ideals through its students' education. Democracy gives the particular twist that standardized accountability has a difficult time meeting. A leader can gain guidance by utilizing the pragmatic path, prioritizing democracy and aesthetics while reflecting upon requirements in an effort to provide students a quality education. The path can provide this tool and ability.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to illustrate a case for the possibility of the pragmatic path. As a theoretical construct, the path does not require measurable, tangible proof. However, through inquiry of leadership perspectives, an atmosphere favorable for the use of a pragmatic path was sought. Once such an atmosphere was found, the construct could be illustrated by theoretical use, by leaders becoming cognizant that options such as the pragmatic path could exist. Additionally, the pragmatic path does not theoretically work in isolation as a systematic scheme, but as a guiding principle in how decisions are made and how a school is led.

I was particularly interested in finding if leaders could develop aesthetic pragmatic consequences that recognized the influence of standardized accountability. Additionally, leaders were queried about how change and growth affect leadership when considering standardization and the aesthetic pragmatic path and how the school reflects those diverse concerns. Most importantly, I searched for the focus on student concerns in leadership under these influences.

Because of the fervor for standardized accountability spreading from the federal government, particularly with the NCLB, this study is timely. I have intended this study for administrators feeling frustration at the preeminence of standardized data directing schools away from the educational foundations most leaders are grounded in. A human element must be present in education and should not be ignored. The pragmatic path can provide a method and manner in which to direct policy and affect change on the way to educational growth.

Researcher Reflection

To gather this contextual information, emerging leader perspectives regarding the ability to integrate standardized accountability were juxtaposed against their previously held critically pragmatic aesthetic ideals of a school. Administrators

were asked to reflect on their aesthetic ideals for a school and then reflect on the challenges to those ideals. The researcher, on a pragmatic path of his own, had presupposed an aesthetic consequence in answer quality, but was willing to adjust and change these presuppositions according to the themes derived through the data. This created a subtle parallel pragmatic path, complete with permutations of variables (Strauss, 1993) affecting action in the research. Further investigations could include issues of democracy, social justice, ethics, and spirituality. Because of its affective connection, aesthetics is a good place to start when investigating leader beliefs, orientations, and preferences (Sergiovanni, 1996).

Findings on the Surface

Texas provided a varied backdrop for data acquisition as I visited the educational leaders at their home schools. Travels were conducted over a three week period during the late winter, or in public school terms early in the spring semester, and communities were selected for their specific demographic characteristics. A dusty small town in west Texas represented vestiges of wealth from the oil boom days while a suburban Hill Country city reflected new, transitional wealth and rapid growth. A poor community in south Texas near the Mexican border revealed influences of intense need for support. A comfortable central Texas town astride a national thoroughfare and a larger city near the Louisiana border in east Texas were chosen for their lack of wealth along with their geographical locations. A cross-section of Texas may reveal no geographical similarities because of the sheer size of the state and variety of its climates and geology, but it does reveal similarities in school leadership. In all, nine leaders were involved, distributed evenly between elementary, middle, and high schools.

The common bond, the unifying tie, of course, is Texas' standardized accountability system. The ubiquitous tests which dominate such an ominous spot of the educational calendar provide a focus for most school's educational efforts. My visits occurred around the time of the first of the annual administrations of the TAKS. Administrators at each level had assessments facing them directly, bringing a sort of urgency and relevancy to their responses about the accountability system. Few administrators were opinionless.

Sorting through the findings and themes and examining some of the external manifestations of standardized accountability immediately revealed several observations. The primary observation, of a qualitative nature, attempts to categorize administrators along a perceived continuum regarding the extent of domination exerted by standardized accountability or aesthetics on leadership styles. As a start, five fairly distinct classifications have emerged from the collected data. These classifications are dynamic and subject to change; they merge with each nuance, each element, of leadership action. Looked at globally, however, these classifications reveal general patterns of influence. While a definition of labels is a decidedly non-critically pragmatic exercise, at this point, the

quality of the continuum seems interesting. Leader contributions build a contextual base, but, as will be seen later, post-modern analysis reveals discourses of power in the responses that were perhaps unintended. Positions on the surface may seem direct and assured, but subtle voices speak from behind the façade and show that an administrator's path does not necessarily go the direction he publicly proclaims.

Finally, I will present an informal, albeit rudimentary attempt at a theory in order to illustrate the tapestry of the contextual issues. While my bias speaks all along throughout this study, I wanted to see if the data could in any way support the theory of the pragmatic path. One can certainly fit any set of data to any preconceived notion, but I since I am particularly concerned with the theoretical nature of the discussion, I thought it would be instructive if I could find some tangible manifestation of my theory, which I found.

Administrator Attitudes

Administrators react to the pressures of standardization in different ways. While this seems an extremely broad statement, the variety of responses seems to be reliant upon awareness and personal intellectual and ethical levels. The continuum described above runs the gamut from blind adherence to the call of standardized accountability to an enlightened awareness of the goals of education. Strict definition was also a fruitless endeavor, as administrators struggled with their beliefs over a range of topics. One could be a blind follower of the test while still caring and fostering a collaborative network on a campus. A critical pragmatist can accept this flow of definition as the workings of a reflective and adjusting administrator, who has weighed the differing permutations in an effort to build a leadership identity. Without knowing the terminology, most leaders looked for a path as a matter of conscience.

Collecting leader perceptions was a tricky proposition done at a fortuitous time. I tried to foster an atmosphere of interest along with an assurance of confidentiality; some administrators were concerned while others were not. I strayed from a script often in order to chase my own rabbits, my own interests that I felt would add context. Stories of a certain school or admired role models certainly added to the tapestries these administrators wove. I believe the administrators answered sincerely and thoughtfully. Each carefully considered the questions and freely addressed the topic. On some questions, I did not define my parameters intentionally, wanting to see where an administrator would take a certain query. On the other hand, I am somewhat wary of some of the discourse I witnessed, but this will be dealt with later. This may be a way of saying that some answers seemed rehearsed, although that could be an unfair assumption. The critical pragmatist in me requires that I question those aims, though.

Additionally, I was visiting schools at the same time that they were administering one of their many tests. One elementary was atwitter because third graders

were taking the important reading test. This test is important to the youngsters, because, despite the national nominal focus, students who do not pass will be left behind. Third graders must pass the reading test in order to promote. Standardized accountability was very much on the minds of the administrators as its immediacy was facing them directly. This lent a certain boost of opinion, whether it was an effort to convince themselves of better achievement or a preparation for the unknown. Indeed, the state had yet to release the passing standards at the time, so the schools were in a sense batting blindly.

After organizing the leader contributions, a continuum of leadership tendencies emerged, ranging from those administrators who were more influenced by the requirements placed on their position by the state to those who were able to focus on their aesthetic values. The continuum yielded five loosely defined, researcher created, categories of administrator. The “slaves to the test” have sacrificed their aesthetic ideals of school leadership in order to serve the accountability system more completely. The “blissfully ignorant” recognize aesthetics on the surface, but focus efforts primarily on the standardized tests. In the middle reside the “wearily resigned,” who absorb equal bombardment from standardized accountability and aesthetic demands. The “confounders” have a special branch off the continuum. These administrators see the testing as aesthetic and their numbers are many. The final grouping is the “path followers” who have little doubts about accountability achievement and focus on education. Most educators could not accurately categorize themselves, but such an exercise would not be necessary. What is interesting is viewing the responses which illustrate the general areas. Throughout the leader responses, pseudonyms will be used for schools and participants.

Slave to the Test

Administrators who see nothing but test results, plan schools around nothing but achievement of high test scores, and seem to live for the test exist on the far right side of the continuum. These administrators can be told about critically pragmatic concerns, but they will not listen. Some have succumbed to the pressures of job retention. Others base their self-worth on their ability to quickly affect a school’s achievement scores. These leaders make personnel and curriculum decisions based solely upon test performance. Diversity is a foreign language and change is irrelevant except under the guise of score advancement. Creativity is eschewed in lieu of test drills, practices, and indoctrinations. One south Texas administrator gave biweekly benchmark tests in order to track improvement on the test objectives. Another based his and the school’s worth on the efforts of testing a small sophomore group (under the TAAS) to the exclusion of the rest of the school; 30 students hardly represent 200. Yet, because of the state system, those 30 earned a nice title for the entire school.

Another administrator has notebooks for every teacher with lists of students in need, as an ersatz individual plan for each student:

We do an IEP on everybody. We don't wait for special ed. I want to know, what are you going to do. I think we have to realize, particularly, each child's capabilities, each child's limitations, and then you have to know. You can ask any teacher in this building who her struggling child is and she can also tell you what she's doing, because I'm going to ask you that when I come in.

Even though these efforts are done in the students' best interest, the focus seems tilted toward the test. These administrators have truly become slaves to the test.

Blissfully Ignorant

These administrators hear the message of critical pragmatism and the pragmatic path. They make eye contact and nod their heads in agreement when hearing about the need to retain an aspect of aesthetics in the schools. They leave an inservice opportunity well-versed in decision making and reflection and re-evaluation. These leaders then return to the schools and ignore everything that was discussed. They are blissfully ignorant of the possible transfer of theory into practice and do not see how those "good" ideas can apply to their school. A typical response could look like this administrator's:

I don't think you'll find any administrator that likes standardized accountability. I mean it's not the save-all, cure-all. But I've been in education for quite a while and what I've seen over the years; things go in cycles in education and if you stay in it long enough you'll get back on that cycle. Something that was started 20 years ago, all of a sudden it's important again and that's just the nature of education.

Educational trends are cyclical and can be easily ignored until they disappear. These leaders have never implemented any program of aesthetic change and are much too busy trying to achieve test scores to experiment. They also reside on the right side of the continuum and need feedback continuously to break the blissful ignorance and try to follow a pragmatic path.

The Warily Resigned

Most administrators probably reside in this category. As indicated by the title, these leaders have accepted standardized accountability for the force it is in their schools. Their frustration resides in the over-reaching influence the system has. One administrator explained:

I think that first I would appear to be negative toward it [standardized accountability], but it's not true. But I think there is a limit. I am the district test coordinator for Blissful Middle School. Hanging on my wall over there is a calendar that's got sixteen different test dates. And again let me make

this point, I think that we crossed the line. I've got that calendar on my wall. There's sixteen dates the state has mandated that we test. Now we're throwing on benchmark testing on top of that and then we just had a deal where they're trying to see if we can do the TAKS testing on line, so we're involved in that. And I got to tell you that our kids are tested out.

Frazzled school leaders in these cases seem to still be guided by aesthetic ideals which they actual try to periodically implement. One principal characterized some of her recent efforts:

I'd like to see our teachers focus on staff development and want that intrinsic value of wanting to learn more. I'd like to see, and hopefully next year we'll start a book study as a staff. I'd really like to see that more intrinsic value to learn more about the profession rather than me assigning it. And we're getting there, slowly but surely. I like to see everyone on the team.

A different middle school leader categorized his attempts at an aesthetic focus a little differently:

We use all the different modalities of teaching to hook that kid and we take that child as far as we can possibly take them in the time that we have them. And now as a principal you need to be aware of those modalities You need to understand that the kids don't just sit on that silver line in the classroom anymore and they don't just all sit down and hang on the notes that are on what you have to say and take the notes. Kids have different learning styles and if anything principals need to be exposed to brain research and understand that our kids learn differently than what we learned as we were growing up. Then we need to be sure our staff has the training and the staff development continuum where that they actually learn about brain research and how our kids learn and then what's the best way to teach to that.

Caring lingers in primary efforts that are not simply test requirements. Burnout is a constant fear as well as resignation. These administrators felt they could make a difference, but are losing the battle to decontextualized requirements. Because they are conscientious leaders, they continue to responsibly guide a school on a more or less pragmatic path.

The Confounders

This group of administrators presents a quandary to the far left pragmatic path follower, who will be described in the next section. These leaders genuinely see standardized accountability results as aesthetic, providing for a pleasing goal for a school. The act of enumerating and evaluating a school via testing is seen as

compatible to the pragmatic path. One particular leader describes her excitement with an innovative opportunity to enhance the accountability process:

I really just must say that we do TAKS disaggregation and where we take each student and we break down their scores and see. And we also do benchmark testing. I think that's crucial to look to see for growth. We also do all the state assessment. I think is crucial for growth to see.

This group leans to the left of the continuum and represents an end product that I am not necessarily looking for but can possibly accept; they are also quite numerous, more so than expected. This group has already compromised the ideals of critical pragmatism and standardization and has moved forward. My comment would be that their grounding is hollow and easily deconstructed. Once again, using testing to evaluate a system is problematic; using it to diagnose is acceptable. Those who accept this system as aesthetic are not reflecting critically enough, confounding the path with correct discourse but incorrect depth.

The Path Followers

Those leaders who exist in this group often have the luxury of working in a school where test results are not a major concern, generally in wealthy, predominantly white schools. It is easy to be creative and diverse where the risk is minimized. One principal remarked:

When this school was in the forming stages, I said to myself, I want to be a principal at that school because the potential. If this school would be out of, the parents we have, the affluent community I think is astronomical. And then when we got here, there was no doubt that's what we were aiming for.

Another particular leader from a wealthy school went through this entire litany of elements for the ideal school and did not mention the accountability system once, relying solely on aesthetic ideals:

That's a facility that is not compromised so that energy and time isn't wasted fixing leaky roofs and light bulbs and is safe. That doesn't necessarily mean new, but a facility that is functional, clean. Because I think how we show ourselves is a reflection of what we believe about ourselves, so free of vandalism, free of litter. That first impression is important for parents and for students. And that we care, so I think a facility is important. Faculty whom are trained in brain theory research so that they are more comfortable with giving kids opportunities to move about, especially in a block scheduling situation, state changes, teaching to the modalities. But, faculty who are also connected with kids more than just what they teach in their classrooms,

whether it's sponsoring a club or volunteering for tutorials. Making it a true community of volunteers to help out each other.

While these leaders are commended for their focus on school aesthetics, the leaders from challenging schools who also choose the pragmatic path are of particular interest. These leaders recognize their school's strengths along this pragmatic path, as evidenced by this elementary principal:

I like it because it's a diversified school. It's not, we have high Hispanic population. We have a high African-American population, and we have a good sized Anglo population, so we bring a lot of cultures here. That's one thing I like. . . . Another thing I like is that even though it is a socio-economically disadvantaged school, we do extremely well. Our students do extremely well. They test extremely well, and we have some very, very good kids. And I think it's because we have some good teachers. I have a good base of teachers at this school.

These leaders see a school as a place for education and not always for score achievement, although score achievement can be a focus. Education in these schools takes the guise of many forms, not only a decontextualized standard form.

Theorizing the Pragmatic Path

I assumed in this study that educational leaders could use my construct of a pragmatic path in order to help with the meshing of standardized accountability concerns and aesthetic concerns. What I found is that administrators already utilize a path with elements of critical pragmatism to survive as leaders. I found similar themes and concerns, discussed here briefly, that indicate that educational leaders are cognizant of the multiple permutations of action in a school community even if they are not familiar with the theoretical backgrounds of the terms and ideas. School leaders must become adept at juggling the many paths converging and diverging, each with its own intrinsic level of importance. The problem-solving aspect of school leadership could benefit from the constant reflection and reevaluation process required by the pragmatic path. While some of the responses can become dogmatic or reflexively instinctive, a path with its own individual aesthetics can be seen running through each leadership pattern. What varied individually was the orientation of the aesthetic values.

Throughout the data, a primary concern for children's welfare permeated. Each leader proclaimed an over-riding concern to do what was best for the students. Interestingly enough, most also felt that their duty was to constantly remind teachers of this concern, as if teachers did not intrinsically have the same orientation. One administrator mentioned while explaining her influence on the school:

It's been a challenge here because the climate was very different from how I like a school to run when I first came. Student centered, very student based, really making all decisions based on what's best for students rather than what's best for teachers. It was a very teacher-oriented campus, so it's been an interesting process to try and get that mindset to start to change and get us more student-focused.

Most educators are in the business because they do care about children; this is rarely questioned of conscientious teachers and administrators. These administrators took the additional duty of actively advocating for student interests, keeping their needs in the forefront as a whole.

This concern also feeds into administrator feelings of the ability of children to learn. One elementary administrator combined the above issues with student ability when describing her influence at her school:

I know what to do now. I know what to do to make children successful. You hear it over and over, all children can learn, that's so trite, but it's true. It's true. They all can. It may not mean they can learn at the same pace and these things, but I've learned that I'm not going to lose anybody and that's the approach I have when I come in here and work with children. I think I can get everybody to pass.

Most school leaders assimilate the popular mantra of "all children can learn" without question. To not accept it would lead to inherent frustration over the fruitlessness of the job.

A real frustration experienced by all the administrators was the appropriateness of the accountability system. Each one of them supported it in their own way to some degree. Each felt, regardless of bias, that the testing results reflected their school correctly. What was questioned was a reflection of the Texan social justice scheme, that each student's ability to take a particular test was primarily predicated upon his chronological age. A middle school principal emphatically expressed this situation in his school:

Let's use a term called age-appropriateness. If indeed our kids, it's appropriate at this point in their life, I think that this high stake testing does help them with some of those high order thinking skills. But I can tell you right now I've been in this business a long time and if a kid is not appropriate for him at this point in time to learn those high order thinking skills, I don't give a rip how many times we test him, I don't care what the state says, I don't care what somebody's opinion is, it is not going to happen and that's a fact. And many of our kids that we're putting through this high-stake test, it is not age appropriate for them. So what are we finding out? We're not finding out anything about them. Test them in a year and a half and find out

that they've changed and all of sudden can handle these concepts. Right now they can't.

Cognitive ability of readiness was not a factor in testing, as age of student (and concomitant grade assignment) determined when a student took a particular test. An elementary principal had a particular wish regarding the new high-stakes 3rd grade reading situation:

I would wish that it would start at the fourth grade level instead of the third grade level. I say that, I don't mean that we should just forget everything. Yes, you still need to prepare at the younger grade levels. But I think the testing, I think they're more developmentally ready at that fourth grade age. Of course that's just my opinion.

The assessing of students without the factoring in of contextual, individual data did not make sense to the administrators. Individual learning factors are important and are not addressed on the standardized assessment. Part of that problem, of course, is the difficulty in grading large numbers of individually attuned assessments and compiling a list of general ratings. That statement was meant to be ironic. Education involves educating the individual child. Schools cannot blindly group themselves generally; students, parents, and the community would not accept that practice and current best educational practice does not support that. The state's assessment, however, does just that, blindly group a school without individual or contextual data. Frustrations are an inevitable by-product. Educational leaders are faced with preparation anyway, as described by this urban principal:

I think you'd be foolish, you'd be in denial and out of a job if you said, if you ever got a reply from any principal who said, "Well, it doesn't do anything to affect my leadership style. I just let them go and do what they want to do and we hope for the best." Don't think that's very wise.

What an administrator does with the school when not preparing for the assessment was interesting to find.

An aesthetic focus was a refreshing addition to the school mode. Leaders expressed a common desire to have the students be exposed to the community and not sequestered within the school walls. One principal from a wealthy district explained that his school was "not the real world" because most of his students came from homes of incredible privilege. He hoped to get the children actually working in the community, not simply writing checks for a fund raiser, to show them that they are "blessed" and not necessarily "entitled" to their advantages. Other leaders proclaim efforts at extra-curricular activities which add dimension to a student's education. Wealthy schools in particular were able to offer a more

varied aesthetic education, which should not be surprising. One non-wealthy school was going through the painful process of cutting extra programs, a painful hit to that principal's aesthetic sensibilities. Regardless of situation, some effort at service and aesthetics seemed to be an element of the school, even if standardized accountability seemed to dominate a majority of the actions.

This meshing of aesthetics with standardized accountability seemed to indicate the existence of a pragmatic path, even if the principals had no idea what that was. Because of the sheer number of decisions needing to be made, the leaders had to be reflective and flexible. Few confessed to being able to keep a consistent schedule. One claimed it was "hopeless" while another claimed the nature of the job was "reactionary." An elementary principal described an epiphany regarding school leadership through a story:

Finally it dawned on him—that's the job. Those interruptions are the job he said. To me it was one of those "aha" experiences when all of sudden I realized those interruptions and annoyances that I've looked at before, that's the job of the principal. You can't, "Don't bother me now I'm too busy. I'm working." Whatever you do, just stop. If it's a teacher, if it's a child, if it's a parent, "Come on in. How can I help you?" And that's the job because all that other stuff can wait till later or you can do it at night. But I think that that's the job of the principal, and probably the superintendent too, is your life is just full of interruptions. And they're not annoyances. That's the job.

Choosing how to lead a school involved the careful consideration of the permutations affecting the path. Each leader had a goal, or vision of a "big picture," but few operated with a systemic recipe.

So, can I categorically state that there is a pragmatic path and leaders should use it? That kind of statement would be foolish and against the aims of a critical pragmatist. Starting and ending points are so temporal that a delineation would be unnecessary. The data reveals, through my critical lens, that leaders do reflect, do reevaluate, do keep a mind on aesthetic consequences, and do accept error as a way to correct situations. The next logical, cognitive step would be an acceptance of the pragmatic path as a guiding, and not subtle, model for leadership. Remembering democratic ideals and aesthetic beauty and experiences on the journey as valuable would add a strong dimension to leadership. Most of these administrators exhibited evidence of pragmatic path consideration and would seem like reasonable subjects for further active pragmatism shaping.

Summary

The primary roadblock to pragmatic path attainment seems to be awareness of the terms. Leaders need to be tangibly instructed in the practices of reflection

and reevaluation, choosing paths for their schools that incorporate aesthetic characteristics. When these paths of education coincide with acceptable standardized scores, an obviously happy medium can be achieved.

There are always difficulties when trying to implement a theory into practice. Critical pragmatism is enough of an esoteric theory that mass attainment and implementation would be slow, if possible. Most Texas administrators have not heard of the terms and could be intimidated by the words; few leaders even recognize the name of Dewey. Yet, all Texan educational leaders face the reality of standardized accountability in the schools. Even though standardization is ever present, the shifting bar of standards makes administrator's goals ever elusive. Because this accountability system produces a tangible document purportedly representing a system evaluation, complete with a quality label, school administrators tend to focus their primary efforts into satisfying its needs. Those leaders who can grasp the pragmatic path and recognize it for the tool it can be will find the ability to mesh the seemingly disparate ideas of aesthetics and standardization with greater ease. Awareness is the key. Students deserve an aesthetically based education.

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