

SQuARE

Status Quo Awareness and Resistance Education

QUENTIN WOODS

Pine Tree Intermediate School in Longview, TX

Abstract

Status quo is defined as “the existing state of affairs”; therefore, status quo can be identified as positive or negative depending on the circumstances in any particular situation. Many educational authors have written about this timeless subject, and these authors’ viewpoints are presented concisely in this project. With the help of movie quotes and historical references, this article describes the drawbacks associated with the status quo, and the reason(s) why the status quo so prevalently exists.

I’m not interested in preserving the status quo; I want to overthrow it.

—Niccolo Machiavelli

Introduction

In the first installment of *The Matrix* (Silver, 1999), Morpheus provides the main character, Neo, a choice between taking a blue pill and a red pill. The blue pill will send Neo back into the Matrix. For Neo the Matrix is familiar; it is all he has ever known. It is his reality. Yet, the red pill provides Neo an opportunity out of the Matrix and into the truth of how the world truly exists. Morpheus tells Neo by taking the red pill, “You stay in wonderland, and I’ll show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” Ironically, the real wonderland is the Matrix (Silver, 1999).

Neo is faced with a moral dilemma, a crisis of belief. Does he return to the fictitious world of the Matrix, or does he leave the Matrix to live in a reality so

foreign to him that it will challenge his every rational thought? Consequently, Neo does choose the red pill.

Later in the movie, Cyphar reveals his inner thoughts to Neo as they foreshadow his eventual betrayal. Cyphar discloses, "I know what you are thinking. I have been thinking about the same thing. Actually, I have been thinking about it since I got here. (Deep breath, then a sigh.) Why, oh, why didn't I take the blue pill?"

This is a significant scene in the film. On one hand, you have a character desiring to go back into the Matrix. On the other hand, Neo well intends to never return to the counterfeit Matrix. Just the opposite has occurred. Leaving the Matrix has given Neo new life, meaning, and purpose.

Educators too have a choice. We can play the part of Neo or Cyphar. Neo leads us to new enlightenment and the hope that our future will be brighter and better than our past. The Neos of education question the status quo and look to new paradigms. Cyphar escorts us back to status quo where nothing changes and nothing is ever questioned. We can remain in a status quo world much like the Matrix, or we can leave status quo behind for "the undiscovered country" described by Hamlet in Shakespeare's tragedy.

Status Quo

According to Merriam-Webster (2006), *Status quo* is a Latin term meaning "the existing state of affairs." In other words, to maintain the status quo is to keep things the way they presently are. In many situations, educators have a desire to maintain the status quo in the classroom, on their campus, or in their district. In fact, there is often a great resistance to any push toward change. Why do educational leaders wish to keep their campus, district, and education at large status quo? There are three underlying answers to this intriguing question. The first answer relates to how leaders handle their power, authority, and control. The second answer is based on how leaders cling to the past, also known as *romanticization*. The third answer has to do with outdated research.

Power, Authority, and Control

The power to lead is an extremely delicate situation since it gives individuals the ability to corrupt, transform, or maintain the status quo. Leadership can be extremely appealing and illusory at the same time. Based on the following research, there are five reasons why administrators keep the status quo centered on power, authority, and control.

First, leaders have difficulty surrendering power and control (Kochan & Reed, 2005). Leaders like the spotlight and the influence to shape people's lives (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Leaders generally want to see their work completed prior to their death. This is why they build grand monuments and choose

successors. Even in departure or demise, they can still control generations to come. Few leaders prepare for their exit from leadership roles successfully. Regardless of whether leaders are well meaning or autocratic, they have issues with relinquishing the authority bestowed upon them (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Leaders have a special place in history since they often have the luxury of writing their own story. This is suggested at the very beginning of the movie *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995). Sir Robert the Bruce avows, "Historians from England would say I am a liar, but history is written by those who have hanged heroes." This is in agreement with what Scheurich (1994) points out as "might" makes "right" (p. 25). In other words, those who possess control dictate policy. They create the truth that history records. Thus, the correlation between truth and power is born. Some leaders have difficulty with relieving their command because they will no longer inscribe history with their signet ring.

Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) discuss the second reason when they write, "The good administrator, teacher, and student can, with talent and knowledge, manipulate the organization but cannot change the basic nature of schools as autocratic hierarchies which serve the interests of the status quo" (p. 79). This is a discouraging notion at best. First, literature bias keeps certain minority administrators, particularly women, off a level playing field (Scheurich, 1994). Second, parents, students, and the community at large force schools to maintain social classes instead of breaking down these barriers to promote social mobility (Quantz et al., 1991). With these exterior forces working together, high-quality administrators can only do so much before status quo takes over.

First-rate administrators face a third reason resulting in status quo's survival. Leaders know whom they work for (Anderson, 1996). They know their supervisor's abilities and limitations. Campus administrators also know how far to push an issue or question a decision made by the superintendent. They want to stay in their positions of authority and do not want to make their bosses angry enough to be replaced. Subsequently, some leaders feel powerless (Quantz et al., 1991). Educators know not to create too many waves. For, if they do, they might have an early departure from the district. In some settings, keeping the status quo means keeping senior management happy.

The fourth reason why status quo continues to thrive is the lack of democracy in this great democratic nation's schools (Anderson, 1996). Without participatory leadership from staff and students, school administrators get to make all of the decisions. It is easy to make the decisions when all you have to do is convince one person, yourself, that your verdict is the right decision. It takes hard work, dedication, commitment, and most of all your time to provide staff and students democratic processes that truly give feedback on the policies and procedures of how the school should function. Many leaders are simply not interested in making this investment. They are too busy keeping parents at bay or their superiors happy (Quantz et al., 1991).

Lastly, tradition (Bogotch, 2005) and routine (Gardner, 2000) force administrators to perform at lackluster levels. How many times do we hear, “That’s the way it has always been done”? And without question, administrators buy into this mentality for many of the reasons already mentioned. Ultimately, leaders who desire to become change agents are held back by the status quo. Status quo tells us to keep traditions and routines that are established when a new leader begins at a new campus or district. Since a school district is to align itself with its community, the community has power to dictate many of the superintendent’s decisions. Thus, the community-at-large via the school board has difficulty letting go of their authority so they may experience a different kind of education for their young people.

Based on these five reasons, it is understandable why status quo continues to be a real and present danger today in America’s schools through the challenges based on power, authority, and control. However, as we look toward questioning authority and leadership succession, we must move away from the status quo toward developing democratic societies on our campuses.

Romanticizing the Past

It only seems natural that the second challenge with status quo would simply be another form of status quo. *Status quo ante*, which means “the state of affairs that existed previously” (Merriam-Webster, 2009), is the perfect synonym for romanticizing the past. When we romanticize the past, we not only relive the glory days of a past life or an event, but we also tend to only remember the positivity of such.

When we reflect on the past, we tend to look at two different angles. First, we look at leaders or people who played significant roles in our lives. Second, we tend to look at our overall life and the circumstances of our life at that specific time. Regardless of how or why, there are many dangers when we romanticize the past.

We often romanticize about the leaders of a specific time period. We do this by exaggerating the leader’s role in that era (Russo, 2005). For example, many elderly Americans vote “democrat” due to the fact that President Roosevelt was a Democrat, and it was his *New Deal* plan that lifted the United States out of the Great Depression. However, it is important to remember that romanticizing the past does not always include a positive connotation. Leaders are condemned when organizations fail even when they were not a part of the cause of the failure. President Hoover was blamed for the Great Depression since he did not interfere with the economy, knowing that the economy would go through bullish and bearish markets. He did not want the Great Depression, and he certainly did not cause it. Yet, he was blamed for it, and to this day many remember his presidency based on his failure to keep the United States out of a lasting depression (R. Rose, personal communication, July 11, 2006).

The second way to romanticize the past is through nostalgia and sentiment about select time periods. Educators are more likely to use this type of romanticization. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) warn that nostalgia is embedded with sentiment as they affirm, “Nostalgia comprises selective, distorted, and idealized views of the past that are contrasted against embittered experiences of the present” (p. 238). In the movie *Dune* (De Laurentiis, 1984), Duke Leto Atreides gives similar advice to his only son and heir, Paul. The Duke knows that he is about to be betrayed by someone close to him. In one of his last conversations with Paul, Leto warns, “Never let sentiment cloud your judgment.” Educators should take heed of this warning as well. Nostalgia and sentiment can obscure our judgment as effective leaders. It creates a thick fog we must navigate through the sea of education.

In my current district, I often hear of the district’s glory days back in the 1980s. Although mandated tests had just begun that decade, scores were good, football teams were making the play-offs every year, and community support was high due to the strength of an oil-based economy. However, those times would not last. Administration and teachers tried to preserve the status quo since the status quo was going great. After a decade or more, scores were dropping, football teams were losing, the economy flailing, and community support waned. Ever since then, there has been a romanticization of the past in this town and school district.

In a more general sense, older teachers often tell me that the glory days of education have long gone. These teachers are guilty of romanticizing the past by recalling only the favorable parts of their early education career. If they could go back in time with an objective point of view, they would visualize a truer reality with both positives and negatives. Although it is important to recognize what has worked in the past (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) by collaborating with older personnel to better understand the campus culture, we must avoid the temptation of romanticizing the past.

Outdated Research

As leaders are reluctant to give up their power, they romanticize about their past success. They reflect on what has worked in the past and assume this will work again in the future. This brings us to the third reason as to why status quo lives on. It relates to how leaders still trust in organizational theories developed well over 300 hundred years ago. This section will focus on the history of organizational research, and the two implications of this research: manufacturers and products.

In my opinion, one of the greatest one-season TV shows of my generation, *Battlestar Galactica* (Larson, 1978), personifies the outdated research so many educational leaders are still wholesaling. The show was based on a fictitious peace treaty between the Twelve Colonies (i.e., humans) and the Cylons. The Cylons, led by the betrayal of the human Baltar, used the peace conference to lure the battlestar fleet in one place so a Cylon surprise attack could wipe out the fleet

rendering the colonies on the 12 planets vulnerable for hostile takeover as well. *Battlestar Galactica* epitomizes the classic struggle of man versus machine. This theme has been prevalent in other movies including *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991) and *The Matrix* (Silver, 1999).

In a metaphorical way, this is what obsolete scientific theory has done to education. Educational leaders are very much in a struggle to preserve humanity in our social organizations (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Theory formulated in the 17th century was heavily centered on breaking objects and systems down into parts, and this theory is still dictating how we operate schools in the 21st century (Wheatley, 1999). When looking at scientific management, institutional, or rational theory, it is important to recognize the history as well as the two implications of such theories, machines and products, and how this relates to the third issue as to why status quo continues to thrive.

History of Organizational Theory

The foundations of the “mechanical view” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 195) rests in the research of Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and Isaac Newton (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) write, “These thinkers helped create a world that was viewed as rational, linear, and understandable through thought and reason” (p. 195). With this research, philosopher John Locke was able to transcend this thinking into the social and economic arenas of everyday life. Locke was able to convince much of society into accepting that the purpose of life was to exploit governments and institutions for self-gratification. This is where our current culture of consumerism and greed began (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Locke’s theories were not the only ones accepted by our society. Dantley (2005) writes about Frederick Taylor’s theories on the scientific management paradigm, or what he calls *Taylorism*. Taylorism stresses that there is only one way to perform a task correctly, and that one way is the most efficient way to get the job done. By believing this theory, there is no problem we cannot understand based on reason, and there is no situation we cannot overcome through rational explanation.

Bacon, Descartes, Newton, and Locke were merely mortal men. They could persuade, enlighten, and enchant only so many social spheres. They needed a catalyst to bring about such revolutionary change to society at large. The catalyst they needed was the industrial revolution (Kochan & Reed, 2005). Kochan and Reed (2005) add, “The rapid industrialization of the United States reinforces this production mentality of schools and leadership” (p. 69). Therefore, the history of this mechanical view not only came from theory and philosophy, but from the practical application of such during specific periods of time throughout history, specifically the industrial revolution.

Schools as Machines

Understanding the origins of these theories is not nearly as important as comprehending the implications of these theories. According to Wheatley (1999),

Newton's theory "leads us to the belief that studying the parts is the key to understanding the whole. Things are taken apart, dissected literally or figuratively, and then put back together without any significant loss" (p. 10). Taking this belief and combining it with the industrial revolution we can see this notion come to fruition. For example, take the invention of the assembly line. As a worker on the line, I had only one task. My task came after several previous tasks, and my task would allow others to perform their work later down the line. If my part broke or I was unable to perform my task, the problem was corrected, and the assembly line kept on rolling.

There are synonymous terms for the mechanical view. Both Wheatley (1999) and Hargreaves and Fink (2006) describe the mechanical view as a "closed system" based on physicist Ilya Prigogine's work. The addition of this term simply designates that a system is independent from other systems. There is no connectivity or interconnectedness to other processes. Russo (2005) elaborates on this rational perspective by defining "technical rationality" (p. 94) as the activities arranged to attain specific and predetermined goals with the greatest efficiency. Therefore, organizations are described as machines with closed systems built for specific purposes. These machines use the greatest efficiency possible. Machines are independent and have no connection with other systems or processes. Again, the assembly line model fits well within this definition.

Since schools are considered to be closed systems (Bates, 1984) that use technical rationality, there are several concerns that emanate from this thinking. Closed systems are defined as systems that wear down and eventually give off all of their energy, never to recover or reclaim this energy to sustain life. Closed systems must eventually wind down and reach equilibrium. By reaching equilibrium, "the system has exhausted all of its capacity for change, done its work, and dissipated its productive capacity into useless entropy" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 76). First, educational leaders and schools will continue to feel powerless and alienated as long as the mechanical view exists (Quantz et al., 1991). With the belief that schools are independent structures, there is no desire to have a relationship with outside influences such as parental and community involvement.

Russo (2005) writes, "Whether organizational structures are intended to produce technical efficiencies or institutional legitimacy, they constrain human activity and relations" (p. 90). Russo (2005) describes this conflict as human nature versus machine. Russo (2005) states, human nature's "importance lies in lived experiences of people in contemporary society" (p. 91). Thus, this type of institutional theory forces organizations to ignore "human interest and agency" (Russo, 2005, p. 100).

In the movie *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991) the T101 model terminator is trying to save a human boy, John Connor, as it faces a more sophisticated terminator machine, the T1000. Despite being an inferior model, the T101 (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) was able to ultimately defeat the T1000 in part due to the T101's design. The T101 was designed to learn from human interaction; therefore, the T101 was quick to adapt to new situations very much like humans. Likewise, schools are not machines that can be broken down into parts

and smaller parts. Schools must have the connectivity of relationships to perform its major purpose: learning.

Students as Products

Hopkins (1994) provides a second major concern with the “mechanical view” in that students are considered products or outputs of the system (as cited in Anderson, 1996). This is easy to misconstrue. A product is something produced. Schools produce graduates, and our outputs are the students as they leave our hallways and go out into the world hopefully as productive citizens. Yet, students cannot be viewed as unemotional tangible objects; they are people with thoughts, feelings, emotions, and souls that cannot be ignored.

As education began to look at its parts more than the whole, the human side of school life faded out of the equation. Educators looked at processes and systems as dependent structures, separate and apart from each other. Fortunately, there is a new science emerging. “Open systems” are described as systems that exchange energy, matter, and information (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 193). Living organizations keep themselves off-balance in order to change and grow. Change is the evolutionary process used only when it is necessary to survive (Wheatley, 1999). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) describe human organizations as complex, living systems that are “open to the outside world, tolerant of new people and ideas, and able to adapt to new circumstances” (p. 162). By challenging authority, participatory democratic processes, and preserving humanity in our schools by encouraging relationship building is how we keep the status quo lifeless.

Combating Status Quo

Combating status quo does not come easily. Focusing on learning, an experience-based initiative used to combat status quo necessarily needs to examine the nature learning and at the same time focus on leadership, democratic ideals, and the work of the scholar–practitioner. Together, these three elements represent a dynamic focusing on learning, that is, each element is essential and each is interdependent with the other at the same required to foster a learning environment that combats status quo.

Learning

At the very center of what education is all about is learning. Every decision, choice, or consequence made by anyone involved in education should be grounded on intensifying learning. To intensify learning, you must have a well-balance curriculum, instruction, and assessment process that is guaranteed and systematic. It must be hands-on and use manipulatives that connect to all three learning styles as well as multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Intense learning also comes from the use of the rigor and relevance model (Daggett, 2010). Learning is life-long for all stakeholders in education, not just for students.

Distributed Leadership

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) explain that distributed leadership is the key to the removal of all the negative attributes associated with authority, power, and control. We must be willing to share authority with others. We cannot carry out this distributed leadership alone, thus it would not be dispersed to others. You may do this by finding others that will help you spark innovation and creativity on your campus. Create more buy-in by delegating responsibility. “Working smarter, not harder” utilizes the talents and energy of all stakeholders giving leadership opportunities to students, teachers, and parents.

Democratic Societies

Students need to see democracy first hand. They need to participate in a democracy on our campuses to understand what it means to live in a democracy when they are old enough to vote and participate authentically. Schools should model the *democratic society* in which we live. For example, students on my campus run for class officer every 6 weeks (Note: the exemplar shared herein is drawn from experience at my previous school). We have four officer positions per homeroom. They are class president, vice president, secretary, and representative. Every 6 weeks, candidates run for office by using posters, banners, and flyers. They also give a speech to the class on why they would make good officers. Every student in the class votes, and the candidate who obtains the majority vote wins the election.

Once in office, I meet with the class officers to discuss critical concepts such as democracy, republic, and servant leadership. Officers are also given an opportunity to present proposals that would make the school a better place. If the proposal is well presented, justified, and does not counter school or district policy, the officers vote on whether they want it to become a procedure, practice, or routine school-wide. Again, if there is a majority vote, it passes the student house. Once a proposal passes, the proposal then goes before the teachers to vote. In this fashion, a proposal must be passed in two houses much like the Senate and the House of Representatives. If the proposal meets teacher approval, it is put into practice according to the specifics of the proposal.

In the past 3 years, there have been several proposals that have come to fruition. One proposal that is now practiced allows students with no discipline issues in a 6-week grading period to break dress code for one school day. Another proposal that passed was a kickball tournament and hot dog cookout to the winning grade-level who had the best TAKS (i.e., Texas’ state-mandated test) scores for that school year.

Scholar-Practitioner

The scholar-practitioner combines the best of both worlds. First, the scholar-practitioner is one who reads and writes current literature and is aware of, as well as creates, new ideas and theories. The scholar-practitioner knows the rhetoric of education’s past. More importantly, the scholar-practitioner merges the

knowledge gained from past experiences with theory of the present to create a bright future for learning better than the practitioner alone. The scholar–practitioner is better equipped to implement current theory than the scholar alone. The scholar–practitioner is not just the principal; teachers, students, and parents should all be scholar–practitioners.

There are two key practical ways to be a scholar–practitioner. First, individuals should stay current on the literature regarding “best practices” in teaching as well as educational leadership skills. Another way is to become a risk-taker by participating in action research. If you see a problem, then ask yourself these questions. Why does this problem exist? What are we going to do about? Then, act on your instincts to make the situation better (Brooks, 2010).

Conclusion

Status quo continues to exist for many reasons such as the vulnerability of leaders to thwart their power and the romanticization of the past. Leaders also have difficulty in letting go of organizational theories that no longer apply to 21st-century schools. Schools should no longer be viewed as machines; students should no longer be considered products.

The Matrix (Silver, 1999) ends with Neo telling the audience:

I know that you are afraid. . . . You are afraid of change. I do not know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this was going to end. I came here to tell you how it is going to begin. I am going to show them a world without rules and controls, without borders and boundaries, a world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

Based on Neo's words, I challenge you to have no fear. I challenge you to instill change in your educational arena. I challenge you to reject the status quo at every turn. I challenge you to begin a new life with new purpose with new meaning. Yet reiterating the words of Neo, the choice is up to you.

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About the Author

Quentin Woods is principal at Pine Tree Intermediate School in Longview, TX. As principal, he works with staff and students to find ways to positively promote expectations and motivate students to succeed. His current research interests include the creation of exemplar lessons that best teach student expectations to elementary students, in particular the minority male student. He may be reached via e-mail at: qwoods@ptisd.org