

National Strategies for Implementing Postmodern Thinking for Improving Secondary Education in Public Education in the United States of America

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss strategies for secondary, public school educators to implement postmodern thinking in the United States of America. Postmodernism is a set of strategic practices that erase limits or norms to abide by placed upon people in society. Jacobs and Kritsonis say the time is now for educators to be recognizant of rapid changes occurring in the school system. They need to be prepared to address these changes. Public school administrators must incorporate postmodern ideas into the secondary school system to implement quality programs in their schools that aides in resolving change. The authors emphasize that if this is not done, secondary public schools will be left behind.

Postmodernist thinking within the secondary, public school system is the wave of the future. This particular type of thinking alludes to reforming the current educational system. It emphasizes the ideology of creating reality with each moment. It brings to the forefront the idea that no one method or teaching/ administrative style appeals to all students or staff. Each child is unique and therefore has unique learning styles. Individual education plans will eventually be implemented for each child in the school system. Moreover, each staff member is unique and brings different talents and skills to the workplace. All of these abilities must be harnessed together to address the rapid changes occurring in the educational system today in order to drastically improve student achievement and workplace solidarity.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss strategies for secondary, public school educators to implement postmodern thinking in the United States of America. The intent

of this article is to focus postmodern thinking as a methodology to improve the current and future educational system. Key strategies will be discussed within the realms of my philosophies- pragmatism and realism- to foster true change. According to Kritsonis (2002), realism is work that is governed by various laws, known or unknown and pragmatism is primarily an American philosophy that is a scientific analysis, learning through experience. The changes mentioned in this article are based upon the goals and outcomes of postmodernism as discussed in the text, The Postmodern Challenge to the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration by Dr. Fenwick W. English, R. Wendell Eaves Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership, School of education, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The ideas presented by Dr. English are geared to help move the current educational system from modernism to postmodernism.

People in society want and seek out conformity, boundaries, and security. This is the basis for modernism. Society likes the conciseness and logic of science, ideas and theories explained simply, and learning how to handle situations under knowledge gained from one perspective. By practicing such beliefs, the rapid changes seen in America's secondary schools are not being addressed properly. Many administrators, teachers, and staff are running schools the same way they did when they first started working in the school system. In a time where school staff have to be motivators, role models, extended parents, disciplinarians, guidance counselors, advocates, and information providers to their students because of their students' specific needs, many secondary schools are falling short on meeting America's kids where they are. Administrators are disciplining kids according to outdated measures and penalties, many teachers are teaching the way they did the first year they began teaching, and school staff are working in bureaucratic schools that believe in the top down approach in making decisions about improving the physical campus, ordering supplies, or assisting in working with students at their respective campuses.

Administrative effectiveness and school discipline, under modernism, are top priorities in schools today because they influence how the school is run as an organization. The goal is to develop strong leadership skills and embed them into schools. It is believed that this will create a culture of learners who feel safe, ready to take risks in the classroom, encourage learners to gain new skills and knowledge, and indoctrinate a school culture with pride for their school and what it represents. When an administration is effective, its workers are thought to be equipped with skills that allows them to better concentrate on performing at their highest standards in the classroom. Moreover, school discipline is seen as a necessary evil in the modern society and is good for all children and adults. It is thought to bring about structure and rules that all members must obey collectively. When there are rules that demand order within the classroom, modernists believe that true learning can occur. Discipline must be consistent and practiced routinely throughout the school and be exhibited by every student and staff member. Each member of the school must be accountable for their actions and become reflexive of what they are seeking to accomplish at the school. As a result, I believe that modernists feel that high gains and successes in student achievement will be seen and predetermined by the commitment level of its staff and learners and definitive rules.

Modernism in schools, according to English (2003), can be seen through bureaucratic leadership. This ideology was created by Frederick Taylor and his

development of the scientific management in the workplace. Taylorism has been instrumental in setting the tone for the field of educational administration. Principals and superintendents within the school system are certified under this guise with the ISLLC standards. Work design is separated from the work itself and universities are seen as the best place or resource for preparing administrators to practice. Under this umbrella, state licensure for administrators is based on simple work-tasks that lower the standards.

Current practicing administrators were not taught four key things, according to English (2003) that help administrators, teachers, and staff adjust to rapid changes in the educational system under the Taylorism design. 1) Practicing administrators have not been presented any knowledge or strategies on how to reform the current social-economic- political structure that schools face on a daily basis. 2) Practicing administrators are not conceptually taught inadequacies that undermine state and national standards and tests. 3) Practicing administrators are not taught how to critically reflect and analyze systemic boundaries that are established by educational hierarchies. 4) Practicing administrators must study everything outside of context instead of within context. As a result, the field of educational administration is rooted in conservative scientific political control. Personal creative control is not encouraged nor expected by school administrators.

However, postmodernism undermines modernism in several ways in the secondary school system. Postmodernism challenges, according to English (2003) the main ideas of how people, in general, function within their world. It values global, international models for organizations and is not based upon science or empirical facts and data. People living and working within this capacity must be able to multi-task and be capable of continual learning. People must also be able to hone in their specialized skills and try to advertise their skills and abilities in certain markets. The workplace should be a place of true democracy. All employees should be considered valuable resources and be encouraged to make decisions regarding their craft. Each worker relies upon the talents and skills of coworkers and self manage by their specific team. The team bases its' work ethic on the culture of the organization and trust and respect each other for differences.

Postmodernists focus on possibilities and do not define things concretely. The current school system is run in a political and bureaucratic way. Old methodologies run rampant throughout the learning process. Schools grasp onto change poorly and it usually takes the leader to convince his stakeholders that change will improve the school. According to English (2003), there are no better schools. Politicians and school officials are always looking for the perfect, utopian school where the administrators, teachers, staff, and students are all working succinctly and achieving at extraordinary levels. There is no such school and any search of this kind will be done in a vain effort. It is notable for educators to realize that schools are only run differently. Therefore, they function in a different way.

Under postmodernism, schools do not need to be based upon business models. Today, many school districts believe that schools should be run like successful businesses. Many educational leaders, especially superintendents, being hired today come from the business industry. The current hope is that leaders with business

experience can fix all of the ailments in the educational system. However, there is no one prescription that yields outstanding results.

Secondary school administrators, teachers, and school staff, under modernism, must go through a period when they must participate in internships where they learn and master current practices and policies. Pedagogy and leadership internships often do not encourage innovative ideas or practices. Creative ideas are not suggested, approved, or well accepted by tenured staff within the school system or by politicians outside of the school system. Status quo is the key to survival within the school system. This ideology would be great if schools did not change in any way. Schools need to be seen as they really are- thriving centers of changing demographics, diverse cultural and social needs, and a multitude of technological advances. If postmodernism is to truly be implemented in secondary schools, educational leaders, teachers, and staff must be willing to devise new methodologies to aide in changing how schools staff are indoctrinated into the system and be accepting of new and original ideas to improve schools. Additionally, school staff should be given the freedom to put their theory into practice.

Moreover, English (2003) emphasizes that the way a person analyzes his or her own reality determines how he critiques the world. This is true of realists working in the school system. School staff members bring their personal philosophies to the school system. What they believe and deem to be true is emphasized by the metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological aspects of each educator's personal and professional philosophies. However, some educators are easily influenced by what they see being presented by the media. As a result, schools are ran upon the ideas from what society emphasizes and desires. Our job, as educators, is not to simply just refine the status quo if we are to make lasting change in the school system. We should seek truth from many dimensions. As human beings, we are complex, multifaceted organisms who cannot be limited to just one extreme. We, like truth, must reside upon the guise of learning from a multitude of sources.

As educational leaders, teachers, and staff members, we must embrace postmodernism and learn to always be mindful of new alternatives to problems or mainstays. We must learn that there are better, more efficient, less costly ways to develop into something much greater than ourselves. True meanings are never fixed because ideas are changeable and developed from a multitude of sources. Patterns are not accepted since everything is subjected to interpretation and contradictions. With postmodernism, educators have to learn how to think outside the box and develop more creative methodologies for solving problems within the school system. We have to step away from boundaries and safety nets we have placed around ourselves and be able to access changeable models.

As a realist and pragmatist, I believe that postmodernism can be implemented into the secondary school system in the United States by making administrators first aware of the fact that true meaning in learning by students and staff can only come about through observing the world and experiencing different life obstacles from several different perspectives. Each student or staff member working or attending the school must be able to construct reality for themselves from a variety of sources. Moreover, I believe that teaching and learning should be demonstrated by a person's own sense of responsibility to grasp or explain knowledge for oneself. Education is only obtained through gaining an

understanding for oneself. It must be presented objectively. Students learn best by being presented authentic knowledge in a format that allows them to use their five senses. Staff members benefit by giving students opportunities to examine factors that can or will change. By knowing this, administrators and educators can begin their exploration into implementing postmodernism within the school system to effect true change.

Postmodernism implementation into secondary education involves three components of philosophy- metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology. Each educator (administrator, teacher, or staff) has different personal philosophical beliefs that they bring into the school system everyday. In order to better understand the educational process, educators need to be aware of how these components tie into the overall picture of how the change process can occur. They all work together in tying in stakeholders' personal beliefs about their craft and each must account for the other in the entire educational process.

Metaphysics involve looking at attempts to provide theory for everything that exists. It is the study of the most generic qualities of events. It is a holistic approach toward looking at qualities or events. Epistemology is the nature of knowledge and is the process at how students and staff arrive at gaining a complete understanding of that knowledge. It encourages the idea of sharing ideas to help others gain knowledge. This belief is the basis for how secondary educators think and act within the school system. Axiology is the values imparted by educators and defines what is of proper conduct.

Every part of the learning process, whether be it for administrators or educational leaders trying to determine methods to implement change or for educators trying to learn new strategies to adjust to change within the school system, must cyclically combine these three philosophical components in learning. Metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology help foster the philosophies of stakeholders in developing new postmodernistic methodologies for the school system. As a result of personal and professional philosophies, the following ten strategies are recommended for all secondary educators practicing in public schools across the United States to implement postmodernism as a change agent in education today:

Strategy I: School administrators must train staff members new methodologies to address change through staff development that addresses non-curricular issues such dealing with students who have mental or physical illnesses, are homeless, have a history of drug abuse, dealing with teenage pregnancy, etc. The staff development being offered for as training on non- curricular issues must have great application potential. Staff members need to be self- starters who work hard at attaining the high standards for their students' academic and social achievement. They must seek out additional educational training through staff development to address non-curricular issues. What appears to be weak or missing components areas in an educator's pedagogy may actually reside around students who lack focus in their education because of outside or external problems and issues they are dealing with prior to coming to the classroom. It is inferred from the text that teachers and school staff may be better prepared to deal with this problem by participating in quality staff development that addresses non-curricular issues.

Urban and rural schools across America are plagued with non-curricular problems like gang violence, bullying, drug/ alcohol abuse or illegal distributing or selling of drugs, teens who are abused for being homosexual, teenage pregnancy, physical and verbal

abuse by parents and relationship partners, teens dealing with mental illness, etc. Staff members in the school need to be prepared to deal with these key issues. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students cannot learn if their basic needs are not met. Staff members cannot teach or administrate students whose focus is on external curriculum issues. School staff members need to be sensitive to students' needs inside and outside the classroom if true learning is to occur.

Strategy II: Secondary school administrators have to find budgetary resources to send secondary educators to conferences that address teaching to students who advance at a rapid pace in their studies. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) calls for all students to be taught a particular concept until the last child in the classroom understands. However, it does not speak to the child who quickly gains an understanding of the ideas presented in the classroom. These children, in particular, are often left frustrated and unmotivated to access higher levels of knowledge. If learning is the key to having a successful future, it should give young minds the ability to see through their current circumstances and develop a sense of wonder about information unknown to them. It widens a learners' perspective about the world. As a result of this current problem, administrators have to discover resources to help teachers and staff members define specific, achievement based learning tools to help these students further develop intellectually.

Too often, secondary educators will use these students as peer tutors in the classroom. This does nothing to advance these students academically, but it does demonstrate their command of the knowledge. Students who are above average need to be given access to more information on topics they have mastered in an effort to support their interests in the subject matter. NCLB implemented in secondary schools primarily focuses on helping low performing to average students gain an understanding at the basic knowledge level, yet it does not speak to interventions or great attention to be placed on those students who do learn at faster paces, but are not eligible or able (due to scheduling conflicts, workload, etc.) to enter advanced placement courses.

Strategy III: Secondary administrators must assist in aiding its leaders and staff in learning how to conduct research to cultivate strategies for practice in order to lead rather than simply just manage schools. True educational leaders do not simply rely upon best practices as determined by certain types of research, but help develop alternative ideas to solutions and create new research approaches and findings. Educational managers just abide by the current rules of the system and do not try something different until told to do so. They rely upon "best practices" to improve their crafts and never question if the research is indeed valid to their current situation. Following proven strategies is indeed great if one is basically trying to develop his or her school according to the standards of another, however, it is not practical for secondary educational leaders when self-assessing their own school issues.

The task to lead is a large one and must be embedded with risk-taking and an enormous amount of self-reflection about key decisions made for the school. Developing new solutions from stakeholders will bring a fresh perspective and more buy-in into ideas and decisions discussed and made by administrators. Leadership is taking the initiative to cultivate new ideas and management is maintaining the status quo. Educational leadership should be about keeping the system running in the same manner

that it has always. Changes will always occur in schools and administrators need to be prepared to deal with them as they come along.

Strategy IV: All secondary administrators, teachers, and school staff must be bilingual to compete with the changes in demographics within the next decade. Educators must be bilingual and able to communicate on an international level. Quality information must be widely distributed to a multitude of cultures. Too often, in our modernistic ways of operating the school system, we as educators are at a loss on communicating with our students and their parents. Being able to diversify within this multilingual society is the key to developing a more international approach toward education. This communication benefit will give every working member in the school system the opportunity to break language barriers and better speak and write to parents and stakeholders within and around the school.

Secondary educators must be able to communicate effectively in multiple languages. It is no longer adequate to state that one must speak in one language. By speaking on English, educators are trying to maintain the status quo and are not preparing themselves for the changes now occurring in schools. More and more immigrants are moving into the United States and are growing population wise at astronomical rates. Students from different countries are filling America's schools and must be provided a quality education. It is the job of secondary school administrators, teachers, and school staff to develop alternative ways to educate immigrants while being able to speak and communicate with them effectively.

Strategy V: All secondary administrators, teachers, and school staff must be trained to make effective school decisions not just based upon hard school data. Student achievement must be every educator's top priority and decisions about it should not just be driven by hard data. Hard data is based upon qualitative and quantitative information. Every stakeholder within the school and community at large must be proponents of student success and data has now been the basis for making important school decisions. School data retrieved from state and district standardized tests are subject to state and local policies and administrative perspectives, values, and theories.

According to English (2003), "effective decisions must take the human factor into account." (pg. 208) He proposes that "data driven decision making" is inherently irrational because: 1) it may not be representational of the entire field and is certainly not objective (meaning unbiased) since it exists within a preformed position or theory; 2) data per se do not contain or project unambiguous signal regarding meaning. The meaning of data is interpretive and requires many other sources of information to establish context, motivation, and intent." (pg. 208- 209) True, actualized learning by students and staff is not validated by hard data because learning involves direct human interactions. This information is crucial to understanding how human interact with each other to create beneficial learning and teaching for students. Educators must realize that data only tells educators one side of the story about student and staff achievement. Humanism must be evident in school improvement decisions.

Strategy VI: Secondary schools must be reconstructed as centers with decentralized management. The overall management and leadership of the school must be left over to its stakeholders to make mistakes and learn from them. It is with this premise that English stresses schools should be seen as part of the democratic process and

not as bureaucratic hierarchies. The top down approach does not allow all members of the school system to become creative. According to English, postmodernists are highly distrustful of hierarchies because no one decision made by one person is right for the entire organization. Every person must be given the opportunity to voice their opinions and put their ideas into action, especially if the person recognizes any defects, such as conflicts with or between staff members, class size issues, teacher shortages, diversity issues etc. within the school improvement process. If this strategy is implemented in secondary public schools, then educators can better define their role and other members of the organization's role in recognizing their interdependence on each other to accomplish their goals and missions.

Decentralized management will give staff members working in America's schools the opportunity to try a multitude of roles within the school system. Current administrative leaders, teachers, and staff will be able to interplay roles to distinguish which skills and abilities they are stronger suited. Teachers and staff would be able to determine if they could function in an administrative capacity or in other roles and administrators could find if they could function in a superintendent's capacity. This would enable staff members to be skilled in a variety of roles and able to deal with any changes that may arise within the school system. For example, teachers will be able to discipline students from a more administrative standpoint or talk to kids about curricular and non-curricular issues from a counselor's viewpoint.

Strategy VII: Secondary administrators must engage teachers and staff in workshops that demonstrate teaching deconstructed knowledge according to the particular content being analyzed. English (2003) writes, "postmodernism utilizes the line of thought and logic contained in a text to turn it in on itself by collapsing categories and exposing circularities and contradictions." (pg. 101) Educators must provide staff members multiple opportunities to analyze a piece of literature from any genre several times to construct meaning and to discover hidden or previously not noted details about the work. This practice should also be used as a tool in the classroom when teaching students. These workshops should teach staff members to analyze a text for meaning during the first reading and for hidden or missed ideas during the second reading. By doing this, students and staff will be able to gain a much deeper understanding of staff development or academic literature.

Strategy XIII: Secondary educators must be trained to work in teams that self-access, are accountable of their work, have authority to change the elements of their job that are not working properly for the good of the organization, and are responsible for each others actions. Teaming allows staff members to identify weaknesses in their programs or departments and try to create new ways for immediately resolving the issues. Each participant in the team should feel that their ideas are valued and allowances for mistakes should be made. Staff members could then become true stakeholders in the educational process.

Teams must be given the leverage to develop new strategies for improving the organization. They have keen insight into what has been working well in their respective programs and what has not. As a group, teams can work together to discuss and assess problems from many viewpoints and develop alternative decisions. By creating alternative decisions, teams will be able to shorten the learning gaps experienced by

many students and staff. This type of postmodernistic approach helps foster the initiation of the end of the educational leadership theory gap and puts it directly into practice.

Strategy IX: Secondary administrators must train their teachers to impart knowledge that is unbiased and not based upon absolute truths and aide students and staff in developing their identities from school culture. Truths taught today can be changed tomorrow. The meanings that educators aide students and staff in creating are based on current realities and come from a multitude of sources. Students and staff members must be taught that all knowledge is questionable and can be replaced with new ideas. Curriculum should be taught in a manner that may or may not be reflective of students' real life experiences. It should be imparted in classrooms whereby students are seen as individuals who are capable of attaining high standards and are able to construct their own meanings out of their own social and physical experiences. Students should be able to determine meaning from any stage in their mental development. Students need to be self learners and take initiative in their learning and in their interactions with peers and adults. Self reliance and independent thinking was what schools are seeking to invoke in students in preparation for the real world outside of the highly structured environment.

Additionally, school administrators must discover methodologies that aide in developing their stakeholders' sense of identity within the confines of the school environment via school culture. Secondary educators must realize that each member of the school organization bases their identity within the school system on the ideas and practices of popular culture. The media dictates what propaganda that is passed on to society. People in power formulate what the public considers as current reality. The general population observes communication in spoken and physical form. Language is the medium through which deconstruction is utilized to create current reality by all segments of society. This develops the morality and ethics of society.

Strategy X: The educational environment must welcome every type of learner and should not restrict anyone in anyway. It should be inviting and captures the interests of its participants- teacher and learner. This can be accomplished by administrators incorporating different strategies to increase positive interactions between stakeholders through character building, award ceremonies not just for academics and sports, but also for school involvement activities like community service, participation in poetry slams and book clubs. Positive interactions between staff members and students help build positive school climates and cultures. School climates and cultures, such as these, foster long- lasting change in the educational system. Application of theory is a must with postmodernism.

In conclusion, postmodernism must be implemented in secondary public schools in the United States to address changes in the school system if progress is to be accomplished. I propose ten key recommendations: 1) school administrators must train staff members new methodologies to address change through non- curricular staff development; 2) find budgetary resources to send secondary educators to conferences that address teaching to intellectually advanced students; 3) assist in aiding its leaders and staff in learning how to conduct research to cultivate strategies for practice in order to lead; 4) encourage staff must be bilingual to compete with changing demographics; 5) train others to make effective school decisions not based upon hard school data; 6) reconstruct schools with decentralized management; 7) engage staff in workshops that

demonstrate teaching deconstructed knowledge; 8) train staff to work in teams that self-access; 9) train staff to impart unbiased knowledge and develop their identities from school culture; and 10) create an educational environment that welcomes everyone and does not restrict anyone. As Americans, we have stifled our growth both professionally and personally by not adapting to changes in the educational system. Strong school administrators, teachers, and staff must be encouraged to take risks for the improvement of the school system.

It is important to remember that allowances for mistakes must be imbedded in this process. Each stakeholder in the American educational system must be given the power to stop defects as soon as they recognize them. They must be able to turn any mistake made into learning opportunities and used to train others in a democratic, positive manner. Negative school cultures must be avoided and schools need to progress to a more decentralized management system where people (administrators, teachers, and school staff) are free to be able to create new and focused theories and apply them to their respective organizations.

References

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