

Making Educational Methods More Lucrative: A Postmodernist's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern thought presents the caveat that academic success will only ensue when administrators begin to become antiparadigmatic. The purpose of this article is to discuss creative strategies for improving postmodern attitudes for public education in the United States. The authors present strategies to help make educational methods more lucrative.

Comparative education has been considered to be the antithesis of postmodern philosophy. Rejecting the notion that changes in organizational structures arise in response to environmental pressures for technical efficiency, early institutional work drew attention to schools' adoption of "rationalized myths" (Booher-Jennings, 2005). However, with some modification, school programs may be improved to appeal to the postmodernist.

The purpose of this article is to discuss creative strategies for improving postmodern attitudes for public education in the United States. A surfeit of educational reform and constant paradigmatic revolutions may attribute to the seemingly perpetual existence of

turmoil in the educational arena. Postmodern thought presents the caveat that academic success will only ensue when administrators begin to become antiparadigmatic. The following recommendations are strategies for improving postmodern attitudes for special programs in public education in the United States.

Reconstruct the Metaphysical Foundations of the Educational Arena

As individuals and subsystems within an organization venture in different strategic directions, pursue different goals, and assign different meanings to organizational signs and symbols, it becomes essential for leaders to unite an organization's membership around a common mission, or a shared vision of the future (Ayers, 2005). As Jacob (2002) contends, simply stated, schools are not neutral institutions designed for providing students with work skills or with the privileged tools of culture; instead, they are deeply implicated in forms of inclusion and exclusion that produce particular moral truths and values.

Metaphysics, the study of the process of thought, is primarily concerned with how one perceives reasons, communicates, or speculates in terms of an abstraction. The main proponents of metaphysics are epistemology and axiology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Axiology is the study of what one values in life and are highly influenced by the culture that one identifies himself or herself with. Axiological beliefs in the educational arena were deeply indoctrinated in hegemony and tailored to suit the average white male.

The struggle within educational administration for its epistemological foundations and the development of a position to shape its intelligence and conceptual boundaries is not new (English, 2003). The epistemological back ground of education was conceptually submerged in the whims of the scientific revolution. Founders in educational administration were convinced that science was the bedrock upon which a new generation of school leaders could be groomed (English, 2003). With the scientific revolution evolved the concept of following monothetic paradigms or "best practices". Paradigms shift incessantly and educational practices are constantly scrutinized and reformed in a scientific effort to find a common solution.

From a postmodern perspective, in order for true transformative change to incur, educational leaders must support paradigmatic diversity. As English (2003) eloquently proclaims:

As long as we insist that only one field is possible and that it is defined by modernistic science, we will continue to substitute paradigm shifts for genuine conceptual change. We guarantee that old ideas will continue to be relabeled and recentered in the name of progress. We are not likely to encounter any real breakthrough unless we reconceptualize education administration as competing fields and employ truly multi-paradigmatic approaches in a wide variety and forms of inquiry. The dominant hold of modernism and its attendant definition of

“right science” must be discarded as a kind of Procrustean baggage of the last century for Lakato’s advocacy of competition of programmes (or paradigms).

Consider All Relevant, Interconnective Factors When Making Data Driven Decisions

In a postmodern transformative multiculturalism, political education contests dominant social issues and ideals and attempts to empower subordinated groups (Jacobs, 2002). On the other hand, the form and matter of current educational policy undermines the importance of the social context and attempts to label academic progress based upon norm-referenced, hegemonic judgments. Educational trends patronize the use of assessment data to drive high stakes educational decisions. According to English (2003), the “data driven” movement is based on the assumption that “‘hard data’ will provide a quantitatively and qualitatively better base and framework for decisions which will lead to improved (more accurate, timely, reliable) decisions.

To make “high stakes” decisions based on the results of a standardized, norm-referenced test further marginalizes certain subpopulations. The academic gap between the socioeconomically disadvantaged and their more affluent counterparts still exists after decades of educational reform. Perhaps this is so because we attempt measure a student’s academic progress by how close his or her test score is to the proverbial “norm”. For a student whose social circumstances are undoubtedly abnormal, this practice is highly iniquitous.

Reform efforts such as NCLB only change a tiny sliver of the context by using test results to gauge student success. Other areas of administrative operations may not be capable of being represented in the same form as standardized test data such as faculty morale, student morale and motivation, parental apathy, etc. (English, 2003). Although many teachers give their lifeblood to sustain academic progress for disadvantaged youths, current accountability measures do not take these qualitative measures into account. Case in point, a child who has gained two years of academic progress within the span of a year is still regarded as a failure if he or she does not obtain a satisfactory score on state mandated assessments. For data to be useful in making administrative decisions it must possess certain characteristics which are interconnective and effective decisions must take the human factor or actor into account (English, 2003). In making educational decisions, we must take into consideration the level that a student is on at the beginning of the school year before stipulating where that child should be at the end of the year. Is it feasible to expect a fourth grade student who began the school year reading on a 2nd grade level to measure up to the standards designated for the “average” fourth grader? What about the teacher who inherits a classroom where over 65% of the students in her classroom are performing below grade level? Is it equitable to compare test results from her classroom to the teacher across town whose students all began the school year reading at or above grade level? Though rhetorical in nature, these poignant questions are of great magnitude in our attempt to ameliorate the ever-present achievement gap.

Refrain From the Imposition of Top-Down Reform

Postmodern challenges call for transformational leadership that facilitates productive responses to change so that increased institutional effectiveness ensues (Ayers, 2005). Thus, educational leaders must refrain from the imposition of top-down reform. Postmodernism theorists, particularly Foucault (1973, 1983, 1995), see the exercise of power as accompanied inevitably by resistance (Harklau and Norwood, 2005). Much of the disparity regarding educational reform stems from the fact that it coerces teachers to undergo transformations that they may view as unwarranted or unnecessary. In the case of NCLB, it was spearheaded by politicians who had virtually no experience in public education. A common thread throughout this discourse is the sense that members of the subjugated regime are outside the mainstream (Ayers, 2005).

With respect to practice, the findings suggest that a critical awareness of diverse organizational discourses may serve organizational leaders who seek to establish organizational climates that empower all personnel, not just the majority or those affiliated with power (Ayers, 2005). For educational reform to be accredited by educators, the educators and stakeholders who toil down in the trenches should have an equal voice in its implementation, thereby creating a sense of ownership. As Ayers (2005) avows, this practice may result in a higher level of commitment to the institutional mission as well as to increased levels of cooperation.

View Educational Evaluation and Research Through a “Postmodern Lens”

Much akin to English’s aforementioned views of data driven decisions, much of the literature calls for educational researchers to consider quantitative and qualitative methods when establishing generalizations in order to lessen the chance of bias and stereotypical assumptions. In recent years a small but growing number of scholars have explored the implications of postmodern theories in regard to evaluator roles and subjectivities (Harklau and Norwood, 2005). Many generalizations and findings generated through educational research are based on biased presuppositions, yet they are deemed as absolute realities. Harklau and Norwood (2005) discuss the value of applying a postmodern lens to the work of ethnographic evaluation.

Ayer (2005) discusses the need for postmodern theoretical applications to educational research:

It is plausible that climate surveys only represent the dominant meanings assigned to elements of organizational climate, thereby rendering all other meanings imperceptible to organizational leaders. As such, ideological-discursive positions of the majority gain dominion over those of the minority. Within the quantitative paradigm, this silencing of the minority may be addressed through linear modeling or multivariate analyses that

pinpoint the differing perceptions of climate; however, such analyses would depend upon the collection of detailed data relating to individual characteristics.

Concluding Implications

Ideas from postfoundational thinking-postmodernism, poststructuralism, and post colonialism are particularly important, because they tend to challenge common comparative education metanarratives of progress, modernity, dominance, and subordination that have been the lifeblood of the major sets of ideas in comparative education (Mehta and Nimes, 2003). Postmodernist attitudes regard past and current efforts to reform education as “a self-delusional gambit that is hopelessly bankrupt” (English, 2003). Federally and state supported initiatives, like charter schools, vouchers, parental choice, high stakes testing, and decentralization, provoke substantive questions in the minds of many about the future of public education and those who staff and lead public schools (Peterson and Young, 2004). There are a range of other debates occurring in comparative education about contemporary educational and social issues, problems, and practices, such as globalization, educational funding, privatization of education, and so on (Mehta and Nimes, 2003).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the purpose of this article was to discuss creative strategies for improving postmodern attitudes for special programs in public education in the United States. Educational standards elicited by reform legislation such as NCLB only serve to constrain the proverbial educator with paradigmatic shackles and confines one to hegemonic parameters. If educational methods are to become more lucrative, they must totally reject the notion of following a paradigm shift by “thinking the unthinkable” and rebel against the tyrannical hegemony that seeks to monopolize the entire field.

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