

THE ROLE OF A PRINCIPAL IN BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND THEORY

The principal can create dynamic changes across a school and district if they are willing to partner with other educators and policy makers to build trust along a common understanding of the purposes of education. In crafting this shared definition or vision, the instructional leader would be wise to turn to the educational philosopher, John Dewey. Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006) state that, “For Dewey, the purpose of education is the intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development of the individual within a democratic society” (p. 9). This definition focuses on the development of the individual freed from what that individual stands to gain, and, even more importantly, what others stand to gain. It pulls away from the anthropocentric version of society specifically in capitalistic societies, and allows the individual to become the author of their own experience. As authors or creators, students can choose to use their abilities to create something new or solve societal problems.

Introduction

The instructional leader has a responsibility to create an authentic public space for the classroom teacher to operate as a transformative intellectual. This may be accomplished in pockets of an educational institution if trust has been established among teachers, administrators, students, and families, but there are a number of obstacles that work against these relationships and even more that prevent synergistic relationships from becoming the status quo. The principal can create dynamic changes across a school and district if they are willing to partner with educators and policy makers to build trust along a set of common understandings of the purpose of education. It is my goal to name those obstacles that prevent this work from happening as well as pose a way forward for all concerned parties to be a part of an educational space that no longer views the current conditions as immovable objects that we must learn to work within.

Defining the terms “authentic public space” and “transformative intellectual” are essential to a clear understanding of the role of the instructional leader. In the article “The Dialectic of Freedom,” Maxine Greene discusses freedom as the “opening of spaces as well as perspectives” (1988, p.5). Greene continues, “For Jean-Paul Sartre, the project of acting on our freedom involves a rejection of the insufficient or the unendurable, a clarification, an imagining of a better state of things” (1988, p.5). Authentic public space is a declaration made by both the classroom

teacher and student that this classroom is a place where all perspectives are valued, and that by naming that our current society has a number of untenable issues, then together they may imagine a better state of things within that space. It is the responsibility of the principal to create and support the conditions within which that declaration of freedom can be made. The relationship between teachers and students in a classroom is tantamount to sustainable change within a school and within society. In order for this change to take place, the teacher in the classroom must act as a transformative intellectual. Henry Giroux describes the teacher as a transformative intellectual in this way:

As intellectuals, they will combine reflection and action in the interest of empowering students with the skills and knowledge needed to address injustices and to be critical actors committed to developing a world free of oppression and exploitation. Such intellectuals are not merely concerned with promoting individual achievement or advancing students along career ladders, they are concerned with empowering students so they can read the world critically and change it when necessary (1988, p. xxxiv).

In order to operate in this way, teachers must be empowered as professionals in spite of the current reforms that would reduce teachers to technicians as opposed to intellectuals, and educational leaders must help change the public perception of the teacher's role. Teachers are reflective practitioners who are educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens. They are not technicians along an assembly line boxing up standards and depositing them in student's minds. The authentic public space can be created through the empowerment of teachers around a clear purpose for education, the shift of public perception about the work of educators, and an extension of trust built through strong collaboration and relationship building.

The Obstacles

The first obstacle that educational leaders must overcome to accomplish the goal of creating authentic public space is that there are competing visions of the purposes of education. David Labaree outlines three competing goals for American education in his article "American Struggle over Educational Goals." Labaree (1997) uses the following phrases to describe the competing goals: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. According to Labaree, the goal of democratic equality says that the purpose of education is to prepare citizens because a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner. The goal of social efficiency outlines an approach to education that says our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence. Finally, the social mobility

goal argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions. These goals reinforce the thinking that has dominated the American education system by examining education as either a public transformative or private transactional good. Henry Giroux (1988) writes, “Instead of defining schools as extensions of the workplace or as front-line institutions in the battle of international markets and foreign competitions, schools should be defined as democratic public spheres that are constructed around forms of critical inquiry that dignify meaningful dialogue and human agency” (p. xxxii). The American education system would be well served to strip education from the primary responsibility of providing students credentials for status attainment or making sure they are ready to support the 21st century job market.

Understanding an educator’s *why* is essential on the path to becoming a transformative intellectual, and if that reason has been co-opted by miseducative experiences around the purpose of education then that can be a damaging and dangerous obstacle for students. I believe the framing that has been left unarticulated is if educators and others consider the student as an individual with their own goals and gifts or if we consider the student as a commodity whose worth is determined by what they can contribute to society as a whole. In fact, it may be that we have deceived ourselves as an institution by saying that we focus on the student’s individual gifts but in reality, it is only in an effort to steer them towards what will most benefit the industry within which those gifts may be used.

Similarly, supporting the social mobility goal of education which focuses on the individual’s own status attainment, we find ourselves still reinforcing the “prevailing economic mode of production” by instilling the popular ideology of meritocracy, the notion that one has earned one’s place in a capitalist society through individual effort. Dimitriadis and Kamberelis summarized Karl Marx’s concept of ideology, “Schooling in capitalist America is, ultimately, about reproducing the capitalist class system, making it seem fair and ‘natural’” (2006, p.33). Jean Anyon’s (1980) work certainly supports this notion in her study of five fifth grade classrooms in different social classes that clearly demonstrated that the pedagogy and curriculum were tied to the labor outcomes each social class was expected to contribute. When schooling is tied to market outcomes, we lose sight of the autonomous nature of the individual who deserves the ability to navigate their own freedom. Diane Ravitch (2016) argues in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, that the federal and state policies have turned education into a competition has industrialized education and departed from the original purpose. It is this departure that began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the following standardization and testing policies under No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top that led to a fundamental questioning of public education, leaving the door open for school choice advocates who stand to gain

from a more polarized citizenry.

S. Alexander Rippa's work, "Education In a Free Society: An American History," outlines the founders' purpose of education in three parts: 1) uplift the well being of the citizenry; 2) utilize natural science for the service of man; and 3) strengthen nationalism/duties of American citizenship (1984). Certainly, this follows Labaree's (1997) definition of democratic equality, which argues that a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner. I, among many, would argue that the primary issue is "equal care." Both the democratic equality tradition and the social efficiency tradition are inherently hostile to the growing effort to reduce public education to a private good. Neither is able to tolerate the social inequality and social inefficiency that are the collective consequences of this shift toward private control. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, defined in Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006) as "a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class," applies here as, behind the scenes, the privileged classes delight as people argue over the definitions of citizenship education which further divides and pushes large portions of society to become more homogenous as political actors push a "school choice" agenda. Labaree (1997) writes, "The rise of private schools as education is promoted as a private good - the government is asked to abdicate its role in educational matters, while the consumer is crowned king" (p. 74). While Labaree may have seen evidence of this movement in 1997, it has grown to a full-fledged assault on public education today.

As I've indicated, the competing-purposes-of-education obstacle grows larger and more foreboding when the actors driving the competing definitions are named. It is not surprising to anyone in the field of education that there is a constant struggle between those that are creating educational policy and those responsible for carrying out policy. The dichotomy of relationships between politicians, school boards, school administrators, teachers, families, the community at large, and students is complicated by a variety of motivations and personal investments in the outcomes of schooling. Storm's *Seven Arrows* (1972) describes the idea of an object placed in the center of a circle surrounded by individuals. Each person has a different vantage point of the object and their perceptions are influenced by their own experiences and innate characteristics. Storm gives the example of a painted drum and then complicates the matter further by suggesting that an idea can be placed in the center of the circle, and that the ephemeral nature of the idea leads to even more interpretations than those of that of the principal object.

I am struck by the idea that in education it is not an object or even an idea that we place in the center of the circle. It is the student that everyone in the educational circle places their own experiences, motivations, innate beliefs, and goals upon. All stakeholders struggle with the idea of

not having some form of control over what is happening in the classroom because the stakes are so high for families, politicians, or administrators. It is no wonder then that there are conflicting conceptions of the purposes of education from the politics to the visions of our founders to the educational philosophers based upon their place around the circle. In reality, it is left to teachers and students with their own influences and goals to apply these conceptions in practice. This situation is rife with the potential for conflict, and it is difficult to trust without authentic relationships. It is the role of the principal to cast a vision for a school that brings collective understanding and commitment to this vast array of perspectives and build the relationships that lead to the trust needed to believe that things don't have to be the way they have always been.

Educators in the classroom can also opt in their own way. A core element of a transformative intellectual is the ability to be reflective of one's personal beliefs and practices. Educators must be committed to growing their personal practice as both experts in pedagogy and their content area with a clear lens on being facilitators of educative experiences. Educators unwilling to grow or reflect communicate a message to others that they are not worthy of the authentic public space that is so desperately needed. Better conditions are needed in terms of class sizes, evaluation models, ability to collaborate with peers, and access to meaningful professional development in order for educators to be given the space to grow as transformative intellectuals. This is where Maxine Greene's (1988) idea of "freedom to" think the world anew despite the current conditions is so essential for educators.

Solutions

Now that we have established that both the competing goals of education and the actors that influence those goals are clear obstacles to the authentic public space needed for transformative intellectuals to work within the classroom, I would like to offer a goal and perspective that may begin to create the space that is needed. John Dewey is a founder in educational philosophy, and he offers that "the purpose of education is the intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development of the individual within a democratic society" (Dewey 1961). This definition focuses on the development of the individual freed from what that individual stands to gain, and even more importantly, what others stand to gain. It pulls away from the anthropocentric version of society created specifically in capitalistic societies, and allows individuals to become the authors of their own experiences. As authors or creators students can choose to use their abilities to create something new or solve societal problems. Dewey's definition of an educative experience, "as one that broadens one's horizons of experience and knowledge and leads in a constructive direction toward intelligent action" gives the teacher and student the space to inquire, hypothesize, and

construct a new way of thinking and acting in the world (Dewey, 1938). It removes the competing motivations of those outside the classroom and allows students the space to create the world anew.

An instructional leader is strategically positioned to cast a vision for a school that seeks to fuse the needs of students, families, and teachers. It is within this vision and the action steps that follow that the instructional leader can create authentic public spaces around shared beliefs about the purposes of education. The principal must cast a vision that gives space for students to grow habits of mind that lead to personal growth while giving educators the freedom to be facilitators and nurturers of the students' individual growth.

The phrase "give space" is certainly loaded. It indicates a form of "freedom from" which is a more limited form of freedom than the self-discovery that Maxine Greene (1988) would hope for but is nonetheless difficult to attain. The principal would hope to gain educators a freedom from the interference of policy that carries with it the agenda and biases of those outside of classroom walls. The crux of this ability to obtain "freedom from" hinges on the growth of the individual educators and students to attain "freedom to." In Dimitriadis and Kamerlis's analysis of John Dewey they comment, "Education is thoroughly social, providing individuals with personal investments in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing social disorder" (2006, p. 9). In order for that vision to be received, those concerned must have trust not only in the message, but also in the messenger. It is essential for the principal to be relational, not only in building relational trust with the community but also as an exemplar for the type of messenger that students and families alike could believe in. This relational trust is built on authenticity and belief in the power of students.

The importance of the rhetoric of the "transformative intellectual" cannot be overstated. Henry Giroux offers that, in this context, teachers are more than "performers" professionally equipped to realize effectively any goals that may be set for them. Rather they should be viewed as free men and women with a special dedication to the values of the intellect and the enhancement of the critical powers of the young" (1988, p.125). Additionally, Giroux remarks that teachers as transformative intellectuals "must work to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical" (1988, p.125). Students must be able to speak with their own voices, before they learn how to move outside of their own frames of reference, before they can break from the common sense that prevents them from understanding the socially-constructed sources underlying their own self-formative processes, and what it means to both challenge the latter and to break with them.

My vision is that all students in my school will be around educators who facilitate educational experiences that inspire all students to

reach their full potential. The core values of Inclusiveness, Optimism, Collaboration, and Integrity are what attract and connect transformative intellectuals to one another. When the right people are centered around the right vision, we are able to recognize opportunities to know, support, and celebrate each student. The principal must be intentional that there are important shared beliefs in the organization that must be expected from the teaching staff. Creating space or relational trust is not dependent on a complete and homogenous buy-in to the vision. The school must be viewed as a mosaic in which each unique teacher and student are valued while the vision serves as the glue binding the pieces together into a shape that can be trusted as a whole by the school community.

Trust is built through authentic relationships. Relationships are given the space to grow when student agency is allowed to thrive uninhibited by actors that seek to control both the processes and outcomes of the students' educational experiences. My hope is that by naming a few of the obstacles that threaten the existence of authentic public spaces for transformative intellectuals to facilitate educative experiences for students, they lose some of their power. My hope is that this becomes the customary practice or praxis of the work in education. A principal who can operate as a connector and trust builder across stakeholders around a clear vision for this kind of school experience is essential to the work of building a school where all students and teachers can commit daily to being agents of change.

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