An Examination of My Supervisory Platform and Its Relationship to My Educational Philosophy

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Abstract

This reflective paper shares the analysis of the educational philosophy and supervisory platform of the author. It seeks to address the basis for the author’s stance on educational philosophy, and links it to the beliefs subscribed to as an administrator. The role of the supervisor, knowledge, skills, abilities and values are also discussed.

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From the time I graduated with my undergraduate degree in elementary and special education, I was convinced I would not seek a position as an educator. This youthful decision was based solely on my lackluster student teaching experience, having been left to find my way with very little actual instructional knowledge. I soon learned, however, student loans come due quickly. This reality forced my hand and pushed me into seeking a teaching position. The amount of support I received as a first year teacher was absolutely nonexistent. I was lonely, afraid to ask questions and left to stumble through instruction with children who deserved a much better teacher. In the years that followed, I managed to grow my skills, and learned more about instruction. My work in the field of education was satisfying but I knew there were other challenges out in the field that I wanted to tackle. I decided to go all in and took a position as a school administrator. It was then I found what had escaped me from the very beginning of my career in education. In the role of administrator, I found the connections I needed to develop a true passion for students, and for helping deliver the best possible instruction to those students.

Remembering my woefully inadequate performance as a special education teacher gave me the desire to ensure my staff would not experience the same isolation and lack of direction which marked my early years in the field. I sincerely desired to become part of an educational system which could have the ability to impact student’s outcomes in positive and innovative ways. My love of the field of special education and working with children with learning challenges colors all of my work and in my opinion forms the very basis of my educational philosophy. Glickman uses a tool developed by Patricia Jersin in 1972 which provides for the analysis of educational philosophy using four varying practices, (as cited in Glickman, Gordon and Ross-Gordon, 2010). The four areas: progressivism, perennialism, essentialism and existentialism, are measured against a variety of multiple choice questions designed to sort out the essence of an individual’s educational philosophy. The tool acknowledges results may not reflect all the sets of beliefs which an individual might espouse, but attempts to convey these four as the major educational systems of which the majority of persons have affiliation. The results of my assessment reflected my philosophical base as leaning towards progressivism, or experimentalism. Glickman notes experimentalism has its roots in the philosophies of pragmatism, progressivism, and reconstructionism (2010, p. 98). He goes on to describe its basis in the reality of what is known at this time.

Foundationally, one who follows an experimentalistic approach to education relies upon the belief of proven theories, which will change over time. For educators, the approaches we value and rely upon should be based upon proven knowledge, but we must be open to other ways of achieving even greater outcomes. There is not a defined boundary for growth and learning, but rather it is a continuous process. John Dewey’s influence on experimentalism cited by Peter Hlebtowitsch (2006) notes:

In 1902, based on his work in his laboratory school, Dewey put forth what

he believed to be the three crucial factors in the learning process: (1) the nature of

the learner, (2) the values and aims of the society, and (3) the wider world of knowledge

represented in the subject matter. This was his way of saying that all good

teaching must be attuned to (1) the character of learners (their interests, problems,

developmental nature), (2) the highest values of the society (democratic principles

of cooperation, tolerance, critical mindedness, and political awareness), and (3) the

reflective representation of the subject matter (the knowledge in the various disciplines

that helps the teacher present material that resonates with both learner and

society). (p.74)

Experimentalists ultimately judge the effectiveness of education being provided against the amount of betterment or progress in the life experience (Hbelowitsch, 2006, p. 75). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires the effectiveness of local school district programs to be judged by the administration of large scale group assessment which are compared to state benchmarks. In contrast to large scale assessments, the special education process in and of itself measures progress of the individual student. Growth is compared to the individual’s current benchmarks and developmental assessments. Projections, or goals which form the basis for instruction, are designed to meet the comprehensive needs of the child. These goals are measured frequently over time to continually adjust and track progress. Each year, new goals are developed based both upon the current functioning of the student, and also their expressed needs and interests as it relates to them at that time. Clearly, as an administrator espousing an experimentalism philosophy, the latter process of measuring growth against the needs defined on an individual level is more aligned to my educational philosophy. In comparison, the once a year assessments are not comprehensive in covering a variety of subject matters nor are they designed to measure if teaching is aligned to address the character of student learners, and societal values.

The experimentalistic philosophy aligns to my supervisory approach and belief in a collaborative approach, with teacher and supervisor being equal in their decision making responsibility (Glickman, 2010, p.103). As an active administrator, I am responsible for the supervision of over sixty teaching staff. The awareness of where individual staff are in their own development impacts my supervisory approach, but primarily I work from a collaborative interpersonal manner for problem solving. Having staff actively engaged with administration in addressing issues of learning, and systems change is critical. Decision-making without staff buy- in leaves the administrator with all the responsibility of making sure things get carried out, and staff without accountability for growth.

In my opinion, the ultimate purpose of supervision is to help the individuals whom I work with to do their jobs the best they can. To effectively build a school culture where learning is the most important thing, the successful administrators must be the instructional leader for their staff. This means they should be able to visibly demonstrate skill and share learning on effective instruction and interventions. Not only should they be highly skilled in instructional concepts, they need to be a resource for classroom staff in matters of behavior management, student progress monitoring and effective parent/teacher relationships. Modeling effective communication and creating caring school communities is another critical skill administrators have to possess when leading staff. All of these components bring together a supervisor who can create a school environment where staff are supported, decisions are made with the needs of students in mind and learning is consistently evident.

Believing my job as an administrator is to help teachers do their job, I actively seek to build an environment where staff have a genuine relationship with me. Coverage of five buildings requires that I respect the knowledge and understanding of the teaching staff in the various buildings. As a central administrator, I rely on the teachers in the buildings to keep me informed of their needs. Without their knowledge sharing, I am missing critical partners planning for and providing effective programming. To keep staff supported and as effective as possible, I believe it is vital to make myself as accessible as possible. This accessibility is operationalized through bi-monthly announcements and articles sent to all staff by email, in addition to providing feedback and responses to inquiries in a very short-turnaround time span. I schedule quarterly district-wide team meetings which are often punctuated by presentations from district staff to share knowledge and skills with one another. Monthly meetings are held with me and the special education teaching staff in every building. At these gatherings, the building staff set the agenda for the meeting and my responsibility is to show up, listen and help problem solve on the issues they want to discuss.

Beyond the knowledge base, skill sets and physical accessibility of the administrator, valuing the professional growth and development of staff is vital. Understanding the developmental stages staff experience supports doing careful planning to determine what staff need and why. A collaborative approach where staff and administrator come to a mutual agreement about the need for identified professional development is desirable. For some staff, however, a more directive approach must be taken. This would be especially true in terms of supporting staff new to their position or staff who are struggling in their position. The emphasis of the learning process for everyone is a given for me as the administrator. Schools are learning communities, and as a member of that community, all of us should be challenging ourselves and the extent of our knowledge base in order to grow. Modeling this behavior and making it a part of daily life demonstrates the culture of the school to students, teaching peers and the community.

Bringing all the necessary components together as an effective administrator seems like an insurmountable task at times. One should not let that keep them from taking on a great challenge. Helen Keller is quoted as saying, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do”. The key, for me, is seeing yourself as that one who can do something.

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