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Taking It All In: A Panoramic View of Education in the 21st Century

Diane A. Permenter, M.Ed.

Texas A & M University- Commerce

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For more than a century now, statesmen, politicians, educators, and parents have been discussing the best ways to initiate reform in public education, an institution that was created in a previous era for a very different purpose (Meier, 2004). The serene mental picture of a one-room schoolhouse, desks neatly arranged in straight rows, and students entering single file is contrary to everything practitioners know about raising young children. For example, it is common knowledge that most successful people are actively engaged in doing, talking, and demonstrating their expertise in a personal way that relates to their intended audience. Yet current education persists in a form of schooling that primarily measures achievement in terms of seated written tests and standardized assessment scores. Dennis Littky (2004) has been asking the question, “What’s wrong with this picture?” for decades and has purposefully invested his time, energy, and tireless efforts into exploring his insatiable curiosity regarding how kids learn best.

Littky (2004) began his career in the sixties by training African American parents to get involved in their local Brooklyn neighborhood. At the age of 27, he became the principal of Shoreham-Wading River, a new model middle school on Long Island, which received national recognition under his leadership. After moving to Winchester, New Hampshire, Littky took on the rural town’s ailing secondary program. Within a few years, Thayer Junior/Senior High School went from a twenty percent dropout rate to a dramatic one percent, and college enrollment skyrocketed from a mere one percent to fifty-five percent. After Littky left Thayer in 1994, he and partner, Elliot Washor, launched a nonprofit education design program known as The Big Picture Company. When the state of Rhode Island announced its intention to establish a new vocational education program, Littky and Washor accepted the challenge of starting the first of six schools that comprise The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, simply

referred to as The Met. In his book, *The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone's Business*, Littky shares that he and Washor established The Met to provide a graphic example of what school can look like when it is small, personalized, and integrally involved in the educational change movement. In the preface, Littky (2004) states,

At the most basic level, this means a movement that sees education as everyone's business and views schools as much more than just buildings where teachers teach and students learn. A movement that is passionate about educating one student at a time, about evaluating students with multiple forms of assessment, and about measuring students' progress against real-world standards. A movement that values students as individuals; values families as integral to each child's learning; values communities as resources; and values educators as change agents who, together, have the power to better our neighborhoods, cities, states, countries, and world (p.xv).

Littky's perceived purpose in publishing this collection of stories about special people and events is not to enable someone else to start a Met School, but rather to serve as a springboard for educators, administrators, school boards, parents, and community members who want to connect theory to the real world, and in doing so, create possibilities for growth, improvement, and genuine change in America's educational system.

Centering the Picture on the Real Goals in Education

In order to identify the real goals of education today, Littky (2004) believes one must ask and answer two significant questions, the first being, "What is learning?" With conviction, Littky (2004) states,

Each of us, if we live to be just 70 years old, spends only 9 percent of our lives in school. Considering that the other 91 percent is spent out there, then the only really substantial

thing education can do is help us to become continuous lifelong learners. Learners who learn without textbooks and tests, without certified teachers and standardized curricula.

Learners who love to learn. To me, this is the ultimate goal of education (p.3).

In this sense, learning is about going beyond the knowledge given in a book, classroom, or museum. It is personal, dynamic, and actually occurs after the lecture or group activity. Learning encompasses what an individual does with the information, how he talks about it, relays it to others, and integrates it into his own life. If this is learning, one might ask, “So what is teaching?” At the Met, Littky was instrumental in changing the term teacher to advisor. His expanded definition describes an adult who is first a learner, who loves kids and is proficient in inspiring them to discover their own passions and ways of learning, and who provides support, encouragement, and serves as an excellent role model along the way. Littky (2004) combines learning and teaching to articulate the real goals of education like this,

Teaching and learning are about problem solving. Education is the process by which you put teachers and learners in the best possible environment for them to do this. And the best possible environment is one where people feel safe, supported, and respected, and where kids and adults are excited and passionate about learning (p.16).

Reframing Culture Through Atmosphere and Relationships

In an effort to create the best possible environment, Littky’s (2004) first priority has been to hire teachers and staff that share his philosophy of cultivating a personalized culture of trust and respect while maintaining an element of fun and enthusiasm in daily learning experiences. In his book, *Schools That Work: America’s Most Innovative Public Education Programs*, George Wood (1992) mentions his initial impression of Littky by stating, “At Thayer every student is greeted by Dennis and a group

of teachers the moment he/she walks in the school...No one gets past him without an encouraging word, a pat on the back, a smile (p.112).” Following the belief system of John Dewey, his personal mentor and inspiration, Littky (2004) believes students must be seen and heard. They must have a voice and be an integral part of a democratic environment. Dewey (1938) denounced the concept of a silent school by stating, “The nonsocial character of the traditional school is seen in the fact that it erected silence into one of its prime virtues (p.63).” Even more poignant, Dewey (1938) proposes that, “Enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real natures (p.62).” Thus, when decisions need to be made regarding school-related issues or problems, Littky (2004) calls a Town Meeting where kids lead the discussion and have a real say in the rules and solutions that evolve. This concept moves beyond the accepted practice of the principal and staff serving as role models to the bigger picture of students serving as role models for one another, charged with passing the culture on so that it truly becomes the school’s legacy for future generations.

Refocusing the Lens One Face, One Child at the Time

When Eliot Levine (2002) decided to write a book documenting the epitome of the Met philosophy, he selected a title that in his opinion said it all, *One Kid at a Time: Big Lessons from a Small School*. In agreement, Littky (2004) adds,

Another way of putting it is treating everyone alike differently. From the way we design curricula and standards to the way we design schools, we must think of the individual and what he needs and wants from education. I cannot state this more strongly...Our kids are being mistreated and abandoned by their schools, and too many are literally dying as a result. We have to save them, one kid at a time (p.73).

Approaching education and the design of a school from this perspective requires stakeholders to

refocus and look at the major, as well as the minor components of schooling through a new lens. The best way to start, Littky (2004) asserts, is "...by creating a small school. The research has shown over and over that students in small schools perform better in math and science and have better attitudes towards learning, lower dropout rates, better attendance - the list goes on and on (p.67)." The second critical action step is to craft a school within a school by establishing an advisory system. Littky (2004) affirms, "...setting up a system where students have a consistent environment where they are able to truly connect with a small group of kids and one adult can radically change their entire schooling experience (p.62)." With an advisory system, there is at least one adult in the school who knows each child as a person and a learner, who can ensure that the other school structures are meeting every student's individual and academic needs, and who is connecting with the parents so that everyone sees the big picture in regard to the child's well-being and academic achievement.

In addition to providing the real core of education, which is building relationships with kids, the advisory structure provides the means by which to address the third component, integrating the curricula (Littky, 2004). A truly personalized school must be flexible in the areas of grouping, schedules, extended class periods, curriculum design, activities, and assessments. Since the underlying belief is that there is no content that is right for every student, truly personalized learning requires advisors to start with the student rather than the subjects or content classes. The focus then becomes what knowledge students acquire and exactly how they intend to use and apply that knowledge. Littky (2004) stresses, "The priority at such a school is to know students and their families well enough to ensure every learning experience excites the students to learn more (p.75)." This philosophy, contends Littky (2004), serves to elevate the idea of personalized learning to the next level, which is to provide every student with a

completely different curriculum, “based on who he or she is right now and who he or she wants to become (p.75).” In so doing, school leaders are able to create an environment where students worry more about failing themselves than competing with others, and thus, diversity is genuinely respected and celebrated. Littky (2004) reflects,

There’s a lot of lip service paid to diversity, but when you approach education one student at a time, you are forced to recognize, and work with, each child’s individual background, native language, gender, abilities, family situation, and whatever else plays a role in their life as a learner (p.76).

Littky (2004) believes the concept of one learner at the time also translates to one staff member at the time. Through the advisory system, principals are in a position to observe advisors, affirm their strengths in order to address their weaknesses, provide them with creative ideas, and assist them in brainstorming effective solutions to kid-centered challenges. Littky (2004) clarifies his position on personalized staff development by stating, “When only one teacher is struggling with an issue, the other teachers aren’t forced to sit through a three-hour training session on it (p.77).”

Enhancing the Learning Picture Through the Pursuit of Interests and Passions

Littky (2004) postulates, “nothing you hand a kid to learn will be as important as what’s already inside them, and if you let them start from there, they will learn more than you could have ever taught them (p.96).” In the *Art of Possibility*, Zander and Zander (2000) extol,

Michelangelo is often quoted as having said that inside every block of stone or marble dwells a beautiful statue; one need only remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within. If we were to apply this visionary concept to education, it would be pointless to compare one child to another. Instead, all the energy would be focused on chipping

away at the stone, getting rid of whatever is in the way of each child's developing skills, mastery, and self-expression (p.26).

If a school's design is to treat everyone alike differently as Littky (2004) advocates, then it would seem natural to allow students to learn through the pursuit of their unique interests and passions. Littky (2004) explains further,

When you connect kids' learning to what they need emotionally, you are making academics more than academic. You are taking the privilege and excitement of learning and entrusting the student with this power. You are helping kids learn about their interests and making learning interesting to them (p.97).

After identifying an area of interest, the student and advisor work together to focus on five learning goals, which serve as framing questions to help the student understand what it means to pursue that goal. Littky (2004) specifies these to include empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, social reasoning, and finally, personal qualities (p.103).

Reflecting the Real World in Meaningful Work and Experience

Dewey (1938) reiterates,

In what I have said I have taken for granted the soundness of principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience-which is always the actual-life experience of some individual (p.89).

In building the curriculum around kids' interests, advisors strive to connect their learning to real, relevant, rigorous work (Littky, 2004). This typically involves establishing strong relationships with business partners in the community or surrounding area that are willing to serve as mentors in their field of expertise. Learning Through Internships (LTI) allows the school to turn its philosophy into authentic experiences that exemplify best practice. In addition, Littky's vision

extends beyond a traditional vocational program that teaches students one specific skill and prepares them for one particular job. On the contrary, Littky (2004) affirms,

Our philosophy is that internships are the best way to create opportunities for kids to do real work and learn the things that are really important for a successful life. LTIs are not just about good projects, but real projects and real consequences that are connected to the students' interests and hands-on work out in the community, where students can really contribute and see their effect on the world (p.124).

Expanding the View to Include the Entire Family in the Educational Picture

At the time of matriculation, both potential students and parents are required to write an essay explaining why they want to attend the Met. Littky (2004) proudly shares that one of the Met's mottos is "We enroll families (p.137)." He elucidates that parents join their child as vital members of their Learning Plan Team, alongside their Internship mentor and advisor. In addition, the parents serve as panel members at their child's exhibition every quarter and provide essential feedback regarding their child's progress. Finally, at the end of four years when the student is ready to graduate, the parents get up in front of the school and sign their child's diploma, along with the principal, school board president, and State Commissioner of Education (Littky, 2004, 137). Littky is convinced that parents must be genuinely valued and involved in the real decisions that affect their kids. This means inviting them to share their opinions in determining their child's total curriculum, as well as in making schoolwide decisions, such as what time school starts. To sum it up, Littky (2004) affirms, "From the day they decide to enroll their child in our school, Met families know we want and need their input, even beyond graduation (p.150)."

Authentic Assessments that Capture a Picture Worth a Thousand Words

Since the Met philosophy views grades as meaningless and completely subjective, every student is evaluated quarterly through a one to two page narrative written by his advisor (Littky, 2004). Given that the real world is structured to provide feedback that shows people what they need to do to improve, a narrative portrays the actual work a student has accomplished, analyzes the work in terms of their personal learning goals, describes the student's attitude and work ethic, and offers concrete guidance on how the student can address any gaps in skills or performance. Littky (2004) reiterates, "A narrative is not meant to make every child look good, but to evaluate him realistically through a broader lens (p.159)." In an effort to expand the limited information provided by traditional standardized assessments, Met students are required to make a 45-minute presentation every quarter known as an exhibition. Exhibitions are designed to promote conversations about learning between students and their teachers, peers, and families. During the student's presentation, the emphasis is on the process of learning, not just the end product. The student must share the process he used to work through his topic, show drafts of the final paper he is presenting, predict what needs to come next, and share goals for future growth. Littky (2004) asserts, "Exhibitions force students to become accountable for and take control of their learning (p.168)."

Framing Education as Lifelong Learning that Stands the Test of Time, Makes a Difference in Students' Lives and Thus, Changes the Big Picture of American Society

In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) proclaims,

Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don't have great schools because we have good schools...Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life (p.1).

Littky (2004) knows firsthand what it means to create and be part of a great school that

genuinely meets the interests, concerns, and needs of its students, teachers, families, and community. In conclusion, Littky (2004) makes this powerful assertion,

If you put good people in an environment that allows them to continue learning and reinforces their risk taking, their passion, and their commitment, then you can make good people great. You can make ordinary people extraordinary just by giving them the right environment in which to do their thing (whether it is comedy or teaching or learning) and letting them grow (p.54).

Thus, the big picture is about enabling great people to create great schools that in turn, transform education in America to true greatness.

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