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Leadership in the Bachelor of Education: A Dialogue between Student and Professor

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Academic Leadership Journal

There are true leaders in education who have overcome the traditional ways of hierarchical thinking and have developed transformational and collaborative orientations. They accomplished this in spite of the fact that our school system does not support these foci. As part of the educational system, the Bachelor of Education program contributes little to the development of this type of leadership in its students.

From the Perspective of the Student: A Banking and Teaching BEd

The Bachelor of Education program – what does that mean in terms of academic leadership? To me, it means very little.

I am a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Education program and have noticed how it supports routine and hinders leadership. It seems as students advance in this education program we are given few opportunities to create, innovate or self-direct. We are not learning how to become leaders.

Throughout this article I will argue that today's educational hierarchy, including the Bachelor of Education degree, only promotes a vicious cycle of depositing information and hindering true leadership.

Paolo Freire argues that teachers are bankers whose duty is to deposit information in the banks of our students (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). This transactional approach is greatly affecting our future students' ability to create, risk-take and innovate. This notion of depositing information is reinforced in the Bachelor of Education program. Prospective teachers are asked to learn about traditionally successful ways to educate, instead of coming together and thinking of new and innovative ways to teach. We are asked to adhere to established ideas and simply 'store the deposits' of other bankers for future use (Belenky et al. 1986, p.63). I recall a week within my 'Methodology' course that was dedicated to learning (i.e., memorizing) the several different ways to present information using visual organizers. There are several different types of organizers such as: the Venn diagram, T-Chart, Timeline, Web etc. It was so imperative that we learn these visual organizers, we were tested on them during our final examination. Reflecting back on this experience has made me realize that if I had ownership in creating a visual organizer with my peers, and if we researched or tested what we developed and proved it to be successful during practice teaching, then perhaps I would not have forgotten all the organizers as soon as I graduated from the program. Perhaps I would not have had Google them for the sake of this argument.

Education System Modeled After Business

Though, I do believe it should be a program of study designed to create teachers to teach and lead the future, it is not solely the fault of the Bachelor of Education program that it lacks leadership opportunities. We must acknowledge how leadership within the education system is designed and operated. Bell (1991) argues that the education system is influenced and built on the ideals of business:

We are still guilty of borrowing perspectives, models, concepts and even theories from the world of industry and commerce...our understandings of educational management are in the main derived from a non-educational framework and this is a weakness, both from the conceptual analysis it enables us to make and in terms of our credibility with practitioners in school and colleges. (p. 136)

This 'borrowing' of a business model has greatly affected the way leadership is viewed within the Bachelor of Education program. It seems more appropriate to use the word "management" to describe ways prospective teachers are guided and instructed. Tony Bush (2008) describes the vast difference between leadership and management: "[L]eadership takes...much ingenuity, energy and skill. Managing is maintaining efficiently and effectively current organizational arrangements" (p. 273). The Bachelor of Education program runs effectively and efficiently by specifying how new teachers should teach, what methods work best for teachers and it appears that prospective teachers do not question this process. Students expect knowledge from their professors and accept it as a theory or process they are not qualified to think of, "so long as teachers hide the imperfect processes of their thinking, allowing their students to glimpse only the polished products, students will remain convinced that only Einstein – or a professor – could think up a theory (Belenky et al. 1986, p. 215). Some teachers feel obliged to remind their students or colleagues of their accomplishments to instill a sense of power or authority over the education they have received. This behaviour is reinforced within the practicum component of the Bachelor of Education degree as well.

Practice Teaching Experience

Many teachers follow a certain routine or 'style' of teaching. Throughout my practice teaching experiences I have had the opportunity to work with a transformational associate teacher who supported and encouraged my new ideas, techniques and strategies to help me to create my own teaching style. This teacher supported me throughout the process by offering suggestions on lessons and giving his/her ideas of how it was done previously. I would accept these suggestions but try to make the lesson my own with my own style, own resources and own strategies. After completing my lessons he/she would always offer positive comments and areas that would help improve my practice. I am grateful for his/her leadership, the support and collaboration which I believe enriched my experience.

I also worked with an authoritative associate teacher who tried to stifle my new strategies and techniques by insisting I adhere to his/her style. This teacher was extremely rigid and focused on structure, rules and routines. He/she acted as my manager and repeatedly told me to follow his/her guidelines and style of teaching. The expectation was that I lecture grade 11 students on Hinduism for 75 minutes. As this topic contained difficult concepts and philosophies for students, I thought of creative ways to engage and get the class involved. These ideas did not impress my associate teacher and this was reflected on my Practice Teaching Report. I have realized that there are always going to be people who try and stifle or support your growth. This is based on personality and values that people have developed throughout their lives and experiences. Providing leadership experiences and encouragement in the Bachelor of Education program may alter the way students, teachers and administrators think about leadership.

From the Perspective of the Professor: A BEd or Teacher Training

Teaching in a BEd program is a wonderful professional opportunity for any teacher or administrator.

However, having this program located in a university and functioning under university timelines and dictates can create a sense having a split personality. I find myself asking, 'am I a trainer of teachers or am I a university professor'?

As a trainer of teachers, I am given limited time to cover the essentials of practice. Availability of time is further compromised by the dictates of traditional university scheduling. As universities have traditionally been focused on Socratic lecturing, the scheduling of courses assumes that professors simply walk into a classroom, teach, and walk out. The setting up of centres, opportunities for investigations, field trips and guest speakers are hindered when you are expected to move from room to room and teach the same lesson on different dates. Modelling good practice and providing leadership opportunities becomes a challenge.

When I first came to the faculty, I found myself teaching in a manner I would never have dreamed of while in the field. I was adapting to the schedule. As a former teacher and administrator, I know what good pedagogy entails and lecturing is not the ideal. It places the students in the role of passive recipient instead of future thinkers. After a few years at the faculty I did find ways to implement hands-on learning with students after I altered my own standards of what I wished my students to experience, especially if classroom set-up was required. I decided a partial experience to be better than no experience. Still, I had to recognize that time is short due to the amount of information which must be covered in order for the students to go out and experience success in practice teaching.

There have been rumblings of creating a two year program for Ontario faculties of education. Ontario has the shortest consecutive program of any province in Canada. When I ask my BEd students if they would like more time they always say yes. When I ask them if the program should be two years they always say no. I do understand this as I remember discussions about a two year program when I was a student in a faculty of education and remember feeling relief that I started when I only had to do a year. Somehow the idea that teaching is an investment in the future is lost to the importance of just getting the year done.

What bothers me the most about the student's reflection is the lack of change in faculties of education. When I was a student in a faculty of education, I learned more from practice teaching than I did from all of my classes. I had two extremely talented associate teachers who encouraged me to develop my own style, offered concrete feedback, and saw their role as a guide to a new peer. The two other associate teachers I encountered were very directive in what I was to do and how I was to do it. Looking back I now realise that one used my presence as a means of having the two weeks off, while the other felt the overwhelming need to dominate. I carried these two experiences with me into my career as a teacher. When I was an associate teacher, I tried my best to be a guide and to let go of my class into the hands of another. Due to a sense of dedication to my students, letting another teach my class was not always an easy thing to do.

During my first year at the faculty I was a practice teaching supervisor. I encountered excellent associate teachers as well as some who saw having a student teacher as a personal advantage. The first type of associate created a sense of personal leadership and risk-taking in student-teachers as they attempted to find their niche in the field. The second type had the power to create a sense of submission and helplessness in the hearts of these future teachers.

Once students returned from placement, I often encountered resistance to leadership opportunities.

Students have actually asked me to just tell them the information instead of having them experience it. It is usually not until after Christmas that I began to encounter students who want to question and, by contributing to the system, develop a sense of leadership. Interestingly, these students were often those who were unsuccessful or experienced adversity in placement.

One Possible Direction for the Future

Without the experiences and insights of others it is difficult to encompass leadership let alone a true perspective of a situation. Through collaboration and learning together we can enhance perspectives and reach higher cognitive skills, "It is the process of making sense with a group of people of the systems that shape and organize the world that we can think about together" (Grumet 1996, p. 19). If leadership skills and philosophies were taught within our schools we would see a very active and visionary future. Barman, Herbert, and McCaskill (1986) note that it is through education that we must change these ideals and philosophies because "education shapes the minds and values of our people" (p. 39). Perhaps we need to consider alternative forms of introducing leadership into our teacher training programs.

Aboriginal traditions and education promote equality and responsibility of leadership within its communities and peoples. According to Jacqueline Gresko's 1986 examination of the Plains Cree and the Coast Salish, "learning emphasized such values as respect for all living things, sharing, self-reliance, individual responsibility and proper conduct" (Barman, Hebert, and McCaskill, 1986, p. 3). These values focus on the individual, providing ideals that encourage self-esteem yet acknowledge others and the environment.

In no way is it being suggested that Aboriginal education or traditional public schooling is better or worse than the other but that they can learn from one another. The notion of individual leadership and community responsibility that is instilled in Aboriginal education is non-existent in our schools today. The notion of focusing on the gifts of the individual and using one's abilities to contribute to their community is admirable. To see the potential in each individual acknowledges different forms of leadership and builds natural leadership skills, instead of relying on the 'special skills' to just naturally emerge from certain individuals. We may be able to educate students or prospective teachers on leadership by acknowledging the capabilities and experiences of the individual and one another. Leadership is exploring who you are, what is important to you and how you may be able to help or improve the quality of life for others.

Conclusion

Teaching students what has worked best for others while ignoring the capabilities and experiences of the individual limits the progress and possibilities of our future. Aboriginal Education contains many ideals and philosophies that enable individuals to grow in leadership responsibilities, self-reliance, and respect (Barman, Hebert, and McCaskill, 1986). Imagine the possibilities for teachers and students in all schools if we adhere to similar philosophies and tenets. By implementing opportunities for individual and collaborative leadership, Bachelor of Education programs could equip new teachers with the skills and, more importantly, the attitude to truly work together and assist each other in creating a difference in our educational system.

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