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Dennis Littky, the Educational Activist: Can His Model Revamp the Public Educational System?

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When an individual observes a classroom of today, he will see many elements that are recognizable to anyone who attended school during the last one hundred years, students working from textbooks, repetitive worksheets, and rows of desks holding students completing tasks directed by the teacher. Even though societal and technological advancements are increasing rapidly, our school system has stayed stagnant. What this means for students is the lack of individuality, teachers' non acceptance of personal interests, lack of personal voice, and in many cases, a non relationship between teacher and student beyond the classroom assignment (Castleman & Littky, 2007).

This is detrimental to the success of many students, but is what we continue to see in classrooms in every grade level. It is understandable from the teachers' viewpoint why the classroom is designed this way. Teachers are charged with teaching an average of 28 students per 45 minutes. They are required to teach every state required curriculum standard within the nine months of school including all the days missed for state evaluations, holidays, and extracurricular activities. Teachers are evaluated on the knowledge and application of the state standards, not on whether the students increased their learning by two or three grade levels, attended school each day, or invented a new video game with a group of friends. Teachers have these students for a year then will receive 150 new students the following year. Teachers are not rewarded for increasing students' learning; they are only rewarded if they reach a certain standard score. Across the United States, teachers are stifled and frustrated. Students are unable to connect learning to real world problems, integrate subjects, or learn the demands of today's workplace (Castleman & Littky, 2007).

Background of Littky

Dennis Littky does not present the professional look of the average educational administrator. His long, scraggly beard, untucked plaid shirts, and unironed pants do not present a professional look to community members. Even though he has brought much acclaim to the schools he has led, his innovative ways had him close to unemployment in every school he has been an administrator (Kammeraad-

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Campbell, 1989; Keough, 1999; Petrie, 1992). His determination to improve the educational system has brought important change in many schools.

Littky believes that the personalized education model should include rigor, structure, and accountability. This is a common belief today, but many of his past enemies saw him as a radical educator (Keough, 1999). His education includes two Doctor of Philosophy degrees in education and clinical psychology. The first school he led was a middle school in Shoreham-Wading River, New York. He hired all the best teachers from the surrounding districts that wanted the challenge of starting a new school. All staff members averaged 80-hour work weeks, read books, and reflected collaboratively. He also added field trips to the curriculum since most of his students had never been out of the city. He required each student to participate in a community service project and a student advisory program. He utilized the concept of integrated learning, combining subjects and developing common themes and team teaching among his staff, but this new excitement was too much for the community. The board dismissed him even though the school won awards and became nationally known by many educators (Goldberg, 1990).

His second challenge was in Winchester in 1981. The students were disgruntled and undisciplined. There was no structure, respect, or relationships between administrators, teachers, or students. Littky met with each of the 310 students for one hour so they could learn about him and likewise. He scheduled coffees for parents to come give their complaints and concerns, and if he had not met a parent, he went to their work. He turned the school into a national model that brought attention nationwide. Once again, he learned that the students needed more structure and development in the real world setting to keep them motivated to learn. He began student internships with local companies, incorporated a collaborative time for both student and teacher to develop rules and structures for the school, and taught the teachers how to use small group structure. Once again this caused discord among the conservative vocals since it looked too disorganized and not like the schools they had attended (Goldberg, 1990; Keough, 1999).

Littky later opened The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (The Met) when Rhode Island requested a new vocational school where students were partnered with local companies. Littky convinced them not to do what had been done before, but to be innovative and think differently. He would not open a school where students sat through seven disjointed subjects a day. The Commissioner of Education, Peter McWalters, gave him permission to lead this new school with the agreement the students would still participate in the required state assessments as the public schools. Other than that, Littky could design the school however way he desired (Keough, 1999).

Littky was adamant that students accepted into the program were the ones that were likely dropouts from the public school system. Unlike some charter schools, these students would not be the highly sought after students with potential. Most of the students were very diverse with 82% being on a free or reduced lunch program. Many did not read on grade level and several were learning to speak English with non-English speaking parents (Littky, 2004).

The leader and teachers met in the beginning to answer the questions, “What’s best for kids; and if we could educate one child at a time, what would the educational environment look like, and how would we create a structure around it?” (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 285). The use of a non-curriculum based school and the lack of teaching standards was very alarming to some. Marcia Redback, Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, was concerned that many students would receive a high school diploma without knowing many of the standard curriculum taught in public schools. Littky’s argument was that standards should be taught based on the individual student. Teachers no longer needed to teach facts. Those could be found on the Internet. Schools must now teach students how to apply facts to real life problems at any time (Keough, 1999).

Littky also noticed that many of the dropouts were African American and Hispanic students. Many community members blamed the environment; Littky blamed the school system. The data show that less than half of students in “high poverty, racially segregated and urban districts complete high school” (Scurry & Littky, 2007, p. 17). Seventy four percent of students who attend colleges come from the top of the socio-economic quartile. Less than ten percent from the low socio-economic quartile attend college. Littky saw this as a great disparity. He understood that by 2020, 30% of the workforce will include minority races that the educational system has not prepared (Scurry & Littky, 2007).

Littky used his knowledge in educational psychology to develop the Big Picture Company and the educational model that follows the three R’s: Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor. This model is now supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Gates Foundation, in 2000, observed the Met and financially supported 56 more schools. Littky and his partners are willing to open more, but remain committed to opening a new facility when they can guarantee the mission and vision remain the same so that none of the educational goals are compromised (Littky, 2004; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Scurry & Littky, 2007).

Even though Littky has received the New Hampshire’s Principal of the Year Award, the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education, and a book and television movie named after him, “A Town Torn Apart,” his radical ways and innovative thinking has caused many lost jobs. Littky feels strongly that all schools can grasp

the goals of his educational philosophy and make major changes in student achievement in all schools. Littky's motto is "Education is Everyone's Business" (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 285; Sparks, 2005). Right now, schools are full of rituals- textbooks, memorization, and military movement. If all stakeholders become involved in the decision making process of each child's learning, then schools can become leaders in the learning process.

Dewey Principles

Much of Littky's educational philosophy is based on John Dewey's, *Experience and Education*. Dewey wrote that education and the continuity of experience must be interrelated for children to grasp a new concept (Dewey, 1938). A student is able to comprehend a new subject when he can compare it to something from his own environment, something he has experienced prior to the learning of the new concept. Dewey stated that if something was a true educational experience, it must lead to growth, which continues to lead the child to learning more. It must also be a positive experience or the child will receive a mis-educative experience. This type will not lead the child to learn more (Bassey, 2010).

Students must be a part of the curriculum process. Working together with the teacher, students should "frame and execute their own purposes" (Tozar, Senese, & Viola, 2009, p. 152). We must start with the interests of the learners and relate the new ideas to an experience they understand. Dewey argued that children did not join the world as a blank slate. Children have many experiences and relate all new learning with them. Without the relationships, there is no learning. We must shape their interests with new experiences that are educational. Reading out of a textbook can be done, but has little interest to a student; therefore, learning rarely takes place. Why is it that we still teach out of textbooks one hundred years later (Tozar et al., 2004)?

Dewey studied the education of African Americans and learned that it was not the students who were incapable of or unwilling to learn, but the system that was forcing them to learn something that was not in their personal environment was leading them to non-learning. The system forces a child to learn in an upper socioeconomic Caucasian way. Any student who does not fall into this category is being forced to learn concepts that mean nothing to them. Dewey asserted that a student must relate educational subjects to their own personal environment to receive an educational experience. Dewey wrote this in 1938, and we still have not fully comprehended and used this theory in the classrooms of 2012 (Bassey, 2010).

Kammeraad-Campbell (1989) described the influence Dewey had on Dennis Littky. With his experimentalist philosophy, both individuals believed that students must have a direct experience with the learning. Students must experience a subject through activity to truly grasp the concept. If a student sees success in the learning, they are more apt to try it again. Teachers and students must both be active learners in the process. With this action, learning and an educational experience occur (Stallones, 2010).

Littky takes Dewey's theory and bases his entire educational philosophy around it. Every new teacher that worked under Littky received a copy of Dewey's *Experience and Education*. Students learn best when they have a personal experience that relates to the subject. If a student is taught math from a textbook with no prior knowledge or understanding of its usefulness, then he will not learn it. Too many times, we see students memorize math skills to fulfill the grading requirements on a test, but when asked later how to complete a problem or the application of the problem in real life, no answer is given.

Parental Involvement

For students to be accepted into one of Littky's schools, parents must sign a contract in which they promise to attend all quarterly evaluations, presentations and participate in their child's individual learning plan. They become an integral part of the student's academic career. Without this contract, students are not accepted (Keough, 1999).

School administrators invite the parents to social events where their concerns and feedback are openly discussed. If students are unable to attend any of the events, administrators go to their homes or work. Littky states that without the parent's participation, students' achievement is negatively affected. Parents are required and encouraged to participate in activities in the school. Parents are encouraged to be proactive with their children's educational plan and state how they will participate in achieving the goals listed for their student (Goldberg, 1990).

Parents also complete surveys each year from the School Accountability for Learning and Teaching. This data is required for the Rhode Island State Accountability system and is made public. School administrators know the importance of keeping parents involved and answering their concerns. Using this data, students' achievement is affected positively. Parents become a part of the school, therefore, a part of the child's educational life (Littky, 2004).

Parents are considered the most valuable resource for the school. Littky says that they not only enroll students but their families as well. Families are asked to write

an essay separately from the child upon enrollment. When the child is accepted, both students and parents sign a contract stating they will support the teachers in the learning process. Parents must provide ten hours of community service every year. They must also participate in every meeting that works on the personalized education plan for their child. All this includes eight yearly visits to the school to participate in planning, presentations, and exhibitions (Littky, Diaz, Dolly, Hempel, Plant, Price & Grabelle, 2004).

School Curriculum

Even though there is no packaged curriculum, Littky's schools follow five goals. The first is empirical reasoning. Instead of teaching basic science vocabulary, students are exposed to proving hypotheses. When students see their theory come true, their grasp of the science subject becomes concrete and a true educational experience. They are taught to act like a scientist. The second goal is quantitative reasoning or the study of mathematical skills in real world problems. This goal is mainly used with measurement and representation of math problems. Each skill is introduced as needed when completing a problem in their apprenticeship. The third goal is social reasoning. Humanities is introduced and discussed while comparing it to modern events. Students are taught to think and act like a historian and anthropologist. The fourth and fifth goals are communication and personal qualities. Written expression and professional speaking along with leadership skills is taught daily and integrated into the other disciplines (Littky & Gabrelle, 2004; Sparks, 2005).

Students use these skills when presenting their learning in public forums or their job sites. Students and teachers meet three days a week in various groups to work on the five goals. Teachers are able to integrate the subjects for the students, subjects are taught using real life experiences that the students encounter in the internships. All the work makes sense to the student, and both teachers and students become learners together (Sparks, 2005).

Real World Learning

Schools that follow Littky's approach, personalize the curriculum for each student's passion and interests (Keough, 1999). Every student has an individual learning plan that incorporates "student's interests, strengths, and areas that need improvement, both academically and personally" (Castleman & Littky, 2007, p. 60). Students meet with an advisory team led by a teacher that remains with the student for the full four years of high school. The advisory committee, including fifteen students, ensures that each member receives the full attention of the leader.

This meets the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of the student. This model makes the “small school smaller” (Scurry & Littky, 2007, p. 17).

It is the responsibility of the teacher to determine the student’s interests and discover resources within the local community to help the student. Based on the students’ interests, students are assigned a mentor from a community business where 2 days a week, they work at the company completing tasks required by the employer. The mentor helps students understand math and science while completing authentic problems within the company. Every 3 weeks, the advisor visits the mentor and observes the students’ work. The observation excites the student to show off skills and helps the advisor know what educational skills must be the next focus of learning (Castleman & Littky, 2007; Scurry & Littky, 2007; Sparks, 2005).

An example of a student success was a 15-year-old African American student who failed most of his public school classes. He enrolled in the Met and told his mentor that he was interested in computers. When asked why he did not take any in his last school, he commented that his school only provided keyboarding. At the Met, he interned at Concept Link Ltd. learning graphic design, Internet publishing, 3-D modeling, and computer animation alongside professionals in the field. This motivated the student and turned him into an excited learner. He never missed school and used his new math skills while developing new animations (Keough, 1999).

Students learn math and science through the internships. They are more accepting of learning the skills because it makes sense to them. It correlates with a real life problem, such as selling a house with a local realtor or building a boat to learn a physics formula. Students meet with math and literacy specialists three days of the week to learn specific skills of the subjects they can take back to the work site to complete a project (Scurry & Littky, 2007).

The Met inspires each student by developing all curriculums around their interests. Some argue that this is a revival of the 1960’s philosophy of giving the students whatever they want, but the data coming from schools using this model is showing success. The public schools in Rhode Island have an 80% daily attendance rate and a 55% graduation rate. The Met has a 94% daily attendance rate and a 95% graduation rate, plus 75% are low-income students and the first in their family to graduate from high school. Ninety-nine percent of students go on to college and of these students, 70% have graduated or are continuing their college studies. When the interests and the passion of students determine the focus of the teaching, student success is achieved (Castleman & Littky, 2007; Keough, 1999).

Alternative Assessments

Besides the states assessments, there are no formal tests or assessments. According to Littky, state assessments were never meant to solely be used to measure a school's performance. Littky uses them to compare his data to traditional public schools to prove his school philosophy works. Students are evaluated every quarter through presentations. Students are expected to present data from their projects to show their learning. Much of this presentation is applying the learning of math, science, and social studies to real world problems that the student has encountered in the internship (Keough, 1999; Littky, 2004).

A student who interned at a physical therapy clinic worked closely with an aquatic treatment for clients. She learned math and physics to understand the reasoning behind how the treatment worked so she could calm the patients while they were receiving the medical care. For her quarterly assessment, she discussed the treatment, research behind the treatment, and the scientific benefits for current patients who participated in the treatments. This hands-on approach made science understandable for this student who had previously never passed a science class in her public school years. Now, not only does she truly grasp science, she is able to take the scientific terminology and apply it in laymen terms to individuals so that they may understand (Scurry & Littky, 2007).

The students still participate in the required state assessments, but all other assessments are completed through portfolios, projects, project presentations, and evaluations. The students present in a dissertation defense style to a panel of teachers, parents, administrators, and local business leaders (Keough, 1999; Scurry & Littky, 2007). Students at the Met pass other state schools with similar demographics in both math and reading on the state assessments, but the school administrators look at several forms of data to determine a school's true success. Attendance data shows the level of relationships and respect between students and teacher. If teachers provide an environment that is engaging and motivating, then students will be present. Two other important elements of engagement is relevance of work and the relationship between teacher and student. If students feel what they are doing is important and personally meaningful, plus the teacher genuinely cares for them, the student will remain in school (Littky, 2004).

Data are also collected on how many students remain and graduate from college. Students should enroll or have the choice to enroll in any college or post-secondary educational facility. Their individual learning plans allow them to make this choice. Teacher availability is also monitored along with school safety, parental involvement and diversity. Surveys are taken which ask if students are able to talk to their teachers about academic and personal problems, and if they

feel safe in their school, not only in the physical facility but also from other students. Lastly, diversity data are disaggregated by class, race, and socioeconomics (Littky, 2004).

The Met has ranked first in parent involvement, school climate, and quality of instruction in all schools in Rhode Island. It has the lowest percentage in students being bullied and the highest percentage in relationships between teacher and student (Littky, 2004). Littky is currently designing data collecting that include finishing college, being in a satisfying career, and continuing learning for learning (Keough, 1999).

Charter Philosophy and Public Reality

Can public schools change the one size fits all system? Four elements are essential to meeting the needs of today's student. Public schools are capable of implementing personalization, real-world learning, community members, and staff development. Administrators must assign a mentor for each student and require weekly meetings. Mentors can use questionnaires and personal interviews to determine the student's interests. Learning plans can be developed and made available to the teachers so they may teach the required subjects around the individual interests of the students (Keough, 1999).

Administrators must also assign a community mentor to each student where they can complete internships. They can meet with the student to help complete projects that must be developed but is also useful to the company. Much of what is holding public schools back is the emotional baggage that students bring with them each day. Littky feels that when students are out and applying their learning to real hands-on problems, they are able to overcome their personal issues and find success in learning (Keough, 1999).

Finally, administrators must provide training for the teachers. They must be taught how to personalize learning and meet the students' needs. They must talk with other peers concerning their own frustrations. This conversation is needed so that administration can address teachers' concerns. Administrators must also make sure that teachers do not fall back into the traditional education mode. To guarantee this, administrators should get constant feedback from teachers and provide solutions for them when needed (Castleman & Littky, 2007; Keough, 1999).

Changing the System

Using Littky's educational model, we can change the current traditional school system. To provide the child a worthy educational experience, we must allow

them the freedom to thrive and use their curiosity and creativity to experience math, science, and history through real life problems. Littky's educational theory uses a holistic approach, meeting the students' needs while engaging their interests and passion for learning. Because of this real-world connection, students come to school and enjoy the process of exploring new learning (Castleman & Littky, 2007).

One key element of Littky's model is the small number of students in each school. The goal is keeping enrollment around 100 students per school with 13-15 students per class. Students are expected to attend one college class at the local community college each year while in school. They are provided support while attending the college class in study skills, note taking, and college success tricks while immersed in an actual class. This support shows the students they are capable and provides them a safety net so that any concerns or fears are addressed immediately (Keough, 1999). Schools can achieve the small school model by separating heterogeneous groups of students today in a teaming format.

Schools must take time to learn each student and who they are as an individual learner. The number one goal is developing the student's love of learning and connecting their happiness to solving real-world problems. What has been most impressive with this educational approach is the increase in student achievement in "degree of focus on school and learning and students developing their own standards for quality of work" (Keough, 1999, p. 26).

Even post secondary education facilities are now adapting and embracing this model. Kaitlyn Britt, College of Engineering Admission's Counselor at the University of North Texas (UNT), stated that UNT has completely redesigned their curriculum around this model. Companies such as Texas Instruments and the United States military voiced their concerns of the lack of skills coming from the engineering graduates. Because of this concern, UNT took a proactive stance and invited companies to bring their problems to the university and allow students to develop solutions. Students no longer spend the first three years learning from textbooks and sitting in classrooms getting the information from the professors (K. Britt, personal communication, March 14, 2012).

UNT Engineering students choose a research cluster, which represents their interests in the first semester they enter. Examples include designing a laser that goes through the body to detect cancer, or designing a helicopter blade for the U.S. military that lasts ten years instead of five. This hands-on approach has made UNT a top choice for many students interested in the engineering field. Also, due to this internship, many students go on working with the partnering companies upon graduation (K. Britt, personal communication, March 14, 2012).

Any school has the ability to change for the better. Research shows that high performing schools all have a “common focus, high expectations, mutual respect between teachers and students, a personalized learning program for each student, authentic performance assessments, and in-depth learning” (Littky, 2004, p. 4). Public school administrators can observe these elements by visiting schools like the Met. Observers see the relationships between the teachers and students, the positive culture seen from all staff and students, the conversations, respect, quality and depth of student work, and more importantly, the pride (Littky, 2004).

Administrators must take time to teach the teachers how to individualize the student’s learning, how to build appropriate relationships with the students and peers, and how to produce quality assignments. Many teachers are state certified, but that does not mean they are qualified. For teachers to truly impact student learning, they must be a part of the collaborative training and professional learning community (Goldberg, 1990; Sparks, 2005).

To truly change the public school system, teachers are key. In the twenty first century, teachers must multitask by running different programs for different students (Sparks, 2005). Administrators must hire teachers that can understand the difference between what they believe in versus what they are actually doing in the classroom. They must undo what many of them have done for several years through the traditional educational model. Teachers must also bring the real world into the classroom. If internships are difficult for some schools due to the rigid state requirements, teachers must be able to bring those real life problems into the classroom instead of dissecting science or math out of a textbook (Sparks, 2005).

Good leaders can shape a teacher by encouraging risk taking, reinforcing their passions, and consistently reviewing their commitment. If the school answers every situation with what is best for the child, then the actions of the school will follow the vision. Great teachers are made by good leader support. If they feel supported and their beliefs are reinforced, then the positive culture will remain and get better. This, in turn, will improve students’ achievement (Sparks, 2005).

Administrators and teachers attitudes must model the mission of the school. They must inform the student through verbal interaction and physical environment that the student can achieve. When students observe their teachers working hard and excited about their work, the students’ attitudes are positively influenced. When students feel supported and others have great faith in them, they carry that attitude throughout their adult life. This does not mean that students can do whatever they want. Discipline and structure is very evident in high performing schools (Sparks, 2005).

The greatest schools have the “frequent, forthright and humane conversation as the lifeblood of school reform” (Sparks, 2005, p. 41). Conversations are the makeup of every great school. When teachers become learners with their students, more ideas are developed and more learning occurs. For true success, every stakeholder must believe in the same vision and shared philosophy. All the traditional ways of teaching must be thrown out. To do this, constant communication through reflective journals and dialogue among administrators and teachers should occur continuously throughout the year (Sparks, 2005).

A successful culture questions everything. Everyone is involved with implementing the students’ learning plans. What works best for the child becomes what is best for the school (Sparks, 2005). Many participants of Littky’s philosophy believe that all schools can improve. If communities love the children more than the traditional educational setting they had growing up, then they can bring change and provide choices to the public school (Likky & Grabelle, 2004).

Ted Sizer, Coalition of Essential Schools, and a proponent of Littky feels that this shift in public schools can be made possible when communities see students and teachers as “active partners in creating meaningful learning” (Likky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 284). If public schools want to make meaningful change, schools should follow six principles. Teachers and administrators must know their students- personally, behaviorally, and academically. Curriculum standards must be lessened in number and studied more in depth. Learning must also be personalized towards each student. If a student learns through problems that relate to the student, then they gain a true educational experience, as Dewey stated. The student must become a worker. The combination of learning in a real world setting is needed for the 21st century learner. Also, to truly assess the success of the school, several varied assessments must take place. Not only should data be taken for the students, a successful school must use data to analyze the teaching strategies, effective learning in the real world, and access to university learning. Finally, schools need to remain small. If schools grow too large, personalization of learning gets lost (Likky & Grabelle, 2004).

The success of the Met has influenced Rhode Island to pass new education laws. The Department of Education is pushing every public school to have an advisory period, produce a personalized learning plan for each student, and use multiple assessment measures including qualitative measures of portfolios and exhibitions. This can be done in any traditional public school. Everyone plays a part in a successful school. Educators become leaders in the schools and communities; students become researchers in their fields; and, community members become

“participants and decision makers in the education of [the] youth” (Likky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 285).

The overall goal is to teach today’s student to become a lifelong learner (Littky et al., 2004). The biggest challenge of changing the educational system today is unlearning what we have always done for the past three hundred years. We have made small strides, but overall, the data still shows that the disparities between races and socioeconomic classes are staggering. For these gaps to be closed, we must accept that change must be made, and we must do whatever it takes to achieve this change. Students deserve to learn the way their brains are designed to learn. Any student, no matter the intelligence, age, race, class, or motivation, can be put in front of a video game and figure out the steps to play. They are capable of learning and applying math and science.

Why not take this excitement for learning and redesign our schools to meet this need? We must realize that students of today do not accept the learning that we have done traditionally. Fortunately, corporations are mandating that we produce different learners. This vocalization is leading down into the school system and demanding change. It can be done; it must be done. Following the educational theory of Dennis Littky, we can do the most common sense action, provide personalized leaning for each student.

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