



A New School Leader's Philosophy of Education

NEH: Philosophers of Education

David Ward

A New School Leader's Philosophy of Education

While completing my Masters of Science degree coursework in Educational Leadership towards becoming a New York State Certified Principal, one of my professors challenged us to examine our philosophy of education as we were articulating our visions for either our existing schools or designing a new school. He told us that effective school leaders use their philosophy, to frame their visions, establish their mission and guide the instruction. The leader's philosophy and vision is the ethical compass to point the school towards its mission. They establish the identity of the stakeholders, set the tone of the building, they are the corner stone of the school's culture. As he was speaking I saw the following image. A ship at sea piloted by a captain without a compass and no idea how to navigate the waters is destined to drift and run aground. So too, a school led by a principal with no philosophy or vision to set the climate, create the culture and guide instruction is destined to fail. The book of Proverbs states, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" and the prophet Hosea wrote, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." (KJV Bible) As I hurriedly completed that assignment I realized I really didn't have a philosophy of education. While investigating opportunities for professional development this summer I came across this NEH Seminar, The Philosophers of Education, and I knew I needed to apply to be a participant, so I could begin to develop my own philosophy of education.

As I completed the preliminary readings it became obvious to me that I really had no philosophy of education. I had not thought deeply about how students should be viewed. I did not consider the importance of their age, temperament or interest. I had not read Locke, Jefferson, Rousseau or Mann and to learn how their ideas shaped America's public education. I had not studied Dewey or Hirsh and yet I was planning on becoming a school building leader without a compass.

So where do I begin? I know I want to design a school for boys and young men of color. I believe it is my duty to save as many black and brown boys as I can because I want my four-year old grandson to have a fighting chance. Selfish, yes but keeps me

motivated. I believe that I should treat and teach each boy as if they were Luca, as if they were my own. That is the heart of my philosophy of education.

I believe closing the achievement gap begins with school building leaders (SBL). I believe effective SBL's set the climate and culture of their schools based on their code of ethics, philosophy of education and vision. "The climate of a school is HOW the students and staff feel about their school. School culture is WHY they feel the way they do." (Konstan, 2013) It is the SBL's philosophy of education that frames their vision and establishes the mission of the school. I believe it is imperative that schools designed to educate boys and young men of color have visionary leaders. The stakes are too high.

Yes, we should be concerned about the education of all children, however there are more of my young men incarcerated than in college. There is a school to prison pipeline that exists and that pipeline must be closed. Educate, "to provide intellectual, moral, social and vocational instruction." (Webster Online Dictionary) Educating boys of color is more than simply book knowledge. In the tradition of Booker T Washington, I believe it is the responsibility of communities of color to educate their boys and young men. We must train our young to become self-sufficient problem solvers, by using their skills as well as their intellect. "...the masses of us are to live by the production of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life..." (Washington, 1901). The same math skills used to negotiate drug sales on the corner can be use to manage hedge fund deals. The same strategies of gang warfare can be used to command troops in the military. The same vision it takes to design an effective pick and roll play on the local blacktop can design cities, erect buildings and research medical break-throughs.

I believe like WEB DuBois that the "talented tenth" are responsible for teaching in our schools and training those who will teach our sons (and daughters). "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." (DuBois, 1903) These exceptional men are not always those who perform great feats on the athletic field or excite fans in stadiums across the country. No, the exceptional men are the consistent ones, the ones who keep their promises, work hard to provide secure and stable homes; these men take pride in what ever job they do because it is excellence of performance that

matters most. My vision is to educate boys and young men of color to become responsible men. I believe that far too many of our young men need to learn how to be self-sufficient. It is a collaborative effort that includes all the stakeholders in a young man's life; his parents, pastor, coach, teacher, principal, friends and relatives. When it comes to his schooling these young men need to be in learning environments where the administration and staff agree to use the best possible instructional tools to guide their teaching. No one teaching model, curriculum or philosophy will ever reach all students, however schools that are dedicated to exploring the best methods available and learn how to use those tools effectively will go a long way in closing the achievement gap for our boys. It will however take exceptionally committed men from the Black and Hispanic communities to do the necessary work. It begins with the "talented tenth" but it requires the commitment of everyone from his community.

The more we read of Hirsh, Gardner and Ravitch and examined cultural literacy, multiple intelligences and progressive education, my thoughts began to crystalize and new guidelines began to emerge.

I believe that members of minority communities need to take control of the education of their children, especially their sons. We can no longer expect or rely upon public education controlled by others to educate our sons. I believe boys of color need to be exposed to a wide range of educational opportunities that permit them to explore and understand who they are as learners. I believe that we must provide them learning communities where they are not afraid to succeed or make mistakes, they need to learn in environments of structured freedom. I believe that schools for boys of color need strong instructors and effective leaders. I believe if the stakeholders in each of these schools approached the education of our young men as though they were their own sons, they would establish deeper and more meaningful relationships. Meaningful relationships are at the heart of quality education. Curriculum, policy, data and schools of thought mean nothing to children where there is no relationship. My philosophy of education is for all the stakeholders in students' lives: to treat and teach each student as though they were our own. Treat each young man as though he matters to you. See him as valuable, treat him as if he were a major asset and a long-term investment. Have a vested interest in him and his successful development as a responsible male; use whatever the best tools available to

educate him. No matter how difficult he may appear to be, even when you are at your wits end as to how to help him, remember, Churchill's words "Never, never, never give up!" (Churchill, 1941) Establishing meaningful relationships is at the core of this philosophy. Successful schools start with relationships, relationships built on mutual respect, common goals and trust. (Peters, 2006)

By now everyone knows about the continuing crisis in education regarding the widening achievement gap, among boys and young men of color. From the White House, to TED talks, to the pundits on talk radio black and Latino boys and young men are a topic of conversation. We all know they are disproportionately represented in special education classes, are more likely to drop out or be pushed out of schools and make up the main source of inmates for rural and metropolitan correctional facilities (Alexander, 2012). The school to prison pipeline is open for business and business is good. We know the problem exists; the question is what are we doing about it? What is our vision for rescuing these endangered species? As part of President Obama's, My Brother's Keeper initiative, he is looking to bring together private sector and philanthropic organizations to improve the lives and outcomes of boys and young men of color. Seven leading educational research centers from across the country have responded by saying,

...As our nation prepares to enact recommendations from the task force, we call for programs, policies, and services that are guided by research and documented effectiveness. We caution, for example, against the widespread replication of mentoring programs that haphazardly match young men with adults, as evidence concerning the outcomes of such programs is mixed. Moreover, we believe interventions should focus on better understanding and remedying systemic inequities in policies, schooling and social practices, and structures that persistently undermine the success of boys and men of color. More significant investment in the dissemination of existing research on what works, as well as funding new studies on promising policies and practices, would help ensure the success of My Brother's Keeper and the Americans it aims to effectively service." (GSE News, 2014)

For this paper I decided to examine how my philosophy of education shapes my role as an educational leader. Let me begin by stating there is not one answer to fix the challenges of educating boys and young men of color. The challenge confronting educators has many layers. I will not attempt to address them all in this paper. My focus is to discuss how I have developed my philosophy of education and how it has framed my vision for developing a combined public elementary and middle school, servicing students from grades three through eight.

This spring I began writing a proposal to submit to the New York City Department of Education for the creation of a new small school. The initial draft outlined a structure without a true purpose. Over the past three weeks I have steadily revised this proposal influenced by the readings and discussions in this seminar. I would like to thank Peter Gibbon and Peter Wright for organizing this informative event and I thank all of the participants for your critical and informative insights on our topic. My philosophy is a work in progress but I have developed it enough to know how it frames the vision for my school.

Rites of Passage: A Learning Community for Boys and Young Men, Grades 3-8

"Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."

Malcolm X

Rites of Passage (ROP), is a High School Preparatory Learning Community for Boys and Young Men dedicated to preparing boys and young men of color for the academic rigors of top-tier high schools. We are a 3 through 8 grade expeditionary learning community servicing black and brown boys living in urban communities. Our primary goal is to provide a solid academic foundation that empowers otherwise disenfranchised young men with the essential moral, academic and physical tools required to grow up and become responsible males, successful students and engaged citizens. The school will focus on character development, academic rigor and healthy, well-balanced living.

Nationally 48 percent of African American and 42 percent of Latino boys fail to graduate high school, compared to 74 percent of white males. In the state of New York only 37 percent of black and Latino males graduate compared the 78 percent of white males (NAEP, 2013); many because they were unprepared when they entered high school. Rites of Passage will work to prepare every enrolled ROP Scholar for the rigorous challenge of a quality high school education. The better prepared they are for high school the more opportunities they will have to be career or college ready. We want to expose them to multiple entry points for developing vocational skills or preparing for higher education. Not all young men of color want to or need to attend college, all however need to be problem-solvers, have the ability to think critically and converse intelligently.

Each young man will have an individual student profile based on written observations, responses to questionnaires and assessments that identifies their learning style preference, multiple intelligences, career aspirations and artistic talents. They will be encouraged to explore, design, critique and revise, all in an effort to gain understanding. Failure or refusing to try is not an option for a ROP Scholar. Taking risks and making mistakes are essential parts of discovery and innovation. Creative minds are looking for challenges that allow them to find solutions using the knowledge they have acquired. ROP leaders and staff will work collaboratively to identify tools that will be used to guide curriculum and instruction. ROP Instructors will be encouraged to find the methods and curriculum that will guide the instruction that leads to understanding. If the young men before you were your sons, based on your analysis of their data what would you use to teach them? What would you use to maximize understanding? How would you create a learning environment of structured freedom using guided instruction?

Strong emphasis will be placed on establishing a firm foundation in the third grade. Using inquiry-based data, our third grade team will analyze the results of each Scholar's learning profile to select the most effective curriculum for that group. This might include direct instruction, expeditionary learning or free association. The focus however will be on developing, improving and honing literacy skills.

“Reading to Understand the World You Live In!” is our focus; *“Reading is more than text!”* our mantra. Emphasis will be placed on reading for understanding. Scholars

will learn how to read everything from stars, plant life, maps, tree rings, financial spreadsheets and text. ROP Scholars will not only learn the mechanics of reading; they will be taught the importance of *reading to learn*.

We purposely intend to recruit and place some of our strongest male teachers in the third grade house. These men are expected to serve as role models of academic excellence. They will be encouraged and funded to have their students spend equal time outside of the classroom as well as inside. As an expeditionary learning school our students will be taught to read a variety of things, not only text. They will read the change in seasons by the sounds in the air. They will read music and art in addition to text. They will read a change in defense by adjustments made at the line of scrimmage. They will work towards gaining understanding through observations, experiments, case studies, fieldwork, outside lecturers and service learning. Each ROP Scholar will have an assigned tutor beginning the second semester of third grade.

Our fourth grade focus will be on math principles and calculations, our fifth grade will emphasize science and technology, and the sixth grade theme will be cultural awareness. Seventh grade we begin inter-disciplinary work; American Literature and U.S. History along with pre-Algebra and Earth Science. Finally, our eighth grade will concentrate on World Literature, Global History, Algebra and Living Environment or Chemistry.

There will be Physical Education four days a week and Saturday School twice a month for tutoring, family conferences, art and music.

We will partner with Outward Bound to have them support our curricular objectives of: Character Building, Promotion of Academic Excellence and the Quest for Learning. As a staff we want our Scholars to understand on their level what they are being taught. Can they apply what they learn in real world situations? Why is this so important? Boys of color in America need to know how to navigate the dangerous waters of American society. Black and brown boys are targeted because they are competition to the dominant culture. Educated boys of color are a threat. In an economy where fewer jobs are available, whether consciously or not, very few members of the previously dominant culture really want to see black and brown boys succeed outside a prescribed set of employment opportunities. It is acceptable for a select few to achieve a measure of

success through professional athletics or entertainment. Some will be permitted to enter the legal or medical profession, however in the world of technology and high finance they are rarely welcomed. Becoming self-reliant and self-sufficient is the only real alternative available and this will not happen unless they are truly educated.

The ROP staff will have a weekly professional development meeting and be offered out of school paid Professional Development opportunities to do research, design and develop annual Learning Expeditions for their respective grade houses. Each team will be expected to send at least two team members every year. When team members return they will prepare an in-house professional development session for the rest of the staff. Grade houses will meet to determine how the new information will be utilized in their upcoming expeditions.

Rites of Passage is a family oriented learning community so twice a month during Saturday School parents and siblings of ROP Scholars will be invited to join their Scholar from 9 to 2 to attend family health workshops, meet with community service organizations, hold extended Student Led Conferences to review the Scholars progress for the term and join our visual and performing arts program. We will engage in community building circles and enjoy potluck dinners. Parents are a vital part of the ROP family and will have full access to the administration, teachers and staff.

Rites of Passage: Learning Community for Young Men in line with President Obama's My Brother's Keeper program is dedicated to the ideal that all young men of color need positive role models. They need to know that they are not an after-thought or forgotten, insignificant members of American society. Young men of color have always been a vital part of the fabric of America and they deserve the best quality education that opens doors of opportunity. Kent Nerburn writes, "In times past there were rituals of passage that conducted a boy into manhood, where other men passed along the wisdom and responsibilities that needed to be shared. But today we have no rituals. We are not conducted into manhood; we simply find ourselves there." No ROP Scholar will stumble into manhood because we are committed to teach each student as though they were our own.

Through our careful examination of these historical philosophers I learned that the public education of children is varied and complex. Throughout time man has attempted

to pass on information, facts, literature, culture and values to the next generation through an organized system. There is disagreement on who should be educated and the methods used to educate, but one thing is certain all parents want their children to be better educated than they were. Public schools are allegedly failing and tenured schoolteachers are under attack. There is a tremendous fear that American children are being left behind and failing to compete in the global arena; and we are searching for answers. Here's what I learned, education is messy because people are complex beings. There are multiple moving parts in the operation of a school system. No two people really learn the same, so one size does not fit all, however, one thing is clear, if educators will treat and teach each child as though they were their own with the same respect, compassion and love they have for their own child, all the problems won't be solved, but the process of teaching children would be less stressful and tremendously satisfying. As an aspiring school building leader I want to find the best teachers, give the best tools and allow them to use their creative, innovative minds to develop a community of learners. My mission is to establish a learning community for boys and young men of color where they are encouraged to pursue their natural love of learning because they know they are being treated as one of our own.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. New York: The New Press, 2012.
- Churchill, Winston. "Inspirational Quotes of Winston Churchill." 29 October 1941.
- DuBois, WEB. The Souls of Black Folks. Dover Publications, 1994.
- Graduate School of Education. GSE News. 2 June 2014. 31 July 2014
<<http://www.gse.upenn.edu/news/leading-educational-research-centers-respond-white-house-report-boys-and-young-men-color>>.
- Konstan, Elayna. Best Practices Standards For Creating and Sustaining a Safe and Supportive School. New York: New York City Department of Education, 2013.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. "National Assessment of Educational Progress." Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.
- Peters, Stephen. Do You Know Enough About Me To Teach Me? A Student's Perspective. Orangeburg: The Peters Group Foundation, 2006.
- Washington, Booker T. Up From Slavery. W. W. Norton and Co, 1996.
- Webster, Merriam. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>>.

