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Building Reform Around Adler's Paideia Proposal

Les Potter

The Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences began using Mortimer Adler's "Paideia Proposal" as a foundation for urban school reform in the 1980's. The practice has now spread to more traditional settings. The fifty-year old concept meets today's needs for structure, rigor, and active learning opportunities.

During the initial period of disillusionment with public schools following publication of *A Nation at Risk*, people in Chattanooga demanded that students' needs be met. Specifically, schools were to raise test scores, guarantee a high quality education for *all* students, increase the number of students entering college, and prepare people to work effectively in a highly technological world.

Knowing that these goals required changes in our then current practice, and well aware of ever intensifying financial constraints, Chattanooga adopted the Paideia Concept. Building a new educational model to accomplish the goals set for schools by society involved risk, but less risk than doing nothing.

The School for the Arts and Sciences achieved more than most of us dared to dream. Students have a 100% graduation rate and 98% attend college. A magnet school, admission is now by lottery to eliminate parents' practice of "camping out" to be in line for their child's opportunity to attend. Unresolved was the question of whether this success could be replicated in more traditional settings.

What is Paideia?

Started by Mortimer Adler in the 1930's, the idea has been slowly spreading across the country. Adler wrote three books in the early 1980's: *The Paideia Proposal*, *The Paideia Program*, and *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*. The Paideia Group, including visionary leaders like Ernest Boyer and TheodoreSizer, meets to mold and implement the concept. There is also a National Paideia Center located at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

With his philosophy, Adler (1982) asks us as educators to:

- create a positive and powerful vision of the future for our students
- provide the same quality of education for all students
- make school general; not specific; liberal not specialized
- motivate the student and prepare him for life
- be aware that learning is active not passive
- realize that education is life long
- promote self-esteem, motivation, and respect for others
- provide opportunities for the democratic process
- utilize the three stages or columns of learning: didactic, coaching, and seminaring and
- recognize that learning isn't only for students but for adults (Adler, 1982).

Implementing Adler's philosophy grew from principles practicing educators identify as being most helpful to them:

- all children can learn—it sets a mind for a positive theme;
- the three callings for which schooling should prepare all Americans are (a) to earn a decent living, (b) to be a good citizen of the nation and world, and (c) to make a good life for oneself;
- the results of these three kinds of teaching should be (a) the acquisition of organized knowledge, (b) the formation of habits of skill in the use of language and mathematics, and (c) the growth of the mind's understanding of basic ideas and issues;
- each student's achievement of these results should be evaluated in terms of that student's capacities and not solely related to the achievements of other students—it means that evaluation is open to all students and can use a variety of means;
- the principal of a school should never be a mere administrator, but also a leading teacher who should cooperate with the faculty in planning, reforming, and reorganizing the school as an educational community—it stresses the principal's role in school change;
- the principal and faculty of a school should themselves be actively engaged in learning.

Paideia calls for a program of teaching and learning whose goal is threefold:

1. to prepare people to earn a living;
2. to prepare people for the duties of citizenship; and
3. to prepare people for life long and continuous learning.

The curriculum is very rigid. Students do not select electives. The curriculum is single track and challenging with a certain prescribed knowledge that all students must acquire in order to achieve these three goals. Adler (1982) predicted that students would:

- acquire a core of general knowledge in the

subjects of language, literature, mathematics, sciences, social studies, fine arts, and physical education;

- develop fundamental skills in reading, writing, calculating, speaking, and thinking; and
- enlarge their understanding of ideas and values.

There is a strong focus on outcomes: knowledge, skills, and understanding must be demonstrated at certain levels. This is a starting point for teachers to begin to develop their own curriculum. In designing curriculum, they must decide what knowledge is worth knowing, how should that knowledge be organized, how should it be taught, and how it fits in with the real world (Adler, 1984).

How To Teach Didactics, Coaching, "Seminaring"

Adler's philosophy about what to teach (the single track curriculum) leads logically to methodology—how to teach. The didactic mode facilitates acquisition of organized knowledge through such means as textbooks, films or lectures. Goodlad (1984) estimated that roughly 70% of our classroom instruction in our schools is currently spent this way. Adler (1982) believes that no more than 20% of the student's time should be occupied by teacher talk or passive learning. While the didactic mode is necessary, especially in presenting new material, it is probably the least effective way of presenting information to students. Adler believes in much more interactive instruction.

Coaching is how students actively gain the intellectual skills which are necessary for further learning. This coaching is the core of the Paideia program and requires practice, mastery, and learning by doing. The proportion of time used in this method should be greatly expanded. At least 40% of the teaching time should be used for coaching (Adler, 1982). A wide variety of methods and approaches should be used in the classroom including laboratories, cooperative learning, observation, small group instruction, problem solving, exercising critical thinking, individualized instruction, and projects.

The seminar component encourages stu-

dents to deepen their understanding of the ideas they have been studying, and apply them to their own lives and values. Seminars should be used as a regular instructional method, with the teachers facilitating an open examination of ideas. There are generally three types of seminars.

The school seminar involves all faculty and students in discussion of a specific idea. This seminar is usually held weekly for several hours with the academic classes canceled. Involvement and commitment are intense. This practice must be carefully planned, implemented, and followed up in classes.

Team seminars examine disciplinary units. Following didactic experiences, students and select teachers meet as they deem necessary.

Finally, the classroom seminar is regularly and frequently used by all teachers. Generally this is used to check understanding, provoke additional interest, and to probe other students for ideas about the topic. "Seminaring" is the keystone to the teaching concept of Paideia as it has the greatest capacity to transform the nature of school for students and teachers.

From these seminars accrue the following advantages:

- a bond of mutual respect is created, both peer to peer and teacher to student;
- each student must think critically to understand ideas, solve problems, and make good decisions;
- conflicts are resolved and knowledge and skills are applied to new situations;
- articulation, listening, and critical thinking skills are improved.
- "Seminaring" and Paideia schools lend themselves very easily and naturally to block scheduling. A good Paideia teacher can make the time fly.

The seminar is usually the first method introduced to teachers. Students and teachers find that skills learned in seminars transfer to their other subjects, improving attitudes and motivation. Initial efforts in using seminar methods are challenging for teachers. Teachers have a difficult task to teach students that they will not be criticized, nor graded for wrong

answers. Only when students believe this will they engage in open interaction.

Teachers must also repeatedly stress that opinions not supported by facts or research have minimal value. The seminar must be a stimulated discussion facilitated by the instructor, not a rap session.

The Phoenix Plan

Given the success of our Paideia-based magnet school, we applied similar principles in a decaying inner city high school. Chattanooga High School, Phoenix Three was changed from a traditional high school to a nontraditional school. When we started discussing the idea of a zoned Paideia high school, we wanted one that had all of the trappings of a school on the verge of failure. This was it. In the 1980's, over 1500 culturally and economically diverse and happy high school students were enrolled. By 1991, fewer than 350 students attended. The school had the city's lowest test scores, highest dropout rates, poorest student behavior, and worst faculty and staff morale.

From a once proud and fine school it had reached about as close to the bottom as a school can get. The question was, "should the school be closed or remain open using a different approach?" Given the amazing success of the magnet Paideia school, parents, faculty, and students wanted to try Adler's idea.

Adler (1983, 1984) said that no single blueprint for designing the perfect Paideia school exists and that for Paideia to work best, existing schools and existing methods need to be restructured. We felt we had a good model in the magnet school.

Once the commitment was made by the school board, superintendent, and the community to start the Phoenix Plan, town meetings were held to explain the concept to staff and to inservice new teachers. The school district and the teachers' association understood and agreed on the following process. The district would "close" the school and allow any teacher in the district to apply to teach in the reopened school or another school in the district. All teachers would keep jobs in Chattanooga.

Sixteen students, parents, teachers, business, and community persons who had an inter-

est in a good educational environment at Phoenix Three comprised the selection committee. This committee chose the principal (the author) and a core of teachers for our school. After this was complete, the rest of the staff was picked by committees of core teachers and administrators who looked for several traits: intelligence, dedication, risk-taking and a belief that all kids could learn and learn at high levels.

Prospective teachers had an opportunity to read Adler's work prior to the interviews. The committee used creative interviewing questions pertaining to Paideia education, the principles of Paideia, and their commitment to students and learning. We only hired about 30% of the original staff who reapplied. A great number of interested teachers from across our district were eager to try this creative approach to education. The newly hired teachers had to be committed, dedicated, and willing to spend a lot of time with staff development. The new staff was chosen before school was out in the Spring.

Staff Development

The inservice began. The first program brought everyone together to become acquainted at a local hotel. (A community foundation paid all the expenses for this meeting.) All staff and administrators were introduced to the mission and goals of Paideia by the central office staff. Mortimer Adler's three textbooks were distributed to each staff member. The books were to be read before we next met.

Two weeks before school started, all staff members met at a four day retreat for an intense inservice. The program was led by the district's curriculum department, trainers from the Paideia Center at the University of North Carolina (led by Dr. Pat Weiss), and Paideia teachers from the successful magnet program at the Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences. For approximately nine hours each day, the staff learned about "seminaring" and coaching skills, the philosophy of Paideia, cooperative learning, and integrated curriculum. After the retreat, the faculty returned to school to continue their training with the Paideia trainer (coordinator) who was assigned to the high school. The Lyndhurst Foundation paid

for accommodations, presenters, stipends, materials, and food. The Paideia coordinator assigned to the high school was paid by the school district.

The Paideia coordinator holds a unique position at the school. The coordinator has teacher status but does not teach, and is used strictly for staff development. He is responsible to the principal and understands his role to be helping teachers teach. The coordinator takes no part evaluating teachers.

His job is to help teachers with the Paideia instruction. This allows teachers freedom to take risks, to experiment with learning, and to try things that they may not in a traditional school. Teachers help and get immediate feedback on their teaching. The coordinator attends or observes classes only when invited to do so. He meets with the teachers outside of class, individually, or in small or large groups. Teachers express great support for this form of staff development.

Our Academic Program

Required Course Offerings (9-12) grade at Chattanooga High School, Phoenix III include those found in typical academic high schools: (a) College English - four years; (b) French or Spanish - four years; (c) College History - World Geography, US History, World History, Government/Economics; (d) Science - Physical Science, Biology, Chemistry, Physics; (e) Mathematics - Algebra I and II, Geometry, Trigonometry, etc.; and (f) Required Electives - Seminars, Physical Education, Computers, Health, and Fine Arts.

Regular extra-curricular activities which meet before or after school included sports, Beta Club, National Honor Society, theater and dramatic arts, cheerleading, video yearbook, various other clubs. In terms of available opportunities for students, ours is a very typical high school.

The school uses a seven period day with fifth period being a tutorial period. During fifth period students can receive help in any class. All students must be in a class getting help but they determine in which subject it is needed. This tutorial opportunity is crucial as the students do not have the needed resources at

home. This tutorial opportunity works well for students in preparing them for their rigorous classes.

Results and Conclusion

Results were better after one year than many of us anticipated:

- Enrollment increased by 190 students.
- Test scores went up only slightly but this was expected in only one year.
- Referrals to the office, suspensions and expulsions decreased significantly over the previous year.
- Dropouts were almost non-existent, but we had an increase of students transferring to other schools. The most common reason given was wanting to go to an "easier" school.
- The grade point average of students increased to close to a 2.5, even though all students are in the "college track".
- Attendance of students improved five percent from the previous year.
- Although it is difficult to determine morale, students and teachers who had been at the school before it became a Paideia school said that they like the reformed school and were very happy there. This is also true of the parents and the community. Students reported that they especially like the caring teachers and the opportunity to express

themselves.

- All students who applied to college were accepted.
- The local community college offered full tuition scholarships to any and all of our graduates.

Phoenix Three has been in existence now for five years. The school continues to improve as measured by students' grades, test scores, and attendance. Discipline continues to improve. The number of seniors who apply for, are accepted, and receive financial aid for college increases yearly. The school now uses block scheduling which appears to be working very well with good academic results.

As the first principal of this school, I am very pleased with the results of the Paideia concept. If this school can succeed in an urban situation with the problems that we faced, Paideia education can succeed anywhere.

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