Chapter 26: My Magnificent Twenty

All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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Every educator dreams of the opportunity to work in an educational Utopia, a school situation in which the concern for the student overshadows all other considerations, a place where all staff is dedicated to providing improved learning opportunities for all students, a place of harmony, hard work and success.

Certainly, my assignment as superintendent of the Edgewood Independent School District in San Antonio in 1969 was anything but utopian experience. Edgewood was the poorest of 1,600 school districts in Texas prior to school finance equity becoming a state court mandate. Over one-half of the instructional staff did not meet minimum requirements for state certification, and a teacher turnover rate of over 33% made staffing a perennial problem.

For many years prior to my superintendency in Edgewood I had been a strong advocate for early childhood education. Working for the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin from 1967 to 1969, I had the opportunity to develop a proposal for an Edgewood pre-school program for submission as part of the San Antonio Model Cities Program. The school district had decided not to include early childhood education as part of the Model Cities program, but upon becoming superintendent, I resurrected the plan and included it in the proposal.

In 1969 the Texas Foundation School Program did not provide for kindergarten or other preschool age programs, therefore, there was no available pool of trained teachers for employment in the preschool Model Cities program when approved for the 1969-70 school year.

That same year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), in an attempt to upgrade teacher competency, had issued new regulations which prohibited the use of emergency certified teachers with less than 90 semester hours of college work. The previous minimum requirement had been 60 semester hours, and the personnel office had already hired a number of prospective teachers with at least 60 but with less than 90 hours of college work.

The personnel office contacted TEA and requested that 20 of these newly hired teachers with between 60 and 90 semester hours of college be allowed to teach in the Model Cities early childhood education program. TEA responded in the affirmative, stating that the program was not state funded nor of much importance in terms of teacher preparation.

So it happened that in September 1969, the early childhood education program was initiated with 20 teachers with less than three years of college. Since state regulations demanded that education courses be offered in the upper-division program, none of the teachers had taken a teacher education course.

It is surprising, therefore, that these 20 teachers became the best group of teachers it has been my privilege to work with in my more than 40 years as a professional educator. Along with the program director, they created the Utopia which every educator dreams of. The Early Childhood Center for 3, 4 and 5 year-old economically disadvantaged children became the place where concern for the student overshadowed all other considerations, a place where all staff was dedicated to providing improved learning opportunities for the students, a place of harmony, hard work and success.

The 20 teachers worked with SEDL in the development and pilot testing of a prototype early childhood curriculum for economically disadvantaged, minority and limited-English-proficient children. The teachers developed a relatively unstructured, warm, loving, nurturing environment that was a joy to behold. Parents were not only welcomed at the school, but few parents ever visited the school for any purpose without finding themselves in teacher aide roles, participating in educational activities with their children.

Parents reluctant to visit the school were enticed by the 20 teachers. They managed to get the cosmetology classes from all three of the district high schools to offer free hairstyling and manicures which brought out many of the mothers. The teachers issued them a number, and while waiting for their number to be called, the mothers were hustled into their children's classrooms where they performed as teacher aides. Fathers were brought to the school to assist in the building and maintenance of playground facilities and in the building of the hundreds of educational toys and manipulatives used in preschool programs.

Visitors to the Center usually found themselves similarly involved in instructional activity. We had visitors from over one-half of the 50 states, and the never-ending stream was becoming a problem until the 20 teachers requested that visitors provide instructional assistance, rather than sit in the rear of the room as non-participating observers.

In addition to instruction and curriculum development, Center personnel conducted research and training activities. Innovative practices included extensive staff participation in school management, a precursor of the site-based management which was to become universally accepted almost 25 years later. Other innovations included the employment of a social worker, the use of outdoor language development activities, flexibility in student assignments with extensive exchange of individual students and groups, a community employment agency, pre-natal parent training, infant stimulation and comprehensive medical and dental services.

The most amazing characteristic of these 20 teachers was their creative capability. There was no student, instructional or administrative problem that they could not solve in their daily staff meetings, although I frequently had to spend hours putting out brush fires ignited by their creative genius.

All 20 teachers participated in the design of the José A. Cárdenas Early Childhood Center, built in 1972 with Model Cities funds. The facility was unique in many ways. It was designed for preschool age children with hardware and fixtures easily accessible to a three-year-old child. There was an emphasis on de-institutionalization with individual rest rooms rather than the traditional gang facilities common to schools. The Center did not include a cafeteria. Meals prepared in the kitchen were served in a home setting in each classroom in order to make the meal part of the instructional activity. The building had ample provisions for research, staff training and curriculum development.

My main contribution to this prototype preschool program was fiscal management. Since the program was located in the poorest school district in Texas, local funds were too scarce to augment the core funding by the San Antonio Model Cities Program. The entire Center was partially supported by funds from Title I and Title I – Migrant from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, Career Opportunities, Urban/Rural, Experimental Schools and National School Lunch programs. Additional funds came from the Handy Andy food store chain and from various foundations.

I have always believed that the main reason for dismantling this most successful program after I left Edgewood schools was the inability, or unwillingness, of subsequent administrators to do the innovative financial juggling necessary to support the program from more than a dozen sources of funds.

As early as 1970, the Edgewood Early Childhood Education Center staff had identified the three essential components of all successful innovative school programs: the valuing of children, the provision of support services and forming unique interrelationships among the home, the community and the school.

The success of this program raises some interesting educational issues. Foremost is the assumption that the existence of the three essential components, valuing of children, support services and home relationships, can provide the elusive success so drastically absent in regular and traditional school programs. Since my experiences in Edgewood, I have maintained that the presence of these three characteristics of successful innovative programs in the regular school program can bring about an immediate solution to the education of children from atypical populations.

A second issue is the conspicuous absence of teacher preparation among the Center staff. Can one assume that teacher preparation is a liability and its absence an asset for teaching personnel? I don't believe so. I believe that my magnificent 20 were successful in spite of a lack of preparation and experience, rather than because of it. The most that I am willing to concede is that no preparation and experience is preferable to poor preparation and experience.

A third issue is the extent to which school governance and tradition constrain teacher creativity. I believe that the unusual creativity of the preschool group was related to the complete absence of experienced personnel that have already learned the boundaries of teacher behavior imposed by the school. If each of these 20 teachers had been assigned to the various elementary schools, I doubt that even a small fraction of their creative potential would have ever surfaced.

A fourth issue is the obvious existence of a "tipping" factor. A group establishes the norm for the behavior of its members. When a majority of the group holds a specific view or value, all members of the group are expected to share the view or value, or at least behave in ways consistent with the majority view.

At the Cárdenas Center, unlike other district schools, corporal punishment was deemed unprofessional and unnecessary. When a problem teacher was transferred to this school and the whipping of preschool children became routine in her classroom, she was professionally and socially ostracized by Center staff, until she requested a transfer from the Center.

School personnel commonly adhere to the "deficit" model, that is, that the poor school performance of atypical children can be attributed to deficit characteristics of such populations. This accounts for the low levels of expectancy which is the most formidable barrier to the successful educational performance of minority and other atypical children. Efforts of individual teachers to improve educational opportunities are fruitless as long as these teachers constitute a minority in the school. Success will remain elusive until such a time as school personnel believing that atypical children have positive qualities for successful school performance become the majority in the school and dictate educational policy favorable for successful performance. Their advocacy for atypical children is now often deemed unacceptable behavior

by the professional group. If the number of school personnel with a positive perception of such children increases to the point that they constitute a majority of the school personnel, then it can be expected that “tipping” will take place, with a group value reversal, and student deficit perceptions will become the unacceptable perspective.

A fifth issue which surfaced early in the Center and 25 years later became a state-wide issue is the emphasis and content of the preschool program. The primary value of preschool education for economically disadvantaged children should be the provision of enriching experiences for physical, mental, social and emotional development. This development subsequently enhances student performance in the academic content of the first grade. Unfortunately, school personnel have a tendency to view preschool programs as an opportunity to present academic content at an earlier age. According to evaluation reports, this “pushdown” curriculum is prevalent in the new state preschool program, with disastrous results. The curriculum that six-year-old atypical children found difficult is now being presented to three-year-old children with a lower level of development. Such academically oriented preschool programs increase the propensity for failure and brings about failure and the accompanying negative concepts of self at an earlier age.

Preschool program staff are pressured by the regular staff to introduce academic content, hoping that the early exposure will enhance academic performance in the regular grades, with an accompanying improved performance on the state-mandated competency tests. The location of the Cárdenas Center in a separate and isolated facility provided a buffer from regular program staff in the various elementary schools. The decentralization of the early childhood program and the assignment of participating children to individual schools eliminated this buffer. It is therefore not surprising that preschool programs were pressured into the “pushdown” curriculum with a substantial decline in student performance.

The four years that I worked with the staff of the Edgewood early childhood education center are by far the most rewarding in my professional career. The unbelievable success of the program can be attributed to the caring, hard work and dedication of 20 magnificent teachers that created their own mold for a school and its educational program.

The group was dispersed shortly after my leaving the district. The relationships among staff have persevered over the years and many of the teachers still communicate and interact with each other. Some of them I haven’t seen in many years. Others, I see regularly. And one of my magnificent 20, Laura Tobin, I see every day. We have been married since 1972.