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4. LET’S PLAY MARCO POLO

Advice for New Teachers on How to Win and Avoid Disaster

Believed to have taken its name from the great Venetian explorer, Marco Polo, the fun swimming pool game of the same title is often played and enjoyed by many young people. Supposedly, the origins of the game are said to be grounded in the travels of the late twelfth century explorer who reportedly did not always know where he was going on his explorative journeys in Asia – hence the name of the game. This children’s pool party game is easy enough to play as long as the players have a basic understanding of the game’s objective and rules, know the two participant roles required to play, and are willing to make adjustments along the way. The trick to knowing how to win the game lies in one’s abilities to be observant, to be a good listener, to make sound decisions, and to be flexible. This is great advice for the game. Moreover, it is solid advice for many of life’s encounters. Just as in the children’s swimming pool game of Marco Polo, novice teachers need to be observant, to listen well, to make sound decisions, and to remain flexible. However, not all pre-service training prepares them for all aspects related to the rigorous requirements of education, sometimes leaving them to discover and to navigate on their own.

Educators new to the profession must have a basic understanding of what is expected of them in order to participate successfully. Because the rules in education are frequently ambiguous, it often becomes necessary to depend on the advice and the expertise of others. New teachers must be willing to play their role well and to be ready to navigate their own journey while not always knowing the path that they are on. They must learn to be selective in their decisions and to be flexible enough to readjust their strategies as necessary. This is particularly true as the novice teacher begins developing professional relationships with colleagues and, to a greater extent, to include working with the school’s leader, the principal.

Effective educational leadership, specifically the position of the school principal, is essential for improving schools and for increasing student achievement. Historically, the school principal’s main responsibility was centered on his or her ability to function as a building-level manager. However, over time, the job’s responsibilities have evolved, and today the principal is considered the main change agent for the school (Rousmaniere, 2013). Beginning in the mid-1990s, as the call for school improvement and school reform increased, so too did the focus on higher levels of student achievement and accountability. Consequently, the public began
looking toward those who were deemed most responsible for the student’s success – the teachers and the school principal. Hence, the link between effective school leadership and student achievement began to be realized by both policy makers and educators as being essential (Spiro, 2013). Accordingly, Rousmaniere (2013) contends that the role of the principal was both altered and expanded to include being much more than a building-level manager. Therefore, the contemporary school principal is expected to be the school’s instructional leader, curriculum leader, and discipline leader. Moreover, this position often demands that the principal be the school’s motivational leader as well (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Many public schools today are facing inestimable problems and often find themselves struggling under the yoke of school reform. Because this is a book for educators, by educators, I will not target any of the precise issues facing contemporary education, as that is for another book and another chapter. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the “burning” issues in education today will eventually be replaced by new and just as dramatic concerns tomorrow, as this is the cyclical nature of education. Therefore, I will reiterate the enduring significance of an effective school principal while also posing the question, “How does the novice educator navigate the contentious waters of poor school leadership?” Accordingly, this chapter is an examination, first, of the how the school principal and the position is often presented to students in pre-service education courses and, second, of how, in turn, the novice teacher can best traverse his or her way through the chaos of poor leadership if needed. To accomplish this, I will share a story. The names of any persons in this story are pseudonyms.

First, I believe that the door to teaching is wide and varied and should be opened to all who can attend to the task effectively. For me, the journey to the classroom was not a traditional path, as I entered the profession at the age of 40, or the typical time in one’s life when many are beginning to weigh their retirement options. Nonetheless, in the fall of 1994, at the age of 36, a mid-life career change was what I pursued. Hence, I attended a small, private, Southern institution that was fully accredited and well known for its education department. Wonderfully for me, it offered an evening program, which afforded me the opportunity to continue working during the day. Today, as I reflect upon that particular educational experience and the courses that prepared me for my chosen profession, I consider not only the content of the courses but also the professors who taught them and the manner in which they approached certain topics in education.

Consummate professionals and true educators to the core, these instructors addressed the subject matter head on. While their teaching styles varied and the depth of inquiry was wide-ranging, a common theme was threaded throughout. Education is serious business, and we as new teachers were to look to the “head of that business” – that is, the principal, with respect for the rank, the knowledge, the experience, and the leadership capabilities that this person possessed. In each education course, the principal was generally presented as one who was all knowing, all seeing, all wise, and all powerful. To me, this person sounded almost godlike.