

PERSONAL SYNTHESIS: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER – Joseph A. Hoover

Michigan State University's Master of Arts degree in Education (MAED) has provided me exposure to new ways of viewing the world and meaning around knowledge. When trying to summarize the greatest impact of this degree program I keep coming back to this idea: *The more I learn, the less I am certain of*. The concepts of learning and development I encountered in the courses I elected to take have provided me with a better understanding of the unique nature of my personal experience in the world. Several classes in particular, have helped reshape my perspective, my purpose, and my practice. Outlined below, these areas of learning (and continued learning) are helping me become a more engaged and intentional leader, educator, and parent.

REVEALING PERSPECTIVE

A main component of each class I took through the MAED degree program was personal reflection. Across all the courses I took, I found my reflective practices most revealing in *Engaging Diverse Students and Families (EAD 822)* and *Issues and Strategies in Multicultural Education (EAD 850)*. These courses allowed me to examine my social positionality, my intersecting identities, and the impact of this new learning. As a white, heterosexual, cis-gender, able-bodied, English-speaking, male, I have practically no social obstacles in my past. In reflecting on my own positionality, I am implicated in the level of naivety I have enjoyed over the course of my life. Needless to say, my perspective was limited and hugely broadened by the histories of oppression traditionally marginalized people have endured. Specifically, important learning for me occurred when watching the Docu-series, *RACE: The Power of an Illusion*. If you haven't seen it, watch it now.

These courses helped me begin to see that a deficit-mindset can be damaging when it is directed toward students and families. I learned that *students tend to "live into" the assumptions adults make about them*. This means I need to hold my students to high expectations, but also *believe* they can actually achieve them. This is powerful perspective change, because if I can consistently make positive assumptions about others, they will tend to live them out—confirmation bias works both ways!

An important experience I have noted in other areas of this site was a triathlon we participated in with some of our students. The experience was not only an eye-opening and challenging experience physically, but also socially. The race benefited the IM ABLE Foundation whose mission is "to remove obstacles that prevent people with physical, cognitive, and/or behavioral challenges from being physically active. They work to procure adaptive equipment, redefining what is possible for adaptive athletes. The event, open to both able-bodied and adaptive athletes, provided reflection on the powerful moments of courage and grit during the race. At one point during the race, two of our students had to dismount their bikes to push the

remaining meters of a difficult hill. As they were walking, an athlete on a hand trike passed them. Our students were not focused on the disability of these athletes, but inspired by their ability! In our conversations after the event, I could clearly hear through their language their mindset changed from one of deficit to asset. These adaptive athletes had something valuable that us “able-bodied” people (so to speak) did not.

The varying perspectives I was exposed to through this coursework felt like a wake-up call. Even after working in a diverse environment for a decade, I never quite grasped how different the world I experience was, compared to that of my students and their families. Revelation like this has made me slower in getting angry or frustrated, and quicker in understanding and empathy.

RECLAIMING PURPOSE

Expanding my understanding of my social positionality led me to engage with the leadership curriculum of the MAED program and pursue leadership opportunities within my organization. My course *Leadership & Organizational Development (EAD 801)* was integral in my growth toward adaptive leadership. Leadership is not a list of quick fix solutions to common problems, but a personal journey—it’s a process. I considered leadership as a person who could make the right choice in the face of a new technical problem. However, it is much closer to a person who can inspire and gain cooperation around robust adaptive organization-wide challenges.

In order to put this new learning to the test, in the fall of 2019, I applied to participate in our school’s Leadership Academy. The academy is a carefully selected, cross-functional cohort of staff, faculty, and administration—I was fortunate to be included in the program. The group (30 participants) engages in full-day professional development sessions centered on principles of leadership. In the first session each participant was assigned to a five-member Action-Learning Team responsible to take on a current organization-wide challenge. We met regularly as a team to meet deliverable deadlines for our team’s assigned challenge and continued to participate in the full cohort’s development sessions as scheduled.

The structured experience of the Leadership Academy of personal growth and practical application emphasized the *importance of purpose* as it pertains to leadership. The modified operations that were required of our cohort and team through the COVID-19 Pandemic, demanded we stay aligned around our purpose as a group. Through this time there were several personal, professional, and even ideological commitments that got in the way of our collective action as a team. Through the stress of mitigation strategies, it became easy to be distracted from our shared purpose: to educate students within a supportive, family-like environment. This purpose blends the scholastic and home-life arenas of our school into a unified direction.

In remaining focused on this purpose, I have spent the last two school years serving to as a Lead Houseparent within my division. This role is similar to a department head in a scholastic setting. In this role, I have the privilege to provide guidance, feedback, and develop a mentoring

relationship with newly hired houseparents. Working closely with passionate new hires is a beneficial way to stay connected to the purpose and benefits of working in this role.

REVISING PRACTICE

With a broader perspective and a closely held purpose, I had to ask an important question: How should this affect change in my practice as a houseparent. As an elective course, outside my concentration area, I was surprised to find some of the clearest application to our work in *Promoting Positive Youth Development through Sport (KIN 857)*. The coaches of my life have had a huge impact on my life's outcome. Due to the nature of teen relationships with their parents, one could argue that my coaches had the *most* impact on my life. This could be due to the voluntary nature associated with coaching in some athlete's perspective. I certainly operated from this viewpoint. My parents were supportive and encouraged me, but I considered their contributions "mandatory"—they were supposed to do those things, they were my parents! My coaches, on the other hand, coached in addition to their work and family life. The sacrifice required for their investment in me made it reasonable to give them authority to impact my life and direction.

Joe Ehrmann, in *InsideOut Coaching: How Sports Can Transform Lives*, ascribes the position and influence of a coach with the ability to make or break a child's life. Ehrmann shares his life-story and how his personal journey, through emotional and sexual abuse, has helped him understand his coaching philosophies. He emphasizes the importance of "going inward" and understanding oneself before trying to ever lead a sports practice. This process was the most helpful for my professional development. Obviously, Ehrmann's work does not apply directly to the home-life context, however, it is helpful to consider the strategies required for Positive Youth Development (PYD) through houseparenting.

The power of our personal stories was a central theme from this course. Ehrmann places value on the details of his childhood and how he has grown through the events of his life. Like me, he is a product of his experiences and choices. Fortunately, I did not experience the abuses and dysfunctions in my childhood that Ehrmann encountered; however, there is a strong correlation from the home my parents created to the career I have chosen. One aspect of this idea that is important to note is the ripple effect that can occur when the power in this discovery process is fully embraced by an adult that is striving to promote PYD. Understanding your own story as a houseparent gives you the wisdom to guide students through their past events in a healthy way. Their process can mirror your own. As a houseparent, we regularly guide students through the understanding of past events impacting their response or attitude in current situations.

Why do I houseparent?

Why do I houseparent the way I do?

What does it feel like to be houseparented by me?

How do I define success?

Questions like the ones above can provide the key starting point for discussion between a houseparent couple and their students. Taking careful consideration in answering these questions helps provide the clarity necessary for programmatic decisions regarding PYD. Clarity in purpose helps narrow the character curriculum toward a defined focus. This also can create or reclaim a passion and determination to move through difficult circumstances in light of the higher goal of PYD.

The second and third questions carry particular significance for me. The method (why we do it the way we do?) and impact (what's it like to be houseparented by us?) of my houseparenting needed to be assessed. Am I simply reverting to the parenting style I was accustomed to? Am I further growing my empathy by investigating what it truly feels like to be one of the students living in our home? The answers here, in light of our purpose, can lead us in a direction of helping students *belong* by navigating the complex and sometimes confusing smattering of societal identities of our world. When a proper setting is established, then the "nuts and bolts" of PYD has a place to occur.

As students graduate and middle schoolers move into high school, our home has some turnover each year. Each new group has a different personality dynamic. This requires that our program tailor to each group. Therefore, creating the appropriate setting each year is key for us to help our students feel heard, valued, and reach their goals—not simply expect them conform to our program. In an effort to take into consideration our student's perspectives and values, we begin each school year with activities allowing them to share with the whole group. We keep our purpose close, but allow our method to evolve to fit with the needs and desires of the current group. Although efficiency cannot be a high value, this process provides some level of ownership for each student, and a higher level of engagement.

IS IT WORKING?

In light of the many perspectives of our home, the purpose we hold closely, and our evolving practice, we have decided to take our group's temperature (so to speak) through a brief culture survey 2-3 times throughout the year. We share a few statements with our girls and have them rate their level of agreement (1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree). The statements selected help give us a gauge on how positive our setting is for development. The statements selected are similar to the following:

1. I feel like I belong in this student home.
2. Generally, in this student home, I feel happy.
3. I know that my houseparents care about me.
4. I am a positive contributor to this student home.
5. I am confident that my voice is heard in this student home.

The data collected from this brief survey is often humbling, but revelatory. Students can tend to hold resentments toward others out of an avoidance of potential conflict. We give opportunity for open-forum discussion after the survey and this has proven to be helpful in clarifying our goals and keeping honest lines of communication open. Now, as the conversation around our home's environment continues, we can collectively decide on programmatic changes that will fulfill mutual goals with careful attention paid to student voice and inclusiveness.