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Modeling Ethics through Leadership

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Moral Leaders in academia stand few and far between, it is only the pervasive and tenacious who are able to remain steadfast in their mission, to have the courage to speak up despite others' moods of discouragement. Far too often freshman teachers capitulate early in their careers, falling victim to an all too common faceless bureaucracy. There is; however, a light that shines bright, one that can provide hope to even the most overworked and underappreciated teacher.

Rafe Esquith is not someone you might consider to be an educational icon, or leader. He has no published pedagogical manuals, and is not revered in the light of Dewey or Paiget. He has though, inspired and changed the lives of thousands of students (and teachers) both in, and outside of the classroom. Esquith, who is a middle school teacher, has been refining his skills for over 19 years at a school nicknamed the jungle, which is located in downtown Los Angeles. The jungle is an inner-city school populated primarily by low-socioeconomic students, with over 90% living below the state poverty level and belonging to families where English is a second language. Esquith is a man with a bipartite mission that focuses on the success of student and teacher alike, as he states "I want to give hope to young teachers who would like to run against the wind, but are afraid of the consequences".

Esquith started his career teaching at a school he nicknamed Camelot, the school's demographic consisted of students from middle-upper socioeconomic classes, one that as Esquith acknowledges "allowed the teachers to take the path of least resistance". This laissez faire attitude towards teaching prompted Esquith to find a school where as he posits "children didn't go to hotels...where children not only didn't own books but didn't even know where the library was". Esquith decided to dedicate his career to a school that soon became a place where he has failed, been hurt, and many times been downright miserable. But despite great adversity, his core belief that mediocrity has no place in the classroom has allowed him to remain true to his course.

After entering the jungle, Esquith soon realized that his students had substantial academic deficits, particularly in math and fundamental English. The school curriculum and time spent on task it seemed was deficient in supporting a successful transition from K-12 to tertiary education and a promising career. Esquith immediately began to modify the curriculum and student work day to compensate for these obvious shortfalls. He extended the school work day by three hours, one hour in the morning and two hours later in the afternoon. Students were not mandated to attend, but rather it was simply offered as an opportunity to gain extra assistance.

During Esquith's tenure at the jungle he has been able to create a classroom environment that is as much about teaching academics, as fostering the social, moral, and ethical development of the student. Additionally, rather than utilize and regurgitate the state mandated basal readers, he has chosen to teach a path, one of ethics through the use of Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Arthur Miller. He has spent almost every lunch hour, weekend, holiday (including summers), for the last decade teaching hundreds of students' culture, the arts, music and math. He has marched through his career fighting for his students with what he proscribes as a "set of principles" for which there is no compromise. Though Esquith realizes that compromise is essential to organizational survival, his principles preclude him from compromising on issues that he holds dear to his heart, as he stated "to be an effective teacher, one sometimes has to stand one's ground even at the risk of angering administrators".

Rafe Esquith is truly a guiding light for all of us who sometimes lose our once explicit vision. He has assisted countless students, and teachers alike in their quest for equal access to a life granted by a democratic society, enabled countless students to see and name their world for the first time. He has devoted his whole life to the education movement, and has been an ambassador for many in contemporary society whose voices we are unable or unwilling to hear. Possessed by a belief that mediocrity has no place in life, Esquith's students have moved onto colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford. They have staged Shakespeare plays at the Globe Theatre in England, and even wowed actors like Sir Ian McKellan. Esquith's years of dedicated service have not gone unnoticed, he has been awarded the National Medal of Arts, National Teacher of the Year, Oprah Winfrey's \$100,000 Use Your Life Award, a Sigma Beta Delta fellowship from John's Hopkins University, and the Compassion in Action Award from the Dalai Lama. Rafe Esquith truly personifies the meaning of a moral, ethical, and inspirational educational leader, one who has fundamentally changed my perspective of both students and the very meaning of the word teacher. For those who have been mentally aroused by this article, I recommend reading "There are no Shortcuts" by Rafe Esquith, it just might change the way you look at teaching.