

FEATURED ARTICLE

“THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE”: EXPLORING THE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF RALPH W. TYLER

KEVIN S. ZAYED, PH.D.

DENISON UNIVERSITY

This article explores the leadership qualities of education researcher and professor Ralph W. Tyler (1902-1994). It argues that Tyler’s theoretical understanding and practical approach to administration, leadership, and mentoring—something he frequently referred to as “the art of the possible”—is instructive for business executives, academics, and others interested in leadership. The article examines key moments in Tyler’s childhood and schooling that served to guide his later thought and actions, considers what, precisely, Tyler meant by “the art of the possible,” and offers glimpses into his leadership style by analyzing the perspectives of those who had a first-hand look at Tyler in action.

In his early eighties, a former professor of education at the University of Chicago named Ralph W. Tyler (1902-1994) sat down with Malca Chall, of the University of California-Berkeley, for a series of interviews that would document Tyler’s decades of work in educational assessment and curriculum reform. In one of their many interviews, Chall sought to redirect a conversation related to the labelling of scholars by beginning to say, “You have a body of literature that you’re leaving in the library; does it—” Tyler quickly interrupted her, saying, “I hope it will be the ideas

rather than me that they get interested in.”¹ Three decades after these words appeared in print, it may be safe to say that Tyler got his wish.

Ralph W. Tyler is a relatively obscure figure outside of the fields of curriculum theory and assessment. However, the projects he either spearheaded or was intimately involved with are easily recognizable to scholars and practitioners working across the various sectors of the American school system. As Director of Evaluation for the well-known Eight-Year Study of 1935-1942, he directly assisted over thirty separate high schools (and a few city-wide school systems) in reforming their general education offerings and helped to create a series of tests that were commonly used by high school teachers during that period and beyond.² From 1938 to 1947, Tyler served as director for a similar project, the Cooperative Study in General Education, that assisted nearly two dozen colleges in reforming their general education programs.³

In 1949, Tyler expanded one of his course syllabi into the book *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. This book caught on quickly and soon became an educational classic that was assigned in the vast majority of teacher training curricula for the next few generations. Many teachers of the mid-to-late twentieth century were steeped in the broader points of the so-called Tyler Rationale, as related to behavioral objectives. Though there have been numerous criticisms of the book, it was still selling about four to six thousand copies a year as of 2003 and continues

1 Ralph W. Tyler, “Education: Curriculum Development and Evaluation,” an oral history conducted 1985-1987 by Malca Chall, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley, 1987), 388.

2 “The Story of the Eight-Year Study,” *School Review* 50 (1942): 328; Vinal H. Tibbets to K.W. Vaughn, 10 September 1945, Box 4, F: Eight-Year Study Test – Copyrights, 1936, 1939, 1945, Progressive Education Association Papers, Record Series Number 10/6/20, Archives Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL. The Eight-Year Study is mentioned by nearly every work on the history of American secondary education in the United States. A few major treatments of the Eight-Year Study include: Eugene Lyle Baum, “History of the Commission on Relation of School and College of the Progressive Education Association, 1930-1942” (PhD diss., Washington University, 1969); Craig Kridel and Robert V. Bullough Jr., *Stories of the Eight-Year Study: Reexamining Secondary Education in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

3 Kevin S. Zayed, “Cooperation Without Consensus: National Discussions and Local Implementation in General Education Reform, 1930-1960” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016), chapter 3.

to remain a staple of many teacher training curriculums.⁴ In addition to this work, Tyler helped found the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences and served as the first president of the National Academy of Education. He was also instrumental in the creation of the ongoing National Assessment of Education Project (NAEP).⁵ Throughout his career, Tyler served as an advisor on education to seven American presidents.⁶

Tyler was certainly a prolific and consequential scholar whose ideas received extensive attention from scholars and practitioners during and after his lifetime. However, it may be beneficial to push back on Tyler's desire that people take a greater interest in his ideas rather than himself. Indeed, the relationship between Tyler as a person and his ideas becomes an even more pressing issue once one considers the following reflection by one of Tyler's students: "Tyler's ideas, or at least the ideas we seem to identify closely with him, were conceived with a lot of people, who themselves were not only part of their creation but published on them too."⁷ This statement hints at yet another of Tyler's legacies: a long line of colleagues, students, and others who were either influenced or mentored by Tyler. His protégés include such luminaries as Bruno Bettelheim, Lee Cronbach, and Benjamin Bloom.⁸

4 On the Tyler Rationale, see Richard David Levy, "A Study of Ralph W. Tyler's Statement, Development, and Later Modifications of His Rationale as Set Forth in His *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (EdD, Dissertation, Temple University, 1972); William G. Wraga, "Understanding the Tyler Rationale: Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction in Historical Context," *Espacio, Tiempo y Educacion* 4 (2017): 227-252. On critiques of the Tyler Rationale, see Gerald Ponder and Dixie D. Massey, "Nothing So Uncommon: Ralph W. Tyler and His Defining Perspective" in *Critical Times in Curriculum Thought: People, Politics, and Perspectives* ed. Marcella L. Kysilka (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011), esp. 63-64. On contemporary sales figures, see Morris Finder, *Educating America: How Ralph W. Tyler Taught America to Teach* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 169.

5 James A. Hazlett, "A History of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1963-1973: A Look at Some Conflicting Ideas and Issues in Contemporary American Education" (EdD diss., University of Kansas, 1974).

6 David J. Parks, "Lest We Forget Our Past: A Leader in Curriculum Development—Ralph Winifred Tyler," *The Educational Forum* 75 (2011): 85.

7 J. Thomas Hastings, "Tyler's Behavioral Objectives: Background Sources, Early Use, and Some Stream-Odds" in *Improving Inquiry in Social Science: A Volume in Honor of Lee J. Cronbach* eds. Richard E. Snow and David E. Wiley (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 315.

8 David R. Krathwohl, "Lessons Learned from Ralph W. Tyler" in *Teachers and Mentors: Profiles of Distinguished Twentieth-Century Professors of Education* eds. Craig Kridel, Robert V. Bullough, Jr., and Paul Shaker (New York: Garland, 1996), 29-44.

This statement also raises a question: If Ralph Tyler accomplished all that he did while working alongside and mentoring colleagues, what leadership and mentoring qualities did he possess? This article explores that question. It argues that an underappreciated legacy of Tyler was both his theoretical understanding and his practical approach to administration, leadership, and mentoring—something he frequently referred to as “the art of the possible.”⁹ Key moments in Tyler’s childhood will be explored, as well as the schooling that served to inspire and guide his later thought and actions. The meaning of, “the art of the possible,” will be addressed, followed by an analysis of his leadership style as explained by those who had a first-hand look at Tyler in action.

This article supplements the few biographies and reflections on Ralph W. Tyler, which may appeal to scholars seeking to understand curriculum theory, educational progressivism, and early approaches to standardized testing and assessment. Its greater contribution, however, lies in its relatively novel approach to the study of academic leadership that makes it particularly germane to business professionals, academics, and leaders in a multitude of fields and roles. Rather than focusing on a political leader, business executive, or college president, the article looks at leadership through the lens of a rank-and-file professor who navigated the web of power relations between policymakers, philanthropists, practitioners, and college administrators.¹⁰

This approach is a departure not only from much of the diverse literature devoted to the topic of leadership, but also from the relatively small portion of that work, which focuses directly on individuals working in

⁹ Tyler himself often used the term “administration” to refer to many activities that scholars now associate with the term “leadership.” Although there are subtle yet significant differences between the two terms, I argue that Tyler’s views on administration are relevant and salient to present-day discussions on leadership. Tyler notes the phrase “the art of the possible” and its influence on him in Kevin Ryan, John Johnston, and Katherine Newman, “An Interview with Ralph Tyler,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 58 (1977): 547. Although Tyler attributed this quote to Lord Acton, Elizabeth Knowles notes that it is frequently misattributed and should instead be credited to Otto von Bismarck. See Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *What They Didn’t Say: A Book of Misquotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 88.

¹⁰ Tyler did, however, hold some leadership positions. Most notably, he served as Dean of the Social Sciences Division at the University of Chicago from 1948 to 1953.

institutions of higher education.¹¹ Indeed, much of the scholarship on higher education leadership has consisted of biographies or more theoretical studies of "positional" leaders (e.g., college presidents).¹² Nevertheless, recent decades have seen scholars expand their understanding of leadership and what constitutes a leader.¹³ Taken as a whole, these scholars have reached a conclusion that has been well-stated by theorist Robert Birnbaum: "Organizational leadership is important," he argues, "but it is a mistake to believe that all leadership must come from 'leaders.'"¹⁴ By focusing on Ralph W. Tyler, this article supplements the burgeoning literature on non-positional leaders with the texture that can be provided by a historical case study.

THE ORIGINS OF "THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE": RALPH W. TYLER'S CHILDHOOD, FORMAL SCHOOLING, AND MENTEE EXPERIENCES

In one of the more systematic studies of leadership in higher education, scholar Arthur Padilla analyzed six university presidents and provided an outline for how leaders might be understood in a holistic manner. Specifically, Padilla found the following four traits to be most revealing: "The evolutionary roots of authority in humans...Early childhood experiences of future leaders...Formal education in domains and the impact of mentors...[and] Adult characteristics of leaders, including gifts in the realms of communication and interpersonal understanding."¹⁵ Padilla's outline is particularly useful in understanding the emergence of Tyler as a leader and the development of "the art of the possible."

11 Much of this literature is analyzed in Adrianna J. Kezar, Rozana Carducci, and Melissa Contreras-McGavin, *Rethinking the "L" Word in Higher Education: The Revolution in Research on Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

12 Examples include Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, *Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President Second Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1986); Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); William A. Link, *William Friday: Power, Purpose, and American Higher Education* second edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

13 Adriana Kezar and Rozana Carducci, "Cultivating Revolutionary Educational Leaders: Translating Emerging Theories into Action," *Journal of Research on Leadership Education* 2 (2007): 1-46; "Special Issue on Grassroots Leadership," *Journal of Change Management* 9 (2009): 305-357.

14 Robert Birnbaum, *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 206.

15 Arthur Padilla, *Portraits in Leadership: Six Extraordinary University Presidents* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 50.

Useful, too, is Padilla's emphasis on childhood as a particularly critical time for future leaders: "There are important dimensions of adult leadership and creativity" he argues, "that have their roots in the patterns of the childhood experiences that shaped them."¹⁶ Padilla also notes the importance of how future leaders interact with their parents: "Research highlights the importance of the establishment in early life of a strong and secure bond of attachment between infant and caretaker: a developing sense of trust between child and caretaker, or its absence, colors the way individuals react to authority in later life."¹⁷

Hence, to understand Tyler and "the art of the possible," one must understand his relationship with his parents and what early lessons he took regarding authority. Tyler was born into a nuclear family as one of four sons. His parents were religious, with his father leaving a lucrative career in medicine for the ministry.¹⁸ Indeed, Tyler notes this religious upbringing and his father's profession—particularly the fact that his father referred to himself as "a teacher of the moral and spiritual life"—as major factors in his decision to become a teacher.¹⁹ Teaching, of course, was a major arena in which Tyler practiced "the art of the possible." In 1993, at the age of ninety-one, Tyler clearly remembered that he "had always wanted to be a teacher because as a minister my father was in effect a teacher and my mother always was a teacher to me."²⁰ "As I listened to their discussions over the years about the great importance of education and teaching," Tyler recalled of his parents, "I knew I wanted to be a teacher."²¹ Tyler would credit his parents not only for his desire to become a teacher, but also for influencing the type of teacher he would be. He would note that his parents "perceived education as the chief, if not the sole, means by which individuals develop their talents and learn to use them effectively."²²

¹⁶ Ibid, 76.

¹⁷ Ibid, 52.

¹⁸ Anne Meek, "On Setting the Highest Standards: A Conversation with Ralph Tyler," *Educational Leadership* 50 (1993): 83.

¹⁹ Ralph W. Tyler, "Reflections on My Experiences and Observations of Education," in *Reflections: Personal Essays by 33 Distinguished Educators* ed. Derek L. Bursell (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan, 1991), 357.

²⁰ Meek, "On Setting," 83.

²¹ Tyler, "Reflections On My Experiences," 357.

²² Ibid, 356.

These discussions were evident in the learning experiences Tyler shared with his parents and brothers. "Always after breakfast," Tyler explained in 1993, "Dad would read us portions of the scripture and say to each of us, 'What does this mean? What can you do about it? What are you planning to do?' And the next day we would report what we had done, so that continually we were asked to apply what we were learning from the Bible and see that we had done something about it."²³ This was not emphasized only at breakfast and alone but rather in family activities that dominated Tyler's childhood. Tyler fondly remembered, "Our family was closely knit. Father, mother, and the four sons did many things together. We also learned much from each other, including some of the content of school learning. We learned to read as we followed the printed pages from the bedtime stories mother read to us. Also, we learned from the school materials of our older brothers, and from our older brothers' efforts to teach us what they were learning in school."²⁴ Tyler would learn two crucial points that would shape his approach to leadership. The first was that authority could be dialectical (or based upon a give-and-take between relative equals) as opposed to hierarchical, and the second was that talents should be developed and applied.

Relatively speaking, Tyler excelled at school despite not initially appreciating its value; in fact, he was able to attend Doane College at the age of fifteen. After graduation and a year of teaching, Tyler began a master's degree program at the University of Nebraska. There, he encountered Herbert Brownell, a former neighbor and family friend. At the time, Brownell was serving as head of the Department of Secondary Education at the university, and he became Tyler's first non-familial mentor. As Tyler recalled, Brownell was "a superb 'hands on' teacher of science...I learned a great deal about education in the four years I worked with Professor Brownell. He was the most effective teacher of science I have ever observed."²⁵ Once Tyler had concluded his studies at Nebraska, he was advised to apply to the University of Chicago in hopes of studying under Charles Hubbard Judd.

23 Meek, "On Setting," 84.

24 Tyler, "Reflections On My Experiences," 360.

25 George H. Lackey, Jr., and Michael D. Rowls, *Wisdom in Education: The Views of Ralph Tyler* (Columbia: Museum of Education, McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina, 1989), 4.

This began perhaps the most consequential mentoring relationship for Tyler. As he would later write, “My work with Brownell and Judd helped me to establish a basic conception of educational studies, which has guided me throughout my professional career.”²⁶ This statement would also apply to his conception of leadership. This can be seen through Tyler’s discussion of Judd’s teaching in which students “carried on an experiment in generalization of student learning... This was characteristic of all of Judd’s classes. Students conducted experiments to test generalizations or to derive them. Judd reminded us continually that a science of education ...is not derived by speculation or by quoting authorities who have not directly tested their conclusions in practice.”²⁷ Similar to the dialectical nature of Tyler’s Bible study with his family, Judd encouraged his students to not rely on him as an authority.

Consideration of the proper relationship with authority would be evident in Tyler’s later views on leadership. When asked by one interviewer how “one should deal with other people,” Tyler responded: “There are two ways to deal with people—to make them dependent or independent.” Later in the same interview, he would iterate his faith in promoting independence, articulating his belief that “people should be self-directing so that they do not become serfs for one or two leaders.”²⁸ Tyler saw the nurturing of independence and encouragement of self-direction as key components in Judd’s teaching style and was influenced by his methods. Tyler noted that Judd’s students “were not only expected to carry out investigations, but also to submit a written report every week” and would suggest that “I found this procedure so helpful to me that when I taught graduate courses later, I expected the students to submit weekly reports through which I could follow their progress in thinking and in understanding the subjects they were studying.”²⁹ This effectively put Tyler’s notions about independence and self-direction into practice. These conceptions would ultimately be the foundation for Tyler’s theory of the “art of the possible.”

26 Tyler, “Reflections On My Experiences,” 359.

27 Ralph W. Tyler, “Charles Hubbard Judd: As I Came to Know Him,” *Teaching Education* 1 (1987): 19-24, reprinted in *Teachers and Mentors*, 21.

28 Diana Buell Hiatt, “No Limit to the Possibilities: An Interview with Ralph Tyler,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 75 (1994): 787.

29 Tyler, “Charles Hubbard Judd,” 22.

THE "ART OF THE POSSIBLE" IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: RALPH W. TYLER AS A LEADER

What precisely did Tyler mean by "the art of the possible?" He provided a definition in 1981 when asked about his time as an administrator: "I like to help people find ways of using their talents most effectively and that's usually by giving them an opportunity for a time to do what they think is important. Then, from that experience, thus try to clarify what they really feel they can do best in that context...it is the art of the possible—helping make possible what others dream and hope they can do."³⁰ Ultimately, "the art of the possible" involves forging a relationship with someone intimate enough so that the "leader" can find out what it is that the individual they are leading wants to accomplish, how their talents could be turned toward those ends, and how their sense of self-sufficiency and introspection could be fostered during this process.

Being able to engage in this very complex set of tasks requires interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Padilla reminds us that "many leaders have great intelligence in the realm of human understanding."³¹ Tyler proved to have such intelligence. A former student of Tyler, David R. Krathwohl, noted that "This natural tendency of Ralph's to reinforce the good in people meant that he was a superb nurturer of talent. Add to this the fact that he was an excellent judge of a person's capability."³² A colleague of Tyler's, Lou Rubin, similarly argued that his "uncanny instinct for high human capacity, together with his altruistic spirit and profound belief in the value of unfettering the best in others, was a formidable force."³³

This would often manifest as Tyler working closely with someone before stepping back and allowing them to take the task on by themselves. "Ralph was a supreme delegator of responsibility," Krathwohl recalled; "As a graduate assistant, I was surprised by how completely he delegated the work to me. But I think this was typical; I, as were others to whom he delegated, was pleased to be trusted enough to be given this much responsibility. It was another aspect of his ability to develop talent by giving it full rein."³⁴

30 Jeri Ridings Nowakowski, "On Educational Evaluation: A Conversation with Ralph Tyler," *Educational Leadership* 40 (1983): 20-21.

31 Padilla, *Portraits in Leadership*, 59.

32 Krathwohl, "Lessons Learned from Ralph W. Tyler," 36.

33 Lou Rubin, "Ralph W. Tyler Remembered," *Educational Leadership* 51 (1994): 84.

34 Krathwohl, "Lessons Learned from Ralph W. Tyler," 37.

Beyond simply delegating responsibility and increasing the autonomy of those he led, Tyler was also able to use what Padilla called “gifts in the realm of communication” to foster robust relationships.³⁵ Krathwohl remembered that in addition to his “unusual ability to organize his extemporaneous speech,” Tyler “had great charm, especially when he smiled, he had a twinkle in his eyes that was irresistible.”³⁶ Two biographers who spent considerable time with Tyler echoed this sentiment, writing, “He is a wise and kindly man. After more than 90 years, he had lost none of his clearness of mind and optimism about life and humanity. The personal warmth and charm of the man has not faded but has grown more subtle, enriched and broadened by decades of energetic and thoughtful living.”³⁷ But how did this “warmth” help Tyler to engage? Often, it manifested in his tone when discussing an issue with someone. Rather than provide an answer or an opinion, Rubin recalled that Tyler “habitually responded to a question with one of his own—cast in such a manner that the inquirer would often suddenly sense the answer.”³⁸ This reflects a critical aspect of “the art of the possible”: allowing others to discover what is inside of them.

CONCLUSION

“Working with others brought meaning to my life,” Tyler once proclaimed.³⁹ While this sentiment has and continues to be common with those who lead, Tyler’s approach to leadership—“the art of the possible”—was not only novel but continues to be instructive. Relying on interpersonal skills and life experience, Tyler was able to form robust relationships with those whom he led, with the purpose of promoting their autonomy and matching their goals with their talents.

Tyler’s childhood and mentee experiences provide compelling evidence that fostering autonomy and allowing children the safety to experiment within a semi-structured environment may likely lead to adults who may embrace a leadership style that is similar to his. Tyler’s experiences as a leader confirm that he certainly fostered autonomy in those he worked

35 Padilla, *Portraits of Leadership*, 50.

36 Krathwohl, “Lessons Learned from Ralph W. Tyler,” 32-33.

37 Lackey, Jr. and Rows, *Wisdom in Education*, 1.

38 Rubin, “Ralph W. Tyler,” 85.

39 Hiatt, “No Limit to the Possibilities,” 789.

with. Upon hearing his definition of "the art of the possible," one interviewer asked whether Tyler saw himself as a "facilitator." He responded in the affirmative. And thus, the art of the possible is not so much a question of leadership as we may traditionally see it, but rather leadership as facilitation. And for Tyler, who preferred that people would be interested in his ideas as opposed to himself, this may be the idea he would prefer present-day leaders to reflect upon.

Kevin S. Zayed, Ph.D. is serving as Visiting Assistant Professor of Education at Denison University for the 2017-2018 academic year and teaches courses on the historical, philosophical, sociological, ethical, legal, political, and psychological foundations of education. His research focuses on the broader history of K-12 and higher education, curriculum reform, and more specifically, the history of general and liberal education in both the secondary school and the undergraduate curriculum. Dr. Zayed's articles have appeared in the *Journal of General Education* and *Comparative and International Higher Education* as well as in a number of edited volumes of *Educating a Working Society: Vocationalism in 20th Century American Education*.