

Autocrats, Bureaucrats and Buffoons: Images of Principals

“You may sit down, Mr. O'Malley! Think you could run this school? If you could, I wouldn't be here, now would I? No one talks at my meetings, no one. You take out your pencils and write. This is an institution of learning. If you can't control it, how can you teach! ... and if you don't like it Mr. Darnell, you can quit. The same goes for the rest of you. ... This is not a damn democracy. ... My word is law. ... There's only one boss in this place and it's me!” (Principal Joe Clark in “Lean on Me,” 1989)

“This is an office, we knock before we enter. ... Follow the curriculum dictated by the board of education ... You must go along with our policies.” (Administrator George Grandey in “Dangerous Minds,” 1995)

“I got a complaint against this pencil you sold me—it don't work. ... Every time I write with it, it gets duller and when I sharpen it, it gets shorter. What we have here is a vicious cycle—duller, shorter, duller, shorter, I don't know what to do?” Respondent: “You know what they say around here. Any time something keeps getting duller and shorter, they make it the principal!” (Conversation between Freddie “Boom Boom” Washington and Juan Epstein in “Welcome Back, Kotter,” 1978)

A researcher finds common stereotypes of school leaders in a study of films and TV sitcoms

Three distinct images of principals emerge from a content analysis of American films and television programs since the 1950s. These excerpts are indicative of these stereotypical images: principal as autocrat; principal as bureaucrat and principal as buffoon.

Joe Clark, classic despot in “Lean on Me,” George Grandey, the stodgy administrator behind a desk in “Dangerous Minds,” and Mr. Woodman, the out-of-touch dullard in “Welcome Back, Kotter,” are certainly not the only school leaders depicted unfavorably in television programs and the movies as insecure autocrats, petty bureaucrats and classic buffoons.

My content analysis of more than 35 television sitcoms and major motion pictures from 1950 through 1997

(including “The Principal,” “Up the Down Staircase,” “Mighty Ducks,” “Kindergarten Cop,” “Blackboard Jungle,” “Teachers,” “Saved by the Bell,” “The Breakfast Club” and “Matilda”) confirms that an overwhelming majority of principals are depicted as either autocratic, bureaucratic or just plain silly.

A Recent Example

Sometimes a single television show or movie depicts all three aspects of principals. A recent made-for-TV movie, “Kidz in the Woods,” highlights a dedicated history teacher (played by Dave Thomas) who takes eight academically and emotionally troubled high school students on a summer class trip during which they retrace the Oregon Trail via wagon trains. The object of the exercise is to “show how yesterday's events can help solve today's problems.”

The principal, who argues against this unorthodox experiment, is portrayed as an autocrat, bureaucrat and, ultimately, a dimwit. The vice principal, who plays a vital role in the movie, also is depicted in various negative ways. In addition, the film describes an interesting and not uncommon relationship between a male principal and a female vice principal.



Left: In the 1950's television series "Our Miss Brooks," Mr. Conklin, the principal, is portrayed as a buffoon who constantly is bested by Miss Brooks, an English teacher.
Bottom: Morgan Freeman plays Principal Joe Clark in the 1989 movie "Lean on Me."

higher ethical standards of behavior. The image of the principal as dimwit is ultimately cast as Dunbar's plan is foiled. Once again, principals are portrayed negatively as compared to more idealistic, intelligent teachers.

An Early TV Portrayal

One of the early views of a principal that demonstrates all three tendencies—autocrat, bureaucrat, dimwit—is seen in the classic 1950's television series, "Our Miss Brooks." Mr. Conklin (played by Gale Gordon) is portrayed as a stern, conservative principal who is continually lampooned by Miss Brooks (played by Eve Arden), the wisecracking high school English teacher.

In the premiere episode, Brooks hurries past the principal's office. "Halt!" charges Conklin, as the audience gains its first glimpse of the principal. "I was just on my way to the cafeteria," explains Brooks. Chastising her, he says, "May I remind you that you are traversing the hallway of a public high school, not the cinder path of the coliseum." "I'll slow down, sir."

The principal continues, "Before you go, there is something I want to talk to you about. Would you mind loping into my office?" he says sarcastically. "But sir." "In girl!" he shouts. Conklin's autocratic image is buttressed numerous times by his proclivity to support school regulations, at all costs.

Yet despite this serious image, Conklin is continually outwitted by the clever teacher and, more often than not, becomes the recipient of her ridiculous and sometimes harebrained schemes. Annoying and mischievous, Brooks accidentally squirts ink all over Conklin's suit.

"Our Miss Brooks" suggests that principals can act authoritatively and take official actions yet should be viewed somewhat lightly.

Not-So-Subtle Messages

What can we learn from examining images of principals in popular culture? Why are principals portrayed as buffoons?

Such depictions may serve simply as means of comical entertainment. After all, television and films also poke fun at authority figures in various oth-

Henry Dunbar, a middle-aged conservative high school principal in "Kidz in the Woods," confirms his role as petty bureaucrat when he chastises the renegade history teacher, Mr. Foster. Dunbar calls Foster into his office and demands he follow the prescribed curriculum.

"What's obvious to me," shouts Dunbar, "is that you blame me because I insist you follow my standard curriculum." "Your standard curriculum," Foster retorts, "is substandard and I blame you for not accepting the responsibility for teaching these kids more than is in their books."

Foster begins to leave Dunbar's office as the bell rings. "I gotta go ... unless of course you want to teach my class?" Dunbar, the principal, remains silent.

The principal's incompetence is not too subtly inferred. The image as incompetent bureaucrat is effectively communicated. In a later scene the vice principal is similarly portrayed as having little, if any, teaching experience. At a school board meeting, Vice Principal Felicia Duffy defends her experience by asserting, "I did teach ... for several semesters, that is."

Dunbar, determined to waylay Foster's efforts at succeeding with his innovative strategies, demands that his vice principal videotape the class trip as students inevitably get into trouble. Armed



with this documentation, Dunbar figures he can convince the school board that he was right. Duffy, aghast at the principal's deceitful and unethical behavior, tries to convince her boss not to pursue this campaign. Relying on his superordinate position in the school hierarchy and employing an autocratic tactic, Dunbar tells Duffy, "You, unlike Foster, don't have tenure." Duffy is coerced to comply reluctantly.

Interestingly, the vice principal complies with the chicanery rather than maintain her integrity by adhering to



James Belushi (center) plays a principal facing tough challenges in a 1987 movie "The Principal."

er professions. Having a sense of humor about such portrayals may be warranted. Yet the unique nature of such satiric entertainment suggests other implications.

Comedic satire is a method employed by popular culture to transmit subtle and often not-so-subtle messages about principals as figureheads representing the school establishment. Portraying principals in such comical ways communicates, in part, that even though they occupy more prestigious positions in the

school hierarchy and earn more money than teachers, they are fallible and should not be taken too seriously. Teachers and students, often disempowered in the school hierarchy, are able to circumvent their subordinate status and demonstrate their autonomy by making the principal seem foolish.

What about images of principals as autocrats and bureaucrats? Schools, by and large, are organized bureaucratically. Principals and other supervisors serve to support and maintain organizational

rules and regulations. Images in popular culture that portray principals as autocrats and bureaucrats are not surprising, given their role expectations and responsibilities.

Perhaps principals need at least to be aware of the images that film makers and television producers are sending to viewers concerning the work they do in schools. How might they counter such images? For starters, principals must demonstrate that instructional leadership, rather than filing reports and other types of "administrivia," is their foremost responsibility.

Influencing Images

Promoting an ethic of caring among principals may go a long way toward altering these negative views. Caring principals develop meaningful relationships and inspire others to excellence. Generally thoughtful and sensitive, they recognize the diverse and individual talents in people. While bureaucrats emphasize compliance to rules and regulations, caring instructional leaders above all else are noncritical, collegial and supportive. Caring principals put people first and policy second.



Jeffrey Glanz, associate professor of education at Kean University.

Whether such an emphasis would alter the views of principals by film makers and sitcom producers is uncertain. What is apparent, however, is that principals sometimes contribute to their own negative image by what they do or fail to do. Principals must demonstrate that individual needs are paramount in any effective organization.

Stereotypical images of principals as humorless bureaucrats can be influenced. These views are socially constructed and therefore can be reframed. It is not too late.

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