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Dilemmas of Assistant Principals in Their Supervisory Role: Reflections of an Assistant Principal

ABSTRACT: Attention is focused, in this article, on the dilemmas of the supervisory role and the shift from a bureaucratic to a collegial culture. This article, based on practitioner reflection, provides anecdotal evidence to support the move from a bureaucratic culture to a collegial one. The author documents a basic conflict he has experienced which hindered his ability to function effectively. Specifically, the article explores an unresolved dilemma between the necessity to evaluate and the desire to genuinely assist teachers in the instructional process. This problem, although seemingly intractable, can, in fact be mitigated through more collaborative efforts which strive to foster participatory democratic leadership. These efforts are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Public education has received much criticism (Johnson, 1990; Katz, 1987; Sizer, 1984). Particularly over the last several years. Various committees and commissions have highlighted the dire state of public education. As a result of the scrutiny into educational policy and practice, research into effective or quality schooling has proceeded at a feverish pace. Research has indicated several important factors that contribute to effective schooling (see, for example, Blase and Kirby, 1992). Much of this literature has focused on the principalship as vital for successful school reform (see, for example, Lipham, Rankin, and Hoeh, Jr., 1985; Lucio and McNeil, 1969). Less attention, however, has been given to the role and function of the assistant principal (Gorton and Ketterman, 1985).

Recent work, however, has attested to the fact that the assistant prin-

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ization (Marshall, 1992; Stevenson, 1991). Traditionally in charge of disciplinary attention is focused on the function to include curricular and instructional leadership (Cala-

of the supervisory role of principals to shift from a bureaucratic to a more collegial one. Although some writers assert that principals are fraught with dilemmas, this article (Cala- et al., 1991) indicates the nature of the dilemmas that assistant principals face as well.

Assistant principals are faced daily with a variety of unplanned and unforeseen dilemmas. Serious altercations between students, the assistant principal and teachers are dilemmas on a daily basis. Assistant principals are burdened with a variety of additional intractable dilemmas. Put with instructional leaders. Put with a basic role conflict. In the school hierarchy, assistant principals are expected to ensure administrative and ensure administrative of the responsibilities frequently evaluating teachers. On the one hand, the assistant principal is expected to judge teacher effectiveness. On the other hand, the assistant principal has the unresolved dilemma of how to balance the desire to genuinely assist

as documented by Marshall (1992), an assistant principal might be required to act as a 'teacher support' principal. Marshall, "conflicts with the

monitoring, supervising, and evaluating functions." Marshall continued "The assistant may be working with a teacher as a colleague in one meeting and, perhaps one hour later, the same assistant may be meeting to chastise the same teacher for noncompliance with the district's new homework policy." Marshall concluded, "When they must monitor teachers' compliance, assistants have difficulty maintaining equal collegial and professional relationships with them" (pp. 6-7).

This inherent role conflict, experienced by many assistant principals, has been documented by other prominent scholars as well. Tanner and Tanner (1987) acknowledge this dilemma. Supervisors are challenged daily, they say, to assist teachers "in solving classroom problems" (p. 105). As such, they are inclined to interact with teachers personally and professionally. To be effective leaders, assistant principals maintain friendly, helpful relationships with teachers. However, when evaluations must be done these collegial relationships may be jeopardized. Tanner and Tanner stated: "No doubt, many teachers are afraid to ask for help from supervisors because they believe that by exposing a problem with their teaching they are inviting a low evaluation of their work . . ." (p. 105). They stated that this role conflict is inherent in supervisory work. They called it a "basic conflict" between "inservice education" and "evaluation" (pp. 105-106).

As an assistant principal in a large urban school in New York City, my primary function was to serve as a disciplinarian. Our school attempted to restructure governance and redefine role expectations of assistant principals and teachers under a plan known as site-based management with "improving" the instructional process in the grades I supervised. An important part of my new responsibilities was to assist and advise teachers on how best to improve instruction and promote learning. After all, "supervision is about helping people grow and develop. . . . It is the job of the supervisor in schools to work with people to improve the educational process and to aid the growth and development of students" (Wiles and Bondi, 1991, p. 85).

I realized that a dilemma was emerging. I was still charged with evaluating the effectiveness of teachers. As an evaluator, I had to make judgements as to their effectiveness. Teachers were observed formally and informally. Observation reports were placed in teachers' files and used for promotional and tenure considerations. Assistant principals, as evaluators, are, at times, perceived by teachers as intrusionary bureaucrats or "snoopervisors" (Shore, 1993, p. 25; Hill, 1992, p. v; Glanz, 1989) and are met with resentment. Consequently, teachers may be unwilling to ask for assistance because the assistant principal is seen as an adversary. Teachers are reluctant to willingly seek help from an

evaluated unsatisfactorily. Supervisors are often confused and assist in dismissing in-evaluation process tends to work productively plain, I found this to be

the conflict between the almost insurmountable principal, I can personally. They stated: "The most serious and, of supervision" (p. 106;

CASE EXAMPLE

It was built in 1905 approximately 1500 pupils (kindergarten) administered by a principal in 1990, by the New York State Department of Education "in need of assistance" at the third grade level. The following data about the school: African American 85%; Hispanic 12%. The socioeconomic status is eligible this year for free school.

Traditionally accepted supervisory policy and (1992), teachers are sub-expected to comply with other things, directly compliance to bureaucratic trying to find assistant principals and performance on rules and regulations. I asked, rather than told, I hoped that they would compliance and responsibility with them. I

wanted to work with them, help them, assist, guide, coach, collaborate . . . I was not going to spy on them. They had a difficult time accepting this. They had not only experienced what one teacher called a "petty tyrant," but also indicated that many assistant principals they had in this and other schools were extremely bureaucratic.

Several teachers asked if I was required to evaluate them several times a year. I informed them that I was required to, but they would find me fair and even-handed. I told them I would never evaluate a teacher unsatisfactorily merely after one performance. We would work together and mutually arrive at an acceptable evaluation schedule and policy. We would do our best to cooperate and coexist. I would help them teach more effectively, share my experiences, and readily accept their expertise and ideas. Despite my reassurances, I sensed their doubts and apprehensions.

As my conversations with teachers continued over the next several months, I realized that their unwillingness to trust an assistant principal was not confined to this school, but might, in fact, be a problem that existed beyond the confines of Public School X. Teachers also shared their apprehensions about the assistant principal/teacher relationship. Many teachers, for example, stated that they hesitate to ask for assistance from assistant principals because they fear negative evaluations. In my school, several teachers confided in me, a year and a half later, that they felt uncomfortable about working closely with assistant principals who might "form negative opinions about me while working on the curriculum committee" "I prefer to stay away from my assistant principal . . . I never know when I'll be written up."

THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE

A RESOLUTION

The question, "How could I, as an assistant principal, minimize the stigma of evaluation and at the same time deliver meaningful assistance to teachers in improving student learning?" became my concern.

As a practicing assistant principal in an urban school setting, I maintained that the tension between evaluation and improvement could not be mitigated to any great extent under current organizational structures. Our schools as bureaucracies had been established to centralize decision-making, enforce an administrative hierarchy for teachers, and a curriculum hierarchy for students. Moreover, within this bureau-

Administrators who, of time had to evaluate administrative mandates. They were viewed as a hindrance. Assistant principals were used to observe, and in this scenario, in fact given the evaluation of a teacher's employment since that time. In sum, as long as it is likely that a resolution of traditional bureaucratic or fair an assistively work with all be compromised. Assistant principal because they are. I believe that re-define the means by content and evaluation. Bureaucracy has been the decision-making process by decision-making hierarchical structure of give to its "first line".

Moreover, supervision is an entirely difficult to bring together a pedagogic alliance with teachers and administrators. More erroneous assumptions in schools. There is a shifting to a collaborative degree to which we mindsets, or as Ser-31, p. 41). Our belief systems are intimately connected to the language we use to articulate and communicate meanings (Wittgenstein, 1958; Brown, 1958). The needed transformation in education requires a realignment of educational phraseology with an entirely, different set of definitions, meanings, and purposes. For example, a reexamination of the metaphors we use is essential. Using *supervision* or reflective coaching will not only clearly indicate "where we are coming from," but also define human interactions in the workplace.

Philosophy influences actions, which in turn affect behavior. How we think shapes the world in which we live. As Arthur Schopenhauer, German philosopher, once posited: "The world in which a man lives shapes itself chiefly by the way in which he looks at it." Our values and beliefs shape the kinds of experiences, for example, we want young children to have in classrooms. They also affect what adults do in schools and define role relationships among members of a school system. If our attitudes about how best to organize large groups of people focus on hierarchical notions of differentiation and classification, then we will tend to conceptualize supervision, for example, as didactic and evaluative. Conversely, if our view of school management stresses collaboration and shared leadership, we will not be willing to construct an educational environment where disempowered individuals become spectators of, rather than participants in, their own work. This "world-view" will define supervision as collegial and interactive.

Teachers, parents, and administrators, at many schools that are school-based managed, have attempted to construct their own metaphors for success (Hallinger and Richardson, 1988). In my school, we undertook similar efforts. Public School X was selected as a school to participate in site-based management because it was designated by the state for review. Initial apprehension by teachers and administrators alike was not uncommon. Frequent comments were: "What does all this mean?"; "Who's in charge?"; "What role will the assistant principal play?"; and "Who's accountable?" Although the faculty and staff did not volunteer to participate in the school-based management project, there was a remarkable consensus among faculty that this was a unique opportunity to help children succeed. Committees were soon formed and training workshops developed at the school and on selected weekends. It certainly took a long while before members of the various committees loosened up and began working together with a sense of mission.

Sitting in on meetings, conferring with teachers, asking their input, and treating them as colleagues had a beneficial effect on how teachers perceived me as their assistant principal. Although it was my perception that teachers viewed me as their assistant principal, I realized

Whether teachers and administrators at Public School X appeared to internalize the philosophy behind school-based management or merely have adopted the language without the behaviors is difficult to say. Public School X has been involved with shared decision-making for only about a year and a half. In this brief time, a fair number of committed individuals has attempted to shift from a bureaucratic paradigm to a collegial culture. Whether they will succeed or will revert to traditional ways of interacting depends on a number of factors, such as the degree of district/state support, as well as the tenacity of people to plod through difficulties that certainly lie ahead. What is evident, at this point in time, is that educators in schools like Public School X are attempting to dispel traditional line and staff hierarchical relationships in favor of participatory involvement.

Despite our positive experiences with shared leadership and collaborative planning, we did have many problems which were difficult to fully resolve. For example, in deciding how a quarter of a million dollars should be spent, many sessions often led to loud disagreements on how best to allocate these funds. Despite these occasional squabbles, we were working together and building trusting relationships. Recent research into shared decision-making indicated that conflicts, although not uncommon, do not mean that efforts expended are not worth it (Weiss, Cambone, and Wyeth, 1992). The authors concluded by stating:

In the schools we studied, people complained a good deal about the aches and strains of shared decision making, but only one or two people said that they wanted to go back to the way things were in the past—and even they hedged. With all the discontents it foments, shared decision making gives school faculties a measure of control over their work lives and over opportunities for their students. It is not a benefit that most teachers are willing to give up. (p. 365)

My experiences at Public School X indicate that schools can indeed attempt to abrogate bureaucratic barriers in favor of collegial interactions among members of faculty. In my school discussions among faculty (especially teachers and assistant principals), during and after school hours, indicated their willingness to construct new meaningful relationships. Teachers and assistant principals discussed mindsets, belief systems, and languages used to express relationships. There was a conscious effort to, for example, avoid using terms such as "supervisors" or "boss." The "production metaphor" that encourages such expressions was an outgrowth of bureaucracy and was seen as inadequate to meet the challenges of participatory-based management. Participatory governance, at this school, was rooted in a totally different meta-

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were not singly responsible for teacher evaluation. Although the principal did, in fact, have the legal mandate as chief evaluator, the task of evaluation was handled by committee. Assistant principals under school-based management, were not viewed by teachers as threats, but as colleagues collaboratively working together to meet instructional objectives (Isenberg, 1990). Assistant principals viewed themselves as "master teachers" whose primary responsibility was to help and work with teachers to improve instruction. When I, for example, worked with a teacher, the teacher realized that my presence in the room was not as an evaluator, but as an instructional partner or "as a peer" (Koehler, 1990, p. 28). Under our unique arrangement, I could separate my evaluative role from my instructional responsibilities.

This is only possible in an environment of cooperation and collegiality. Shared decision-making and participatory school management is an ideal model that has the potential to nourish collaboration and eschew the duality that exists between improvement and evaluation. A change to this model, however, is complex and difficult. It requires a new vision or paradigm. A fundamental premise underlying change is the necessity to alter mindsets or belief systems that are not conducive to participatory management. Implicit in this discussion is the need to eliminate barriers to achieving collegiality between teachers and administrators. School-based management is an arrangement where collegiality can be nurtured and furthered. Research has found an association between participation at all levels with positive outcomes such as greater staff morale, organizational commitment, and a reduction of conflict (see, for example, Blase and Kirby, 1992; Kochan, Katz, and Mower, 1985; Nadler, 1986; Sashkin, 1984). Our experiences at Public School X demonstrate a concerted effort by teachers and administrators to forge new relationships with one another.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is the inherent submissive nature of hierarchical governance that causes conflict among faculty in schools. Moreover, the dilemma of improvement versus evaluation is exacerbated and ever-present under non-facilitative and non-collaborative school models. Research indicates that teachers prefer "collaborative/non-directive" styles among supervisors (Norris, 1992, p. 132). Teachers resent dictatorial supervisors with "tyrannical" evaluative powers, but certainly welcome encouragement, suggestions, and support within a collaborative framework (Blase and Kirby, 1992; also, see Whistler, 1984). Norris (1992)

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