Will anything short of eliminating *supervision bridge the gap between teacher needs and problems and the services offered by supervisory and curriculum professionals?*

The Powerlessness of Irrelevancy

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I HAD some reservations about writing this article mainly due to my lack of formal training in supervision and curriculum development. In other words, I did not want to reveal my ignorance. Whatever I have learned about either has been through performing both functions for a number of years, reading and relying—more than I like to admit—on instinct. I decided, however, to run that risk because—from where I stand—supervision and curriculum development, especially for the disadvantaged and their teachers, are irrelevant to their needs and problems.

The current critical self-examination that supervisors and curriculum workers are indulging in reveals bleakly how little the frontiers of knowledge about both crafts have advanced. Some researchers and practitioners admit candidly that the role of the supervisor is confused and results are murky. In the words of one researcher:

> There is, in fact, little sound evidence that teachers change at all, to say nothing about change in relation to supervisory efforts.[2]

Similarly, some curriculum workers speak with little confidence when roles and results are discussed. In effect, the profession is at that primitive stage of relying on personal observation, intuition, and "feeling."

Now there is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting that the role of the supervisor has yet to be carved out with precision, or that a solid theory and practice of supervision have yet to be created; English and social studies education, for example, share similar problems and, for that matter, so does education in general.

What is deeply irritating and even arrogant, however, is the assumption that supervisors should and can be "agents of change" in the present order of things. Or as one professor profiled the supervisor urgently needed in the public schools:

> He is responsible for identifying instruc-

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[2] James B. Macdonald. "Knowledge About Supervision: Rationalization or Rationale?" *Educational Leadership* 23 (2):161-63; November 1965.

tional problems and for providing leadership in their resolution. He is an authority on teaching, a resource person, an expert in group dynamics and more recently is conceived of as a catalyst or an agent of change.[3]

Rhetoric and Reality

When I think of how large urban school systems are organized, the circumscribed staff function of supervisors and curriculum people, and what teachers of the disadvantaged are most concerned about and match all of these against the rhetoric, I almost laugh at the absurdity of it all. Yet I do not laugh, because irrelevancy is intolerable at a time when teaching is at its lowest ebb and youngsters continue to die a slow death in too many inner-city classrooms.

Supervisors are powerless to deal effectively with the concerns of teachers. What teachers need—smaller classes, time to plan and think, opportunities to analyze with others what happens in a classroom, freedom to experiment, and support for that experimentation—supervisors cannot provide.

Indeed, what does a supervisor do? While my observation of large city operations may be narrow, I gather that he collects and distributes materials; he visits classrooms sporadically, usually those of first year teachers, convinces teachers that they should review textbooks, checks lesson plans occasionally, and presides at meetings with teachers, etc. In short, the supervisor is irrelevant and is powerless to cope with the needs and concerns of teachers.

And his colleagues across the hall share the same fate. After all, what do curriculum workers do? Preparing curriculum guides, compiling reading lists, bringing together teachers to list materials and activities in teaching a particular unit, introducing in selected schools some recently developed materials from a curriculum reform program pinpoint their functions.

Curriculum workers in the central office will crank out course guides and syllabi and send them to teachers. The teachers stack them neatly on the shelf next to the last batch of materials that were sent out. Knowing full well what happens to their products, the staff can only bemoan the low-level intelligence of teachers and their inability to use effectively the abundant instructional materials the central office provides.

Again, what do teachers of the disadvantaged need? They need diverse materials from which to choose what works with their kids, not just the most recent textbook. They need assistance and support to learn how to use these materials. They need time and facilities to prepare lessons and units that are not commercially available. As with supervisors' needs, teachers' needs and concerns slide past noiselessly the services offered by those who are supposed to help teachers perform their job effectively.

To charge that supervisory and curriculum staff are powerless and irrelevant does not raise a new issue. Talking to teachers reveals that they know quite well the rituals and charades carried on between themselves and supervisors and curriculum people. The fact of the matter is that teachers see such staff as highly paid agents of the system—not as free-wheeling entrepreneurs of

[3] Richard F. Neville. "The Supervisor We Need." *Educational Leadership* 23 (8):634-40; May 1966.

change. Staff people who visit schools or send directives, have responsibility but little authority; they can be easily dealt with by teachers who nod their heads, "yes sirring" each statement, and waving goodbye.

Now the question is whether supervisors and curriculum workers can become relevant to teachers in inner-city schools and link up the social ferment occurring in the community with the school. Yes, they can. Will they? I doubt it.

Suggestions From a Skeptic

Enough writers have sketched out the knowledge, skills, and attitudes supervisors and curriculum workers must have to be effective. Suggestions range from more familiarity with current research on the teacher-learner process to equipping these professionals with the skills of working with people. I would add three to the list: (a) specific knowledge of the community—its diversity, crises, and politics; (b) actual classroom teaching; and (c) more face-to-face contact with teachers.

For supervisors and curriculum workers to be especially knowledgable about the city, urbane if you will, is the first step toward making school staff relevant to the community. They could provide support and expertise to teachers who encourage student involvement in the community; they could assist teachers in creating units and courses on the city.

That civics courses, for example, in most large school systems remain pristine in their imbecilic innocence of urban reality is shocking. The failure of social studies supervisors and curriculum workers to drag these courses into the 20th century and deal with metropolitan America speaks to their powerlessness and lack of personal involvement with the city. Supervisory and curriculum staff must be conversant with the promise of and threat to urban life.

So, too, must they continue to keep one foot in the classroom door. A high correlation seems to exist between flatulent rhetoric and distance from youngsters. Too little information exists on what happens in the classroom to permit a supervisor to be promoted out of teaching and thereafter see only the backs of students' heads. A supervisor who teaches and maintains an open-door policy for colleagues is solid evidence to everyone in the school that the act of teaching has an intrinsic value; that he wants to retain honesty and perspective in his advice to individual teachers.

None of what I suggest is new. It has been included in any number of recommendations by better qualified persons. Gestures toward implementation have been made in various parts of the country, with clinical professors being the ones who come most readily to mind. Paper recommendations are plentiful; implementation is scarce.

And the reason is simple enough. Implementing these suggestions would require a fundamental overhauling of staff and line organization, a closer examination and ultimate revision of graduate courses leading toward certification in these fields and a decentralization of supervisory and curriculum staff and activities. The enormity of what has to be done paralyzes even the young and energetic.

Let me multiply the enormity by

spelling out briefly the changes that would follow upon decentralization.

To get more supervisors into the field to teach and work with faculty, centers of teacher education would have to be established at various schools. Each of these centers would have a staff that teaches, supervises, and develops curriculum materials. Thus, an action center for instruction and development of materials would be physically closer to teachers and the community.

These centers, of course, could easily provide training for new and experienced teachers.

Many additional staff members would have to be recruited and, while costly, such recruitment would pointedly demonstrate to all teachers that there is a career open to those who want to stay in the classroom.

Certainly this would be costly, perhaps duplicative and, worst of all, such a scheme may not even attack the issues that trouble teachers. Yet if not decentralization, then another plan is essential that will eliminate the charades that teachers and supervisors play with one another.

Will anything happen? I doubt it. Supervisors and curriculum workers are part of a system that is monopolistic and, I believe, almost incapable of generating the energy necessary to reform the traditional relationships and procedures that have accumulated over the years. Consider how cumbersome it is to initiate curriculum changes in most school systems. Or note the inspector-general attitude of many supervisors toward teachers departing from established conventions. And if this is a myth, it is one that continues to shape teacher behavior. What I had always thought was an apocryphal story turned into reality when I heard a supervisor lambaste, in my presence, a teacher for the unorthodox letters and colors used on her bulletin board. I thought the supervisor was imitating a stereotyped version of a supervisor until I realized she was serious.

The situation is deplorable and sad. I do not know how to energize a school system into revitalizing itself and in the process retool the supervisory and curriculum roles. That the pressure must come from outside the system is evident to me. One hopeful sign is the anti-poverty money that has poured into most inner-city schools. That money has produced many exciting programs, involving a great number of teachers in supervising, in developing curriculum materials, and in creating in some schools intellectual ferment. Some of that ferment has already begun to percolate upwards and to challenge existing relationships and procedures. This is all to the good.

Whether the results will shake up people and programs remains to be seen. More to the point is whether anything short of eliminating the conventional supervisory apparatus will bring into line the disparity between teacher needs and problems and the services proffered by supervisory and curriculum professionals.

And when that disparity disappears, then we can begin to examine with more precision exactly what supervisors can do to bridge the gap between school and community. Until then, no real dialogue on supervisory and curriculum worker effectiveness can take place.

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