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# SUPERVISING TEACHERS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

*AUTHORS' NOTE: During the Summer of 1966 Bank Street College of Education conducted an NDEA Institute for 29 supervisors and leadership personnel from New York City, Washington, D.C., San Juan, Puerto Rico and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We lived in Manhattan and worked in several of the Harlem Schools. Our goal was to develop strategies for changing ourselves, our colleagues, and our schools in order to better serve the disadvantaged.*

*The fact that this staff, its consultants and the participants, was the most able we have ever worked with became a source of out-rightened discouragement: We realized that unless we could come to grips with some of the realities of supervision in urban areas, there was even less chance that others would. In only six weeks we made some heartwarming progress by using our racially integrated staff and participants to encounter and feel each other as people. But we failed—perhaps because of time—to confront each other with some of the racial problems of supervision in the schools. We were defensive about ourselves and our schools, ashamed of our participation in discriminatory activities and reluctant to discuss our feelings of helplessness.*

*The issues selected for this article are merely a few of many which must be openly discussed. There has now been a cooling-off period of several months to determine whether feelings would somehow become more objective and less intense once we were all back in our own comfortable situations. They haven't.—MRC and MH.*

OPERATIONALLY, the disadvantaged are those whose teachers perceive them as disadvantaged. So we begin with occupational tunnel vision. The vernacular of pedageese derives from eviscerated concepts and results in near-miss approximations labeled "objectivity," so this circuitous definition does not reveal anything about the nature of these children. But it does focus on the most powerful determinant of children's achievement: their teachers' assessment of their potential. Methodology, curriculum, school organization and materials are all launched from this teacher perception.

How can supervisors help teachers surrender the distortions of these nega-

tive expectations? A beginning might be an injection of reality into what supervisors study, work on, and talk about.

The paucity of supervisory strategy is often attributed to the newness of our field; bogus cries are raised for a theory of supervision, more research and firmer value commitments. But what would such theory describe and predict? Which variables could be researched? And how might we strengthen our values? Finally, why would any of these exercises influence our daily practices or the social system of the school?

These "supposed" needs are merely smoke screens of a flight syndrome; the real problems are a little too real. For example, supervisors must develop coping behaviors and action strategies which are germane to urban schools serving the disadvantaged.

### **Reluctant Teachers**

The supervisor's basic problem is like that of the Boy Scout helping reluctant little old ladies to cross streets when they would rather stay on corners. We Americans are socialized to believe we should be able to solve life problems independently. A welter of guilt results when we soon discover our need for friends, family, to borrow money, and to use hospitals. Overlay this fantasy-like moral prescription with a teacher education that portrays instructional problems as teacher or pupil faults, rather than as opportunities and we can see that an impossible role perception has been conveyed to teachers. As "normal" adult Americans, they do not want "help," and as teachers they cannot admit to needs.

As if this were not bad enough, the

supervisor is perceived as someone who cannot "help" with reality problems. Just as the disadvantaged pupils perceive their teachers as powerless to help with any real problems (e.g., Can he get me a job? a decent place to live? police protection? a loving home? sexual gratification? equal opportunity?), so the supervisor is perceived as powerless to help with problems the teachers perceive as real. (Can he give me a smaller class? more supporting and psychological services? fewer emotionally disturbed pupils? effective methods and techniques for my instructional problems?)

### **Teachers' Dislike for Children**

It is unpleasant, almost impolite, to mention our pretense that teachers like their pupils. Many do, but supervising others—particularly in schools serving the disadvantaged, who discriminate against poor youngsters of various ethnic backgrounds—is analogous to helping children learn subjects they hate. Without positive teacher regard, little beyond drill, rote, or mechanical teaching occurs. Youngsters might escape irreparable damage from the hands of a bigoted coach or bandmaster, but the positive regard of one's teacher is too powerful, too essential to their growth, to be completely washed out by even the most technical subject matter.

Teachers (certified in their states, tenured in their systems and paid-up members of professional associations) who dislike their youngsters have a natural reluctance to discuss their feelings, while we, their leaders, are often prejudiced and unaware ourselves. When this round robin of unawareness

is revealed, we find we lack the know-how to change the behaviors from which prejudiced perceptions continue to develop.

The most grinding, debilitating aspect of their deprived subculture is its failure to offer these children any choices. When their teachers perceive their potential with equally negative expectations, their classroom experience concurs with and reinforces this demoralization. The positive regard of his teacher may be a deprived child's only hope.

Since the most powerful determinant of teacher effectiveness is his perception of pupils' potential growth, this effectiveness cannot help but be affected negatively by tendencies to stereotype, or to remain closed to the talents, divergencies and strengths of individuals of different backgrounds.

### **Supervisors of Resentful Whites**

The status gap between teachers and supervisors is a real one; but teachers are often wiser about recognizing its validity than supervisors who attempt a strategy of co-worker, helpmate, team-member, colleague, etc. Overlaying these basic distinctions in role are age and sex differences; supervisors who are younger than teachers; women attempting to help men. These differences which deepen the natural gulf between them are compounded when we add the difficulties of Negroes who supervise whites.

Symptoms of the "racial problem" between Negro supervisors and white teachers usually occur in integrated or predominantly Negro schools—where one is most likely to find non-white

supervisors. We find this constellation:

- Teachers who are fearful their supervisor will no longer back them up in situations involving corporal punishment of a Negro pupil

- Teachers who are reluctant to discuss their perceptions of "disadvantaged" problems because they do not want to appear prejudiced

- Teachers who over-react, love everyone, and have absolutely no problems

- Supervisors who become overly oriented to academic progress and avoid recognizing emotional problems of pupils. The remedial reading syndrome is a common phenomenon among supervisors bent on "proving" success

- Supervisors who solidify in the belief that only a Negro can understand the problems of educational disadvantage—even a middle class Negro living in the suburbs

- Supervisors who become more concerned with their own advancement and play militant for the community and Uncle Tom for the system.

### **White Negro Teachers**

The interaction of mutual prejudice and fear between white teachers and Negro supervisors is understandable. After understanding, however, behavioral techniques are required to help supervisors who are struggling for an identity of their own to establish functional relationships. The problem is not unlike the fearful teacher forced to work with resentful, hostile youngsters at a time in life when self definition may be his greatest need.

One of the most difficult forms of

pupil rejection occurs in schools serving urban Negroes. It is the lowest form of reverse prejudice which fails to recognize the wide range of abilities, attitudes and effectiveness amongst middle-class, well educated Negroes assigned as teachers in urban schools. Typical placement procedures which assign Negro teachers to schools serving the disadvantaged fail to recognize the personal needs and class level of different individuals. Many Negroes merely respond to the white "they all look alike to me" syndrome which lumps all Negroes together. As a result, some Negro teachers try to "prove" they are in no way related to or identified with these youngsters. Others respond with an intensified need to demonstrate masculinity, and they often try to dominate rather than relate to their pupils.

Many Negro colleges guide the least able into teaching; better students are advised to enter business, or the more prestigious professions in order to more influentially "represent" their group.

Although these problems all have causes which invariably derive from centuries of discrimination in which whites have brutalized Negroes, the fact remains that important problems are now at home roosting. Supervisors need courage to risk accusations of discrimination and reverse discrimination. More important, white leadership needs to open up all white schools to those Negro faculty members who work best with middle class students.

Most supervision is directed toward helping beginning teachers, although the evidence indicates that they do as well or better than experienced teachers. We assume (erroneously) that be-

ginners are more amenable to change than experienced teachers. (This usually means "susceptible to directive influences." What are beginners changing from?) In reality much supervisory practice is the imposition of unwanted assistance, and beginners are less able to resist than the securely-tenured, more confident teachers. Another explanation is logistical; there isn't enough time to help all, and supervisory effort must be expended where it will do the most good. This is a dangerous rationalization, since most beginners work less than a year and merely pass through the profession, while the experienced "older" teacher with twenty years of experience is overlooked in spite of the fact that he may have another twenty to go.

### **Changing Experienced, "Model" Teachers**

Unfortunately, many experienced teachers are perceived as having "connections" and as informal leaders in their schools and neighborhoods. Supervisors, particularly newly appointed ones, are reluctant to risk "rocking the boat" with such teachers under their egis. An experienced, informal teacher-leader has immeasurable power to control by merely threatening to request transfer. As a result, much supervision mollifies the strong and over-supervises the weak. In schools serving the disadvantaged, where turnover is high or requests for in-transfer infrequent, supervisors often practice the realistic but unprofessional philosophy of "leaving well enough alone." In reality, conservation of an inadequate status quo is preservation of failure.

The ignorant may become educated,

the disaffected involved, and the prejudiced more open; but strategies to release the potentialities of the fearful teacher are as yet unexplored. We might begin with the recognition that many (perhaps most) supervisors, principals and teachers are fearful. But fear of what? The sources of fear may be in both the nature of the person who becomes a teacher and in the nature of a "disadvantaged" classroom where many pupils need to feel some power. Demonstrations of fear are natural responses to feelings of powerlessness.

### Fearful Teachers

Do teachers fear change? Behind all the rationalizations (e.g., My principal won't let me. My fellow teachers will be upset. The children need structure.) is fear of the new, the unfamiliar, the unpredictable.

Do teachers fear expression of emotions—aggression, love, bursting joy? It is clear that schools are not the best settings for natural behavior. The current cardinal operating principle of American schools is "keep the lid on feelings." We were nearly run down on the sidewalk outside a junior high school recently by exuberant, naturally expressive adolescents whose apathetic, glazed-over responses in the classroom we had observed only five minutes earlier.

Fear of all three factors—supervisors, change, and emotions—are present to some degree. Also, these fears are all interrelated and derive from one basic fear: a fear of inadequacy. In their professional lives, teachers lack the ability to predict the multiplicity of problems with which they may be instantly and continuously confronted

and they lack the more complete predictability present in other professional roles. They lack power.

To assume that fear is *not* a factor, or should not be, is unsound and unrealistic. By recognizing teachers' feelings of inadequacy, we can consider possible causes, and connect them with the teacher's perception of power. Since our own perceptions of fear and power are also involved, the problem is now more complex and emotionally charged. Power, personal and professional, is not given but taken. The usual discussion of how to *give* teachers more power is sterile; we need to identify situational elements and to structure conditions in which fearful teachers can learn to take power.

When teachers and supervisors independently arrive at the same objectives for changing themselves, we have an optimum condition for supervision. In practice, such convergence rarely occurs. Supervisors perceive their major *raison d'être* as changing teachers' attitudes; teachers perceive their biggest problems as large classes, individual problem-students, and rigid curricula. Operationally then, supervision becomes a search for means to detour around teacher-perceived problems, and attempts to shift the locus of teacher concern from the children and the curriculum to themselves.

The democratic ethic, principles of learning and our own needs for approval prevent us from overtly imposing our ideas through directive supervision. Yet, we are powerless to deal with the structural and basic problems perceived by teachers—even when these perceptions may be accurate and we recognize that their perceptions must be the

starting point for supervisory practice. The situation is not unlike the teacher who asks his class, "What are you interested in?" When they respond, "Girls, money, fame," he replies, "No, no. I mean like any of your after-school hobbies that might help me to relate your life experiences to the acid and base weights of the chemical elements."

Meanwhile, ask teachers to describe their basic concerns; they tell about classes that are too large to differentiate assignments, the need to cover prescribed material with children who cannot read, and the difficulty of managing a group situation with several emotionally disturbed youngsters. To which the supervisor replies, "No, no. I mean what are you doing that will help me to relate your problems to the workshop I offer Thursday afternoons on 'Creativity in Written Expression'!"

This article has raised issues and ignored canons. Our questions imply that what we have been doing is not good enough; yet no concrete sugges-

tions have been made. (That's cynicism!) We have implied that opening up tough issues in urban schools may change supervisors personally and professionally, as well as teachers. (That's derogation!) One might infer that teachers and supervisors frequently perceive each others' services as somewhat less than useful; we need, first, to recognize that supervisory reality begins with teachers' perceptions—not supervisors' needs and interests. (That's insulting!)

Finally, the stress on disadvantage-ment has been underplayed; we believe that supervision, like teaching, is basically the same in all situations, but pupils in "disadvantaged" schools are less likely to learn in spite of their teachers, and their teachers are less likely to succeed without realistic help. (That's devious!) Right answers only result from the right questions: What are teachers' *real* problems? The right supervisory objectives will develop in the light of those needs. ☛

## The Changing Curriculum: SCIENCE

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