

Supervision in a Militant Era

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THE challenge to the supervisor is to hear the messages of the militants and to respond in ways that will effect improvement of education and teaching-learning processes. Let us explore a few of the messages being thrown out and what might be appropriate responses.

Some of the messages are these:

- "The curriculum isn't relevant. We want a black studies course."
- "The history courses we take don't teach the truth about the Negro in America."
- "In my regular history class they tell us that Abraham Lincoln was a great hero; in my black history class I'm learning that Lincoln was just a politician. His decisions were just expedient."
- "We need more time to explore interests like art and electronics."
- "We need a course in psychology to help you understand people better."
- "We need to learn the skill of reading the newspaper."
- "We want more vocational education opportunities to learn about different kinds of work, what skills are needed, what education you have to have to get certain jobs."
- "In high school we must have time for the facts and we don't have time for the other things. I could do with a lot less of the completely irrelevant things taught here and they could give time for the kids to talk and begin to see each other's viewpoints and what the other guy really is thinking and what he's got to say."

These statements were made by young people from different high schools all over the nation.

Educators are reacting to these statements in various ways. Some become defensive and try to justify each course offered, each text and teaching strategy used. A few take the stance of advocating the immediate overthrow of the total current curriculum. (We could label these teacher militants.) Others are listening, examining, discussing, and moving into action to take small concrete visible measures, such as the use of texts and other materials that provide a more authentic picture of the contributions of all minority groups in this nation; the elimination from the classroom of materials that give distorted impressions; or better yet, provision of materials that present different views and help students deal with the diversity through analysis and comparison.

I have been struck with the shallowness of our response to student unrest. Some of us seem concerned only with quelling the immediate fire. This must be done, of course. We cannot tolerate physical violence, but we are also finding that some educators are responding only to this visible level—only to provide a return to safety. We are not pushing more deeply into grappling with needed changes in curriculum.

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What Is Relevant?

Many of the demands need to be examined as symptoms of critical problems. We need to be asking ourselves:

- Is what we are teaching commensurate with the demands of living in a highly complex world?
- Is the content of each course or class meaningful to the students? (I have had to clarify for myself what I mean by relevant or meaningful. I have concluded that relevance varies with each learner and that a major criterion is whether the student finds some meaning for himself. It may be a functional or usable skill or body of information. It may be an intriguing intellectual theory. It may constitute an in-depth interest in some field of knowledge or some topic.)

Yet the educator by himself can't decide what is relevant. He must watch for responses in the learner to detect whether what is being offered or dealt with in school has meaning to the students. If disinterest, failure to carry out classroom or homework assignments, truancy, or other symptoms are found, then the educator can probably assume that the content is not relevant to a particular group of students.

The problem may be due to the teaching-learning processes that are being used, and not to the content in and of itself; yet regardless of this, the content is irrelevant if the learner deems it so. This is a long way of saying that the educator must continuously observe what is happening to the learner. He must seek feedback from the learners in order to ascertain and evaluate what is happening. This means he must involve the students in the assessment of what they are learning.

What about the demand for a black or brown studies course? How should educators respond to this request? We believe it is sound educationally to widen the scope of the content being pursued in school when students are interested and concerned. Such a process in working with pupils may further the goals of nurturing self-understanding and of appreciation for other human beings.

The functions of the supervisor/consultant in this process include:

- Delineating what content could and should be included
- Searching for resources both human and material
- Anticipating with teachers and administrators some of the problems which may occur as a result of new instructional adventures (facing the critical parent, a hesitant principal; dealing with class discussions which go further than the teacher feels equipped to handle)
- Planning professional development activities such as practice with role-playing and simulation, review of literature and other materials new to the staff
- Identifying teachers who want to experiment with new approaches and giving them moral and material support as needed
- Disseminating information about promising practices used within and outside the district
- Assisting teachers and principals in gathering and analyzing data regarding students' behavior, such as utilization of tape recordings of class discussion, observation of playground and lunch time groupings, interviewing of students.

Recent experience has given the writer a new insight into our behavior as educators. We tend to be reluctant about sharing ideas and perceptions when these seem to differ greatly from those of the other people with whom we work. I am learning that we can help one another much more by being willing to share our differences, not in the spirit that "I am right and the other guy is wrong." Rather, by pooling our reactions we can come up with better understanding and a greater range of solution strategies than would be possible by acting alone.

Another demand of many students is to participate more fully in the activities and the decision making regarding the total school experience. Two frequent comments come to mind:

- "We want to participate 100 percent in activities like the after-school clubs and the election of cheerleaders."
- "Student government is a farce. They

let us make decisions about the decorations for the dances and the color to paint the trash cans, but we want to work on dress standards, problems of litter, smoking, obscenity, boys' hair length."

Again, why not respond constructively to demands like these? Is it because we are reacting defensively to the situation of having demands made that we sometimes revert to the position of asserting our control over the students? Why not use our authority to listen maturely to the demands, and act on those which our logic and human sensitivities tell us have potential?

Must we say, "If we give an inch they will take a mile," to paraphrase the old saying? Why not declare, "We will leap forward and find ways with you to make the school experience more responsive to your concerns and desires to direct your own lives"?

Community Militancy

What of militants in the community who are shouting their messages through the mass media, at boards of education, and into the ears of the young? We are all aware of the small, well-organized, vociferous groups demanding that the schools eliminate all teaching about sex education, that more minority group teachers be hired, that we indoctrinate for patriotism, that we prohibit this or promote that. By "militant," we mean any pressure group that persists in forcing its particular thinking on the rest of society with little or no regard for other views and potential solutions. Such groups, both in support and in criticism of the public schools, apparently are multiplying.

As educational leaders, we must find better ways to deal with these pressures. I am convinced that a new thrust for democratization is taking place. Many people sincerely want to become a part of the decision making related to schools and other social institutions. Individuals and groups will become increasingly aggressive or militant if they find no vent for their ideas or grievances. A major function of the supervisor, the consultant, the curriculum director, the assistant superintendent of instruction, is to invite

dialogue with and among a wide cross-section of the community. There is much evidence that educators tend to build walls around themselves and exclude the public from participation in educational decision making. In my judgment, this era is rapidly coming to a close.

We need to learn the skills of dealing with divergent opinion in constructive ways. One skill is the intellectual process of extracting common threads or persistent ideas out of diversity. We should learn better how to sort out which ideas, problems, and/or solutions are held in consensus and which are discrepant. We can move into action on the former; the latter may require further study and dialogue.

Another attitude to be cultivated is that of not expecting 100 percent agreement on an issue before some action is taken. On crucial issues, often a two- or three-fold attack is needed, thus testing out divergent approaches. This means encouraging individuals and small teams on a staff to try something considered controversial provided they are willing to evaluate what is happening to children and youth in the process and to share these evaluations with the staff.

We educators also need to learn to view parents as having something valuable, and in fact essential, to contribute to the process of making curriculum and instructional decisions. What are some of these assets? One crucial area is that of feedback about how their children are reacting to the school experience: what their educational excitements and interests are, what their hang-ups are, how they feel about the classes they are in, whether they understand their homework or are challenged by it.

A few quotes from a recent series of interviews with parents speak for themselves:

- "Students don't understand homework assignments and subjects."
- "Some children are afraid to go to school; they are forced to take narcotics."
- "Children pick on each other too much."
- "Our children are too shy; they're afraid to ask the teacher questions."

These same parents had all kinds of sug-

gestions for possible solutions to problems, ranging from willingness to assist in patrolling the grounds to taking courses in various subject fields (for example, the new math). The list of problems and solutions is extensive. The above only suggest the willingness and the potential for improving the schools which can emanate from parent-school cooperative planning and action.

Space does not permit other descriptions: of industry-education programs, of projects for training in citizen-participation, of the involvement of voluntary and paid aides in various aspects of the school program. Suffice it to say that the profession cannot become frozen in its concepts regarding the teachers', the students', or the community's roles.

The supervisor can encourage these new ways of demonstrating that he himself is open to experience. His willingness to explore innovative ideas, his knowledge of what others are doing, his skill in assisting teachers in planning-development-evaluation processes can be the key to constructive change.

We are talking here about the change agent role. I envision working relationships within a staff where different members take on this role. Sometimes the change agent will

be a classroom teacher, sometimes a support staff member such as the supervisor, sometimes the administrator or the university resource person or the county office consultant or the "fed" such as the ESEA Title III or Title IV consultant.

This approach requires an attitude of faith and confidence in the people with whom we work. It assumes professional partnerships where staff members who have differentiated responsibilities work as equals in making decisions about instruction. Traditional line-staff conceptions are no longer adequate to deal with current challenges. These newly emerging ways of working have not yet become fully crystallized, but require urgent attention if we are to learn to accommodate the militants within the profession.

We are in a transition stage just now in which many conventions are breaking down. It is a painful time—a growing, learning period. Out of it, hopefully, will come the renewal John Gardner talks about. We can create more effective ways of clarifying purposes and objectives, of designing better programs, and of evaluating the results, using the feedback to redirect our energies—the cycle of growth and change. This is the challenge to supervisors in a militant era. □

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