Role Expectations of the School Library Supervisor as a Function of the Distance Between Expected and Perceived Fulfillment

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FEW who have occupied a supervisory role in education would disagree with Lucio and McNeil in their statement that:

It sometimes seems to matter little what a supervisor actually does. It matters more that what others think a supervisor does is what they think he should do.[1]

Numerous role studies, notably those by Bidwell, Chase, and Ferneau, have shown that the effectiveness of official leaders is measured in terms of the congruence between what they are expected to do and what they are perceived to be doing. The gap between expected and perceived performance, especially as these apply to leadership roles in education, has often been uncomfortably wide. Such a gap became evident in a recent four-state study of the school library supervisor's role.[2]

For purposes of the study and according to the interpretation used in *Standards for School Library Programs*, a library supervisor was considered to be "a person whose major responsibility is direction of a school library program for a school system. His responsibilities may or may not include the direction of audio-visual services and his title may vary." Data for the study were collected by means of a partially open-ended questionnaire describing 90 activities in which school library supervisors might be expected to engage. These expectations for the library supervisor's role, prescribed in the literature of education and librarianship, were categorized according to Harris's ten major supervisory tasks.[3] (These tasks appear in Table 2.) Questionnaire recipients were asked to indicate the extent to which they expected and perceived the library supervisors in their counties to engage in each activity.

The study questionnaire was directed to four groups of school personnel in the complete county unit states of Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, and West Virginia. Recipients included the county school library supervisors, their immediate superiors, and random samples of the principals and librarians with whom these supervisors worked. A 77 percent return of the questionnaire yielded 336 usable responses.

[1] William H. Lucio and John D. McNeil. *Supervision: A Synthesis of Thought and Action.* Second edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969. p. 29.

[2] Ruth B. Newcomb. "Role Expectations of the County School Library Supervisor and Their Perceived Fulfillment." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, Tallahassee, 1968.

[3] Ben M. Harris. *Supervisory Behavior in Education.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963. pp. 13-14.

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Conspicuous among the findings of the study were the high frequencies of expectation associated with many of the activities theoretically prescribed for the library supervisor's role. Seventy-five percent or more of the study participants expected library supervisors to engage "regularly" in 43 of the activities described on the study questionnaire. In other words, nearly half of the 90 prescribed activities had a 75 percent or greater frequency of expectation. On the other hand, only 15 of the 90 had frequencies of expectation lower than 50 percent; that is, were expected by fewer than 50 percent of the participants. When their frequencies of expectation were combined by averaging, the 90 activities were found to have a 68 percent average frequency of expectation "regularly."

Percentages expecting library supervisors to engage in the 90 activities prescribed for their role tended to be highest among the supervisors themselves. Frequencies with which other groups expected such engagement tended to vary inversely with positional status. Percentages reflecting these tendencies are included in Table 1.

When the 90 activities were grouped according to Harris's ten supervisory tasks and the frequencies of their expectation averaged, varying levels of expectancy for the different tasks became evident. This variation can be seen in Table 2, in which the tasks appear in descending order of the percentages expecting supervisors to engage "regularly" in their related activities.

As conspicuous as the high expectancy for many of the supervisor's role activities was the low perception of their fulfillment. None of the 90 activities was *perceived* as being fulfilled "regularly" with greater than 77 percent frequency. Yet two-fifths of them were *expected* "regularly" by more than 77 percent of the study participants. Conversely, 67 of the 90 activities were perceived "regularly" with less than 50 percent frequency, while fewer than one-fourth as many had frequencies of expectation this low. Frequencies with which they were *perceived* as "regular" activities of the school library supervisor averaged 37 percent for the 90 activities as compared to the 68 percent frequency with which they were *expected*. These low perceptions of expectation fulfillment were shared by all groups of study participants, as may be noted in Table 1. They are seen to characterize, in somewhat uneven fashion, all the supervisory tasks listed in Table 2.

The disparity between performance expected and performance perceived was substantially widened by participant uncertainty regarding the extent of performance perceived. While "Do not know" responses on the study questionnaire reflected minimal uncertainty regarding activities in which library supervisors *should* engage, they revealed major uncertainty about activities in which the supervisors *do* engage. The high incidence of uncertainty pushed frequencies of perception downward, thereby widening the gap between expected and perceived performance.

Uncertainty regarding activities in which library supervisors *do* engage was negligible among the library supervisors themselves. It varied inversely with positional status among other groups of participants. "Do not know" responses accounted for 24 percent of all those given by school librarians to questionnaire items concerned with perceptions of the library supervisor's performance. Simi-

Participant group	Number in group	Averaged percentages		Differences in percentages
		Expecting engagement	Perceiving engagement	
Librarians	148	68.4	36.4	32.0
Principals	130	66.3	36.0	30.3
Library supervisors	33	76.7	44.6	32.1
Immediate superiors	25	63.3	39.0	24.3
All participants	336	68.0	37.0	31.0

Table 1. Percentages Expecting and Perceiving Library Supervisors To Engage "Regularly" In 90 Prescribed Activities, Averaged in Terms of Participant Groups

Tasks	Participant percentages		Differences in percentages
	Expecting engagement	Perceiving engagement	
Orienting new staff	85.5	48.0	37.5
Providing facilities	82.9	40.7	42.2
Organizing for instruction	79.6	39.4	40.2
Developing curriculum	73.6	28.2	45.4
Relating special services	72.5	34.5	38.0
Arranging in-service education	69.0	33.0	36.0
Staffing	65.9	32.8	33.1
Evaluating	65.5	32.7	32.8
Developing public relations	63.5	28.5	35.0
Providing materials	59.8	42.8	17.0

Table 2. Comparison of Percentages Expecting and Perceiving School Library Supervisors To Engage "Regularly" in Activities Related to Ten Supervisory Tasks

lar uncertainty influenced 18 percent of the responses given by school principals to these items and 6 percent of those given by immediate superiors of the library supervisors. Apparently those farthest removed from the library supervisor in terms of positional status were most uncertain of his activities. Those closer to the supervisor in positional status less frequently expressed uncertainty regarding his performance.

Their "Do not know" responses on the study questionnaire revealed that more than one-fourth of the study participants were uncertain of the extent to which their library supervisors engage in activities related to the tasks of staffing, providing facilities, and developing public relations. Least uncertainty was associated with the tasks of orienting new staff and providing materials—the same tasks for which frequencies of perception were highest.

Associated with their uncertainty was a lack of awareness on the part of the study participants regarding services regularly performed by library supervisors. Comments with which participants accompanied their responses on the study questionnaire are indicative of this lack:

"I've been so busy in the library that I've never thought about what the supervisor was or was not doing. I've tended to take him for granted. . . ."

"I am late in returning this questionnaire. Before I could respond to all the items I had to find out what the library supervisor in our county does."

"I am amazed at the scope of a school library supervisor's responsibilities!"

Meeting part of the library supervisor's activities for the first time on the study questionnaire may have prompted some study participants to add them to their expectations for his role but not to their perceptions of its fulfillment.

The need for adequate staff, time, and budget may also have widened, for the library supervisor, the distance between "Do" and "Should." This possibility is suggested by comments with which librarians and their supervisors frequently concluded the study questionnaire. The following comments are typical:

"With shortage of librarians and no clerical help, the supervisor goes to schools without full-time librarians and does any work that is needed. I haven't swept or dusted yet, but may any day—it's needed!"

"It is physically impossible to do all that must be done, particularly in those areas where county supervision is new. My supervisor, however, accomplishes tasks in amounts and quality that startle me."

"With adequate personnel and budget, our 'Do's' could come much closer to our 'Should's.'"

Whatever the reasons for its magnitude, the distance from "Do" to "Should" cannot be ignored without serious consequences. Satis-

faction with a supervisor's leadership is known to depend upon convergence of the expectations others hold for his role and their perceptions of expectation-fulfillment. As a determinant of leadership effectiveness, this convergence often exceeds in importance actual competencies which the supervisor displays. Unless he can anticipate successfully the expectations held by people in positions related or "referent" to his, the supervisor will have little success in helping them play their roles successfully. Not only the supervisor but the objectives and activities of the school system are apt to be rejected should he fail to live up to the expectations held for his role. It is, accordingly, the responsibility of the library supervisor to cultivate perceptions congruent with these expectations and so hold to a minimum the distance from "*Do*" to "*Should.*"

Cultivation of perceptions congruent with expectations for his role implies for the school library supervisor a clear definition of what those expectations are. Such a definition might well begin with an up-to-date job description that is: (a) cooperatively planned and fully shared with personnel in positions referent to that of the library supervisor; and (b) frequently reviewed to keep it consistent with currently felt needs.

Despite its obvious importance both to the library supervisor and to his co-workers, a written description of his responsibilities was completely lacking in some counties participating in the study. Other counties had such a description but could not find it, while many possessed descriptions so vague or out-of-date as to be useless.

Perceptions consistent with expectations for the library supervisor's role can hardly be expected to thrive in a climate of uncertainty like that which so conspicuously surrounds them. This uncertainty could be reduced to a significant extent, in many instances, by a communication system which would provide for: (a) frequent person-to-person contact between the supervisor and those in referent positions; (b) convenient access to and exchange of needed information at all levels in the educational hierarchy; and (c) feedback adequate for checking understanding and encouraging free expression of feelings about school library problems, needs, and proposals.

Not only does lack of communication create uncertainty and misperception on the part of others but it clouds, through lack of feedback, the supervisor's own perception of his role performance.

Library supervisors share with their school systems the task of meeting the needs implicit in the wide discrepancies between expectations and their perceived fulfillment —namely, the needs for adequate time, staff, and budget. Theirs is the responsibility not only of accurately appraising these needs but of vigorously pursuing the resources to satisfy them. The effectiveness of the pursuit hinges on public awareness of what school library supervisors do and how it makes a difference in the learning opportunities of children and youth.

As specialists in the selection and use of instructional materials, school library supervisors have at their disposal the whole realm of communication media. By using these to build an image consistent with expectations for their role, school library supervisors could shorten immeasurably the distance from "*Do*" to "*Should.*" □

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