

The Supervisor's Challenge: Changing the Teacher's Work Environment

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To create a professional environment in schools, supervisors need to provide more opportunities for teachers to make choices, observe each other, discuss their work, and help beginning teachers ease into their responsibilities.

discussing problems; Goodlad (1983) to goal participation and agreement; and Rutter and others (1979) to a "concept of ethos... the well-nigh universal tendency for individuals in common circumstances to form social groups with their own rules, values, and standards of behavior" (p. 184). Where an ethos was developed around a clear educational purpose, an effective school emerged.

It should be emphasized that the more successful schools are not unduly regimented. Rather, they are characterized by good morale and the routine of people working harmoniously together as part of an efficient system that offers both supervision and support to teachers (Rutter and others, 1979, p. 184).

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Every major research study on effective schools has noted the organizational phenomenon of collective action, agreed-upon purpose, and belief in attainment. I call these manifestations of ethos "a cause beyond oneself" (Glickman, in press). Teachers of effective schools see themselves as part of the total action with an agreed-upon purpose and belief that as a group they can attain their goals. Similarly, research on ineffective schools has noted the lack of a common purpose, finding that teachers in such schools see themselves as isolated individuals, "islands unto themselves," concerned with their own students within their own four walls. To improve instruction we must give constant attention to bringing teachers together to work on common instructional concerns.

Why Most Schools Do Not Improve

There are four factors in the work environment that prevent this from happening: (1) inverse beginner responsibilities, (2) invisibility and isolation, (3) lack of professional dialogue, and (4) restricted choice.

Inverse Beginner Responsibilities. We educators tend to keep the embarrassment of blatant unprofessionalism to ourselves. The truth is that we usually give our newest and least experienced teachers the most difficult jobs in our schools. As a principal and consultant to schools, I am aware that when a teacher resigns, the remaining teachers often descend upon the classroom and remove any materials, equipment, or furniture of value and replace them with their discards. The new teacher enters a classroom equipped with leftovers. In addition, administrators often place the most difficult and lowest achieving students

Many state legislatures are in the midst of proposing or implementing such reforms as higher educational standards for prospective teachers; salaries that are competitive with industry; 11-month contracts; career ladders; and incentives, such as grants and loans, to attract outstanding students to teaching.

All of these reforms are worthy in that they strive to reward teachers with career advancement and higher salaries and status. Yet simply to attract and reward capable and sensitive teachers by improving external conditions will not be enough. Those of us who are familiar with the everyday life of teachers and schools know that unless the "place called school" becomes a professional work environment for teachers, we probably will not improve the situation. We will continue to lose good teachers, and those who remain will still have little incentive to excel.

Supervisors, department heads, instructional lead teachers, and principals must take on the difficult task of changing those characteristics of the teaching environment that stifle the improvement of instruction. Their best resource in this effort is our rapidly accumulating knowledge about the characteristics of schools that are effective.

A Cause Beyond Oneself

The research on effective schools is well known. Instead of recapitulating the specific findings of each study, let's look at what they have in common. They all refer to a particular type of social organization. Edmonds (1979) referred to a climate of expectations; Brookover (1979) to teachers' expectations that students can learn; Little (1982) to collective action and common terminology used by teachers in

with the new teacher. New teachers, therefore, are left with the most demanding students in the most poorly supplied classrooms. Meanwhile, teachers with experience have the inverse situation—the least demanding students in the best equipped classrooms. The message to beginning teachers is, "Welcome to teaching. Let's see if you can make it." This professional environment is hardly conducive to support and sharing. If new teachers do make it, they pass their initiation rites onto the next group of beginners.

Invisibility and Isolation. Although public schools supposedly have evolved from the one-room schoolhouse, it still exists every couple of yards down the school corridor. Teachers have their own students, their own rooms, their own instructional programs. Basically, teachers can close off their classrooms from other teachers and supervisors. Other than being observed a few times a year, most teachers are not viewed in the act of teaching, nor do they view others. It is remarkable that teachers can work in the same building on the same common task (instruction) with the same clientele (students) with virtually no knowledge of what other teachers are doing. How can teachers possibly know how they are complementing, reinforcing, or negating each other's instruction?

Lack of Professional Dialogue. Since most classrooms are closed from one another, teachers do not engage in much professional dialogue. DeSanctis and Blumberg (1979) found that professional talk among teachers usually lasts less than two minutes. Teachers have few opportunities to speak with each other, and when they do, it is usually when passing in the hall or during a break in the teachers

lounge. Such dialogue is frequently of a social and nonprofessional nature. Teachers spend an overwhelming amount of their time speaking to students and socializing with each other but not solving instructional problems. Rarely do supervisors engage teachers in mutual problem solving.

Restricted Choice. Finally, teachers have little choice over their working lives, which are often bureaucratic and restricted (Lortie, 1975). Schedules are set, teachers are told what they will teach and when they will teach. Minimum competencies, mandated curriculums, and externally developed policies restrict their choices. Goodlad (1984) found that teachers have virtu-

ally no involvement in schoolwide decisions.

Reviewing some of the obstacles of instructional improvement, Goodlad made pertinent observations about the work environment of teachers:

In general the practicing teacher—to the degree we can generalize from our findings—functions in a context where the beliefs and expectations are those of a professional but where the realities tend to constrain, likening actual practice more to a trade. It undoubtedly is too late to turn back the clock with respect to embellishing teaching with the trappings of a profession. But a question arises as to whether the circumstances of teaching can be made conducive to developing in all teachers the behavior a profession entails. By its very nature a profession involves both considerable autonomy in decision making and



knowledge and skills developed before entry and then honed in practice. The teachers in our sample, on the whole, went into teaching because of these inherent professional values. However, they encountered in school many realities not conducive to professional growth (Goodlad, 1984, pp. 193-194).

At last, we have the real challenge to supervisors. To improve instruction, we must reshape the work environment of teachers into one that is conducive to reflective and collective dialogue among staff members who are given power to act upon their decisions.

Removing the Obstacles

All supervisors must assess their own school situation, staff members, and community to determine how to approach the problem. I offer the following suggestions for moving teachers from individualistic and fragmented actions toward a "cause beyond oneself."

Gradually increase the responsibilities of beginning teachers:

- Plan with experienced teachers ways to make the first year of teaching a situation of lessened responsibilities, involving peer support and help in easing the beginner into the profession.

- Plan a "buddy system" of matching experienced teachers with beginning teachers so that the beginner has someone to turn to for information and help.

Increase visibility among teachers:

- Encourage teachers to visit each other and, therefore, find out what others are doing. The visited teacher can ask the visiting teacher to observe and give feedback on particular classroom concerns.

- Hold after-school meetings in different rooms where teachers are asked to defend the what and how of their instruction. Barth (1980) wrote of how teachers in his school presented their instructional plans to each other. They continued the intellectual task of asking, "In which ways does my teaching support yours, and in which ways does my teaching contradict what you are trying to do?" Teachers can see more easily where the curriculum inconsistencies exist from teacher to teacher and grade level to grade level.

Increase professional dialogue among teachers:

"The truth is that we usually give our newest and least experienced teachers the most difficult jobs in our schools."

- Provide time for professional talk among teachers during faculty meetings. Give teachers time to propose plans for what *they can do* to change current problems. Keep talk focused on actions the staff can control.

- Invite teachers to help interview teacher candidates. This involvement not only gives recognition to their experience but also enables them to examine and explain the workings of their school to outsiders. The need to articulate school purpose becomes apparent when a candidate asks, "What is it like to teach here?"

Increase teachers' professional choices:

- Encourage teachers to work in groups where they can control part of their own teaching schedules, materials, and curriculum. Teachers across grades or subjects can be grouped together and given complete responsibility for planning some activities for the year. Whether the work involves a special extracurricular project, a study group on discipline, or curriculum changes, the power to implement as a group can help build collective action.

- Continually ask staff members to think about an active philosophy, not a theoretical philosophy. What is the purpose of the school? Is the purpose academic achievement on tests or is it other ways of knowing? Do we value memorization and recitation or experimentation and inquisitiveness? Do we want students to become aware of self-values? Do we want conformity or autonomy? Or do we want to do everything? These are not pie-in-the-sky

questions; the research on effective schools has shown that faculty members in effective schools clearly know their priorities no matter how narrow or broad they may be, and that the use of their human and fiscal energy clearly reflects those priorities. Clarity does not occur by itself. It occurs when we ask teachers, "What do you want our students to become? What do you do in your class? What do we do in the school that either supports or negates those goals?"

The challenge is clear: supervisors have to move forcefully to eliminate factors in the school environment that impede improvement and replace them with collective action—"a cause beyond oneself." □

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