WHERE WE CAME FROM:
NOTES ON SUPERVISION IN THE 1840s

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In a recent article in *Educational Leadership*, Laurel N. Tanner wrote that educators who think about and work in curriculum lack a historical perspective of their field. This absence of a sense of curriculum history, she noted, has led to "recycling old educational models and treating them as new." Tanner also commented that the curriculum field "fails to learn from its past and consequently repeats its failures."

This paper, too, is concerned with a part of the history of education—in this case, the focus is on supervision—but with a somewhat different aim in mind. That is, I write not so much with the idea that a brief study into the history of supervision will provide guidelines for the future, but with the more modest aim of suggesting that to learn something of the history of our craft is simply an enriching personal and professional experience. It was for me.

The study itself is a selective description and analysis of the thoughts, evidenced by their language in their annual reports, of school supervisors in the early days of the common schools in New York State. The data source was the *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools of the State of New York* (1845). This volume included the reports of the superintendents of New York's 59 counties.

The superintendent's role has changed markedly from what it was in 1845, when county superintendents were circuit riding supervisors. And though their reports dealt with such matters as attendance figures and the physical condition of school buildings, for example, by far the bulk of their concern dealt with matters educational.

It is also important to understand that though the common school system had been established by law in 1821 in New York, schooling was not compulsory. Further, though some state monies were earmarked for education,

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1Laurel N. Tanner, "Curriculum History and Educational Leadership." *Educational Leadership* 41 (November 1983) 38

parents who wanted to send their children to school had to pay a fee that was dependent on the frequency of their attendance. The impact of all this on the role of superintendents was that, if one can judge by what they wrote, a good part of what they did was evangelical. The future of this country and its republican form of government, as they saw it, were intimately connected with the schools. It would only be through their success and popularization that the country would have an educated populace capable of making informed decisions and learning the skills necessary for productive adult life. Indeed, the state superintendent said that "On the flourishing condition of our schools repose the hopes of the present and the destinies of the future" (p. 17), and "The only salvation for the republic is to be sought for in our schools" (p. 19). Failing to develop a viable and widespread school system would result, the implication was clear, in the replication in this country of the condition of the South American republics that "have fallen into revolutionary decrepitude, and degenerated into military despotisms..." (p. 18). Superintendents/supervisors were, if nothing else, missionaries.

Though a few of the reports were rather matter of fact (for example, dealing mainly with the number of school visitations and school houses in their county and their condition), most were rich in detail as the superintendents took the opportunity to discourse on matters that seemed near and dear to their hearts. This paper focuses on several of these matters as one means of informing us about the history of thought and action that is connected with the work that many of us engage in today. The image of our supervisory ancestors that emerges, though limited, should be sufficient to give us some sense of our common heritage.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

There is little doubt that the county superintendents agreed with their state superintendent concerning the importance of education and the value of teachers and teaching. On the value of education, for example, a common theme is represented by the following: "Under other and less favored forms of government, where the State makes no provision for the education of the mass, the evils resulting from bloated, concentrated wealth, and the distinctions created by the conferring of titles, are felt with fearful oppression" (p. 217). Without a good system of public schools, the thinking went, the great experiment in republican government that was America, where each person had the opportunity to be what he or she could be, would degenerate. Wealth would be concentrated in the hands of a few, and such a concentration of wealth "enables its possessor to monopolize intellectual attainment, and robs the mass of motive power to effort" (p. 217). Public schools were the antidote to this possibility. Or, as was put by another superintendent, "As is the character of the schools, so will be the character of the nation" (p. 118).

The idea of the relationship between the character of the schools and that of the nation was transferred to the local school level. A number of the
reports included the phrase "so goes the teacher, so goes the school." And to this idea was added: "As the teacher, so the school," has already passed into proverb, to which I will add, "As the school, so the neighborhood," for, in my peregrinations through the county, where I have found a well constructed, well finished school house, and a good school kept therein, there I found an enlightened, sober, moral, and religious community, and vice versa (p. 415).

The general substance and tone of these comments are repeated numerous times. There is a clear salvationist hue to them but, on occasion, a practical side as well. The man quoted above, for example, recounted an experience of a person who wanted to buy a farm in a particular community. When he inquired into and found the condition of the local school to be less than desirable, he said, "I would not take the farm as a gift" (p. 415).

Much as the development of good schools was seen as central to the development of the local community and the nation itself, so was the position of teacher held in high esteem by the supervisors. Witness the colorful language in the following comment:

"the office of teacher, which I am bold to affirm, without fear of contradiction, is of more importance than any other in the commonwealth—for on it, in great measure, the present and future happiness of the human race depends" (p. 125).

One is immediately struck by the language. Surely, supervisors in today’s schools would not write in a similar tone even if they had similar feelings. Evidently, the culture of the 1840s permitted it much as that of the 1980s might discourage it. It may be that we are worse off for the change.

Not all of the superintendents, of course, wrote in such emotional terms. But most, through one means or another, communicated an almost religious sense of mission that they attached to their job and with which they viewed the role of the teacher. They seemed to see themselves engaged in a crusade, though none of them used that word. And they also seemed to have little doubt that the crusade would be a successful one, a position that recently has been called somewhat into question.

In the remainder of this paper, I give attention to five categories of thought that seemed to be of major concern to these supervisors and that appear to be concerns in today’s world of education. It may seem a little odd that such current concerns were also those of our supervisory ancestors, but such is precisely the case. And this fact should give us cause to think about the nature of the enterprise in which, in one way or another, we are all engaged. That is, it may be the root nature of this enterprise is such that the classes of problems it generates are absolutely enduring.

ON THE STATUS OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR TEACHING

Though there is little doubt of the depth of commitment of the superintendents to the idea that the efficacy of the schools depended on the quality...
of teachers, their view of the school community's commitment to providing
good teachers did not parallel their own. Over and over again they bemoaned,
and sometimes verbally flogged, the citizenry for its unwillingness to provide
adequate financial support for teachers. For example:

Good teaching and education have a price in public estimation, and if they cost more
than so many dollars, and so many cents, they can be dispensed with. The cheap teacher
is demanded, but he is required to be a good one (p 110).

No encouragement had been held out to teachers to excel at their profession. Indeed,
so low was the calling considered, that few would enter upon its duties but from
necessity, and remain in it no longer than a favorable opportunity presented to make
their escape. (p 88)

But so long as the compensation for teaching but little if any exceeds that for ordinary
day labor, and often falls short of mechanics wages, what possible degree of improve-
ment can be expected? (p 216)

It seems as though we are dealing with the echoes of these comments
today. If through some mysterious process one of these superintendents could
read about the financial status of teachers in 1984, he probably would say,
"Welcome to the club." There are differences, of course In 1845, the school
system was abuilding. The idea that the future of the country was directly
related to the power of schooling was not one that was widely shared. The
educational expectations of parents for their children were modest, to say the
least. Teachers and teaching seemed not to be held in high repute by the
community, but the reasons were quite different from what we are experi-
encing today. Anybody could be a teacher and thus, it appears, the value that
the market placed on teachers was also low Many potentially good teachers
could not be attracted to the field and for those who were, the monetary
rewards of other lines of work proved enticing.

In 1984 the system of schooling is no longer abuilding in the way our
supervisors wrote about it. Some people say, indeed, that it has been built,
has flourished, and is now in the process of decay. The expectations of parents
in the 1980s for their children in school are by no means modest. Further,
though it may have been that the teachers of 1845 were better educated than
many or most of their pupils' parents, the same general point cannot be made
of the teachers of today's children. One might say, in point of fact, that the
very success of the schools is in someway responsible for the discontent and,
perhaps, disenchantment that many of today's parents apparently feel toward
the schools. The schools have created a better educated citizenry and helped
increase its expectations about the outcomes of schooling. In many commu-
nities large numbers of parents are better than or at least equally as well
educated as the teachers Thus, they, like parents of the mid-1800s may tend
to hold teachers in low esteem but for different reasons.

All this makes for interesting speculation. Perhaps of more interest, though,
is that the supervisors of almost a century and a half ago sensed that if a
community wanted to have good teachers and good schools, there would
have to be a change in that community's value structure, which would be
followed by a change in the priorities of resource allocation. If the reader has a sense of déjà vu, it is appropriate.

ON TEACHERS

The superintendents wrote at some length concerning teachers, their qualifications, and their evaluation. Their comments were based on the fact that they were empowered to grant teaching licenses of the first, second, and third class. For example:

Of the first class of teachers, I am happy to say that they are an honor to the profession in which they are engaged. To tell one of the secrets of their success, they endeavor to make the interest of their pupils their interest. Of the second class possess all the literacy qualifications necessary, but are wanting in that all essential quality, energy, which is so indispensable in conducting the exercises in the school room, and giving to them that life and animation so desirable. Of the third class, I would that they were not numbered among the teachers, for they are totally unfit for the business in which they are employed. They are drones, and spend their time in the school room barely to draw their pay. They hang like an incubus upon the schools in which they are employed. (pp. 121-122)

Among the first class are those who are thoroughly educated in the branches of science they are required to teach, and who are well skilled in the art of disciplining and governing a school. Every effort of theirs seems to be aimed to the accomplishment of the great objects of simplifying and adapting instruction to the capacities and understandings of their pupils. Another class are not only superficial in their attainments, and unacquainted with the practical operations of the school room, but they are averse to the business of teaching. They seem to despise the society of children. There is another class, whose literary acquirements may be considered respectable, but who do not possess an aptness to teach. (p. 186)

Of the first class I would say but little, as "those only that are sick, need the physician." They teach their pupils to think for themselves, they learn [sic] them that an education involves something more than a mere knowledge of stereotyped books. The second class a very respectable class of teachers, when we forget that any modern improvements have been made in the science of teaching. They teach more words than ideas. The third class ... are very ordinary indeed. I apprehend they might find a much more congenial sphere of action than that which the school room opens. The fourth class are decidedly bad teachers, actually cramming the mind with error (pp. 74-79).

Certainly by current practice, the notion of classifying teachers into three or four classes in what seems to be an offhand manner is a primitive one. On careful reading, though, some thoughts surface that suggest that if the system is primitive and simplistic, its ingredients contain a sensitivity to the work of the teacher that may well symbolize enduring truths about that work. Note, for example, the phrases used to describe teachers of the "first class"

- "...to tell one of the secrets of their success, they endeavor to make the interest of their pupils their interest."
- "simplifying and adapting instruction to the capacities and understandings of their pupils."
...they teach their pupils to think for themselves; they learn [sic] them that an education involves something more than a mere knowledge of stereotyped books...

What we appear to have here are some early, insightful, and probably untutored notions about what good teachers do. "Untutored" is used advisedly. These supervisors were appointed, apparently, by the county legislative body. No comment is made in the Report about qualifications for such an appointment. Presumably they had been teachers at one time, but there is no statement in the Report that this was a criterion. Part of their job involved the granting and withdrawing of teacher certification. All this notwithstanding, they seemed to know when they were observing teachers of the "first class" and how to differentiate them from others. The teaching of ideas, for example, rather than words was important and observable. And they also seemed to know that a certain undefinable type of energy on the part of the teacher was needed in order to lend the "life" and "animation" that is needed in good learning situations. Furthermore, the language they used leaves little doubt of the distaste they felt for inept teachers or the admiration they had for good ones. It is almost refreshing to read it.

ON TEACHING METHODS

Much space in the reports was devoted to concern with what were seen to be outmoded teaching methods limited to what one might construe to be philosophy of instruction. The reports conveyed a flavor of this concern in a variety of ways:

season after season children are compelled to go to school and commit, commit, commit, and recite, recite, recite. One might be sometimes disposed to ask if common sense had, indeed, been banished from the schools and sent to dwell with the "convicts and Kangaroos" of Australia! (p. 167)

The method of instruction has become less fixed and mechanical the oral plan has become more generally introduced, and is fast removing the necessity of that dull plodding method of memorizing from books (p. 117)

the old and almost useless method of teaching everything "by rote," is fast giving way to the inductive and analytical system of instruction. Children are taught that they are intellectual beings, that they are endowed with capacities and powers of the mind, (p. 265)

The old hoop system has been in vogue generally in this county, and now prevails probably in a majority of districts. But the seeds of dissolution are in it, and it is fast disappearing. It goes without regret, and leaves none to mourn for it. Our teachers are beginning teaching instead of telling; to impress ideas and meaning, instead of loading the mind with words without meaning (p. 420)

What the supervisors were reacting to in all this was their experience of observing youngsters in school go through the rather deadening experience of committing everything to memory, giving it back to the teacher, and not knowing the meaning of it all. For example, one man wrote.
The old mechanical system of teaching, which cultivates a memory for words and leaves the reason undeveloped, is in vogue in some parts of this section of the county. Pupils are not required to think, they are not disciplined to habits of deduction, or to draw opinions from principles and facts, but are too often compelled to commit to memory lessons of which, in many instances, they have not one rational idea (p. 192).

So we come, in effect, to what today we call instructional supervision. With a vengeance, it might be added. The quality and methodology of teaching was of foremost concern to our supervisory forebears, and they expressed this concern in forceful, colorful language. Theirs was not merely a mission to spread schooling, but to spread what they conceived to be an educative experience for youngsters. Perhaps they realized that to perpetuate a system of instruction that involved little more than memorizing and reciting would mean the end of their grander dream, a society in which schools would lead the way to civility and understanding. Sending one's children to school, as was remarked earlier, was a voluntary act. And if what was happening to children in school had the effect of being a dulling experience, then community support, the lack of which the superintendents complained about, would be further diminished.

From another perspective, the concern with method speaks to much of what has occupied the minds of educators today. Note the phrase "inductive and analytical system of instruction" and the comment that "pupils are not required to think, they are not disciplined to habits of deduction, or to draw opinions from principles and facts." One may find it humorous or depressing to note that in 1983 A Nation at Risk made recommendations in the areas of English and social studies that focus on the essence of these remarks about method. Is it too much to suggest that the writers of that report may not have read their history?

ON STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Quite related to these concerns about teaching method was, of course, the critical question of how to upgrade the quality of teaching. This question was a major focus of the visits that the supervisors made to the schools in their county. Many of them seemed rather self-congratulatory about their efforts (Shades of talking with some supervisors today.) They attributed changes in instructional methodology directly to their work with teachers. For example, one of them commented:

Some of our old teachers who imagined themselves masters of their trade have recently found out their mistake. One remarked to me not long since, "I have kept school a great many winters, but now I am going to see if I cannot teach school" (p. 268)

Be that as it may, there was also a realization on the part of some of the supervisors that the one-to-one relationship with a teacher, while indeed it might be helpful, was not the most effective way to induce broad changes in
the system as far as the quality of teaching was concerned. One man made this remark:

however well qualified the county superintendents may be, too much reliance ought not to be placed upon visitation to the schools, to give method to the teacher and efficacy to his instructions. Instruction is the primary object of visitation, and I speak guardedly when I say that more instruction can be given to teachers of a town when assembled together in one day, than in as many days as there are schools, spent with teachers, amidst the business and confusion of school rooms (p 131)

So early on, then, we have a developing notion of what we call today staff development, a term that seems to have supplanted what for years has been called inservice training. Neither term, of course, was used by these early supervisors. In fact, it appears that no term was applied to the process (which, I might add, may have been just as well). Rather, the idea was that teaching could be improved by holding teachers institutes. One man put it this way:

One of the greatest defects now existing among our teachers is the want of a proper knowledge of the best systems of government and instruction. It is generally believed that "Teachers Institutes" would do much toward remedying this defect (p. 141)

This opinion was widely shared among the superintendents. Much as they had faith in the mission of the schools, they also seemed to feel that they knew what to do to improve them. And the way they interpreted their experience reinforced this faith. The following comments give testimony to this point:

Teachers Institutes for this district are being held semi-annually, and with the most happy results (p. 85)

two weeks were very pleasurably spent, and as "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," we believe that the recommendations, suggestions and instructions, given at that institute will be felt in every "nook and corner" of the county, and transmitted to unborn generations (pp 172-173)

The idea is evidently gaining ground among those entrusted with the supervision of our schools, that all who will shall have the opportunity of improving, and that those who will not, shall no longer desecrate the educational temples of our land, nor disgrace a profession which ought to be as sacred as the priesthood (pp 222-223).

Given what we know (think?) about the results of inservice or staff development programs in school today—primarily, a lack of any generalized data concerning their efficacy—one may be pardoned for smiling a bit at both the optimism and effusiveness of these comments. Smiles aside, though, what the supervisor had to say about teachers institutes was both serious and revealing. There was a real and deep concern about improving the quality of teaching. "Our teachers need teaching" was the way one man put it (p 194). And certainly, this must have been the case.

What is perhaps most to the point, though, is the rather unbounded optimism about the development of ways and means to do things better. Perhaps these men were deluding themselves, perhaps not. Or perhaps what we see is part of the American way of seeing life: if we have a problem, we
also have the know-how, resources, and skills to solve it. We are rational beings, seems to be the thought, and thus we will know and do what is best

ON CURRICULUM

Matters of curriculum did not seem to be a central interest of our early supervisors. For the most part they confined themselves to reporting the list of subjects taught, but the list itself was frequently a prodigious one. A girl of 12 is reported to have told her father, to his utter amazement, of "thirteen different studies, which she was then pursuing" (p. 65). And one man reported:

The branches usually taught in our schools comprise the ordinary English branches, including spelling, reading, defining, geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar, besides these, algebra, surveying, geometry, natural philosophy, chemistry, botany, physiology, book-keeping, and Latin are taught in some of them (p. 357)

He was not, incidentally, particularly pleased with all this and went on to say:

Let the elementary branches be thoroughly taught in our common schools, let the pupils be made accurate spellers, good readers, and good grammarians, let a practical and thorough knowledge of arithmetic be imparted, also, that of geography and the history of their own country (p. 357)

The Back-to-Basics movement seems indeed to have a long history. There was one curricular innovation, though, that seemed to be taking the common schools of New York by storm. Time and again the supervisors referred to the introduction of "vocal music" into the school day. It was seen in the most positive terms imaginable:

An exercise so delightful, and so well calculated to animate the whole school, as that of singing . . . will unquestionably soon become one of the leading and most prominent exercises in school (p. 182)

The practice of vocal music in school affords a pleasing relaxation of the youthful mind, and tends to cultivate in children kind and tender feelings for each other (p. 188)

Those schools in which it has been introduced seem to be more easily governed, and the mind being made cheerful, seems to be more susceptible to improvement (p. 320)

One supervisor suggested that the introduction of vocal music, which had come up against parental resistance in a community, could be used effectively to combat tardiness if the teacher would schedule it half an hour before the official start of the school day. Noting that there were few complaints about pupils being late to school where such a schedule existed, he said:

The reason is obvious. Children all like to sing, and I have known them to weep as though their little hearts would break, when they have been detained at home beyond the singing hour, and prevented from taking part in this exercise (p. 273)

We may find ourselves somewhat amused at the way these men wrote about vocal music and the benefits that would accrue to those schools in
which it was practiced. In the light of today's school world, their words seem naive. Simply a reaction of amusement, though, misses the point for at least two reasons. First, what gets communicated along with the flowery and somewhat panacea-like language is the familiar intense commitment to the mission of the schools. The innovation of vocal singing seemed to be seen as something that would help further the crusade. Not only would it make school more enjoyable for pupils, but it would also serve as a vehicle for getting more community support. Parents enjoyed hearing their children sing at the county "school celebrations" that were coming into vogue—times at which teachers and youngsters were put on public display, so to speak, in order to demonstrate what had been learned in school.

There is a second, perhaps more subtle, reason for treating the remarks about vocal singing with more than amusement. In a way, they foreshadow the reactions to curricular and structural innovations that school people (or some of them) have had through the years down to the current day. We need no reminding to know that, for example, such things as the "new math," team-teaching, open schools, "Science—A Process Approach," and even clinical supervision have been hailed by their proponents as the ultimate answer to general or specific school problems. And we need no reminding to know that, currently, one of the new, ultimate answers is to lengthen the school year. Somehow, it seems that when problems of education and the schools arise, the search for solution seems to focus on certitude rather than provisionalism, perfection rather than narrowing the margin of error. Such searches, of course, are always doomed to failure. Whether this perfection-orientation is a function of the kind of people we are—a symptom of our frustration, unrealistic expectations of the school as an institution, or whatever—is not the point. What is the point, though, is that we need to look at where we came from if for no other reason than to start to understand something about ourselves, and where we are today.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What, then, is to be learned from this brief journey backward in time? For some, it may be a source of comfort to learn that the types of problems with which we deal today were also being dealt with in the early days of the public schools. For others, this same insight may prove upsetting. Has nothing changed?

Neither of these reactions, however, strikes me as being really important. Rather, to learn about the thoughts and actions of people who years ago performed the job with which we claim to be concerned today is simply an intellectually enriching experience. Knowing about these thoughts and actions will not make one a more effective supervisor, nor will not knowing make one less effective. But knowing might make life more fun.

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