Supervision of the marginal teacher

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Abstract
Much of today's rhetoric for stemming the "rising tide of mediocrity" in American education has focused on the unsatisfactory performance of America's teachers (Sweeney and Manatt, 1984). Yet, too often the efforts of the nation's very able teachers are overshadowed by the poor performances of a relatively small number of incompetent classroom teachers. The accomplishments of the competent majority will continue to be overlooked and unappreciated unless principals deal directly with unsatisfactory teachers (Bridges, 1985). What we need is a reliable and accurate method for identifying teachers who are not performing up to standard and a systematic process for helping them improve (Sweeney and Manatt, 1984).
Supervision of the Marginal Teacher

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
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May, 1989
This Research Paper by: MICHAEL D. HALUSKA

Entitled: SUPERVISION OF THE MARGINAL TEACHER

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

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Much of today's rhetoric for stemming the "rising tide of mediocrity" in American education has focused on the unsatisfactory performance of America's teachers (Sweeney and Manatt, 1984). Yet, too often the efforts of the nation's very able teachers are overshadowed by the poor performances of a relatively small number of incompetent classroom teachers. The accomplishments of the competent majority will continue to be overlooked and unappreciated unless principals deal directly with unsatisfactory teachers (Bridges, 1985). What we need is a reliable and accurate method for identifying teachers who are not performing up to standard and a systematic process for helping them improve (Sweeney and Manatt, 1984).

Call it what you will, the marginal or incompetent teacher is not easy to define. Only two states have supplied definitions and neither the American Federation of Teachers nor the National Education Association has adopted an organizational stand on the meaning of incompetence (Bridges, 1985). Therefore, the burden of defining the term incompetence has fallen on school administrators (Munnelly, 1979).

Many authors have made an effort to define the marginal, or incompetent, teacher. Sweeney and Manatt (1984) have used data
obtained from more than 750 principals to provide a portrait of the marginal teacher. The principals observe that the marginal teacher is one who appears to have sufficient command of subject matter but whose lack of classroom management skills gets in the way of student learning. Put more bluntly, the marginal teacher often butchers a lesson, failing to effectively check for understanding, use modeling appropriately, or attend to student motivation. They also observed two affective characteristics of note: tacit hostility toward supervision and "up and down" personalities.

Other definitions saw incompetence as irreparable harm done to students (Dolgin, 1981); a lack of sensitivity toward both children and teaching (Palker, 1980); or those who had demonstrated their inability to meet minimum standards of performance over a number of years (Kelleher, 1985). On the other hand, effective teachers are those whose students show statistically significant gains on achievement tests (Ellis, 1984).

According to Bridges (1985), when administrators define incompetence, they tend to think of it in terms of failure, and the failure takes one or more of the following forms:

a. Technical failure -- The teacher's expertise falls short of what the task requires.
b. Bureaucratic failure -- The teacher fails to comply with school/district rules and regulations or directives of superiors.

c. Ethical failure -- The teacher fails to conform to standards of conduct presumably applicable to members of the teaching profession.

d. Productive failure -- The teacher fails to obtain certain desirable results in the classroom, such as academic progress in the classroom.

e. Personal failure -- The teacher lacks certain attributes deemed instrumental in teaching. These include poor judgement, emotional instability, lack of self-control, and insufficient strength to withstand the rigors of teaching.

Since the first task of the principal is to determine whether managerial or organizational shortcomings may be contributing to the teacher's difficulties in the classroom, the principal must pinpoint the reason or combination of reasons for the substandard performance. Specifically, the administrator must ascertain whether the difficulties are due to a lack of skill or a lack of effort by the teacher (Bridges, 1985).

However, teachers are often frustrated with the typical evaluation process that has an administrator "making the rounds" once or twice a year observing all and completing some kind of
assessment instrument that really has little impact on their becoming better educators. This inspection style of evaluation leaves both teacher and administrator frustrated (Rothberg, 1979). As a result, teachers seldom respect principals as experts on classroom practice or as skilled classroom observers, and in the absence of principal credibility, teachers consider the evaluation illegitimate as a commentary on their performance and ignore its findings (McLaughlin, 1984).

Evaluation is a necessity to draw the line between satisfactory and unsatisfactory performance in the classroom (Sweeney and Manatt, 1984). But teachers are unique individuals. They bring to the school environment a diversity of talents and experiences. That is why Glatthorn and Shields (1983) believe in "differentiated supervision" as a way of providing different kinds of supervisory support for teachers with different needs. Some teachers can profit from working with colleagues. Others can work on their own in a self-directed model, while still others need the intensive support of the clinical supervision model.

The process whereby pairs or teams of teachers work together for their mutual improvement, chiefly through observing each other's classes and discussing those observations, has been commonly called peer supervision or collegial supervision.
Glatthorn and Shields (1983) use the term "collaborative professional development" because many teachers react negatively to any term using the word supervision.

Advocates of the plan claim several advantages for peer supervision as an alternative. First, it is possible that working with peers may be the key to reducing anxiety about supervision since colleagues are not perceived as a threat in the ways that administrators are (McGee and Eaker, 1977). Secondly, teachers valued the approach because it enabled them to work on problems that they perceived as important — not ones that some administrator had identified (Ellis, Smith, and Abbott, 1979). Lastly, teachers are more likely to be receptive to suggestions from colleagues who are more aware of the day-to-day demands of teaching than are administrators or supervisors (Haefle, 1980).

There are also those teachers who can profit from an experience in self-directed development. They are mature teachers, autonomous and self-motivated, who are highly competent in the classroom (Glatthorn and Shields, 1983).

Teacher self-improvement is the continuous process of taking an honest and open look at one's performance, assessing one's strengths as well as areas where improvement is needed, and then developing a personal plan for initiating and evaluating changes in those areas where improvement is needed (Iwanicki and
McEachern, 1983). The self-improvement activities can be planned individually, or on an institutional basis. However, the most powerful of the two is a plan prescribed by the individual educator because it is unique to personal needs (Olivero, 1976).

Clinical supervision is an intensive form of supervision which focuses on the improvement of teaching skills and can best be provided to beginning teachers and to experienced teachers who are encountering serious instructional problems. Restricting clinical supervision to those who most need it will usually mean that the supervisor can focus his or her efforts on perhaps ten percent of the faculty, a manageable number even when the time-consuming clinical approach is used (Glatthorn and Shields, 1983).

The purpose of clinical supervision is to help the teacher improve professional skills through the use of a four-step plan. The first step involves the pre-observation conference, which amounts to a dialogue between the teacher and the supervisor. It gives the two parties an opportunity to talk about objectives and activities and it enables both teacher and supervisor to confer as professional peers, exchanging ideas about what is to happen -- not judging what has already taken place (Glatthorn and Shields, 1983).
The second step is the actual observation. The notes taken by the supervisor are to be complete and focus on the important teaching and learning transactions: the teacher's objectives, the teacher's instructional behaviors, and the pupils' responses (Glatthorn and Shields, 1983).

Step three involves the analysis of the observation. The notes are reviewed carefully, looking for patterns of recurring teacher and pupil behaviors (Glatthorn and Shields, 1983). A common error, however, is the tendency to attempt to deal with every problem observed in the lesson. A teacher experiencing problems is often overloaded with criticism and may see the situation as hopeless. Therefore, the wise supervisor selects those areas which are most important and those which the teacher has the best chance of improving (Sweeney, 1983).

James Sweeney (1983) sees the fourth step, the post-observation conference, as the critical component in the clinical supervision model. Its goal is to help teachers become more effective in the classroom. Skillful supervisors are able to communicate that they are trying to do something for teachers rather than to them. An essential to this endeavor is the climate of the conference. Teachers' perceptions affect their behavior, so Sweeney recommends holding the conference in the
teacher's room or at a neutral site to remove the shadow of authority cast by "the office."

There are, however, two reasons why it seems unwise to provide clinical supervision to all teachers. The first one is a practical one: there is just not enough time. Principals feel that the greatest problem in providing supervision is the lack of time for classroom visitation and conference (Delahanty, 1976). Yet, the clinical model can be modified by omitting the planning conference and getting a written copy of the teacher's plan. The observation, analysis, and post-observation can then be done in the same day (Glatthorn and Shields, 1983).

The second reason for not providing clinical supervision to all is that all teachers do not need it. While all teachers can profit from feedback, a successful teacher may not require the intensive help of clinical supervision (Barth, 1979).

Whatever the method of evaluation, the key is effectiveness. To be effective, a supervisory system must provide the teacher with time and help to get better and the school organization with sufficient data in addition to a process for implementing personnel decisions (Sweeney and Manatt, 1984).

Once the staff has been evaluated and teachers have been deemed marginal, the supervisor must ask himself/herself if remediation is really worth the effort. Managing the incompetent
teacher is a taxing activity and principals may pay a high psychological price for dealing forthrightly with the unsatisfactory teacher (Bridges, 1985). However, if a faculty member is found to be incompetent, Sweeney and Manatt (1984) suggest the supervisor has three choices: (a) forget it, and abrogate your responsibility; (b) begin dismissal procedures, and abrogate your commitment to ethical, procedural, and substantive due process; or (c) turn to intensive assistance, and fulfill your responsibility by providing the teacher with the time and help to improve.

Principals need a variety of resources to manage incompetent teachers. Time and remedial assistance are the most important resources a principal will need. Without these resources, even the most courageous and capable principal will be unable to remediate incompetent teachers (Bridges, 1985).

Time is an especially acute problem in evaluation. Ideally, the superintendent and board of education should establish priorities among the job descriptions of principals. If dealing with unsatisfactory teachers represents a high priority in the district, principals can knowingly devote greater attention to this responsibility (Bridges, 1985).

Principals also need access to remedial assistance. Remediation of the incompetent teacher requires an inordinate
amount of time, energy, and expertise. The district can supply
this assistance through a variety of mechanisms --
self-instructional materials, inservice training, master
teachers, and discretionary funds to hire consultants who have
expertise in dealing with particular types of teacher
shortcomings (Bridges, 1985).

Remediation attempts may follow different avenues, but all
have the goal of improving the teacher's performance as opposed
to dismissal or resignation. Pfeifer (1986) states that the
Santa Clara (California) Unified School District uses the
remediation process as the backbone of their evaluation system.
If selected for remediation, the teacher and Assistant
Superintendent for Personnel mutually select two or three
teachers who agree to act as a remediation team. These
individuals have access to any district resources they deem
necessary to assist them including workshops, training materials,
and substitute days for observation and conferencing. At the end
of the 60 day remediation period, the team recommends the
teacher's continued employment or dismissal.

Sweeney and Manatt (1984) recommend the Intensive Assistance
Program to help marginal teachers improve sufficiently to meet
district standards. The first step in the process is to provide
frequent formal observations. The teacher needs to know that there is concern and that the principal is willing to help.

Step two is to put in place the intensive assistance team. Its primary function is to provide the teacher and principal with support and assistance. The "best" team has three or four staff members who are willing and able to help a teacher grow. Two guidelines anchor the activity: (a) the team members provide assistance; the principal is the prime evaluator and decision maker; and (b) the team is there to provide help, not evidence.

During the intensive assistance period several activities must be carefully monitored. The principal must coordinate meetings with the teacher and the team. They provide the teacher with a written evaluation of his/her progress.

Once the intensive assistance period is over, the principal must choose from three options. The first is to discontinue the intensive assistance if the teacher is performing in an acceptable manner. The second is to continue intensive assistance if the performance is up to standard but still needs considerable reinforcement. Third, if the teacher has not reached the mark, the principal must consider dismissal.

If classroom difficulties are due to a lack of skill, the principal needs to use multiple types of remediation. Skill deficiencies often involve the learning of complex behaviors and
the ability to integrate these behaviors into a long-established behavior pattern (Bridges, 1985).

Three types of remediation are essential to remedying skill deficiencies. First, the teacher should receive the information and knowledge which are relevant to the skills which are lacking. Second, the teacher should be given the opportunity to observe examples of a teaching performance that exemplifies key behaviors and skills. Finally, the teacher should have the opportunity to try out the new behavior or skill in a restricted environment before attempting to incorporate the practice into the classroom (Bridges and Groves, 1984).

The final example of a remediation process comes from the staff development program used in the Newport News (Virginia) Public Schools. The model is similar to the clinical supervision model previously discussed. The essential components of that process are:

a. Observe the lesson and record the lesson anecdotally, being careful to note the teacher behavior and student response. Notetaking is encouraged so that every exchange can be recorded.

b. Label all the parts of the lesson (based on the Hunter model).
c. Analyze the anecdotal record for strengths and weaknesses in the teaching act.

d. Prioritize strengths and weaknesses for the conference.

e. Plan the conference.

f. Conduct the conference. Involve the teacher in the analysis of the lesson.

g. Follow up. At the close of the conference, clearly establish the area(s) in which the teacher should strive for growth. Set a reasonable time to allow for practice and then follow up with another observation and conference (Cox, 1982).

The Newport model incorporates the Glatthorn and Shields (1983) suggestion of omitting the planning conference and completing the observation, analysis, and post-observation phases in one day. However, the remediation practice lacks a definite course to follow. To strengthen the program, the Intensive Assistance Program recommended by Sweeney and Manatt (1984) would give a specific course to follow in remediating the marginal teacher.

Conclusion

Provided are three models for supervision and four examples giving solutions for remediation of the marginal teacher. Each can be adapted to fit the particular need or style of an administrator. The essential point is that the principal be
well-trained and familiar with at least one sound system of classroom management (Klitgaard, 1987).

Teachers respect knowledge and attempts at assistance. If the initial attempts at assistance are carefully chosen to ensure success, teachers will be more receptive to attempts to help them improve the delivery of instruction (Klitgaard, 1987).
References

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