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Thomas P. Mossman
University of Northern Iowa

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Helping teachers teach: The principal's role

Abstract

Those individuals in any way connected with education understand the pressures being placed upon them by outside forces to improve the product they offer. Perhaps no one individual understands the push for improvement more than the building principal. If a principal is to improve the education offered in his building he must eventually look to his teachers as the ultimate key to that improvement (Boyer, 1986). As Fleming stated in 1986, if education is to be improved the teachers themselves must be improved good schools come from good teaching.

HELPING TEACHERS TEACH: THE PRINCIPALS' ROLE

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James E. Albrecht

11-5-88

Date Approved

[Signature]
Adviser

Robert H. Decker

11-7-88

Date Approved

[Signature]
Second Reader of Research Paper

11/8/88

Date Recieved

Dale R. Jackson

[Signature]
Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

Those individuals in any way connected with education understand the pressures being placed upon them by outside forces to improve the product they offer. Perhaps no one individual understands the push for improvement more than the building principal. If a principal is to improve the education offered in his building he must eventually look to his teachers as the ultimate key to that improvement (Boyer, 1986). As Fleming stated in 1986, if education is to be improved the teachers themselves must be improved; good schools come from good teaching.

Weldy, (1979) in a brief history of the principalship, stated that the principal began as the "head" or "principal" teacher in the district. In this capacity the principal was regarded as a teacher of teachers. With the added pressures of the job as well as the requests upon his time, most principals have been forced to put this teacher-of-teachers aspect of the job low on the list of priorities. Hassenpflug (1986) stated, however, that being an administrator and being an educator were not mutually exclusive roles.

In past decades many have argued that the teaching profession has become stale and unimaginative with no desire to attempt new procedures and techniques to improve education. One of the possible reasons for

this lack of resourcefulness and imagination may lie in an economy where fewer teachers are willing to change jobs. The positive side of having a changing faculty is that often new teachers serve as inservice opportunities for other staff members, bringing in new ideas and new energies. With fewer new teachers joining the faculty the responsibility falls upon the principal to act as the catalyst, bringing new ideas and resources to influence and improve the faculty (Lipham, Rankin, & Hoch, 1985).

What then should be the position of the principal upon whose shoulders lies the ultimate responsibility for the effectiveness of the school (Irwin, 1985)? The effective principal must have a vision, a clear set of goals upon which he and his faculty may focus to achieve the desired improvement in education (Anderson & Pigford, 1987). This vision must not be singular but rather one that is shared both in its conception and in its instigation by faculty, students and community. As Lange (1986) found, those principals who were most effective were those willing to share the decision-making and goal-making process. Realistically speaking, however, the principal more than anyone else must contribute significantly to the overall vision of the school in order to make learning more permanent and

meaningful (Doll, 1972). The principal has the power and position to promote those specific programs and projects of instructional improvement that best suit the needs of the school (Little, 1982). The principal must also focus attention upon the instructional goals, procedures, and outcomes within each area (Slevert, 1983). And although the principal may not be an expert in each of the disciplines, acting as a catalyst to improve individual teaching style may be a primary concern (Weldy, 1979).

The principal is subject to numerous pressures and may become a slave to these pressures unless a vision is set to create a role as an educational leader (Jwaideh, 1984a). Principals are not likely to be thought of as instructional leaders until they define their own roles (Anderson & Pigford, 1987).

Once this vision of improved education has been set the principal must create a climate within the school which is conducive to the desired changes (Werner, 1982). This means that the principal must be able to communicate the goals of the organization as well as remain enthused about those goals (Frey & Young, 1983). But more important than the outward communication of those goals will be the quiet, behind the scenes work which will allow those goals to bear

fruit. The principal must have the patience to allow these goals to be realized in due time. When, for the sake of speed, it would be easier to use an autocratic approach and order change to take place, it might be advantageous for the principal to sit back and let the change happen naturally (Herlihy & Herlihy, 1985). What this means is that rather than making decisions from the ivory tower, the principal will need to delve into the classroom to gain an understanding of the needs of faculty and students (Kroeze, 1982). This will take a commitment to become an instructional leader rather than just an administrator. The principal will need to free up time by delegating some noninstructional responsibilities to others, as well as be willing to become more knowledgeable in the research, findings, and readings that pertain to classroom management (Little, 1982). Only in this way will the principal become free to discuss educationally valuable information intelligently with the individual instructor.

In order for the principal to be able to accomplish the task of improving instruction, a first step must be to get the teachers enthused about educational improvement and then keep them enthused about continual improvement even though it will take

extra time and effort on the part of the staff. Next the principal must offer different types of help in conjunction with the individual needs of each teacher. Finally the principal must be prepared to once again become a teacher of teachers.

The motivation of faculty members is not always the first priority of the principal. When day-to-day pressures distract well-laid plans it becomes difficult for the principal to keep priorities straight. However the principal must realize that a well-motivated staff will be a more productive staff (Sievert, 1983). There are two forms of staff motivation that the principal may undertake. First, the simpler things, which are geared to letting teachers know that they are accepted and appreciated as staff members and as human beings. A principal may stop in the teacher's room to say hello and ask how things are going, ask if there is anything the teacher needs, or seek advice on a school related matter. A principal may point out a job well done in a personal visit or by putting a note in the mailbox (Cooper & Forrer, 1986). A more formal approach may be taken by the principal to acknowledge accomplishments by putting comments in faculty bulletins or by making deliberate statements during faculty meetings. The

second phase in motivation is to get the teachers involved in the decision-making process of the school. Dunne and Maurer (1982) noted that people will be more committed to an organization, and more motivated to work on the problems of the organization, if they have a hand in attempting to resolve them.

The first step in the resolution of a problem is to do a needs assessment in the building, which provides the teachers the opportunity to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school (Whitfield, Whitfield, & Purkerson, 1983). Next the principal should involve the teachers in selecting innovations, or at least in planning the implementation of the innovations, within the district (Jwaldeh, 1984b). Through this process the teachers are more likely to accept change and to be positively motivated to improve their immediate educational situation.

A facet related to motivation is the principal's ability to meet the intrinsic needs of each faculty member. These intrinsic needs may be achievement, recognition, advancement, and personal growth possibilities (Werner, 1982). Each teacher will place one of these intrinsic needs above the rest and may even change the importance of each need as the teacher changes and matures. It is important that the principal

recognize this personal growth and take steps to meet these needs thereby providing job satisfaction (Werner, 1982).

In providing avenues for achievement and recognition the principal must reinforce and reward effective teaching that makes significant contributions within the school (Cruz, 1983). In regard to advancement and personal growth it is important that the principal show concern for the needs of faculty members and understand that advancement and personal growth are parts of the professional person. There must not only be a recognition of these needs, but concern shown to support the efforts of the faculty member to achieve the goals set for personal growth (Anderson & Plgford, 1987).

As Rhoads (1982,p.24) pointed out, "The influence of the principal is directly related to his ability to meet the professional and educational needs of that school's teachers."

This brings us then to the heart of educational improvement. If educational improvement is to be realized, we must improve the quality of instruction. Improvement in the quality of instruction can be separated into two areas. The first deals with making

the day-to-day tasks of teaching easier and less cluttered. The second area deals with making the principal once again a teacher of teachers.

Many of the things which are day-to-day occurrences in a school, or those things which are accepted practices, tend to make teaching a more difficult task than it need be. The small amount of time available for a teacher to give individual instruction to each student, or the intrusions upon time spent in preparation are sources of frustration. The stress caused by a lack of time can be partially alleviated if the principal takes some fairly simple steps. Those steps might include, when possible, reducing class size, eliminating unnecessary meetings, reducing paperwork, and offering clerical assistance for some of the paperwork that must be done (Werner, 1982). In those schools in which large class size is a constant problem, it might be possible to use teacher's aides to eliminate some of the paperwork (Cruz, 1983). Another area that can be a source of friction among faculties is the monitoring duties that must be undertaken within the school and at extracurricular events. As much as possible the principal should attempt to limit the number of night and weekend

activities that each teacher must supervise. This can be approached by assuring equality in the selection of these supervisors. No one teacher or group of teachers should be expected to carry the load while others do not do their fair share (Werner, 1982).

The principal should also undertake the task of providing adequate materials to the classrooms. It is stressful to the teacher if they have to have confrontations with superiors in order to adequately supply their rooms. The provision of these materials to the teacher also allows for the freedom to choose the method of instruction best suited to a particular class (Kurt, 1983). With some teachers there may be a lack of knowledge as to what resources are available. Help with discovering ways to use current resources may add to the curricular options open to a teacher (Doll, 1972).

Another source of distraction for many teachers is communication with parents. The actions the principal may take to alleviate this problem will be to act as a buffer between the community and the teacher (Frey & Young, 1983). The principal, rather than the teacher, can be the first to meet with disgruntled parents to cushion their emotions as a knowledgeable and interested third party, rather than allow a confrontation to take

place directly between parent and teacher (Doll, 1972). The principal can also act as a public relations agent to the community, extolling the virtues of the school system and faculty whenever he/she is in contact with the public (Frey et al., 1983).

The most notable sign of a principals ability to help a teacher is usually in terms of discipline. As Kroeze (1982) stated, it is the principal's job to preserve order in the building. The principal must maintain rules and regulations that can promote an academically oriented, orderly, and purposeful school climate (Anderson & Pigford, 1987). These rules must be specific, easy to understand, and consistent in their enforcement, not only for the students but for the teachers as well. The disciplinary policy must give teachers options to take under varying circumstances and clearly outline the principal's actions if he/she is brought into the picture (Cruz, 1983). The principals best able to carry off this type of disciplinary coup are those who seem to be quietly visible everywhere throughout the building during the entire school day (Sweeney, 1982).

Lange (1986) stated that one of the characteristics of effective principals was the ability to remove obstacles from the path of the teacher. The

preceding ideas offer some ways to help accomplish this goal.

Providing opportunities for teachers to become more effective in existing positions is a primary responsibility of the building principal (Whitfield et al., 1983). Education is returning full circle to what Weldy (1979) stated from a historical view had been one of the original justifications of the principalship, and that was to be a teacher of teachers. What is meant by improvement of the teaching staff includes those techniques and procedures designed to enhance the teacher's performance and effectiveness (Lipham et al., 1985). Obviously within any school system the faculty will have many individual as well as team strengths. It therefore becomes the principal's task to find teachers' specific needs as well as the common needs of a majority of the faculty (Rhoads, 1982). The principal must decipher the possible causes of these needs and the proper actions to be taken to remedy them (Bridges, 1985). In this way the principal must accept the belief that effective teaching is an acquired skill and one on which a definite impact can be made (Jacobsen, 1984).

Jwaideh (1984b) reduced this idea of teacher remediation to a three-tiered approach. First the teacher should receive information relevant to the instructional skills that are lacking or that he or she has targeted for improvement. Next the teacher should be allowed to observe these skills in action. Finally the teacher should be allowed to practice these newly acquired skills in a controlled and evaluated environment without fear of negative consequences.

Before the teachers will actively seek out new information it is important that they have a curiosity about the educational process. Also present should be a personal desire to improve. The principal can foster this desire and curiosity by the use of guest speakers, weekly handouts, short informational meetings, and one-to-one contact with individual teachers in which instructional ideas and practices are discussed (Little, 1982).

Once this curiosity has been aroused the principal may involve teachers in large and small group discussions, buzz sessions, and special projects wherein the teacher may ask questions and discuss instructional ideas and practices that have become of interest (Whitfield et al., 1984). What the ultimate goal is at this point is for the teacher to be

acquiring expertise in teaching theory and practice with an understanding of its application. If it is difficult for the principal to act as the catalyst in this process, it may be advantageous to institute a master teacher or mentoring program within the school. These master teachers/mentors can serve as sources of information and models to those less skilled or qualified (Herlihy et al., 1985).

As Boyer (1986) stated, it is imperative that every school district offer enrichment programs for teachers. The most common source of enrichment programs is inservice. Inservice programs can be developed to provide teachers with skills to improve teaching and more specifically can be designed to address those needs which a number of the teachers within a given district exhibit (Jwaldeh, 1984b).

Another way to keep abreast of current developments in given subject areas is for the teachers to participate actively in professional associations. The principal should encourage this participation as well as the formation of a professional library which would house periodicals and other literature pertinent to education as well as to specific subject areas (Lipham et al., 1985).

Possibly the most obvious method that teachers have of increasing their knowledge is for them to take advantage of courses offered by local area education agencies as well as colleges and universities. But once again it may take a gentle push from the principal for the teacher to see the benefits of taking those classes.

The next step in Jwaldeh's approach to teacher improvement is for teachers to observe in action those theories and practices which they have discovered in the aforementioned learning process. The best way for this to take place is for the teacher to visit other classrooms within his/her own school and even to arrange for visits to other schools (Lipham et al., 1985). Since the principal is one of the few people who has access to all the classrooms, he/she becomes the logical one to suggest what classrooms might be visited to see a certain theory in action (Hassenpflug, 1986). It might also be beneficial for the school to create a teacher travel fund which could be used by teachers to make contact with colleagues in other districts (Boyer, 1986). Other benefits may also be derived from these visits, such as seeing how other teachers handle students. It might also help school unity if teachers could see what happens at other

levels of school operation (Lipham et al., 1985). An often unconsidered way for a teacher to observe teaching methods is for the teacher to observe how a principal uses certain theories during faculty meetings. This form of observation may even go so far as to have the principal teach a unit in the classroom with the faculty member as evaluator (Herlihy et al., 1985).

The final phase of Jwaideh's procedure is for the teacher to be evaluated in regard to his/her ability to utilize these new techniques. Since the teachers are attempting new curricular innovations it is important that the evaluations take place in an atmosphere where the principal will not show any displeasure with what is observed (Lipham et al., 1985). If this type of atmosphere is to be created the principal must take seriously the role of evaluator for teacher improvement and staff development, rather than for termination purposes (Anderson et al., 1987). Therefore the central purpose of the classroom visit will need to be to increase teacher awareness of classroom behavior and delivery (Lipham et al., 1985).

If the principal and teacher are going to be able to converse intelligently about expected outcomes, it is important that they have a common base of knowledge

and expectations. In order for this to happen there should be ample pre-observation discussion concerning theory, practice, and how these are to be incorporated in the observed lesson (Jacobsen, 1984). For the purpose of this common base of knowledge it might be valuable for both parties to accept a teaching technique such as the one used by Madeline Hunter. This would lead to a more informed exchange of views (Jacobsen, 1984).

If as McDaniels (1983) says, it is within the power of the principal to assign tasks in accordance with the needs and talents of individual staff members, then it also seems that it is within the principal's power to affect elements that would positively change the educational atmosphere of the school. In order to oversee this change it may be within the scope of the principal's duties to "compliment the accomplished, support the inexperienced, counsel the specialists, and correct the incompetent" (Weldy, 1979, p.37).

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