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ABSTRACT

By state law, many educators are being forced to move from a traditional norm of autonomy to one of collaboration. This paper presents findings of a study that identified the changing role of the 21st century superintendent and described the way one female superintendent promoted state-mandated collaboration in a rural school district with very low commitment to democratic practices. The female superintendent, an advocate of collaboration, had recently been hired in a district that had a history of "old-boys' club" leadership. Data were derived from: (1) a survey of all teachers (N=317) in a rural southern Oregon school district, which yielded a 60 percent response rate; (2) interviews with 24 teachers; (3) observation of the superintendent's interactions; and (4) a review of district personnel office's formal written feedback to the superintendent. Findings suggest that the 21st-century superintendent role focuses more on being a facilitator than a figurehead. In addition, a superintendent's enthusiastic support of state-mandated collaboration can set a norm for harmony despite the district's prior leadership history. The superintendent was effective in that she utilized people-oriented strategies, modeled collaboration in her personal behavior, remained dedicated to the change effort, and demonstrated a willingness to take risks by leading in a way contrary to established district norms. (LMI)

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THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR: LEADING TOWARD COOPERATION

Dr. Eleanor A. Perry

A paper presented at the 8th International Conference of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education:

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION

Portland, Oregon
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THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR: LEADING TOWARD COOPERATION

Dr. Eleanor A. Perry

By state law, many educators are being forced to move from a traditional norm of autonomy to one of collaboration. The purpose of this descriptive, heuristic study was to identify (1) the changing role of the 21st century superintendent and (2) the way one female superintendent promoted state-mandated collaboration in a rural school district with very low commitment to democratic practices.

The Changing Role Of The 21st Century Superintendent

We always have made demands on our school superintendents. In the 50s we called on them to orchestrate "massive school building programs;" in the 60s and 70s it was civil rights followed by concerns over drug abuse and special education needs (Eaton, 1990). Then we looked to our school heads to be instructional leaders of the 80s (Greenfield, 1987). Now the 21st century superintendents' buzzword is "collaboration."

Collaboration is about people interacting with other people, working toward a common goal. Do school employees perceive superintendents as facilitating collaboration at the district level or are they seen as politicians perching precariously on the mighty steps of their capitol buildings scrambling for what little money can be eked out of dwindling state budgets? Do superintendents set the norms and climate for the district or do they act as political figureheads distant from the realities of educating our children?

Superintendents' interactions with school boards and state policy makers are well documented in the literature (see for example Cuban, 1976 and 1988, Wissler & Ortiz, 1988, and Blumberg, 1985). State-mandated collaboration, however, stretches the superintendent's interpersonal skills beyond boards' and legislators' chambers. State-mandated collaboration forces the superintendent to assume a new role and become directly involved at home.

Chief school officers, in the last three decades have been characterized most frequently as executive, manager, educator, politician, negotiator, or statesman (Goldhammer, 1977; Wimpelberg, 1987; Blumberg, 1985). In my research, I heard the unsavory labels of "figurehead" and "school board puppet" added to the list. Konnert & Augenstein (1990) wrote "The early superintendents were expected to be reporters and managers but not leaders." Little is written about this new role as facilitators. What new skills then do successful 21st century superintendents need to move themselves from the role of figurehead to facilitator? How can they promote collaboration? Those questions triggered the design of my study.

The Study

When trying to understand people, it is important to give the participants center stage in telling their own stories. My task as a researcher, then, was to poke around in the embers of memory, stoke the fire of feeling, and to ignite stimulating thought for further elaboration. I set out not to test a theory, but to satisfy a curiosity. The design of my study, therefore, was guided by elements of Glaser and Strauss's (1977) grounded theory and Mitroff and Kilmann's (1978) conceptual humanistic research methods.

I used multiple data collection methods. Questionnaires were distributed to all 317 teachers in one school district. There was a 60% return rate. The questionnaire followed the format of the semantic differential of Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum

(1957). Then I interviewed 24 teachers. The interview questions probed for an explanation of questionnaire response patterns. I observed how the district's superintendent interacted with adults as well as children. District office personnel's formal written feedback to the superintendent also was reviewed. Although statistical methods were used to interpret the findings, the main purpose of this study was descriptive.

The majority of this research took place in a large Southern Oregon rural school district which had approximately 6,000 students enrolled in 16 schools. District employees involved in this study included teachers, principals, and central office personnel. I chose this district for two reasons: (1) for many years it was headed by ultra-conservative, authoritarian leaders known as the "old-boys club" and (2) a new, energetic, female superintendent, who was a strong advocate of collaboration, recently had been hired.

I found that (1) the 21st century superintendent role focuses more on being a facilitator than a figurehead and (2) a superintendent's enthusiastic support of state-mandated collaboration can set the norm of harmony in a school district regardless of its prior leadership history.

The Superintendent as Facilitator

Before I did this study, I thought the principalship was the most influential administrative position in managing state-mandated collaboration. It seemed to me that if decentralization meant more focus on the school site, the head of that site should be the motivator behind the movement toward collaboration. That is not necessarily what the participants in this study thought.

Teachers identified the superintendent new to Oregon, more often than the returning school principals, as the most powerful stakeholder who influenced attitudes toward collaboration. Although some teachers alluded to others being displeased with the superintendent, no one outwardly spoke against her. I found that data interesting because it was so different from what Powell (1990) found in his study of 319 Oregon administrators. His research showed that superintendents perceived themselves as the key influence agents in their districts while principals and vice principals perceived superintendents as a hindrance to getting the job done. Communication was most often noted as lacking between the building sites and central office.

My findings appear to show that the superintendent more than the principal can, and maybe should be, a more critical player in the change toward more collaboration in the school. The superintendent does not have to be merely a figurehead. How then does a superintendent become a powerful role model in setting the norms of collaboration for the entire district? Is training the key or must the values and traits of a collaborative leader be innate?

The rural superintendent in my study received traditional doctoral training in supervision, administration, and curriculum. Her courses were quite unlike the program at the Institute for Executive Leadership, Lewis and Clark College (Portland, Oregon) which prepares superintendents to become managers of culture. (See P. Schmuck, 1992, for a holistic approach to educating a new generation of leaders through feedback, conceptualization, and reflection.) Despite her theoretical training, how did she become such a strong collaborative leader? Did collaboration simply come naturally to her? No. She believed being collaborative, which she stated was key to her success, developed through maturity and experience. Yet her collaborative skills were greatly stretched when dealing with board members who insisted on "micro-managing" the district and with administrators who had agendas which did not focus on what was best for kids. She also perceived many of her male colleagues as

still being top-down managers. Her opinion was the reverse of Chance's (1991) findings. He studied 24 male, rural. long-term Oklahoma superintendents who perceived themselves as being highly successful collaborative communicators. When asked to compare her style to other female superintendents, she was hard pressed since there were so few in the entire state and none in her immediate geographic location.

In my research, teachers used possessive pronouns when they spoke about this dynamic superintendent. They referred to her as "their" new superintendent. They used descriptive phases like "I appreciate our new superintendent" and "I think our superintendent is doing a good job." They took possession of her as they looked to her for leadership: "We've got a new superdog." What better example of support is there than a superintendent who has gained that type of respect in a few short months? How did she do it? I'm reminded of the teacher who spoke about the potluck her new superintendent had for four or five schools to which all came on their own time without pay because they wanted to listen and share with others. The superintendent could have had separate formal faculty meetings, but she chose to set the tone of collaboration among teachers in an informal setting.

I personally observed the superintendent's collaborative skills of bringing together district personnel. For example, I saw her at a potluck holiday party at the central office. Both top district administrators and the district's maintenance workers attended. Odd bedfellows? Not in that district. Equalitarianism was quickly becoming the norm. She was setting the stage for continued conversations among all levels of district employees.

Teachers in their 50s with many years in the district voiced the loudest hopes and concerns. One said, "Fortunately we are having changes now, and I'm very pleased. She's a gal. At least there's some hope. Not everybody shares my opinion though."

A teacher with 18 years' service in the district mentioned that she appreciated a superintendent "who is willing to help push us along" but cautioned that "sometimes all it takes is a gentle nudge." She described her perception of the new superintendent's style:

> She steps on a few toes and scares a few people, mainly the men, but I know my principal really appreciates her. It took him a while. The higher level men, you know the men in the grades above elementary school, have had a rougher time.

But a middle-school male's comments contradicted his peer's perceptions. He stated, "She's [the superintendent] got a lot of good ideas. I don't always agree with her total concept, but I can't knock her. She's coming in fresh and bringing in new ideas." Having spent his entire career in that district, he spoke with some conviction about the new superintendent's visibility:

> She's very vocal. I'm not saying that she's wrong. She's got some good ideas, but I think she's going to find out that she's going to feel strangled before it's over. She's locking horns with tax groups and other groups that are always in the newspaper opposing education and that type of thing. Even the local paper itself, at different times, you know, the reporters. She goes to the Rotary Club, Jaycees, Elks. She's on the attack, if that's such a word to use for this; she attacks for the money. I think they have a right to attack back; certainly they're not going to swallow all this stuff.

His comments were filled with mixed emotions:

> She's very dominant, very positive. I think she's a good one in that respect. She's going to get her way as far as she feels. She's going after it. Now how long that lasts, one against several, humph. . . . I don't think she has that many years to go to be honest with you. So she could probably leap with no fear. . . . She's not going to come here and change it overnight. If she does, I'll personally kiss her foot in Main Street!

The youngest teacher praised the new superintendent's efforts but also acknowledged that the superintendent was not accepted by all members of the staff. She said, "You've probably already talked with people who disagree with me, but I really think our new superintendent is doing a good job."

I was especially intrigued by what impressed this young, early-career teacher. Her description of the superintendent as a role model captured why that leadership position was so important in setting the tone for collaboration in a district:

> She's so supportive and so positive. Just to have a person up top who comes to you and says, "I believe in what you can do to change and make education better for kids." And to know you have that support. Then she follows up that support with professional opportunities. Opportunities to talk. . . . When she takes extra special time like that, I think she's stepping in the right direction. This is only her first year, but she's getting us going. She's getting people comfortable with the idea. Gradually I can see her pushing saying, "All right, I've let you test the water and now you will do this because the state says you will, and I say you will do this because it's better for kids." It's people like her running a school district that will make change a lot easier. I think if you have that top support, than you've got it made down the road.

Many times teachers referred to past administrators as "old boys" and indicated the informal norm in the district was for autocratic, top-down practices. A mid-life, mid-career teacher described what the district was like before the new superintendent arrived and hypothesized why changing to a collaborative environment was difficult. He said:

> For years it's been "you do what you're told" and the administration makes the decision on whatever grounds they have. When you leave teachers out of the process for years, they don't know how to respond when you open it up to them. Like rats in a maze. Now the district says you have to change--we can't do it overnight.

It seems if superintendents concentrated less on bureaucratic procedures and more on the people involved, chances for collaboration would increase. Superintendents who provide opportunities for collaboration in schools, model collaboration, and take into account factors influencing administrators' and teachers' attitudes toward collaboration will get more support than superintendents who don't.

When administrators work in a district with traditionally low commitment to democratic practices, it seems reasonable to believe that their style of leadership might be consistent with the norms of the district. It also seems reasonable that administrators' leadership style might be influenced by what they read. Since many implementation theorists focus more on the change process (see Zaltman, 1977, for a

detailed summary of numerous educational change implementation schemes) rather than on the attitudes of the implementers of the change, it also follows that administrators might do the same thing. Perhaps that might be a reason why educational change has had such a shaky past.

Wayson (1988) wrote that many reform efforts since the 1950s (like the ones associated with the launching of Sputnik, the Ford Foundation Improvement programs, the War on Poverty, career education, and the Excellence Movement) "blew in, blew off, and blew out" (p. 11). He suggested that each of those reforms "left its mark, or scars; but few survive and most have left . . . a host of disillusioned and jaded teachers and administrators . . . cautious about investing in new educational ventures" (p. 11).

Fullan (1991) argued that to implement change in schools, a relationship focusing on "people work, not paper work" ought to be established (p. 79). Perry's (1994) research supported Fullan's notion. She found that "if change implementation were more people-oriented than task-oriented, the probability of institutionalizing the change would increase" (p.15).

The superintendent in my study chose to encourage implementation of collaboration in her district by being just that--people oriented. She did not rely on implementation literature that was task oriented. She did more than talk about collaboration. She was herself collaborative. Although some did not like her personally, most still supported her efforts to move the district from an autocratic, "old boys club" to a collaborative, person-oriented environment. They saw her as a catalyst who valued what they had to say and who modeled collaboration. In other words, they thought she "walked the talk."

Educational Implications

This study has strong implications for K-12 educational leaders. Most often studies about reform are conducted at urban schools that are considered "exemplary" or "schools of excellence" (for example, see Louis & Miles, 1990 and Kleine-Kracht & Wong, 1991). What about the voices from rural schools that are not distinguished by such lofty labels? What about superintendents who move to schools where autocratic leadership has been in vogue for many years?

With few exceptions (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Jacobson, 1988) there is little data on the leadership styles of superintendents and how district employees perceive their chief executive officers. This study provided a thick, rich description of a 21st century superintendent's determination to be a facilitator rather than a figurehead.

Although I conducted my research in a rural district, I think administrators in urban and suburban settings can benefit from my findings as well. I do not think low commitment to democratic practices in the workplace can be isolated by geographic location. With increased cuts in school funding, many administrators will find themselves moving to new locations. This study's data have meaning then for those administrators who are setting out to change a top-down style of managing to a collaborative style of leadership.

Administrators can learn from the leadership style of the superintendent in my study. Her style provides administrators with ways to facilitate collaboration, i.e. dedication to the change effort and a willingness to take risks by leading in a way that may be contrary to established norms. She provides the incentive and the assurance that collaboration can work regardless of the original norms of the school district. The first time I met her she said, "You'll never forget me." She was right.

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