

Supervision for Empowerment

BY KEN PALMER

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resently, the most supervised group of SDA educators is the least empowered. Yet, upon this group—above all others—depends the survival of Adventist education, as well as the fulfillment of its goals.

K-12 teachers make up the one group to which educational supervision applies when the term is used precisely. However, they receive far broader supervision than policy books indicate. They are “supervised” not only by their principals, union and local superintendents of education and elementary supervisors, but also by school board members, pastors, church members—just about anyone with a vested interest in Adventist education.

Many church school teachers feel overwhelmed when expected to function effectively under such a weight of supervision, much of which would be better termed “snoopervision.”

As a result, some teachers substitute performance for meaningful achievement. On several of my announced supervisory visits, it was painfully obvious that the teachers had prepared their students to put on a show. They would “warm over” some previous lesson they felt had gone well, or do a review lesson to impress me with how well their students were learning. And a number of these were not beginners but veteran teachers!

Through skillful supervision administrators can empower their teachers.

This, to me, clearly indicates that many teachers have a misconception of the supervisor’s objectives. However, I’m reluctant to blame the teacher for this misunderstanding. Legitimate supervisors should clearly explain and

model their role for teachers. They must not add to teachers' feelings of fear and powerlessness.

Since until recently teachers have had the lowest level of preparation of any established profession¹ we should not be surprised that elementary teachers are viewed as the least among professionals and are paid a salary that reflects their lowly estate. The profession suffers even further when many teacher-education institutions award diplomas to those ill-suited by training and temperament to be outstanding teachers.²

Furthermore, new teachers are often thrust into the classroom with little assistance or contact with other professionals. This isolation and the expectation that schools should solve the myriad problems of society has made modern teaching much more difficult than it ever was in the past.

With the new laws on accountability, teachers fear that their jobs are in jeopardy if their students don't perform as well or better than those in other school districts, so they may spend much of their

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time priming their classes for standardized tests, rather than helping them discover the joy of learning.

In urban schools, teachers are expected to motivate students who have no interest in learning and are disruptive and even violent. The bureaucracy of the school system forces many public school teachers to function mostly as test givers, keepers of the peace, and paper shufflers.

All these problems, and others, contribute to the teacher's sense of powerlessness. In the case of church school teachers, another telling blow to their shaky autonomy is what George Knight calls the "Myth of Up and Down."³ In our hierarchical church structure, below the college professor is the academy teacher, and at the lowest level is the church school teacher. In the "organized work" the teacher is only patronizingly included as "worker," if at all.

Recently, I listened as a pastor introduced a distinguished guest speaker at a local church. The well-intentioned pastor recited the many achievements of the speaker, a conference president visiting the U.S. To impress the congregation with the man's service record the pastor declared, "He even served as a lowly church school teacher!"

It would hardly be surprising if the low esteem accorded the church school teacher influenced the poor opinion of, and the critical attitude toward Adventist elementary education in North America by some in responding to the Seltzer Daley study of SDA education in North America. After all, if teachers are perceived as inferior, their product must also be viewed as substandard.

Power to Become, Power to Choose

For teachers to achieve the goal of true education—the development of power kindred to that of the Creator⁴—they must receive the kind of supervision that will empower them to grow professionally, and help them choose a system of responsibility rather than one of mere accountability.⁵

Supervision that limits its concern to what teachers are doing in the classroom—maintaining order, making lesson plans, keeping students on task—belongs to the system of accountability. It emphasizes regimentation above innovation, creativity, and professional growth; contributes to burnout; and discourages progressive and enterprising young people from entering or remaining in the profession.

Only supervision that addresses the teacher's needs after classroom routines are mastered can be considered empowering. This kind of supervision goes beyond holding teachers accountable for classroom behavior or lost books. It inspires them to become responsible for the accomplishments and attainments of themselves and their students.

Teachers must be empowered to accomplish the things they feel are important to develop the art of teaching so that they may experience a sense of efficacy, a feeling of pride in and ownership of what they are doing, and the ability to derive intrinsic satisfaction from their work.⁶

And who will benefit from the empowerment of teachers? The boys and girls whom they in turn empower to become "leaders in enterprise, who bear responsibilities and influence character."⁷ Such teachers will act on their conviction that every student is created in the image of God. They will see each child as endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator, a power that it is the work of true education to develop.⁸

Presently, the outcry against the poor quality of public education is also being heard in Adventist circles. One response to *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, is highly significant to empowering teachers and achieving the goals of Adventist education.

Roy R. Pellicano sums up the need in

education and offers a solution in these words:

Whereas the symbol of the 60's was one of explosive and immediate national destruction, the image of the 80's is one of decay and malignancy. "Social dynamite" has given way to the rising tide of mediocrity. American society needs a policy agenda that legitimates the school as a mediating structure for those who are powerless to develop their own potential.⁹

The similarity between this recommendation and the true objective of Adventist education, advocated for nearly a hundred years, could not be more striking.

After we have completed our present study of Adventist education in the North American Division, and have analyzed the data of the Seltzer Daley report, our conclusion may well be our need to educate—not for employment or for democracy,¹⁰ but for empowerment.

Steps Toward Empowerment

The first step toward supervision for empowerment is for principals and superintendents to distinguish between "power over" and "power to," and let the latter be the basis of their supervisory role. "Power over," Thomas Sergiovanni observes, "is concerned with dominance, control, and hierarchy, and does not fit the image of schooling and the professional conception of the role of the teacher."¹¹

The feeling of many elementary teachers I have encountered, including church school teachers, is one of subjection to hierarchical control. They feel locked into the system of accountability to a flock of people with "power over" the teacher's working environment, pedagogical behavior, and professional judgment.

In our schools, the administrators as well as patrons and supporters of the school, are right to hold teachers accountable for performance. But the supervisor who is sensitive to the disabling impact on the teacher's operating under a strict system of accountability will be careful not to make it seem more oppressive by exercising more "power over" teachers' behavior, methods, and techniques by strictly prescribing these areas.

If teaching is a constant stream of decisions, and good decisions increase the probability of learning, as Madeline Hunter asserts,¹² then the supervisor's real challenge is to help teachers progress toward improved decision making. This is *not* done by making decisions for teachers that they should make themselves, particularly at the point of program implementation.

The delegation of intellectual control at the level of the teacher, has the potential to promote and sustain real learning because it fosters individual motivation and builds confidence. Without sufficient latitude for independent testing of alternatives and explo-

ration of alternatives, one's growth opportunities are severely limited.¹³

Surrendering of control to teachers in order to release their potential and allow them to make their actions and decisions count is referred to as "the principle of power investment."¹⁴ In Christian education it is referred to as "the power to become" (see John 1:12). Only to the extent that this power is experienced by teachers and students will the objective of true education be achieved, and the Adventist school remain viable.

The next step in teacher empowerment is for the supervisor to assume the role of instructional coach. As an athletic coach assists players in developing their special skills, so the supervisor should observe teachers' personal style and special strengths. The supervisor should then help teachers further develop and refine these areas.

Using this approach in pre- and post-conference visits with teachers creates a nonthreatening and supportive climate. It prepares teachers to accept and to react positively to the supervisor's technical recommendations for improvement. On the other hand, teachers may resent even needful directives from an authoritarian supervisor, implementing such recommendations in form, but not in spirit.

Probably the biggest, if not the most important step in empowering teachers is the sharing of a vision—"a mental journey from the known to the unknown."¹⁵

No other system of education has as big a vision as the Adventist educational system. And the greatest challenge of the supervisor is to keep before teachers this vision in its purest and most radiant light.

There is great danger of blurring the

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vision of Christian education. Teachers feel pressured to compete with public schools in producing students who perform well on standardized tests and other measures of achievement. Pursuing excellence as secularly defined can readily distract teachers from the vision of "God's ideal for His children."

Much of this pressure comes from parents who are more interested in their children's being prepared for a well-paying, prestigious career than for service to God and humanity. It is not uncommon for parents to come in to discuss students' report cards and make a big fuss over a poor grade in science, math, or social studies. But they are satisfied with a passing grade (or lower) in Bible, because that's not being measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or other achievement and aptitude tests.

SDA educational supervisors must lead their teachers toward a higher standard. By holding up for them a vision reaching beyond the empirical and experiential to which secular education is limited, supervisors can help teachers see the "invisible" (Hebrews 11:27). This shared vision, which enables teachers to see in

themselves and their students the creative power to be developed for service to God and humanity, is the most enabling force in supervision for empowerment. □

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