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WHY OUR URBAN SCHOOLS ARE LEADERLESS

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"THERE is no real opportunity for me to initiate anything really new. New ideas seem to frighten many people. Actually, what I can and cannot do seems pretty well prescribed for me."[1]

Apparently, these are the words of a school principal who believes that initiating the new has something to do with his assigned role as a school administrator in the modern, large, urban school district. Perhaps he can be excused for the reason that he is new and still endowed with the stardust of the ill-defined yet seductive concepts of leadership elevated before him at the altars of various institutions of higher learning. On the other hand, he may be aware of the great need to close the gap between educational traditions and the reforms necessary to make urban schools more effective. It is relevant, particularly in view of the

complexity and precarious nature of today's urban scene, to examine assumptions in the field of educational administration regarding the realities that confront elementary principals as they fulfill their roles in urban areas.

THE LEADERSHIP MYTH

A fundamental question is whether or not the concepts of administration and leadership can justifiably be wedded as they often are into one concept—administrative leadership. Lipham (1964: 123) relates the paradoxical nature of the term administrative leadership: "To characterize a given behavioral act as administrative leadership is to fail to recognize a source of conflict inherent in most superordinate organizational roles—conflict between the administrative role and the leadership role." The literal definitions of the terms suggest the incompatible nature of the relationship. To lead is to take new steps away from the old; to venture forth. To administer is to maintain or restore the stability of or perpetuate that which exists. It is difficult, at best, to conceive of the modern school executive vacillating back and forth with any degree of effectiveness between these two functions. The implications involving the responsibilities of both roles are enormous.

The considerations above give rise to a second relevant question. Is it not apparent that large urban school districts are beginning to relieve the principal of his vaguely defined leadership role so that he can devote himself to the growing and enormous complexities of his administrative role? At least is there not a shift taking place away from the mythology of the principal as an instructional leader toward a concept of the principal as an effective administrator? Campbell (1965: 23) points out that principals have been grossly misdirected in assuming that they can become instructional experts and further misdirected in assuming little need to know much, if anything, about administration. He states that principals are basically administrators, and as such, their major responsibilities are to (1) help the organization clarify its purpose, (2) coordinate the organization, and (3) obtain the resources that will permit the organization to work toward its goals. Empirical support for these assumptions exists in the growing patterns in large urban school districts toward heavier concentrations of qualified specialists who serve schools, greater access to systematized data and data processing, and elaborate

extensions of centralized services to teachers. School districts are more narrowly defining principals' roles as administrative and are expecting more explicit results.

A third question now comes into focus. What are the characteristics of principals, and upon what basis do school districts discriminate between these characteristics to appoint principals? Halpin and Croft (1960: 19-20) report from their study of the biographical characteristics of elementary principals:

> The strongest single impression we get from the biographical in-
> formation is one of "sameness." Obviously the principals differ
> but, on the whole, the biographical data reflect a reasonably
> consistent picture: the picture of "the good child," personally
> bland and colorless, and ever eager to conform to the expectations
> of authorities and to the anonymous authority that resides in "the
> group." Here is a group of amiable, cooperative people who are
> eager to please, who have chosen education as a means of raising
> their social status a notch or two, and who have, indeed, been
> "good," have worked hard, and have "succeeded." One portrait is
> that of a well-meaning group of innocents, staunchly dedicated to
> America's middle-class ideology.

The research of the author (Wiggins, 1969) revealed elementary princi-pals as highly task-oriented, kindly and considerate of subordinates, and needing direction and support to arrive at their own decisions.

In summary, the image derived from the research cited depicts the principal as conforming, hard-working, pleasant, and relatively anony-mous as a person. Generally, these are characteristics of followers, not leaders.

Various research studies (Purdy, 1965: Bronfield, 1962; Stewart, 1963) on practices in the selection and retention of elementary prin-cipals by school districts show a variety of methods whereby candidates are identified and appointed. Appraisals of intelligence, knowledge of the discipline, impressions of superordinates, and evaluations of experi-ence and competence were among the common variables considered. The variance, however, in the means of attempting to measure these variables was great. Stapley (1958) concluded that the majority of school districts do not have a systematic program for identifying prospective elementary school principals.

Comparing the research on the characteristics of incumbent principals with the research on the practices of selecting principals reveals dissimi-larities in desired characteristics as compared with actual characteristics.

Efforts to identify candidates for principalships who are intelligent, knowledgeable, well-thought-of, and competent result in the subsequent appointment of principals who are conforming, hard working, pleasant, and somewhat anonymous as persons.

THE REWARD STRUCTURE

In the terms of Presthus (1962), the principal aspirant is clearly an "upward mobile." He is striving for promotion (status and increased salary), one of the few tangible organizational rewards the school has to offer. In this regard, the school is influential in socializing its members. Homans (1961) and Blau (1967) have elaborated this notion into the major considerations involved in their theories of social behavior.

Most, if not all, upward mobile principal aspirants are teachers. These teachers are apparently successful in perceiving the model behavior which exists in the criteria for the consideration of applicants for principalships. The perception of desired behavior serves as a guide for the principal aspirant. In this sense, effectiveness and efficiency are enhanced as the principal aspirant perceives the reward model and proceeds to modify his behavior accordingly in order to satisfy his needs.

THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

The teacher. Socialization is a process whereby individuals learn to become viable group members. It normally begins at birth and continues throughout life. In socializing, the teacher engages his personality with the construed role of the school. In the process, the teacher role and the teacher personality become realigned to facilitate arrival at a point of organizational homeostasis or balance. The socializing forces of the school which influence the reconciliation of the teacher to the organization are pervasive and effective. Compliance is almost a guarantee as the school establishes what Getzels (1963: 311) calls "imperative functions that are to be carried out in certain routinized patterns." Compliance is the means whereby teachers become good teachers, for good teachers are teachers whose beliefs, norms, and behavior are brought into line with those of the organization. The research of Hoy (1968)

and Willower and Jones (1967) indicates that the influence of experience upon teacher behavior is significant:

> The findings suggest that the pupil control ideology of beginning teachers is affected by teaching experience. The process of socialization within the school subculture seems important in reshaping the control ideology of organizational newcomers. New idealistic teachers appear to be confronted with a relatively custodial control orientation as they become a part of the organization ... [Hoy, 1968: 320].

The principal. Although no major research justifies the assumption, the most commonly shared basis upon which school districts select candidates for principalships is evidence of experience as a good teacher. The good teacher candidates for principalships in large, urban school districts are almost always chosen from the ranks of the upward mobiles who already reside within the district. By the time the principal aspirant shows interest, the district has had ample time to identify the candidate as compatible with the image it holds for successful principals. One can surmise that promotions of this nature are ways that urban school districts reward compliance and make predictions regarding continued compliance in the principal role after promotion. In this sense compliance appears to be a pervasive and highly valued phenomenon in the administrative role.

Halpin and Croft (1960: 115) found that the lives of elementary principals as children were characterized by a concept of "the good child." Principals perceived their idealized self-image of goodness incredibly similarly. Indeed, individuality was virtually nonexistant or buried in the importance of identity with the idealized self-image. The research of the author on principal characteristics and organizational climate showed a remarkable similarity in the behavior characteristics of principals. The sample of 41 principals in a large urban school district in California were found to be highly task-oriented, kindly and considerate of subordinates, needing direction and support from superordinates, but desirous of independence to use the direction and support to arrive at their own decisions. As with Halpin and Croft's portrait, it would be difficult to deny that this is the picture of a principal in a large urban area who is endowed with characteristics which would tend to stabilize and perpetuate schools. That is, these principals are likely to be better administrators than leaders. Furthermore, it would be equally difficult to deny that a reservoir of principals could be interchanged freely as is

frequently necessary in large urban school districts where problems of growth prevail. This identifies the school district as the primary socializing force which influences principal behavior.

In his analysis of the organizational society, Presthus (1962) makes the assumption that societal values and the climate of the social system mold individual personalities through the process of socialization. Fromm (1947: 241) states it another way: "Those drives which make for the differences in men's character like . . . the lust for power and the yearning for submission are all products of the social process." While man in the social system may have some scope for individual choices, the influences through socialization significantly influence the conditions under which choices are made. There is no reason why elementary principals in large urban areas should be excluded from these assumptions. He can expect to find that his behavior is largely subject to the control of the school, or more accurately, the school district in the urban area. The school represents the source of the assumptions that the principal forms about his identity. It is in this way that the principal becomes, as Reisman (1950) and Hoffer (1951) suggest, motivated by the need for group approval and thus intensely subject to conventional values.

As a result of his research, Bridges (1965: 27) states that: "The cumulative effect of experience, which is viewed as an extension of the socialization process within the context of large scale organizations, may be one of the most overlooked determinants of organizational behavior and outlook." His research tested whether or not the elementary principal's perspectives, outlook, and behavior are shaped more and more by his role in the school and less and less by his personality in the course of his service (see Figure 1).

As mentioned earlier, the author investigated the relationship of the leader behavior characteristics of elementary principals and the organizational climate of their schools (Wiggins, 1969). Included was an exploration of the effect of the replacement of a principal upon the climate of the school, and, like Bridges, the effect of the length of the principal's incumbency upon his leader behavior in relation to the school climate. A multivariate analysis showed no significant relationship between the principal's behavioral characteristics and the school climate. Additional analyses revealed no change in the school climate as principals were replaced, and the longer the principal had been assigned to the school, the more significant was the relationship of his behavioral characteristics and the school climate.

NEWLY ASSIGNED   PRINCIPAL WITH
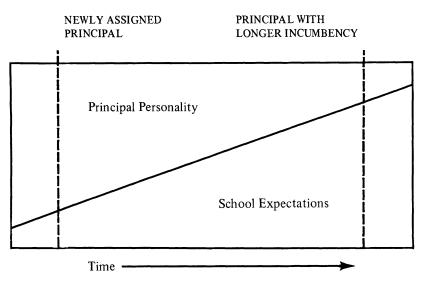PRINCIPAL   LONGER INCUMBENCY

Figure 1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS AND
PRINCIPAL PERSONALITY IN OBSERVED BEHAVIOR

The discovery of no general relationship between principal behavior and school climate was not expected as a result of the research. A search was conducted for plausible explanations. The principals in this study were discovered to share almost identical behavioral charac-teristics. School climates varied, but principal characteristics did not. The measurement of the school climate was predominantly that which was perceived by teachers—usually fifteen or more teachers to one principal. Because the principals were fundamentally behaviorally alike and the school climates did not change as the principals were replaced, one can conclude that the principals were as interchangeable parts. The surprising factor was the general lack of relationship between principal behavior and school climate. There were some changes with increase in the length of the principal's incumbency, but generally, there was no significant relationship.

This finding suggests a refutation of the socialization assumptions. In fact, it refutes more fundamental organizational theory regarding the relationship of individual's personalities to institutional roles. The key to understanding these findings lies in the discovery that the socializing influences in the case of the principals extends beyond the immediate school site. These principals had all been "reared" as teachers, vice

principals, and in other service positions within the same large urban district. Apparently the district and the educational establishment itself carefully prepare principals to behave in a rational, predictable, and uniform manner. This renders them more predictable and more easily interchangeable. Their personalities become as one. With this in mind, the research of the author measured the principal's behavior as related to the school (the subsystem) when it more appropriately should have focused upon the district (the system). In the urban scene, over the years, it is the district which influences the behavioral characteristics of its principals in an enduring and pervasive manner a good deal more than does the school where they are assigned. The hypotheses need to be reformulated and retested accordingly. The efficacy of the theories need reexamination accordingly. Further study will provide additional empirical evidence regarding the impact of socialization upon principals as leaders and might further suggest why the likelihood of leadership is preempted by the desire for organizational stability.

SUMMARY

Concepts of the elementary principalship as essentially a role couched in the vagaries of administrative leadership and instructional leadership seem to be questionable under the scrutiny of research. Although the urgencies of the urban scene tend to explicate the need for schools to be dynamic and responsible to the uniqueness of their needs, schools appear relatively unchangeable. Their leaders are strongly influenced by the forces of socialization which tend to mold individuals into roles devised toward maintaining stability. Under these circumstances acts of leadership by principals, are relatively improbable.

NOTE

1. This is a comment recently made to the author by a newly assigned elementary principal in a large urban area.

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