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Bruce S. Cooper, Patricia A.L. Ehrensal and Matthew Bromme

Educational Policy 2005; 19; 112

DOI: 10.1177/0895904804272231

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School-Level Politics and Professional Development: Traps in Evaluating the Quality of Practicing Teachers

BRUCE S. COOPER, PATRICIA A. L. EHRENSAL,
and MATTHEW BROMME

Teacher supervision and evaluation are fundamental responsibilities of the principal. Yet principals and teachers find their supervisory interactions to be difficult and unsatisfying experiences. This article explores the micropolitical context in which supervision and evaluation take place. Highlighting specific examples in New York City, the article argues that the environment in which teacher-principal interactions occur is shaped by union contracts, state and district personnel policies, and precedents set by local experiences with teacher dismissals. These historical and structural factors and others converge to create three traps of supervision.

Keywords: *supervision; teacher-administrator relations; micropolitics*

A MAJOR RESPONSIBILITY of principals and assistant principals is the evaluation of teacher performance. Called instructional leadership, staff review, and performance evaluation, these efforts are deemed critical to teaching and learning and to the quality of school productivity. Nevertheless, they remain the source of much conflict within schools (Cuban, 1998;

EDUCATIONAL POLICY, Vol. 19 No. 1, January and March 2005 112-125
DOI: 10.1177/0895904804272231
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Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2003; Reeves, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2000).

As Gordon (1997) explains, because

> the historic role of supervision has been inspection and control, it is not surprising that most teachers do not equate supervision with collegiality. When teachers have been asked to make word associations with the term instructional supervision, most of the associations have been negative. (p. 118)

Teachers are not alone in their frustration. For principals, the inspectorial function—making sure that classrooms and schools are safe places for children, the most basic form of supervision—is greatly constrained by rules, laws, and procedures. Some principals complain that they cannot remove even a negligent or abusive teacher.

This article explores the micropolitical context in which supervision, evaluation, and professional development take place. Highlighting specific examples in New York City, it argues that the environment in which teacher-principal interactions occur is shaped by teachers' (and principals') union contracts, by state and districts' personnel policies, and by precedents set by local experiences with teacher dismissals. These factors converge to form three traps of supervision. Each is discussed in turn below. The final section offers suggestions about how to release them.

THE THREE TRAPS OF SUPERVISION

Despite the importance of teacher supervision and support, little research has treated the teacher-principal relationship as micropolitical, involving layers of authority and control. Yet few areas in education leadership are quite as complex or filled with as many obstacles and as much ambiguity. Three major traps complicate principals' supervision of teachers: the bureaucratic organization and labor-management relations trap, the teaching as a semi-profession trap, and the collegiality of leadership and teacher empowerment trap.

The Bureaucratic Organization and Labor-Management Relations Trap

In use, teacher supervision, development, and evaluation have reinforced the top-down nature of school governance, emphasizing "procedures and techniques for telling people what to do, for determining whether they are doing it, and for administering rewards and punishments" (McGregor, 1960, p. 132). Yet if schools are to be effective, a different approach is essential. As Likert (1961), in his classic statement about the role of supervision, explains,

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> The leader and other processes of the organization must be such as to ensure a maximum probability that in all interactions and in all relationships within the organization, each member, in light of his background, values, desires, and expectations, will view the experience as supportive and one which builds and maintains his sense of personal worth and importance. (p. 103)

In addition to long-held norms and bureaucratic structures that contextualize supervision, teacher-supervisor relations are constrained by the long history of labor-management relations in the United States in general and in education particularly (Cooper, 2001; Cooper & Liotta, 2004; Kerchner & Mitchell, 1988; Koppich, 2005 [this issue]). The micropolitics of teacher supervision and evaluation have become intertwined and directed by organized teachers confronting organized management, a relationship that routinizes political activity (e.g., grievances, lobbying, striking, and collective bargaining) and makes much of the collective action predictable.

As teacher unions have become a major force in education, the need to understand their role is essential to any improvement in teacher preparation, evaluation, and replacement. Research shows that teacher union contracts specify prescribed observations, evaluations, and corrective actions by principals and department heads. For example, McDonnell and Pascal (1988) found a high percentage of contracts had personnel processes that made it very difficult to dismiss incompetent teachers. At minimum, it takes 2 years to dismiss weak teachers (S. M. Johnson & Kardos, 2000). In Milwaukee, Fuller, Mitchell, and Hartmann (2000) determined that

> a singular failure of the collective bargaining era is that MTEA [union] and MPS [management] have not developed an adequate system to evaluate and assist ineffective teachers and to terminate those who are incompetent. The failure goes to the core of bargaining's adverse impact on educational quality. (p. 128)

Teaching as a Semiprofession Trap

According to S. M. Johnson (1990), "Teachers are the would-be professionals, seeking the influence exercised routinely by doctors and lawyers in our society" (p. 180). The work of teachers shares characteristics with members of other professional fields. Professionals (teachers) work directly with their clients (children) and without direct supervision (T. J. Johnson, 1972; Mintzberg, 1979). Furthermore, in their work, professionals "have two basic tasks: (1) to categorize the client's need in terms of a contingency, which indicates which standard program to use, a task known as diagnosis; and (2) to apply or execute, that program" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 352). That is, teachers, before presenting instruction, must first assess students' needs in terms of

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age, developmental level, abilities, and so on and then, based on knowledge of pedagogy and experience, must determine the methods best suited to the particular set of contingencies. Because of the difficulties presented by the variability in the students' abilities and achievements, and because of day-to-day fluctuations in response to the lessons, teachers require a great deal of discretion in their work. That is, they must be free to make the alterations they find necessary to control these uncertainties (Mintzberg, 1979).

In addition, teachers must undergo extensive, initial university-based education and training to be certified as teaching professionals. They often complete more specialized education and training (usually graduate degrees) to maintain their certification and advance in pay rank. Thus, like their counterparts in other fields, the ever-increasing and ever-more specialized education produces a professional with high-level function and specialization (T. J. Johnson, 1972).

Teachers' sense of professionalism is in some ways shaped by their supervisory contexts. Supervision of teachers takes place both indirectly and directly (S. M. Johnson, 1990; Mintzberg, 1979). Indirect supervision over the process and product of public education has increasingly taken the form of high-stakes testing (Johnson, 1990). As Goldring and Greenfield (2002) state, "Under high-stakes testing and statewide accountability systems, educational leaders are confronted with ongoing pressure to show good results quickly and regularly" (p. 14). Consequently, superintendents and principals, wishing to avoid having the district or school declared in need of improvement, stress the importance of performance on these tests and on the teachers' role in ensuring high performance. S. M. Johnson (1990) notes,

> The respondents [teachers] themselves seldom viewed the system-wide tests as professional tools enabling them to teach better. Because students vary and develop at different rates, it is difficult to isolate any single teacher's contribution to a student's test scores. However, some teachers believed that tests could be used by administrators to reveal individual teachers' shortcomings. (p. 139)

Teachers, not surprisingly, interpret this mandate as having to teach to the test, which is viewed as a further reduction in their autonomy and discretion and consequently in their professional status.

Direct supervision takes the form of classroom observations by administrators who are regarded by teachers "as spot checks on teachers' basic competence, but do not provide school officials with continuous data about the teacher's compliance with curriculum or prescribed teaching methods" (S. M. Johnson, 1990, p. 137). Furthermore, teachers often see these classroom observations as mostly symbolic, done primarily to fulfill contractual

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obligations rather than to help teachers do a better job. Therefore, classroom observations are more akin to worker-manager rather than professional-collegial relationships.

Teacher Empowerment and the Collegiality of Leadership Trap

Teacher empowerment and consultative leadership have been advanced as means to foster collegiality and to minimize the structural constraints posed by the first two traps. We suggest that these solutions constitute yet another trap.

Teacher empowerment. One approach to mitigating the worker-manager relationship and to promoting the professional status of teachers has been the implementation of participatory decision making (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Grace, 1995). Yet because schools have, by virtue of their position, formal authority, participatory decision making presents "an essentially micro-political conundrum. The head must achieve and maintain control (the problem of domination), while encouraging and ensuring social order and commitment (the problem of integration)" (Ball, 1987, p. 82).

To do so, members of the school organization are controlled through a subtle process encouraging them to control themselves (P. Johnson & Gill, 1993). The role of the manager in such organizations, then, is to lead members through a consultative process that results in members forming a commitment to the organization. For administrators or leaders,

> Control is achieved by the channeling and formalizing of talk into a structure of committees and working parties. The only valid access to voice is through this structure. The structure itself creates hierarchy and limits subordinate participation and the manager's control of agendas and the timing of discussions provides a further source of veto over the content of the talk. (Ball, 1987, p. 125)

Formal settings and hierarchical structures limit participants' voices, reducing participation to a symbolic gesture.

In addition to setting agendas and chairing and staffing meetings of committees and working parties, principals can restrain full participation by channeling "dissent along positive paths that indirectly contribute to the school's goals—or at least into the harmless side roads" (Hargreaves, 1999, p. 58). Ball (1987) refers to this as non–decision making, that is, "the use of power by heads to prevent the emergence of any potentially subversive opposition" (p. 128).

Finally, participatory decision making stresses the importance of commitment to the school and privileges the group over the individual.

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Loyalty is a major vehicle for maintaining political integration by stressing as it does the preeminence of the institution or the person (usually in the person of the head) over individual concerns or principles. It can act as a form of sanction. The label disloyal suggests betrayal, double-dealing, dishonesty, and breach of faith (Ball, 1987, p. 143).

Committed or loyal members of the organization are to put aside their individual concerns in favor of those of the organization. The needs of the organization become paramount. As Ball (1987) states, "As soon as discussion becomes oppositional, it is redefined as subversive and disloyal—very powerful concepts. Such redefinition serves to fractionalized the staff and stigmatize and isolate opponents" (p. 137). If administrators are unable to manipulate the discourse to give the appearance of consensus or to channel opposing views into more constructive arenas (Hargreaves, 1999), they can declare such talk disloyal. The teachers who pose the oppositional views can then be denounced as not being team players or as being selfish political operatives who are only looking out for themselves. In this way, administrators can minimize the potential damage of such views and characterize their own view as being in the best interest of the entire organization. Consequently, administrators (management) are able to maintain their position of dominance and to reproduce and reinforce the asymmetrical power relationships within the school organization.

Collegiality of leadership. At the heart of the school-level micropolitics of teacher supervision, development, and evaluation are the conflated and contradictory roles of principals. These administrators are expected to be both educational leaders and unit managers. As leaders, they are concerned about the professional development and performance of teachers using devices such as clinical supervision. As building managers, however, principals are responsible for the operation of their schools including the formal evaluation of teachers as part of their annual review of employees.

Although they appear complementary, these functions are often contradictory. As leaders and trusted mentors of teachers, principals are expected to nurture and develop members of the educational team. Seeing weaknesses, principals are in the best position to help teachers to improve. These leaders are urged to be open to teachers' suggestions and to make helpful observations. This support emanates from the basic assumption that teachers are respected professionals and that the educational leader is a first among equals. The relationship is mutual and respectful, or so the argument goes, with the principal serving the teachers (Maxcy, 1994).

On the other hand, when seen from the school management perspective, teacher individuality is a potential liability. Today, with so much attention

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focused squarely on student achievement and with accountability provisions firmly in place, principals, as representative of the system, are concerned with the efficient operation of the school. In this context, evaluation often takes on a managerialistic discourse imposing a superior-subordinate relationship that gives greater legitimacy to the opinion of the principal and that destroys the platform for shared decision making.

Both teachers and principals must carefully negotiate the political terrain established by this conflicting role because at any given time the principal can be a colleague (leader) or boss (administrator) or both. Teachers have to determine in an instant which role their principal is adopting at that moment. The principal, however, may move seamlessly between the roles, obfuscating the power relationships and undermining the trust and support that teachers need.

THE TRAPS AT PLAY

The traps outlined here are not isolated and independent structural constraints. Rather, they act in concert to shape perceptions and interactions within the school organization. To illustrate the constraints these three traps pose for supervision, we present two examples drawn from the third author's experiences as a principal and superintendent in New York City schools.

Example 1: Bureaucratic and Labor-Management Relations Limitations

In New York City, the regulations of the Department of Education and the procedures spelled out in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) contract act jointly to constrain the actions of supervisors and to limit the power of the Department of Education (in the personage of the Regional Superintendent and Chancellor) to review and remove teachers. Actions in the schools are limited in two ways. First, to act, the principal must follow elaborate procedures. Second, final action requires third-party intervention.

These limitations circumscribe the roles of the teacher and the administrator, reducing their interactions to a set of official, time-consuming procedures. For example, if the principal wishes to give a teacher a negative performance evaluation, he or she must write a letter that conforms in format to past arbitration decisions. An incorrectly written letter will be removed from the teacher's personnel file and will not be used as future evidence of poor teacher performance.

Unions, to fulfill their obligation to represent and protect their members, train special union representatives on the grievance process. Principals, however, receive no formal training, including what constitutes an appropriate file letter, in the procedural rules of this process. Consequently, principals

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who believed they had a strong case against a classroom teacher became disillusioned when the arbitrator cites technical errors and allows the teacher to return to the school where the alleged incompetent teaching or inappropriate acts occurred.

The process is equally frustrating for teachers. As these procedures are highly time-consuming, teachers under review for alleged misconduct spend weeks, months, and sometimes years at the regional operations center awaiting the dispensation of their cases.

Example 2: Imposed Shared Decision Making Limitations

The central office administration negotiates contracts with the school system's teachers' union. However, in most urban environments, principals are often not involved in these union negotiations. When they are, their hopes for positive change have sometimes been dashed by the central bureaucracy's failure to implement their suggestions when the final contract is signed.

Such was the case in New York City when the Department of Education, the City of New York, and the UTF negotiated a contract that included a school-based option to empower teachers in the running of their schools. Principals voiced their strong concerns but were ignored. Under the plan, if local school-based union leaders wished to present a change in the school (e.g., allow teachers to perform administrative duties or change the instructional schedule) to the school's union members, they called for a meeting during which all union members including secretaries, paraprofessionals, and teachers were eligible to vote on the changes. Under this system, principals shared decision-making authority with their subordinates and were bound by these joint decisions. However, the responsibility for the implementation and outcomes of these decisions was solely that of the principal. That is, it was the principal who faced potential termination for failed change efforts.

TRAPS RELEASED

Better Forms of Review and Evaluation

There are no easy ways out of these traps, but a first step might be to improve the techniques and methods of teacher review and evaluation. The portfolio movement may be a start. With this type of evaluation process, teachers are asked to submit their work and accomplishments in tangible form (materials, student work, curricula, and displays). Tucker, Stronge, Gareis, and Beers (2004) explain, "Portfolios are sometimes viewed as assessment techniques that 'get close to the activity of interest'" (p. 583). Yet

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evidence of their effectiveness in changing teacher practice is limited. As Tucker et al. state,

> Self-reflection is a first step in the process, but improving practice is the ultimate goal of teacher evaluation, and further study is needed to explore ways to harness the power of portfolios for this purpose. Would more training and changes in the culture of the school district over time encourage changes based on greater self-knowledge? Would peer coaching around the development and review of portfolios enhance their impact on teaching? (p. 594)

More Collegiality and Sharing

Another step in dismantling the supervision traps and improving teaching is the age-old notion of teacher collegiality. Participation in a group of teachers who talk, share, and support one another (often in a small, informal cadre) can be a powerful experience for the individual teacher. When these teachers draw in outsiders (e.g., professional societies, school boards, parent groups, city council members), they can construct working relationships that expose the possibilities and strengths under which each group is working. According to Boyd, Plank, and Sykes (2000),

> If organized teachers could come together with public officials around a professional agenda that accords weight to both the legitimate desires of the public and the necessary discretion allocated to teachers, this unity would be the best course. The twin policy themes of standards and choice have emerged as the likely foci for such partnerships, but each contains the seeds of both collaboration and conflict around professional conceptions of the teacher's role and of participation in reform by organized teachers. (p. 207)

Although administrators can work to foster a collaborative and collegial environment, they cannot mandate it. Teacher collaboration and collegiality must originate from within the teaching hierarchy; otherwise, it will likely be interpreted as another managerialistic control strategy and will be thus resisted (Blase & Anderson, 2000).

Teachers as Self-Employed, Self-Directed Professionals

In a few cases, such as in teacher-initiated charter schools, teachers can remove themselves and their schools from the controls of the system and from under the aegis of the local teachers' contract. The stakes are high, and teachers sometimes find it easier to live under the regime of the public schools than to become their own bosses. Overextension and burnout are

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common in teacher-run charter schools where the roles of administration and central-office managers are shifted to teachers. This results in teachers' having to do tasks (e.g., managing, accounting, scheduling, dealing with parents and community members, etc.) for which they have no expertise or training. Furthermore, these tasks take time away from the work that they have the expertise and credentials to do—teaching. In short, it is the job of administrators to buffer the teachers from organizational and external intrusions into their work (Blase & Anderson, 2000; Mintzberg, 1979). The idea, however, has real appeal. Going out on one's own works for some teachers despite the longer hours, higher stakes, and greater energy requirements.

Payment by Results, Again

Another model for organizing teachers' work and pay is to relate their salaries to their efforts and success in improving student learning. In a sense, this approach takes the supervisors (principals) out of the tedious teacher-evaluation business and allows teachers to select a tougher assignment for more pay and to be rewarded for improved pupil performance as measured by student and school improvement. Randi Weingartner, President of the UTF of New York City, the nation's largest local teachers' union, recently advocated that the worst, poorest, and lowest performing public schools become their own school enterprise zones and "proposed a 15 percent salary incentive for teachers willing to work in the City's 200 lowest-performing schools" (Herszenhorn, 2004, p. 27). The next step, as experts have long suggested, would be merit pay for individual outstanding teachers or for the whole staff in schools that show marked improvement.

Whichever of these reforms may be adopted, whether it is incentive pay for teachers in the worst schools and/or merit pay for schools or teachers who show significant improvement, these economic incentive models tend to bypass traditional supervisory approaches and allow differentiated pay to begin to leverage reform both in the assignment of teachers using the concept of battle pay for taking on the toughest jobs or of merit pay based on school and/or individual teacher performance.

Perhaps then the ultimate teacher-development plan, evaluation tool, and driver for improvement are economic and not supervisory. This approach digs out of several traps, overriding the strictures of the traditional teacher contract, moving controls to the paycheck and beyond the bureaucracy, relinquishing the professional or semiprofessional concerns, and ultimately making each school and teacher responsible and responsive to the noted improvement in student attendance, test scores, and graduation.

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Senior Teachers as Evaluators

The concept of the principal as the principal teacher (or head teacher in the United Kingdom) has some promise as well. Why not create self-sustaining professional development and review committees of teachers who are elected by their peers to act as mentors and evaluators? Making teachers masters of their own profession and fate requires an overhaul of the politics of education in the United States. Under this model, power would be vested in those most experienced and knowledgeable, in the so-called master teacher, and his or her role with other teachers would be protected from the overstructuring of the union and contracts on one hand and from bureaucratic controls on the other.

For example, take the medical profession where each week, as Atul Gawande (2004) explains, doctors meet for an M & M (Morbidity and Mortality) conference where physicians are free to discuss what went wrong. Errors and problems, rather than being points to ignore or cover up, become powerful tools for collegial professional improvement. Imagine teachers meeting weekly not to listen to a professional-development expert or to directives from administration but to talk about what happened that week—what worked and what failed and how to improve practice. Here the micropolitics of the profession are around collegiality, openness to hearing about others' problems and shortcomings, and other more successful actions. Working together critically and honestly may be the best means for building a powerful professional culture of teaching and learning, one that benefits the practitioner as well as the students.

Knowing When (Not) to Lead

Grint (2004) argues that leaders are only needed in times of crisis. At most times people can get on with their work without the assistance of a person in charge. This is especially true of professionals who are highly educated and credentialed in their field (T. J. Johnson, 1972). For the most part, teachers can and do carry out their daily activities without the need for direction from an administrator (leader). In times of crisis or instability, strong and decisive leadership is needed. School leaders should, in this context, listen carefully to dissenting voices to obtain the fullest possible understanding of the environment in which they are operating (Grint, 2004). It is important for principals and other educational leaders to know when they should actively lead and when they should leave teachers to carry out their professional activities. At all times, however, educational leaders need to be supportive of the teachers in their organizations if they want to foster an environment for collaboration and collegiality.

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CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that three major traps complicate the micropolitics of supervision. Organizational norms and relationships between labor and management can inhibit the potential for both teachers and principals to exact important staffing and instructional improvements. Also complicating the process is the macro- and microlevel accountability discourse that obfuscates whether teaching is in fact a profession. Finally, leadership styles and participatory decision making in schools themselves work to affect both the supervisory process and its effectiveness for instructional change.

From a historical perspective, the imposition of what Mintzberg (1979) has called a machine bureaucracy on schools, together with the characterization of teaching as a semiprofession, has resulted in the formation of teachers' unions as means of resistance to this control. Consequently, relationships among organizational actors became and remain highly prescribed in very elaborate collective-bargaining agreements.

It is unclear whether these bureaucratic, organizational, and leadership traps of supervision are tightened within the context of various reform efforts since the 1990s. Reform policies do complicate the overall micropolitics of schooling as, when they are top-down or perceived as top-down, they may "divest teachers (and sometimes even local school administrators) of the power to make decisions about their courses and students" (McNeil, 1986, p. 209).

We have, in this article, provided some guidance for school leaders in terms of negotiating the supervision traps and have at times highlighted the perils and pitfalls of strategies for releasing them. Future research should empirically explore the potential for each of the suggested releases to lead to real and effective teacher supervision.

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Bruce S. Cooper, Ph.D., is professor and chair of the Division of Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University. He is serving as president of the Politics of Education Association. His latest books include Better Policies, Better Schools*,* Promises and Perils Facing Today's School Superintendent*, and* Truancy Revisited: Students as Consumers*.*

Patricia A. L. Ehrensal, Ed.D., is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University. She has published articles in Educational Administration Quarterly*,* The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*,* The Journal for a Just and Caring Education*, and* Religion and Public Education*.*

Matthew Bromme, senior clinical instructor in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University, was formerly employed by the New York City Department of Education as an assistant principal, as a principal of an elementary and middle school, and as superintendent of the largest school district in New York City. He also served as the senior operations manager to the chancellor of the New York City Department of Education before joining Fordham University.

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