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The Political Context of Instructional Supervision in Primary Schools in Developing Countries

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Abstract: Supervisory practice has evolved since its origins in colonial times, and its effectiveness as a means of improving instruction depends on the ability of educational leaders to remain responsive to the needs of teachers and students. An educational leader's resolve to remain adaptable also depends on an appreciation of the changing and evolving nature of supervision, especially in the new millennium. An educational leader who understands the history of supervision and how current demands are influenced by that history will be better able to confront the technological, social, political, and moral issues of the day. Educational leaders also will have to develop the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are the foundation for effective supervisory practice. This chapter explicates how supervision has evolved to its current state, how you might respond to ever-increasing supervisory needs and demands, and how your beliefs and attitudes affect how you react to daily challenges.

Keywords: Political, context, instructional, primary schools, supervision, developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

In the last forty years many developing countries have been plagued by bad governance resulting in war and violent unrest. Schools have been sites of politically motivated violence during these wars and periods of violent unrest [1].

Many schools in the developing countries have been directly affected by war. For example, during the 1980s, the war in Mozambique caused the destruction or closure of 60 percent of the country's schools [2]. The conditions of work are appalling in the aftermath of the war. Furniture and equipment are usually stolen, or broken, leaving very little in the way of facilities.

Long term violence in a society can create a culture of violence which may be difficult to eradicate overnight. In South Africa, for example, apartheid which only finally disappeared in 1994, left a legacy of violence in most institutions of learning. In the aftermath of the Soweto uprisings the police shot and killed more than one thousand learners [3]. The culture of violence in a sense has replaced the culture of learning and a great deal of work still remains to be done to re-establish the latter.

The cultural context

According to Harber and Davies [4], the values, beliefs and behaviours of traditional cultures co-exist, even though not always harmoniously, with Western ones in developing societies. Schools are also affected by the co-existence of the imported cultural values of the Western school and the values of the surrounding society.

In the next segment we argue that schools in developing countries are predominantly authoritarian. Part of the reason for this is to be found in the inherited colonial forms of education in terms of what constituted school and knowledge. However, as Harber and Davies [4] point out, the confirmation of authoritarian relationships as we have seen, is also related to the nature of traditional political cultures and patterns, cultural expectations and gender relations.

Hofstede [5] in his book *Culture's Consequences,* vividly captures the influence of culture on instructional supervision. He concludes that people vary a great deal concerning cultural variations that challenge the effective instructional supervisory practices. In this regard Hofstede [5] talks of four cultural dimensions: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, masculinity versus feminity, and

uncertainty avoidance. Because of their perceived direct relevance to this study, the first two dimensions are briefly discussed below.

Power Distance

Power distance is a national culture attribute describing the extent to which a society accepts that power in institutions is distributed unequally. Questions such as the following are addressed by this cultural dimension of power distance. How important is status in an organisation? What powers are given to principals as a function of their positions? In this regard, Harber and Davies [4] point out that people in developing countries observe the custom of power distance. For example, Nagel [6], in relation to the Shona culture in Zimbabwe, says:

The underlying values of both tradition and modernity probability support each other. An example is the military, authoritarian English education with its strong emphasis on obedience and discipline, which coincides with the authoritarian gerontocratic and patriarchic social systems of traditional society.

Clearly, therefore, instructional supervisory practices in most developing countries tend to reflect the unequal power distribution promoted by their cultures.

Individualism versus collectivism

Individualism versus collectivism is another dimension of national culture identified by Hofstede [5]. Individualism refers to a national culture – attribute describing a loosely-knit social framework in which people emphasise only the care of themselves and their immediate families. This is made possible by the large amount of freedom that such a society allows individuals. Collectivism is the opposite of individualism [5]. It is characterised by a tight social framework in which people expect others in groups of which they are part to look after them and protect them when they are in trouble. As can be expected developed countries tend to lean towards individualism while the developing ones tend to emphasise collectivism.

In this, regard, the contention is that the instructional supervisory practices of principals in primary schools in the developing countries are also affected by the co-existence of the imported cultural values of the Western school and the values of the surrounding society. In this regard the questions facing those who wish to improve primary school instructional supervision in developing countries are therefore; what aspects of the interplay between existing and modern social and cultural imperatives can be lived with and which ones must be changed? What is the impact of this interplay of values on the actual instructional supervision in primary schools in developing countries? The latter question is discussed in the next segment.

CONCLUSION

The supervisory landscape has evolved since the early inspectional practices of supervisors in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Supervision in a post-industrial society requires a new breed of supervisor, one who advocates and affirms participatory democratic practices. Who are these supervisors? What kind of supervisors do we want to attract into the field? Are you more inclined to encourage teachers in ongoing, meaningful dialogue about instructional improvement, or do you feel more comfortable suggesting to teachers' ways to improve their teaching?

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