

Images of Principals on Television and in the Movies

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Scholarly research into the work experiences of teachers has burgeoned in the last ten years (e.g., Jalongo and Isenberg 1995; Johnson 1990; Joseph and Burnaford 1994; Warren 1989), to the great benefit of both teachers and students. Unfortunately, research into the role of the principal has not proceeded at the same accelerated pace. Although some recent studies have tried to provide insight into what it means for a principal to "supervise" (e.g., Beck and Murphy 1993; Hartzell, Williams, and Nelson 1995; Marshall 1992; Webster 1995), much work still remains.

Considering the dearth of literature about the work and experiences of principals, how does the lay public come to know and understand their work? What do teachers, students, and parents expect from principals? How do principals themselves understand their own role? What cultural forces influence our perception of the role of principals?

My recent research¹ has led me to believe that our images and perceptions of principals are influenced largely by popular culture—in particular, movies and television. A cultural studies approach examines the dynamic interaction between cultural images of principals in film, for example, and the perception we have of them. My research indicates that those images—or, in the language of cultural studies, those "culturally shared cognitive models"—influence not only how principals are perceived by others, but how principals themselves understand their own professional identity.

In my study, I surveyed over twenty television programs and films depicting principals. Data sources included video stores and cable television and visits to the Museum of Broadcasting and the Museum of Radio and Television in New York City. Research questions included "How are principals portrayed in film and television?" and "To what extent do principals contribute to the perpetuation of stereotyped images?" A cultural studies approach served as the primary perspective or theoretical framework for the analy-

sis. Comparative content analysis was also used to generate and verify themes (Holsti 1969; Marshall and Rossman 1989). The findings suggest, in part, that reconceptualizing the theory and practice of administration based on an "ethic of caring" should be a priority (Noddings 1992).

Three Images of Principals in Film and on Television

The Authoritarian Principal

Three distinct, yet related, views of the principal have consistently appeared in film and on television. The first view is that of the authoritarian principal who employs autocratic administrative practices. Ruling by fiat and relying on intimidation, supervisors of this type, mostly male, legitimize their methods based on hierarchical and patriarchal sources of authority. An example of this image of a principal is Mr. Wameke (played by John Hoyt) in the 1955 film classic *Blackboard Jungle*. Stern, aloof, and humorless, Mr. Wameke is the stereotypical, middle-aged, authoritarian principal.

In our first glimpses of Mr. Wameke, we note his conservative dress, stoic manner, and privileged position in the school. Perhaps the most memorable image is of the ruler he clasps, as a king might hold his scepter. At the start of the first faculty meeting, the vice principal formally announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, your principal." In walks Mr. Wameke to greet his faculty. Prior to that scene "our hero," Mr. Dadier, experiences firsthand who the boss of a school really is. After offering Mr. Dadier a teaching position, Mr. Wameke asks, "Any questions?" Hesitatingly, the neophyte says, "Just one question, sir, the uh . . . discipline problem here . . ." Incredulous, Mr. Wameke says, "I beg your pardon?!" "Well, I understand . . ." Mr. Wameke interrupts and inches closer to Mr. Dadier: "There is no discipline problem in this school, Mr. Dadier, as long as I am principal!"

Another classic example of this authoritarian, almost dictatorial type of supervisor can be found in the film *Lean on Me* (1989). The principal-as-despot is depicted in this profile of Joe Clark, the real-life former principal of Eastside

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High School in Paterson, New Jersey. Although more flamboyant than Mr. Wameke, Joe Clark (portrayed by Morgan Freeman) is the prototypical autocrat. During the first faculty meeting, when a representative from the teachers' union is welcoming the new principal, saying, "We've heard so much about you and we want to tell you what we've done in anticipation of your arrival—" Clark interrupts the teacher, bellowing, "You may sit down, Mr. O'Mally! Think you could run this school? If you could, I wouldn't be here, now would I?" Clark paces about the room and thunders, "No one talks at my meetings. No one! You take out your pencils and write." Clark continues, "This is an institution of learning. If you can't control it, how can you teach?" After demoting the football coach, Clark tells him, "If you don't like it, Mr. Darnell, you can quit—the same goes for the rest of you." Clark ends his diatribe by explaining that "this is not a damn democracy . . . my word is law. . . . There's only one boss in this place and it's me!"

The Principal-as-Bureaucrat

A second prevalent image in film and on television is the principal-as-bureaucrat. That type of principal is overly concerned with administrative reports, scheduling exigencies, and logistical procedures and, worse, adheres to organizational mandates at the expense of the individual needs of students and teachers. He or she is often depicted as a humorless stickler for every one of the board of education's rules and regulations.

Judd Hirsch's portrayal of a principal, Mr. Rivelle, in the 1984 film *Teachers*, shows an administrator who places bureaucratic mandates above ethical and moral imperatives related to teaching and learning. For example, Mr. Rivelle succumbs to bureaucratic and organizational policies when he asks for a teacher's resignation out of fear that the teacher will testify that the school was liable for not teaching a former high school graduate to read. In another scene that illustrates that bureaucratic penchant, Mr. Jerrel (our hero teacher, played by Nick Nolte) tries to motivate Eddie (played by Ralph Maccio of *Karate Kid* fame) by encouraging him to report on some of the deficiencies of the school and to use any method of reporting he chooses. Eddie takes candid photos of selected staff members that eventually get published in a local newspaper. Many of the photos are unflattering, such as one of a teacher sleeping at his desk. Mr. Rivelle fumes after viewing the photos in the newspaper. With Eddie sitting outside Mr. Rivelle's office, the principal says to Mr. Jerrel, "He claims you okayed this. Did you?" Hesitating for a moment, Mr. Jerrel says, "Yes." The principal berates Mr. Jerrel: "Where the hell are your brains? Do you know how much embarrassment this is going to cause us?" Mr. Jerrel tries to justify his teaching methods, albeit unsuccessfully. Mr. Rivelle finally ends the conversation by informing Mr. Jerrel, "This goes on your permanent record!" To which Mr. Jerrel responds sarcastically, "Does this mean I have to stay after school, too?"

The characters of Mr. Bestor the principal and Mr. McKay the supervisor-for-supplies in the movie *Up the Down Staircase* (1965) also reinforce the image of the principal-as-petty-bureaucrat. Characterized by teachers as "snoopervisors" (Glanz 1989) and by-the-book supervisors, such principals are seen to place organizational demands over individual needs.

The Principal-as-Numskull

Supervisor-as-numskull constitutes a third view of principals on television and in the movies. Relying on caricature and exaggeration, that portrayal implies that principals are dimwitted dolts who haven't the foggiest notion of what is transpiring in the school. Almost always male, those principals are easily taken in by outlandish schemes conceived by presumably far brighter and more creative students. Mr. Woodman, in the television show *Welcome Back, Kotter*, is a classic example of that type of principal.

In one scene, Freddie "Boom-Boom" Washington, a black student stereotyped in not very favorable ways, joins Horseshack, simpleton and scapegoat of the "Sweathogs," in selling school supplies. In comes Puerto Rican-Jewish "Sweathog" Juan Epstein to complain about a pencil he bought from Boom-Boom and Horseshack. "I got a complaint against this pencil you sold me—it don't work." Horseshack, looking at the small pencil, moans, "Ohhhhh. . . what seems to be the problem?" Epstein replies, "Every time I write with it, it gets duller and when I sharpen it, it gets shorter. What we have here is a vicious cycle—duller, shorter, duller, shorter. I don't know what to do!" As Mr. Woodman walks by, Boom-Boom says, "You know what they say around here. Any time something keeps getting duller and shorter, they make it the *principal!*" The boys laugh uncontrollably as the principal shouts, "Hyenas! You are all hyenas."

Mr. Belding, in *Saved by the Bell*, a more recent T.V. series, is another example of this type of principal. Like *Welcome Back, Kotter*, *Saved by the Bell* is a sitcom that clearly illustrates the persistent theme of the principal as an out-of-touch dullard who serves as the object of student ridicule and buffoonery. The depiction of Mr. Edward R. Rooney in the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) is also representative of this third image of the principal.

Discussion and Implications

Despite the growing literature that acknowledges the importance of the principal for achieving an effective school, principals, for the most part, have been depicted unfavorably in film and on television as insecure autocrats, petty bureaucrats, and classic buffoons. What can we do about such depictions? Surely we cannot dictate to television and cinema executives how to portray principals. Moreover, television and the movies use inaccurate and exaggerated negative images to depict virtually every professional, including politicians, lawyers, doctors, nurses, and teachers. So what can we learn from examining images

of principals in popular culture? I think at least three lessons are clear.

First, extensive research in cultural studies indicates that the popular media have a powerful influence on our images of various professions. The extent to which popular culture reflects reality or merely constructs imaginary images for entertainment purposes can be debated. Regardless of one's position, however, images—i.e., the way in which a person or thing is popularly perceived or regarded—form a public impression and thus shape reality. Perception is reality to the extent to which images communicated through various forms of popular culture are internalized, at least cognitively, by viewers or consumers of popular culture. Our understandings of principals are shaped by the beliefs, viewpoints, and values explicitly or implicitly transmitted by television and cinema. Culturally shared cognitive models that communicate that principals are arrogant bureaucrats, for example, influence our assumptions about principals and structure the way we think about them (Holland and Quinn 1987; Mead 1951/1962).

Real-life principals need to be aware of the images of their work that filmmakers and television producers are sending to viewers. They may counter such images by assuring others in the school community that they are opposed to autocratic and bureaucratic practices. As for portrayals of principals as buffoons, principals should communicate that they too have a sense of humor.

Second, a cultural studies perspective reveals that various forms of popular culture serve, in part, to critique established dogma and practices (see, e.g., Appelbaum 1995; Giroux and Simon 1989; Spring 1992; Weber and Mitchell 1995). Comedic satire is a method employed by popular culture to transmit subtle and, often, not so subtle messages about, for instance, principals as figureheads representing the school establishment. Portraying principals in such comical ways communicates, in part, that even though they occupy more prestigious positions in the school hierarchy and earn more money than teachers, principals are fallible and should not be taken too seriously. Teachers and students, often without power in the school hierarchy, are able, in a manner, to circumvent their subordinate status and demonstrate their autonomy by making the principal seem foolish. Outrageous satire at the expense of principals essentially conveys a notion that hegemonic relationships, although perhaps appropriate in business settings or factories, are ill-suited for schools.

A third implication has to do with the extent to which principals contribute to their own negative image. What can they learn by examining images of principals in popular culture? To the extent that they minimize autocratic and bureaucratic practices, principals communicate their com-

mitment to the human dimension of supervision—or to what has more recently been termed an “ethic of caring.” A principal committed to caring will “be grounded in the belief that the integrity of human relationships should be held sacred and that the school as an organization should hold the good of human beings within it as sacred” (Starratt 1996). As Mr. Jerrel reminded Mr. Rivelle in *Teachers*, “The damn school wasn’t built for us, Roger. It’s built for the kids! They’re not here for us, we’re here for them.” Reconceptualizing the theory and practice of administration based on an ethic of caring will influence current practices, as well as the recruitment and training of principals.

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