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PREVIEW

CATHOLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND AUTONOMY

by

BARBARA A. MARCHESE

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 2000

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PREVIEW

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Catholic School Principals and Autonomy

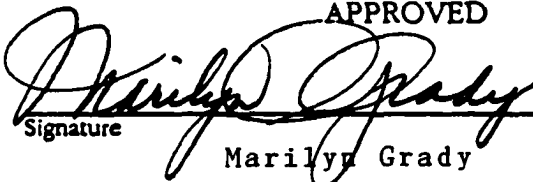
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CATHOLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND AUTONOMY

Barbara A Marchese, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2000

Advisor: Marilyn L. Grady

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify Catholic school principals' perceptions of their autonomy. The study focused on how six Catholic school principals function within the diocesan school system. The grand tour question was:

In what ways do Catholic school administrators perceive that they are autonomous in their work as school administrators?

The sub questions were:

- 1. How do principals describe the discretion they have in their work?**
- 2. How do principals describe the advantages they perceive from having discretion in their role as principal?**
- 3. How do principals describe the disadvantages of having discretion in their role as principal?**

Five themes emerged in this study: Singular Leadership, Constraints, Relationships, Support and Areas of Additional Help. In looking at singular leadership, five of the six principals did feel that they were autonomous in their jobs as principals. Boards of Education and pastors played significant roles in the extent of autonomy experienced by the principals. The relationship between the pastor and principal is not discussed in the literature but is very important when discussing principal autonomy.

A major constraint that all the principals experienced was in the area of finances. Financial resources are limited and the pastor determines the monies available to be spent. The schools are very dependent on the parish for financial support in running the school.

The Catholic school office and other principals readily helped when contacted. All of the principals in this study would welcome additional help in their jobs.

The principals felt that their preparation for the job was not learned at the university level. Most of the training came from on-site experiences or from their principals when they were teaching.

Literature concerning Catholic school leadership would be enhanced by looking at the pastor/principal relationship and the impact that that relationship has on the longevity of the principal's tenure. Catholic school board roles and responsibilities and how they differ from public school boards would be an area for further research.

PREVIEW

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project like this does not happen without the support and guidance of many individuals. I want to express my gratitude to the following people or groups of people. Without their influence I would not have completed this endeavor.

I thank my family and friends for believing in me, encouraging me and never doubting that I would complete this project. A special thank you to my mom and dad for instilling in me a strong work ethic, determination, sense of humor and the ability to know what is important and to follow my heart.

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I want to express my deepest gratitude to my colleagues and friends who allowed me to interview them throughout this project. I am appreciative of their willingness to be honest and open with me on this topic.

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I thank all the members of my committee, Dr. Martha Bruckner, Dr. Marilyn Grady, Dr. Barbara LaCost, Dr. Stanley Vasa, and Dr. Fred Wendel for their willingness to offer assistance and guidance.

DEDICATION

In memory of my mother Betty Marchese, who always believed in me when I doubted myself. She was a woman of substance, passion, courage and vision who taught me by example that I could do anything. I always felt her close by during this project and will always be grateful that she was in my life and continues to be a strong influence.

In memory of my friend Tom Kros who died after one semester of classes. He was a driving force for me in pursuing this degree and I missed his presence on the trips to Lincoln. This one's for you, Tom.

PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Omaha	2
Common Frameworks	3
Policy 6001 School Calendar	4
Policy 2070 Local School Boards/Board of Education/ School Communities	4
Policy 4040 Salary and Benefits	4
The Call of the Catholic School Principal	6
Educational, Spiritual, Managerial Leader	7
A Personal Story	8
Co-Operative Observation Pilot Program	9
1995-1996 School Year	9
Sampling Method	11
Tradition of Inquiry	12
Findings	13
Theme of Autonomy	14
Theme of Pursuit of Excellence	14
Theme of Time	15
Theme of Relationships	15
Discussion	16
Recommendations	17
Purpose of the Study	20
Research Question	20
Definition of Terms	21
2. APPROACH TO THE STUDY	24
Rationale for Qualitative Method	24
Case Study Research	25
The Role of the Researcher	25
Data Collection and Sampling	26
Data Analysis Procedures	29

CHAPTER	PAGE
Verification Strategies	29
Clarifying Research Bias	30
Member Checks	30
Rich, Thick Description	30
Presentation of Findings	31
Ethical Considerations	31
Dissemination	31
3. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS	32
Principals' Perceptions	32
Research Question 1	32
Singular Leadership	33
Singular Leadership and Pastors	35
Singular Leadership and Boards of Education	36
Singular Leadership and Money	37
Research Question 2	38
Relationships	38
Research Question 3	53
Constraints	53
Additional Findings	66
Preparation for the Job	66
Additional Skills	69
Shared Responsibilities	73
4. REFLECTIONS AND AMPLIFICATION	79
Singular Leadership	79
Preparation for the Job	81
Support and Assistance	84
Constraints	87

CHAPTER	PAGE
Board Relationships	90
Principal and Pastor Relationships	92
Shared Responsibilities	94
Propositions	94
Recommendations	98
Additional Research	99
REFERENCES	100
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Consent to Participate in Research	104
Appendix B: Letter to Participants	106
Appendix C: Interview Protocol	108
Appendix D: Archdiocese of Omaha Job Description	116

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Educational organizations face many challenges as they attempt to provide for the educational needs of students. Schools must enhance the quality of their services, ensure that all children are learning and encourage the involvement of parents or guardians in the educational process. Education calls for strong leadership by all administrators whether in public or private schools. There are many theories and ideas about leadership, but there is no secret formula for success. Creative ideas and solutions are required of all principals. Increasing demands are being placed on principals that formal university preparation does not address. Administrators gain certification through university preparation, yet, most of their training occurs later on the job. As one elementary principal said, "I try to make thoughtful decisions. Operating by the seat of my pants is not the best way 'to do' my job."

Administrators strive to understand their school culture, build relationships, provide leadership and vision, and struggle with the demands of multiple roles that inevitably impact their personal lives. All principals deal with difficult issues, make tough decisions, and initiate change within their organizations. Principals must recognize the tremendous role they play as change facilitators or obstructors. "Throughout our years of research and experience, we have never seen a situation in which the principal was not a significant factor in the efforts of schools to improve" (Hall & Hord, 1987, p.1). Principals contribute to educational change since they are acutely involved in the culture and structure of the school (Fullan & Steigelbauer, 1991). Principals' actions do influence change.

Principals discover personal strategies to tackle problems that are similar to those faced by other principals. These strategies can help bridge the feeling of isolation that principals may encounter. Public school districts generally have a well-defined system of policies, rules, and regulations that they must follow. As Gorton (1980) stated, schools do not operate in isolation but as part of a school district with a broad set of goals and values imposed on them from a central office. In public school systems a strong relationship between the school and central office is necessary to implement any major change or schoolwide decision. It is not enough to desire change. Funding and resources must be available, and the central office can supply both. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) noted that, "Individual schools can become highly innovative for a short period of time without the district, but they cannot stay innovative without district action to establish the conditions for continuous and long term improvement" (p.209). Catholic schools do not fit this model. Some of the challenges faced by Catholic school administrators are very different from their public counterparts.

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify Catholic school principals' perception of their autonomy. The study focused on how Catholic school principals function within the diocesan school system.

Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Omaha

Catholic schools are an integral part of the educational mission of the Catholic Church as defined by the American Bishops in their 1972 pastoral letter. "Catholic education is an expression of the mission entrusted by Jesus to the Church He founded.

Through education the Church seeks to prepare members to proclaim the Good News and to translate this proclamation into action.” (To Teach As Jesus Did, 1973, #7).

As stated in The Archdiocese of Omaha Continuous Improvement Guide:

The mission of Catholic schools is an extension of the four-fold educational mission of the Catholic Church: to proclaim the message of faith; to foster community; to encourage worship and prayer; and to motivate service to others. The specific mission of each school should include the following: to educate students to become academically proficient, responsible, community-minded adults who will be active and loyal members of their church and their country. These threads should be present in every Catholic school for these are the foundations with which solid Catholic schools are built. (1944, p. 1)

Common Frameworks

Catholic schools, though referred to as a district or system, function autonomously. So, too, do the administrators. Catholic school administrators are unique. They construct their own calendars, have their own school boards, have different salary scales, and operate independently according to the individual pastors of each parish. Administrators in the Omaha Catholic Schools have a policy book for guidance in forming their own individual school policies. The policies in this book are intended to provide general guidelines within which each school can establish more definitive policies and directives as necessary. This policy book is generated from the Omaha Archdiocesan School Board. The following are some examples of policies that administrators can refer to when forming their own policies, rules or regulations (Policy Book Archdiocese School Board, 1995).

Policy 6001 School Calendar

The school administrator develops an annual calendar which:

1. provides an optimum number of instructional days in recognition of the direct correlation between instructional time and student learning;
2. fulfills, as minimum, state and applicable accrediting agency requirements;
3. gives priority to number of instructional days regardless of length of the school day. (p. 26)

Policy Approved: October 15, 1995

Revision Approved: January 31, 1997

Policy 2070 Local School Boards/Board of Education/School Committees

Local school/education boards or their counterparts designated by another name, formulate policy and assist the pastor and administrator through performance of the functions defined in the board bylaws. (p. 8)

Policy Approved: October 15, 1995

Policy 4040 Salary and Benefits

Salary and benefits for employees of Catholic Education programs are in accord with teachings of the church relative to just compensation for church employees.

Salaries are, to the extent possible, comparable to those accorded for similar positions in the area.

Benefits include health insurance, retirement, and appropriate vacation and/or leave days. Provision for life insurance, disability insurance, and annuity plans is at the discretion of the employer. (p. 15)

Policy Approved: October 15, 1995

The above policies are guidelines. Complying with any of the policies is at the discretion of each individual school and parish. There are no mandated number of instructional days, however, instructional contact hours are established by Nebraska State

Law. Individual parishes decide on their school's salary scale and benefit package.

Compensation is dependent on the financial status of each parish. The pastor of each school/parish is responsible for funding; and, funding is based on the individual parish resources. There are no other outside sources of revenue earmarked for education.

Public school systems rely on tax revenue. According to Policy 3001, in the Policy Book, "All Catholics have the responsibility to contribute to the support of total Catholic Education in the Archdiocese" (p. 11). On the individual school level this means that members of the parish, whether they have children attending the parish school or not, support the school through the Sunday collection. Families who have students attending the school are often charged a tuition. The tuition is usually based on a per pupil cost but no child will be denied a Catholic education because of a family's inability to pay tuition. Pastors and principals will work with families to ensure that their children will be provided with a Catholic education. Although the goals of each school are similar, the ways to achieve them are determined by each individual school/parish. Schools in wealthier areas may not experience the same problems that schools in lower economic areas may encounter. Since there is no general fund that Catholic schools can tap into, schools must decide on ways to raise revenue. Every school has different needs and must find ways to meet those needs. Because each school is its own entity, the Catholic system does not enhance the development of networks of communication and support. Shared leadership is not common; most principals are working in isolation from their peers and superiors.

The work of school principals is extremely complex, demanding, intense and, at times, surprising. Daily, principals must solve complex problems, deal with demands and

conflicts from parents and students, and in addition, maintaining a busy administrative schedule. The days of principals are full of unexpected happenings, from the success of students to the tragedy of dealing with suspected child abuse. It is within these days that decision making, school improvement and leadership happen. Although a principal interacts with other people constantly, Catholic school principals experience isolation. There is no other administrative colleague on site unless the student population and the school budget provides for an additional administrator. Thus a principal's work life can be characterized by isolation.

The Call of the Catholic School Principal

What is it like to work in a Catholic school as the administrator? Research concerning the principalship reveals how important principals are in fostering school improvement (Griffith, 1988; Murphy, 1993; Smylie, 1992). Much of the action takes place in the classrooms, nevertheless, much of the school's success hinges upon the principal's ability to make sense of things so that teachers become more effective in accomplishing in their classrooms what they are there to accomplish (Ackerman, Donaldson, & van der Bogert, 1996). Principals occupy an important role, one vesting them with authority to articulate the school's fundamental purpose to a variety of constituents. In Catholic schools, principals may articulate this purpose at the opening liturgy of the school year or during an all school prayer service. These are the times that principals clearly let the parents and children know "what we are all about." Principals continually iterate their school's fundamental purpose while admonishing students or offering professional advice and counsel to teachers.

One area that sets Catholic school administrators apart from public school administrators is the ability and responsibility they have to share their faith with those they come in contact with daily. Catholic school administrators are “called” to communicate God’s love for youth, to prophetically announce God’s challenges, to dare young men and women to utilize their God-given gifts, and to respond to God’s summons in their own lives. In short, they are disciples who help youth to hear the Good News, to turn from sin, and to experience salvation (Jacobs, 1997).

For these educators, true professionalism and excellence are achieved to the degree that their hearts are animated by God’s love, and that they share it with the young men and women, parents, staff and immediate public. Every action taken and decision made must be reflective of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Catholic educators stand before one another as living symbols of what the Catholic faith assumes, believes, and values to be true. And, as a consequence of this shared vision, they form an educational community that devotes its efforts to the fulfillment of its theological purpose. They strive to provide youth with the moral and intellectual formation that will enable them one day to fulfill their vocation not only as a citizen of a nation but also as citizens of God’s kingdom.

Educational, Spiritual, Managerial Leader

The Catholic school principal is involved in all areas of the school. There is no one else to call on to complete tasks. The Catholic school office will offer guidance and help, but the principal is the one responsible for the completion of a variety of jobs. Typical administrative responsibilities include the following: faith formation, budget preparation, personnel hiring, curriculum development, teacher in-service training, discipline, staff

observation/evaluation, public relations, maintenance/building supervision, annual and state reports, and other day-to-day tasks. Unlike public schools of similar sizes, most Catholic School administrators serve their school community without the help of an assistant or vice principal. Peterson (1982), in a study of principals' work, noted three attributes of their work lives: brevity, fragmentation, and variety. He also found that 85% of the principals' tasks lasted nine minutes or less. Often there was a sense of fragmentation related to the work because the principal was interrupted by forces over which one had no control, and these interruptions were unexpected. What is it like for these administrators who operate without the help of an assistant or vice principal? What is it like to solely complete a variety of tasks? Some tasks may require technical skills for which an administrator has had no previous experience or preparation. I currently face the challenges, complexities and issues that a Catholic School administrator must deal with alone.

A Personal Story

My teaching experience had always been in the primary grades. I taught first grade for 15 years at a K-8 school. I also taught a religion class for public school children once a week in grades three and four for nine years. My experiences allowed me to become knowledgeable and confident in the curriculum and behavioral expectations of children in grades kindergarten through fourth.

I returned to graduate school to pursue a degree in Educational Administration. I graduated in 1990 and became a principal of a K-8 school in 1991. I enjoyed my graduate program, but I came to realize first hand that nothing could prepare

a person for the job of an administrator. I joked to my friends that I had no idea what I was going to do the first day. There were no manuals or lesson plans for this job. It was going to be--“learn as you go and hope that you have enough common sense to make a go of it.” An area in which I felt particularly inadequate was teacher evaluation.

I was expected to do yearly evaluations on all the teachers in my building. This does not sound like a difficult job as I only had 14 teachers to evaluate. I was supposed to be an educational leader who could offer my teachers the help and guidance they needed and deserved. What became evident to me was that I was not an expert in all areas of the curriculum, for all ages.

I realized that I did not have to remain isolated from others and could seek help. This prompted me to develop a cooperative program that would utilize other principals' expertise that I lacked. In return I would be able to offer my strengths to other schools.

Cooperative Observation Pilot Program

1995-1996 School Year

In the spring of 1995 I approached our superintendent about piloting a cooperative observation program that would allow principals in the Catholic schools to work together on teacher evaluations. I was not sure whether there were any legal implications involved with this kind of program. The Diocesan Superintendent of Schools was very supportive of the pilot program. She hoped it would be a model that other principals would be able to use. So, I set out to find two other principals who would be willing to venture into uncharted territories in teacher observations. I was interested in teaming up with principals who had taught in either intermediate or high school. I had no idea what the

reaction from other principals would be, but I was delighted to find two other principals who were interested in the idea.

The first principal with whom I discussed the idea was a former high school math teacher. He had approached me in 1989 to see if I would be interested in working with him on the consolidation of six elementary schools. The consolidation effort would close down four school buildings and house the new school in two buildings. He was interested in having me take on the position of a building principal for the new school. He made it very clear that he was worried about his ability as an instructional leader at the elementary level and would welcome a primary teacher as his counterpart. He had only been associated with high school curriculum. I did not take the job but did help him whenever a concern arose. He had moved on from that job after five years, and we kept in close contact. He was at an elementary school with an enrollment of over 500 students. Half of his school population was still made up of primary students, and he still had some concerns about his instructional leadership at that level. I knew he would jump at the chance to have some help in teacher evaluation. He did!

The other principal had taught science at the junior high level for five years. After leaving teaching he had been an administrator for four years, and he also was very interested in the idea of shared observations. He was the administrator at a school that had more than 300 students with two classes at every grade level. This was the perfect combination for me as neither science nor math were my areas of strength. They both struggled with the curriculum basics at the primary level. This was almost too good to be

true, but I was intrigued and excited to get started. So, we began a cooperative evaluation process among the three schools in 1995.

Making the Grade: Interviews with Principals on Teacher Observations

During the fall of 1997, I had the opportunity to further explore teacher observation. This time the study would involve teacher observation from the perspective of several principals. Because I had been involved with the cooperative observation program for two years, I was very interested in finding out how other principals viewed evaluating teachers. With the help of three other individuals we began to investigate principals' perceptions of evaluation in 12 Catholic grade schools.

The qualitative research format was used because we were primarily concerned about each principal's perspective. Interviews were conducted for data collection and the results were analyzed. Fieldwork, an important component of qualitative research, was used. Each researcher gleaned information primarily from the words of the participants. Themes were developed by using the inductive process.

Sampling Method

The method for collecting data was the interview. The interview was intended to gain an understanding of how Catholic elementary school principals in Omaha, Nebraska, viewed teacher observation.

The interview was designed to obtain information concerning: the model or instrument currently being used for teacher observations in the schools surveyed (administrators interviewed); the strengths and weaknesses of that instrument from both the principal and teacher perspectives; the frequency of use of the instrument; and whether

or not the principal would be in favor of having another principal observe the teaching staff.

The principals of 12 elementary schools were selected for interviews. Those who participated in the interviews were sent a letter explaining the purpose of the interview along with a set of the interview questions. Providing the interview questions in advance allowed the principals the opportunity to review the questions and respond with quality data during the interviews.

The interview protocol was designed to address the following question: How do Catholic school administrators perceive their jobs as teacher evaluators?

Tradition of Inquiry

The tradition of inquiry was the 'case study.' The focus of the case study involved identifying and isolating a specific issue: teacher observation. Data collection was primarily through the interview process. Data analysis focused on theme analysis in narrative form.

The study was bounded by conducting a 'single case study' of principals who served in Omaha schools with student enrollment between 300 and 600 students. The rationale for selecting the case study was based on prior discussions with several principals who voiced a concern that their schools were isolated from interaction with other Catholic schools.

A total of 12 interviews was conducted. The average length of an interview was 50 minutes. The interviews were conducted at the individual schools in the principal's office. The interviews consisted of eight questions that compromised three constructs: the