

Teacher Supervision 'A Dilemma for Samoa': The Issue of Cultural Relativity in the Supervision Literature.

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Abstract

There is an assumption in the literature that philosophical concerns in the supervision and mentoring discourse apply across culture however this commentary paper argues on the contrary. The paper examines the ethnocentrism notion of supervision as highlighted in the literature and makes a case about the importance of considering supervision from a cultural relativism perspective. The paper provides a general examination of the supervision concept then it focuses more specifically on supervision as it is applied to teacher supervisors and student teachers from my own cultural context. It highlights the authoritarian nature of supervision as it is applied in this context and concludes with some thought provoking questions that researchers may wish to take into consideration while involved in current debates on supervision and mentoring.

Keywords: Supervision, Teacher, Samoan Culture, Authoritarian

Introduction

'Supervision was understood chiefly as a function and role in public schools aimed at improving the quality of instruction'

(Glanz 1998: 40)

The notion of supervision is widely discussed in the literature and a number of issues have surfaced regarding this concept. This paper will primarily discuss some of the issues related to supervision as highlighted in the literature and in relation to Samoa, a transforming traditional society. Firstly it will critically examine the literature provided in terms of its application to Samoa. Secondly, it will provide a snapshot of how supervision is applied in Samoa from the teacher supervisors' perspective. The paper will then offer a brief discussion on the notion of cultural relativism as it relates to supervision within the Samoan context and then conclude by emphasizing the importance of considering cultural relativism in understanding teacher supervision.

The supervision of students is a construct of many influences. For example, Glanz (1998) notes the influence of colonialism on the American educational system. Similarly, Samoa has also had an association with colonialism that has resulted in the increasingly complex evolution of its culture and society. The notion of bureaucracy and professionalism noted by Glanz and others was introduced to Samoa around 1840 (Gilson 1970) with the establishment of the role of pastor/teacher by the London Missionary Society.

Pastor/teachers were Samoa's first professionals and the church apparatus its first bureaucracy. Wilkes (1845 cited by Gilson 1970) reports that by 1845, some ten years after contact with the London Missionary Society, 10,000 adults and children were receiving instruction in reading and

writing in what seems to have been a well-organized church educational bureaucracy in which the missionaries were the supervisors (Davidson 1967; Gilson 1970, Keesing 1934; Meleisea 1987a). Using a notion developed by the German sociologist Max Weber, the Samoan historian Malama Meleisea (1987) grounds his thesis about the modern Samoan organizational dilemma on the establishment of a legal/rational system of social organization by the German colonial administrations of 1900-1914 that would from then on co-exist alongside the traditional one. The New Zealand administration in Samoa which began in the early 1920s established a school system based on the British model (Davidson 1967) further entrenching the legal/rational motif.

The Lack of Consideration of Culture in the Literature

There is an assumption in the literature that the philosophical concerns in the supervision/mentoring discourses apply across cultures but this can be demonstrated to be not entirely the case. Although referred to theoretically (Shapiro and Blumberg 1998), the literature does not present through examples the extent to which culture can be an impediment to or even a superior method with which to ground supervisory practice. I will briefly refer to some of the literature in order to illustrate this point.

Dewey's notion that modernity means democracy was influential on the first half of 20th century education in the United States (Dewey 1903 cited by Glanz 1998: 54). In Samoa modernity, as represented by capitalism and to some extent bureaucracy, are present in the social construction of many individual actors. However, modernity correlates in some societies while egalitarianism is only modestly entrenched as a philosophical idea, nonetheless, in its actual daily playing out, the notion of egalitarianism appears to be precarious.

Glanz illustrates the possibility of the contradiction between theory and practice. He argues that in spite of the presence of egalitarian motifs in American society, as Americans looked to science for answers to the organization of industry, resistance to egalitarian forms of supervision was noted. There was difficulty in distancing school supervision from past authoritarian motifs. In fact Glanz notes that egalitarian supervision "never came to fruition." (Glanz, 1998:58). This is perhaps a suitable although not a perfect analogy to the Samoan situation with regard to its traditional stratified authoritarian model of relationships, this is despite lip service being paid to more egalitarian ideas in its cultural ethos and at times in its history (Davidson 1967).

The literature highlighted later models of supervision, such as clinical supervision. These models built further upon democratic models, introducing the notion of collegiality between supervisors and student teachers (Glanz 1998; Goldhammer 1969) which has greater relevance to the Samoan context.

Sergiovanni and Starrat's three part argument that "human growth, achievement of disciplined skills and knowledge, and fulfillment of social responsibilities - should not be in conflict", (Sergiovanni and Starrat 1988: 235; 2007) also has application to Samoa. Here, the notion of fulfillment of social practices dominates life in both the school, home and supervisory settings and would take precedence over the other two parts of their schema. Indeed the delaying of

immediate gratification for a higher goal that the authors note, is particularly evident in Samoa where the stratification system demands almost total deferral of personal gratification until much later in life. The teacher/supervisor is often an active or tacit conveyor of cultural practices such as these.

As in the Zeichner and Tabachnik (1982) study, a variation of the reproduction of belief systems also takes place in Samoa. If anything the Samoan system could be said to only allow for the technical-instrumental aspect of the authors' model. Indeed, that is the extent to which the Samoan educational system has gone in the conveyance of knowledge and/or the secondary socialization that is required for modern capitalistic/bureaucratic sensibilities and the economic needs of this small transforming society.

The idea of being analytical of one's own performance, as suggested in the clinical supervision model, would simply not be easily considered within the Samoan education system at this time. This perhaps reflects Samoa's distance from the mainstream pedagogical discourses and the persistent of the influence of the old New Zealand system in spite of Samoan independence from NZ since 1962. There is also the cultural practice of giving to the authority figure all responsibility for the definitions of situations, to utilize the construct of the social psychologist W.I. Thomas. Thus, as Hogan (1983:30) argues "... people's perceptions of education and of teaching are almost invariably bound up with their own ideologies or undisclosed prejudices" and in Samoa this is the case. Hogan's argument is supported by (Shapiro and Blumberg 1998: 1056) who write that

"the social context in any society defines the issues that will be considered, determines the interaction and discussion, and often determines which issues or concerns will not even become conscious matters for consideration.

While Zeichner and Tabachnik argue that 'a careful self- scrutiny of one's belief system with regard to supervision is a necessary part of a supervisor's education' (Zeichner and Tabachnik 1982: 51 cited by Hogan 1983: 32), the notion of self-examination is simply not a dominant one in where I work as a teacher educator. For example, entrenched cultural Samoan values including the hierarchical nature of the Fa'a Samoa seem to influence teacher educators' own practice thus teachers seem to define the teaching and learning situations.

With respect to males there is some evidence of positive effects of mentoring relationships that are paternalistic as noted by Cochrane-Smith and Paris (1995: 188). This suggests a hierarchical form of mentoring (p.189), which they claim is not suited to the mentoring of females. However, there must be a cultural relativism operating in the case they present. In Samoa, hierarchical supervisory relationships seem to work for both males and females. This may be due to the uniform stratification issues in which both genders are involved, although it is claimed that females have higher status than males in the traditional system (Shore 1982). For both genders knowledge is handed down from above in an extremely authoritarian manner. The form of supervision which Cochrane-Smith and Paris support, shared activity, could not be a comfortable method in Samoa at this time. This is perhaps because, as Dewey (1904/1965: 153) argues, one cannot "...isolate the psychology of learning that goes on in the schoolroom from the psychology of learning that goes on elsewhere" In the Western model the transformation of mentalities is

often expected to be ongoing and in part progressive. However, in Samoa we do not encounter points of view, such as Goldhammer's who notes,

"I have worried about the archaic dependencies we manifest upon authority for initiation of our intellectual tasks... I am troubled by what seems to be the common absence of intellectual autonomy and the common prevalence of docility and anti-intellectualism among us"

(Goldhammer 1969:49 cited by Smyth 1986).

As Smyth argues "so much of what teachers do in schools appears to be habituated and originates from social conditions over which they are effectively prevented from exercising deliberate control." (Smyth 1986: 133). Smyth could be describing the Samoan case, which is pervaded with authoritarian control, where teachers are in full control of the teaching and learning situation. This notion of teachers defining situation is also noted by Roberts and Blasé (1995) when they highlighted modes of manipulating and defining situations as one of the factors that can influence supervisor-teacher interaction. Indeed, to paraphrase Blumberg (1980: 192), it is unlikely that student teacher-supervisor relationships are seen as inherently humanistic in Samoa but rather appear to be more of the ritualistic stratified variety as are most face to face relationships in this society. Again, while this may be a universal aspect of dyads in the west, there is no question for Samoans as to who actually gets to define situations– the answer unequivocally is the lecturer-supervisor.

Views Concerning Teacher Supervision in Samoa

I would like to further clarify the current view of supervision in Samoa by briefly presenting some data based on the results of a study that I and other colleagues carried out during an evaluation of teaching practice in Samoa (Esera et al. 2010). The primary purpose of the study was to discover perceptions about teaching practice on the part of supervisors and what they perceived their roles as supervisors of student teachers to be. Data was collected via teacher interviews, student teachers' feedback as well as anecdotal material based on our own experiences in the field. We conducted interviews with 13 teachers from 4 urban primary schools. The teacher participants had been involved in supervising student teachers over a number of years. A set of ten questions were developed and asked of the participants. The authors also collected data via verbal interactions with student teachers after teaching practice to find out their views concerning their teaching practice experience. Findings from supervisors indicated 90% of supervisors opted for a very authoritarian top down approach to supervision. Findings from student teachers also indicated a very authoritarian approach to supervision by teacher supervisors. This authoritarian approach was deemed very unfavorable by student teachers i.e. student teachers were extremely critical of the excesses of the authoritarian approach taken by supervisors such as their superior, high handed demeanor towards student teachers.

The Samoan Context and Notion of Cultural Relativism

On the basis of the literature review, my own observations and views concerning teacher supervision in Samoa as noted above, the following question surfaces. How do the present debates and discourses in the literature provide for an understanding of the Samoan system and its differences from the mainstream examples that the literature presents?

Overall I believe they point to an issue of cultural relativism. A more authoritarian approach reflective of similar cultural motifs of supervision in some societies in Asia and Oceania may work well for the goals of education as presently constituted in these societies. These goals are mostly concerned with instrumental training and not education for its intrinsic value, nor for the expansion of self-awareness in any analytical or critical sense. These societies may in fact not be stakeholders in the democratic project in the way that the Western world has been. For example, societies in Oceania are mainly organized by family groups, and not by overarching centralized government.

In evaluating this system perhaps plausible questions for scholars and educators in Samoa to ask would be: are student teachers learning under the authoritarian supervisory type system? I would argue that this authoritarian supervisory system appears to be working for teachers in the Samoan context. Why? Because based on experience and observation, these individuals seem to be able to achieve their educational goals under this type of supervision. Besides, I and my colleagues have progressed under the same type of supervision within our own context, and are now participants in a structure of learning in which we are able to demonstrate our capacities to serve and to some extent, enlighten. Although I am a participant in the reproduction of an authoritarian supervisory system, I argue that the very hierarchical nature of the Samoan culture has greatly influenced individuals' paradigms and mindset as reflected in this authoritarian approach, and changing one's cultural values and belief system is not always an easy.

What is worthy of consideration would be to continue to maintain the stability of the current supervisory system, correcting its deficiencies with respect to supervisor excesses, while understanding the capacities of other forms. I would hypothesize with apologies to Dewey that if this authoritarian supervisory approach is not working it is highly likely that the entire social structure of Samoa would be in disarray but this is not the case at present.

Conclusion

The notion of supervision is influenced by many philosophical views such as the egalitarian, democratic and authoritarian approach to supervision. The supervision literature however is critique for its lack of consideration for culture. For example, teacher supervisors from a very hierarchical culture such as Samoa may have problems in understanding how supervision from a more democratic and egalitarian perspective as noted in the literature may apply in their own situation. This view seem to be supported by the findings on a research undertaken on Samoan teacher supervisors which clearly indicated that a more authoritarian type of teacher supervision seem to prevail within the Samoan context. The hierarchical nature of the Samoan culture seem

to have greatly influenced the manner in which individuals from within the Samoan context carry out their everyday life, which can include supervision of other individuals. The notion of cultural relativism is worthy to consider when one is involved in trying to understand and unravel the concept of supervision and how it works from culture to culture.

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