Three dilemmas of supervision

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Supervision, in the opinion of the author, can be singularly important in the improvement of teaching and learning. In this article, he identifies three dilemmas facing supervision, which he claims must be confronted before improvements can be made.

Three Dilemmas of Supervision

ROBERT R. NEWTON

Supervision for many teachers has negative connotations. Teachers often find their encounters with supervisors neither pleasant nor valuable. And their feelings are probably on the mark, for in my experience the supervisory activities that teachers have been subjected to have produced, more often than not, anxiety rather than confidence, defensiveness rather than change.

Supervision Is the Key

Yet supervision seems to be the critical point at which American schools might confront and do battle with the "mindlessness" which Charles Silberman uncovers at every turn in our educational system. The encounter between teacher and student is the climax of all training and resources that go into schooling. It is the point at which the theory and research of university training might be made relevant to the realm of professional practice, where professional attitudes and skills—that intermediary creative mind capable of the application of research to the actual process of teaching—could be nurtured and developed.

Supervision could easily contribute a great deal to teachers' understanding and competence but it doesn't. Rather, it is often avoided and resented by teachers. And supervisors, sensitive to this resentment, frequently must approach their duties with reluctant enthusiasm.

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There are many reasons for this; and I would like to explore briefly the key dilemmas which in my experience prevent supervision from being the powerful tool for the improvement of teaching that it might be. These dilemmas include:

1) confusion between supervisory judgments based on processes rather than outcomes,
2) the tension between supervision as evaluation and supervision as teacher-development, and
3) conflict between supervisor and teacher assumptions on ideal teaching behavior.

Process vs. Outcomes

When Silberman called "mindlessness" the most pervasive problem in American education, he had little difficulty in proving his point. From the graduate school to the kindergarten, in faculty and in administrative and familial circles, few people ever pause to ask "why" they are doing what they are doing. It is a problem of society as well as of schools. In any organized endeavor, it is easy to lose sight of purposes, to expend resources and energies on tasks or activities that are little more than hollow routine.

One of the most powerful movements currently influencing American education is the management of objectives movement. PPBS, performance contracts, behavioral objectives, performance criteria for administrators and teachers are all part of a movement focusing attention on questions of purpose, on what we are trying to accomplish and why. At every level, educators are being held accountable for the effectiveness of their use of resources in accomplishing clearly defined objectives. This movement also raises some serious questions for teachers and supervisors.

Teachers, for example, find it much easier to plan what students will do than to work through clear objectives and then to review and select resources and activities that would be most likely to achieve those objectives.

Supervisors experience a parallel problem. It is much easier to observe processes rather than outcomes. The focus of the supervisor's attention is on technique and activities, and there is frequently little awareness of the outcomes, the learning that has taken place as a result of the class. Of course, a supervisor (or
anyone) can make the connection between high levels of student disorder or boredom and negative or weak outcomes. But the vast majority of teachers avoid these extremes and fall into a range where their performance meets minimum standards. Their efforts are a mixture of the effective and ineffective, and they could profit from a systematic analysis of their teaching activities and the connection of this teaching with student learning.

The difficulty is that there is little solid knowledge on what variables produce learning. This is compounded by the fact that what little is known is rarely utilized by supervisors. As a consequence, teachers are supervised on the basis of what they do rather than the results or effects of what they do—on process rather than outcome. And as the concentration on purposes and objectives in the educational sphere becomes more apparent, this tension between supervision by process and supervision by outcome will become more acute.

**Staff Development vs. Evaluation**

The second dilemma which surrounds supervision is the potential contradiction between supervision as staff development and supervision as evaluation. If teachers are asked to describe what supervision means to them, one of the first ideas they advance is evaluation. The supervisor is frequently seen by the teacher as someone who occupies a position of authority to inspect and render a judgment on the teacher's professional effectiveness.

The teacher sees the supervisor armed with a rating sheet—usually a list of predetermined questions or categories into which his teaching behavior must be fit. The teacher is aware that such ratings will become part of a permanent record which will at some future date probably influence his promotion or security. Given such a function, it is not difficult to understand why teachers are often resentful of supervision; and why supervisors, sensitive to these teacher feelings, approach their responsibilities with ambivalence. Teachers, especially those who are beginning, are aware that the supervisor is in fact a potential threat to their survival in the teaching profession and they cannot be completely at ease or open in this relationship.

Turning to the staff development role of the supervisor, it becomes obvious that his relationship with the teacher must exhibit very different characteristics. His responsibility is to aid
in the development of the personal growth and professional competence of the teacher—to establish with the teacher what is fundamentally a “helping” relationship. The helping relationship is one characterized by openness and honesty, by the freedom to explore the personal and professional dimensions of this unique individual in the teaching role. The nature of this kind of relationship would seem to exclude a priori any hint of authority of the position or evaluative judgment.

Given the internal contradiction in the fusion of the seemingly unreconcilable roles, it is little wonder that supervisors and teachers experience confusion and anxiety as a result of this dilemma.

Teacher vs. Supervisor Assumptions

The third and final dilemma vexing the practice of supervision concerns the frequent conflict between teacher and supervisor assumptions about ideal teaching behavior. Teachers often legitimately complain that the advice or evaluative comments of superiors impose on them some unspoken teacher role or ideal which they neither subscribe to nor completely understand. It is inevitable that the supervisor will enter the classroom with some preconceptions about what the teacher should be doing.

One could identify three different models of teacher behavior based on educational theories currently competing for attention and allegiance in educational circles. They illustrate the way in which unspoken assumptions can and do influence supervisory behavior, and point to some of the contradictory assumptions which are operative in supervisory activity.

An educational theory which makes some fairly clear prescriptions about the function and role of the teacher could be termed the “scholarly discipline school.” It derives its direction from works like Bruner’s *Process of Education*, which maintained that the focus of learning should be the disciplines—both their substance and the ways of knowing that have been developed within them. The teacher is viewed as a scholar in his discipline who, instead of producing further knowledge, devotes himself to mediating the structure and content of the discipline to the next generation. The teacher is expected to be a model of scholarly attitudes and behavior and encourage in his student the insights and intuitive leaps that are characteristic of a practitioner of that discipline.
A second very different teacher model would be the "behaviorist." Defined by its chief theoretician, B. F. Skinner, education is doing, and learning is a process of shaping the desired complex behavioral changes by reinforcing the subject through successive changes. The teacher is a manager who defines or selects precise behavioral objectives and arranges to set up contingencies of reinforcement under which the desired behavioral changes are made to occur.

The third view could be termed the "humanistic school." It takes a still different approach to the learning process. The emphasis is on the student as agent, as source and initiator of all significant learning. The teacher is expected to provide a rich environment for the student to explore and then to stand back ready to help or guide, but reluctant to interfere with the natural unfolding of the student's desire to learn.

It is obvious that these approaches to learning suggest different and, in many ways, contradictory models of ideal teaching behavior. Both supervisors and teachers explicitly, or more often implicitly, operate out of one or a combination of these models, or perhaps assumptions which are different still. The potential conflicts involved in a behaviorist supervisor working with a humanist teacher seem obvious. More often than not, meaningful exploration of classroom teaching is rendered impossible because contradictory assumptions remain under the surface and prevent real communication. It should also be obvious that these unexpressed assumptions are at the heart of many teachers' complaints that supervisor judgments have been unfair.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I expressed the opinion that supervision was probably the most effective mechanism under our control for developing professional teaching competence and stimulating the reform of education being sought from all sides. Yet supervisory activity, in the experience of most teachers and administrators, falls dramatically short of these expectations. It is my contention that the three dilemmas I have described are to a large extent the causes of ineffective supervision. Until supervisory systems are evolved which seriously confront and solve the issues involved in these dilemmas, it is unlikely that supervision in the future will be any more effective than it has been in the past.