Need for Research on Instructional Supervision

Ben M. Harris

RESEARCH on instructional supervision has been undertaken in greater or lesser amounts in recent years depending upon the way one defines the term "supervision." Teaching methods have been fairly extensively, and occasionally even rather intensively, researched. Organizational arrangements for instruction—ungraded primary, ability grouping, core curriculum, team teaching, etc.—have all consumed enough time and energy of researchers to provide some guidelines for educational practice.

When we consider supervision at its central core as the *tasks* and *processes* of *instructional improvement*, we find, however, that little research of high quality has been undertaken. Most of what is currently known about instructional supervision from this point of view is based upon "folk wisdom" or ideas borrowed from other disciplines (2, 6, 13). This is not to say that practices warranted by and borrowed from these sources are not reasonably useful for instructional supervision. Each sub-profession borrows from others, relies on "folk wisdom" where research is lacking, and extracts the relevant findings from research in related fields. Yet each profession which grows to maturity as an applied science does so partly because of the efforts of the members of that group to promote and employ researches which are *directly related* to the unique problems and circumstances of that sub-profession.

Instructional supervision is practiced as one of the oldest sub-professions in education. Its attainment of maturity through research is, for the most part, yet to be realized! The effectiveness of various supervisory activities and programs applied to influence persons and situations toward better instruction needs to be thoroughly researched. The personal characteristics of instructional supervisors and the relationships between these characteristics and educational change need a great deal of study. The rigorous study of forces making for and resisting educational change needs analysis beyond research undertakings to date. A few notes on specific research studies of these kinds which are most needed are offered in the following paragraphs. Some of these studies can and should be undertaken as action research by practitioners. Other studies will need more elaborate designs.

Several decades of organized, specialized, supervisory practice in school situations have produced an array of supervisory activities. Such activities as classroom observation, teacher-supervisor

interviews, demonstration teaching, lecturing, and group discussions are all well known and widely used. The *usefulness* of these activities is not seriously questioned, yet little is known about the *effectiveness* of these and other activities in different situations, with different problems, and different personalities involved. Rogers (16) is among those who have suggested, through research, the value of nondirective interview techniques for therapeutic counseling purposes. There is good reason to believe that this same approach is valuable in supervisory interviewing, but validating evidence is needed. Hughes (11) and Ryans (17) are only two of several who have recently provided new information on approaches to classroom observations. Their studies relate, however, to the problem of *describing* teacher behavior; they are not helpful in answering questions about the use of observation activities for *improving* teacher behavior.

The study by Hill (10) has emphasized some unique values in both lectures and group discussions in voluntary, adult education study groups. Whether these same results apply to not-so-voluntary adult teacher in-service groups is an open question! Furthermore, Hill's study compared the results from skilled lecturing with unskilled discussion leading. This leaves many unanswered questions about the effectiveness of discussion activities under the leadership of professionals (4).

One of the most important steps toward improving supervisory practice and placing it on a truly professional level could come from a large-scale program of research on activity effectiveness. The known supervisory activities need to be precisely tested for relative effectiveness in a series of situations, directed toward various problems, with diverse personalities involved. This is a large order, one worthy of being sponsored by an organization like ASCD, provided financial support might be secured from agencies or foundations also interested in excellence in education.

Research on Program Effectiveness

Exacting studies of supervision programs as distinguished from specific activities or isolated supervisory endeavors are almost nonexistent. Programs of curriculum development often lack sufficient specificity of purpose to permit adequate evaluation of outcomes. Yet even carefully designed programs, such as MPATI, the Texas Media Project, and the Catskill and Rocky Mountain small school projects tend, because of their initial construction, to contribute little to our knowledge of supervision program design. The reasons are various.

1. Programs worthy of study in depth are often large, complex undertakings which make related research difficult.

2. A problem is found in lack of resources. Research on action programs is much more demanding of staff, funds and time than is old-fashioned, campus-centered educational research.

3. Sponsoring agencies tend to want to advertise the success of a supervisory program before the data are in. This discourages the kind of follow-up studies that are often essential in researching programs or projects.

4. Program research tends to focus attention upon outcomes rather than processes.

Underlying these difficulties hampering program research is a basic problem. To date we lack conceptual models to guide supervisors in designing super-

vision programs. Theories of learning have not generally been applied to the design of in-service programs for teachers. Concepts of the dynamics of planned change (13) are now emerging with sufficient clarity to serve in designing curriculum development programs. Models for conceptualizing institutional dynamics might well apply to projects, schools and districts. As these theories and models are used in designing programs of supervision, it will become feasible to research such programs so as to gain new insights into the impact upon people and situations, and the dynamics involved.

Characteristics of Supervisory Personnel

Characteristics of the school principal and the superintendent of schools have been much more fully researched than those of supervisors. We know relatively little about people in such positions as assistant superintendent, curriculum director, general supervisor, coordinator, or consultant. Leadership studies (18) have provided some new insights into the nature of effective leadership for people in administrative positions, but these findings may not apply to supervisory leadership. Ryans' (17) study of teacher characteristics may provide a point of departure for assessing the characteristics of supervisors. The distinguishing "patterns" of teacher behavior which were determined in this classic study were sufficiently *fundamental* as to offer promise as a framework for studying supervisory behavior.

It is curious indeed that we have little reliable evidence even on the fundamental nature of the work of "supervision." Job analyses have rarely been undertaken. Like the teacher, the supervisor often works alone and only fragments of his behavior are readily observable. Unlike the teacher, or the principal, the supervisor usually has no single location in which he or she works, hence, analysis of the job is made still more difficult. Despite these difficulties, simple descriptions of supervisory behavior and sophisticated analyses of these descriptive data for a variety of persons, positions and situations could be most illuminating to the profession. Such descriptive studies need to be undertaken before more precise research designs are forthcoming.

The preceding paragraphs have emphasized the supervisor as an individual. This tends to ignore another important aspect of supervision which is worthy of research. Most supervisory endeavors which seem to be productive are *team undertakings;* a variety of people are involved in several supervisory positions. Herein lies the need for study of supervisory staffs and their working relationships. We need to know more about functional relationships between principals, supervisors, and other staff members.

Communication patterns within a staff and the barriers to effective communication have been fruitfully researched in other institutional settings. Role conflicts between principals and supervisors are a reality which needs to be better understood via research (8). How value, interest, and personality structures of supervisory personnel influence their behavior patterns may well provide an important key to help solve the mystery of modern education—*why schools don't change much!* Equally important in this respect may be the findings from studies of the power structure of the social milieu

of the school as it influences the curriculum and instructional processes (3).

Problem of Research Publication

No discussion of needs for research in instructional supervision would be in proper perspective without some comment on the problem of dissemination. Just as well tested teaching practices find great difficulty in being disseminated, so research in supervision—limited as it is—is often not available to those who might use it. *Educational Leadership* is rare among nationally circulated periodicals in being devoted primarily to supervision and curriculum development. Yet even this journal publishes few articles on supervision *per se* and few in supervision research. Other journals do, of course, publish manuscripts on supervision topics, but they are limited and research articles are rare. Listings in *Education Index* for the past ten years number only 36 per year on the average under the heading, "Supervision and Supervisors." In none of these years was more than a single article listed as supervision research. Research in the field of supervision is going on, if only in the form of doctoral dissertations. Phi Delta Kappa reported 20 dissertations on supervision completed in 1961 in over 100 colleges. Thirty-seven such dissertations were reported under way or completed in 1962.

One of the needs relating to research in supervision is the publication of studies. The journal *Educational Administration and Supervision* used to meet this need. It is no longer being published and an old problem is made worse. A plain fact that must be faced is this—one important stimulant to research production is research consumption. Supervision research tends not to be consumed because its findings are not published. This is a vicious spiral which might be broken by the establishment of a single journal of supervision research. Perhaps this would be an important step toward more and better research which in turn would mark the emergence of supervision as a genuine profession!

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Editorial—Corey

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do and then get me to do it. The help I need most is with a process and I regret that attention to processes has diminished in the recent emphasis on a product that is usually in the form of knowledge. I hope that ASCD can accelerate the return to a more wholesome balance.

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Semantics—*Hayakawa*

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ing. The most common one is, "I didn't know I could write!" It is also surprising how many students want the instructor to read their hastily-written, unedited stuff. It is as if they were saying (as they cannot say about their laboriously written assigned themes), "This is I—this is what I am like—*please* read it." In a matter of weeks, student writings, at first so labored and self-conscious, become fluid, expressive, and resonant with the rhythms of the spoken American language.

Students find subject matter in this way, too, because they write down things that they would not have written in premeditated themes, and discover that some of it is literary material. Frequently, having touched upon a subject in their impromptu papers and found it interesting, students will explore the same subject more deeply later, in carefully rewritten and revised papers.

Of course, these exercises in spontaneity are not the whole of freshman composition in my view, but they provide the release and establish the self-confidence in students that enable them to approach their more formal writing assignments with fewer inhibitions, fewer anxieties. Teachers who have not tried such an approach as this are earnestly entreated not to argue against this exercise on *a priori* grounds, but to try it, because I am sure they will be as amazed by the results as I was.

So that's my formula for Freshman English: semantics, to induce a heightened awareness of language and its many complexities; abundant reading; a *vast* amount of writing, more than most students have ever done. The aim is not simply better students in the academic sense. The aim is growth.

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