

A Research Agenda

SUPERVISION: NEEDED RESEARCH

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The paucity of serious research about supervision in education is disturbing, especially in the light of extraordinary claims made about its importance. Of all the specialized functions in American education, supervision may be the least informed by research. The reasons for the absence of significant, focused research in this field are not entirely clear. Of primary importance may be the lack of a clear definition of supervision, and so the resulting inability to identify who supervisors are. Many people share this function, and for some it constitutes a small portion of their role in educational leadership. The historical lack of clarity about who supervisors are and what they do persists. This problem at least partly explains the inadequate research base. Still, the educational profession should have confronted these issues by now.

At universities that generate research, instructional supervision too seldom receives prominence in organizational arrangements. With notable exceptions, supervision is subservient to the interests of either educational administration or curriculum. Other research interests receive priority. Moreover, professors of supervision are few in number and typically teach in other specialties as well. In short, the *specialty* of instructional supervision has not been properly recognized in higher education. Why historically this is the case might be interesting to explore.

Administration, counseling, school psychology, and special education have all attained a prominence in the organization and program of colleges of education that has generally been denied to instructional supervision, although instructional supervision is essential to the achievement of educational purposes. With the exception of a handful of universities, supervision is not taken seriously in most graduate programs in education. Where the field is taken seriously, we find some interesting work.

Despite a sharp increase in scholarship, supervisory practice has historically been rooted more in tradition and personal preference than in a body of knowledge. The available literature is all too often either highly *descriptive* (accounts of what practicing supervisors do) or *prescriptive* (a listing of the essential objectives and tasks of supervision). A third body of literature might

be described as *adulation*, asserting the importance of supervision and supervisors and including broad pronouncements about the responsibility to improve instruction. Practice was confirmed by observation. Such fragmentation has negative consequences: the strong research base that informs professional practice in other areas of education is still inadequate in supervision.

Until recent years, systematic inquiry into effective supervisory behavior has been almost nonexistent. Even now much pertinent scholarship is more concerned with what supervision should accomplish than with the essential body of knowledge and skills that should inform practice. Contrasted with the available research base for other professional roles in schools, supervision is seriously handicapped. Moreover, supervision is frequently practiced in ways that ignore what we do know about organizations and human behavior. It is simplistic to expect so much of supervision when we have so little agreement on its nature and so little research to guide its practice. The recent surge of research interest, though promising, has not yet significantly affected practice. We need a clearer, more focused research agenda.

In 1978, the then fledgling Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision (COPIS) convened—the issue, “Instructional Supervision. Research and Theory.” The dearth of research and theory in the field was immediately obvious, as were the disparate views that its most respected scholars held regarding even the definition of supervision. Regardless of the divergent points of view presenters at the conference expressed, they generally agreed that supervision, while full of good intentions and replete with prescriptions, lacked sufficient scholarly inquiry.

This 1978 COPIS conference was a watershed. It convened scholars in instructional supervision who had never before met. Since the conference, the council has continued to meet regularly, has stimulated scholarship, and has been a positive force for the study of supervision. Another result was the creation of a special interest group on instructional supervision within the American Educational Research Association. Subsequently, scholars interested in supervision found increased enthusiasm for their research and gained outlets for its presentation, including the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Within COPIS, as within the profession at large, however, a wide divergence of opinion still remains on supervision in education. Without some consensus on the nature and practice of supervision, scholars and practitioners conveniently and reassuringly fashion constructs and recommendations about supervision to fit their own biases, experiences, and personal orientations to power and organization. As a result, prescriptions for supervisory behavior match preferred ways of dealing with formal organization, subordinates, and superordinates.

In the absence of any commonly accepted and refined definition of supervision—other than “to improve instruction”—research has historically

been fragmented. This lack of agreement about the responsibilities of supervision allows potentially helpful research to be ignored, or worse, interpreted to support particular biases. In addition, studies have too often supported a point of view rather than addressing agreed upon critical issues in supervision. The problem of definition also extends to practice, where supervisors are called on to perform a variety of tasks, many only remotely related to monitoring and improving teacher performance. Descriptive studies—if they have served any purpose—highlight varied interpretations of supervisory behavior, its highly managerial emphasis, and its transitory and idiosyncratic nature.

Highly theoretical and even speculative scholarship is always needed, but research in instructional supervision should be based largely on the realities of life and work in school organizations. Although we need to encourage visions of the future of radically different forms of school organization and of professional interaction, instructional supervision at the moment most needs systematic, focused inquiry.

To suggest a possible research agenda, we have grouped possible topics into five categories:

- What personal and professional characteristics should instructional supervisors have?
- What conditions are necessary for effective instructional supervision?
- What organizational structures permit the most efficient and effective instructional supervision?
- What professional development (preparation programs and certification) would be most effective and desirable?
- What are the dimensions of instructional supervision as a field of study?

What unique personal qualities and qualifications do instructional supervisors have? Because of the vague roles and diffused nature of supervision in schools, we need to further investigate the unique qualities and qualifications of instructional supervisors (either full- or part-time). We must determine how and to what extent instructional supervisors differ from principals, curriculum directors, and staff developers.

In particular, further research needs to identify the essential skills that supervisors need to possess. The great interest in clinical supervision is often cited as a popular example of recent work. That movement presented a step-by-step approach to observing and providing feedback to teachers. Perhaps the process received more attention than the skills. Scholars have prescribed various approaches to improving instruction but have given too little attention to identifying and verifying the essential skills of supervision. Elsewhere we have identified a set of skills presumed to be essential for instructional supervision, but these skills also require further examination and verification.¹

¹Robert J. Alfonso, Gerald R. Firth, and Richard F. Neville, *Instructional Supervision: A Behavior System*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1981), pp. 322–367.

Furthermore, we must verify the skills necessary in working with teachers in actual classroom settings rather than in facsimiles—especially in conducting research on the supervision of student teachers. This research base is suspect when results are applied to traditional classroom settings. Because the relationship between a university supervisor and a student teacher is, essentially, a teaching relationship, we urge caution in this too-common practice. Neither is employed by the school district, and the student teacher is still a student. Neither the university professor nor the mentor teacher is a supervisor in the organizational sense.

The tendency to draw too heavily on student teaching as a research setting for instructional supervision is evident. At the 1989 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, of 25 papers and presentations on instructional supervision, at least 11 used student teaching as a data source. Research on the essential skills and competencies for instructional supervision must occur in actual settings, where all the influences of professional relationships, authority, time pressures, and the culture of the school receive proper recognition.

The knowledge base for supervisors also needs additional investigation. The essential body of knowledge is not at all clear. Expertise in teaching, learning theory, change processes, and human relations skills are prime candidates for inclusion. Supervisors are expected to be mainly experts in teaching and in changing teacher behavior, but often they also are expected to have some expertise (or even equal expertise) in curriculum and its development.

Scholars have given scant attention to the kinds of knowledge that supervisors should have. Little is known or reported about the need for supervisors to be grounded in one or more disciplines. Is it helpful if they are scholars in a broad disciplinary area? Does such preparation, or the lack of it, make any difference in how they work with teachers or in what they emphasize? Research needs to identify the essential skill base for instructional supervision. Accurately identifying the essential body of knowledge, both professional and academic, should ensure that these skills are applied intelligently.

Beliefs and values largely determine behavior. This area of research also holds promise because the educational profession needs to know more about the values, beliefs, and attitudes of instructional supervisors. The premise is that their beliefs and values differ from those of principals and administrators, that instructional supervisors have different conceptions of the nature and use of authority, and that their beliefs and values should be consistent (or at least not very inconsistent) with those they supervise or report to.

While age, gender, extent of preparation, and extent of experience are, perhaps, less intriguing, investigating these matters would give a broad picture of when people move into supervisory roles. Women once dominated the field, but the current status needs examination to determine sex equity and any similarity in preparation or experience. Also, do supervisors tend to be

younger than the teaching staff or older than other leadership personnel, and do age differences have any positive or negative consequences?

What conditions are necessary for effective instructional supervisors? Two research issues are particularly promising here. One concerns the issue of authority. Is instructional supervision best-served when supervisors have formal authority (position authority) or when competence authority is earned over time by demonstrated performance? This popular question again raises the issue of whether a supervisor is primarily a resource person, responding to the needs and initiatives of teachers, or whether a supervisor is first committed to achieving organizational goals, seeking to influence teacher behavior for that ultimate purpose. Whether formal authority makes a supervisor more or less effective is not entirely clear, nor are the responsibilities and degree of authority of supervisors adequately documented. Are supervisors vested with authority perceived as more or less effective; can teachers distinguish between the sources of supervisory authority; and do they respond differently depending on the source?

Because of the historic lack of clarity about supervisory responsibilities, we have varying expectations of the supervisory role. Perhaps supervision is more effective when the expectations of teachers, principals, and the organization (superintendent or board) are similar. According to some studies, teachers want supervision that is supportive, helpful, and nonjudgmental, but the central administration often expects supervision to be instrumental, enforcing the organization's expectations and seeking goal achievement. Where expectations differ widely, we need to determine whether a degree of role conflict exists for supervisors, and where expectations are relatively similar, whether supervisors are considered more effective.

Because of changes in teacher-education programs, we may also have some new expectations for supervisors. In more and more states, students seeking certification as elementary teachers will be required to have an academic major. The requirement of a subject major may alter elementary school teachers' perceptions about themselves and the organization, as well as about teaching and communicating knowledge. It may also change their expectations of supervisors. They may seek or prefer a similar kind of preparation in their supervisors, or they may respond well to supervisors with a traditional background of preparation in elementary education. This dramatic change in the preparation of elementary school teachers suggests several research questions.

A final promising area of inquiry is ethics in supervision, an issue almost totally ignored by the educational profession. We must delineate the ethical issues and guidelines for instructional supervision. What information about a teacher or teaching behavior is a supervisor obligated to share, and what should be held in confidence? What ethical issues are involved in intervening and attempting to change a teacher's behavior, particularly when suggesting

or requiring a change based on fact versus supervisory preference? With our strongly held and dramatically different opinions on such matters as abortion, the environment, sex education, and evolution, supervisors must deal with the ethical issues related to dramatically different beliefs between themselves and a teacher.

In general, ethical questions and our attempts to change another person's behavior need to be explored. Inquiry might deal with issues of legitimacy, authority, certainty, and individual rights. Despite all attempts to apply a system or science, teaching is still a personal act and, to a large extent, a visible expression of oneself. To intervene and to attempt to change, then, raises ethical questions that deserve analysis.

What organizational structures permit the most efficient, effective instructional supervision? We need more proof that supervision makes a difference, and what kind makes the difference. Perhaps important distinctions exist between the supervision provided from a central, district office and the kind provided from within a school by a principal, department chair, or team leader. We need to know whether supervision differs in kind, as well as whether it differs in quality and effectiveness, especially as perceived by teachers. One promising area of inquiry is the varying kinds of structures for supervision: What structures are appropriate for different sizes or types of school districts; is one kind of structure more effective than another? This research question, however, raises a much more fundamental one—can we devise a means to judge the effectiveness of supervision, and should the determinant of effectiveness be changes in teacher behavior or changes in student-learning outcomes?

The differences between elementary and secondary schools in supervision have not received sufficient attention. Dealing with supervision generically might be appropriate for elementary schools (although perhaps less so in the future), but the approach may not be adequate for secondary schools, where teachers have a strong disciplinary orientation and where departmental organizations also support and protect them. In large school districts with subject-matter specialists, subject-oriented supervision is possible—although the central office only periodically provides it. Additional research needs to be done on the promising role of a department chair as supervisor, just as research is needed on the legitimate or possible role for a high school principal in instructional supervision. Because of the structure and organization of a high school, many questions remain about what a principal can accomplish in improving instruction.

Two opposing points of view warrant further examination. The belief that supervision is generic and that issues in teaching cross over levels and disciplines and the contrary point of view that "you can't supervise what you don't know," meaning the supervisor must have a common background of experi-

ence and expertise with the person being supervised. The accuracy of these assertions needs further investigation.

What professional development (preparation programs and certification) is most effective and desirable? Until we identify the knowledge base of supervision, preparation programs likely will continue to be weak and vulnerable to personal preference and historical antecedent, if not accident. We need to thoroughly analyze preparation programs for supervisors to determine whether they address the emerging needs of schools. Are unique programs preparing individuals for supervisory roles, or do programs differ little in content from preparation for curriculum directors or school administrators?

Previous studies have indicated only minor differences between preparation programs and certification requirements for supervisors and administrators. If the education profession believes that the supervisory role truly is a unique specialty, those appropriate and distinctive characteristics should be manifest in preparation programs. A national analysis of supervision as a field of study would be revealing. From a more technical aspect, certification requirements undergo constant scrutiny, although no national organization addresses these matters, as is done for principals, counselors, school psychologists, and teachers. Research might provide evidence that the unique needs and characteristics of instructional supervision are being washed away in a multitude of other certificates under which the field is subsumed. This study might also result in clearer professional expectations and certification requirements.

What are the dimensions of instructional supervision as a field of study? Continued investigation needs to be made into supervision as a field of study. Should the focus be narrowly on instructional supervision in schools, or can we better understand and improve educational supervision by studying supervisory practice in related fields, such as business and industry, the health sciences, government agencies, and military organizations? Although supervisors in schools have often been reluctant to be compared with supervisors in other agencies, research might reveal findings applicable to instructional supervision. Certainly, research studies would highlight similarities and differences, but cross-organizational study might provide valuable sources of information about supervision, just as it has contributed to the professionalization of educational administration.

Much research that instructional supervision draws on was conducted in business and industry by professors of management, speech, or psychology. Because of the great increase in research on instructional supervision in recent years, the field may depend less on outside research in future years. Since supervision is a function that has to exist in all formal organizations, however, studies from a variety of fields still merit consideration.

Similarly, research in instructional supervision might profit from such foundation areas as psychology and sociology, as well as three disciplines not normally considered—philosophy, anthropology, and political science. Drawing on research in these fields or engaging in joint research studies with professors from these areas might provide rich insights into human behavior and organization. The tendency to view schools as organizations completely separate from all others has worked against interdisciplinary research, yet the disciplines identified hold much promise for inquiry into supervision and teacher behavior.

Summary. The lack of research and continuing disagreement on the definition and the purposes of supervision in education have stifled the identification and development of skills and have contributed to weak preparation programs for instructional supervisors. With no consensus on the purpose of supervision, it is easy to ignore research that does not fit our scheme of "how things should be." The untidiness of the field of supervision in schools makes this dismissal particularly possible, in universities, where the development of a supporting research base might originate, supervision is given short shrift by most colleges of education. When scholars can do no more than agree that the purpose of supervision is "to improve instruction," the study of supervisory behavior has little focus. The weak definition enables scholars and researchers to direct their investigations either to the needs of teachers or to the needs of the organization and to pursue personal preferences about what should be done.

The possibility of closing the gap between research and practice for instructional supervision is certainly greater now than it has been in recent years. We can close the gap, however, only if scholars turn away from attempts to shape supervision into an image that fits their own biases and their own ways of dealing with formal organizations and instead begin analyzing behavior on the basis of what schools wish it to be. This is a somewhat delicate proposition because scholars are obligated to recommend improved practice based on research. They cannot, however, ignore the realities of schools and prescribe approaches inconsistent with the realities of school organizations. We argue, then, for a reality-based, pragmatic approach to research in supervision.

The most promising development is the great resurgence of interest in supervision and the growing number of scholars truly committed to serious research. The excitement that now characterizes the field holds promise for an increased body of significant research and, as a consequence, improved practice in the future.

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