

Supervision in Transition

HAROLD SPEARS

Pivotal in curriculum improvement programs is the work of the modern supervisor. This author analyzes characteristics of instructional supervision in the present period.

TODAY we are in a period of cooperative supervision. It is a period of transition, in which instructional leadership is running after this and that program of promise as it flees from the tight-and-tidy concept of inspectional supervision that was all the rage earlier this century.

What had seemed a simple and efficient classroom assignment for supervision early this century turned into an almost complete rout of the staff forces by 1935. The meticulous attack upon classroom operation was overthrown in the revolution that elevated human relationships to the seat of honor. Once school administrators and supervisors saw the way the democratic wind was blowing, they fled from the classrooms, leaving their check-sheets and other mechanical paraphernalia behind them. They sought other means of effecting teacher growth on the job.

As they confessed their authoritarian sins at the altar of cooperative planning, some in turn expressed a reluctance to supervise the teacher in his classroom setting. In fact, some students of the subject persuaded themselves that there was something downright wicked about a supervisor's pointing out defects in a teacher's classroom. If it were not exactly a criminal act, it could be classified as a breach of professional etiquette, akin to calling attention to a mole on the teacher's face.

Classrooms were bound to be neglected for a time as supervisors and administrators sought new programs for instructional leadership. The term supervision had become so odious, the reaction was natural. In reacting to questionnaires on the subject, teachers thought they didn't want to be supervised, their concept being limited to the inspectional approach that they had experienced or heard their neighbors tell about. Titles of staff positions were changed to co-ordinator, director, resource person, helping teacher, and what-not. The term "instructional leadership" was substituted freely for supervision as the new period in the history of help-for-teachers got under way.

Those of us who study this present period of supervision must do so with a realization that it is a period of transition, one that will continue to defy exact description until it has resolved its issues and conflicts, and has proved its principles through practice. What supervision is escaping from is much more distinct than what it is moving into. Certain characteristics of this exploratory period stand out rather clearly.

Characteristics of the Present Period

Instructional leadership finds itself today very much like a poor man who has suddenly inherited a fortune. It is

now in possession of the rich concept known as democratic supervision, and it doesn't know exactly what to do with it. And just like the bewildered newly rich who finds himself surrounded by a multitude of new faces—parties anxious to tie their pet projects onto his soaring kite—so school administration is being surrounded by a multitude of new supervisory faces—parties bearing miscellaneous titles and even more miscellaneous programs. Apparent are these characteristics of the present period of supervision:

1. Group study programs are in the ascendency. Supervisors and other staff leaders are spending more and more of their school day working with teachers in groups instead of limiting their leadership efforts to visiting teachers in their individual classrooms.

2. Consequently, the group process has become a popular topic of study among supervisors as they search for ways of pooling the talents and contributions of all those who make up the group in question.

3. Curriculum planning as an avenue of school improvement, calling for group effort, is now well accepted. Supervisors are continually engaged in curriculum study programs.

4. In-service education as a growth idea is the late bloomer in school administration's garden of instructional improvement. As the latest discovery it is naturally receiving the major share of attention in the cultivation of school improvement programs. The newness has not worn off; there is yet so much to be known about the possibilities, and the varieties seem almost unlimited. Early supervision was floated on the idea that teachers had weak-

nesses to be discovered and corrected. In-service education has the advantage of being floated on the more positive idea that all teachers can grow on the job right up until the day of retirement.

5. The present emphasis in supervision is upon the improvement of learning rather than merely upon the improvement of instruction. This implies that all of the effort of instructional leadership need not be directed through the teacher. Consequently, staff services to help the learning situation indirectly include guidance, measurement, psychiatry, health, and other types of assistance.

6. Supervisory leaders are highly conscious of the importance of good human relationships. There is a general tendency to de-emphasize levels of operation. As attested to by the printed proceedings of their conferences, supervisors want to be freed of authority over teachers and to be classified in the helping role.

Issues To Be Reconciled

As school administration seeks the ideal program of instructional leadership today it faces a number of issues and conflicts which must in time be reconciled. To workers in this and that supervisory position, the answers to some of these may seem clear. But to the student of the subject of supervision, the answers aren't nearly so easily

Harold Spears is assistant superintendent, San Francisco, California, Public Schools. Some of the material in this article is taken from Dr. Spears' book, Improving the Supervision of Instruction, recently published by Prentice-Hall, Incorporated, New York City. This material is used by special permission of the publisher.

obtainable. Points to be pondered are these:

1. Is there conflict between the concepts of school efficiency and democratic supervision? As school costs go up and administration must account fully to the public for its mounting investment, can instructional leaders always keep the good human relationships that they wish?

2. Can those in supervisory positions be freed from sharing with administration the responsibility for judging the effectiveness of teaching effort? As the expert in instructional matters, can the supervisor be released from judging a teacher's work?

3. In-service education programs often represent growth activities required of all teachers. It is now common to tie in-service credits with salary increments, movement up the salary scale being dependent upon in-service credits. Does this reversal in supervisory policy assure actual growth or does it threaten the wholesome spirit upon which effective instructional leadership is so dependent?

4. To what extent does the ability of people to work together as a group represent a science in group mechanics that must be mastered by an instructional leader?

5. As the supervisory concept is broadened, to what extent can school districts afford to add the miscellaneous staff services that are implied in the ideal?

6. Is the school principal to be looked upon as a real instructional leader, or is his leadership threatened by the miscellaneous special services being added to help teachers?

7. Are classrooms being neglected in

the present tendency to assist teachers through in-service group activities?

8. Who is to measure the effectiveness of supervisory programs and supervisory effort? Teaching effort is being judged continually, as is the work of the administrator. Is there a tendency to neglect to judge the effectiveness of the supervisory effort?

9. In the case of large staffs of supervisory workers, as in a large city or county, how can the co-ordination of effort be assured? Are teachers actually confused by the multiplicity of services and the overlapping of demands upon their time and energy?

10. Is there a place for rating sheets or efficiency reports to be used in judging the effectiveness of the teaching effort?

11. In endorsing cooperative planning as the true essence of teacher growth on the job, has supervision inadvertently forced teachers to give up free time that should be theirs?

These are but a few of the questions that intrigue the one who sets out to catch the spirit and the action of the current period of instructional leadership. The writer has just completed such a study. The conclusion is that there is a promising middle point somewhere between the two extremes in instructional leadership, (a) the cold, calculating, over-efficient improvement of instruction, and (b) the ever-smiling, back-slapping, go-ahead-and-do-as-you-democratically-please supervision of instruction.

It is concluded that supervision can be thorough and yet creative. It can encourage strengths and yet help with weaknesses. It can be cooperative and yet not shirk responsibilities. It can re-

tain standards and yet respect people as such. It can tell teachers things to do without being dictatorial. It can represent miscellaneous services and yet protect the teacher against confusion of overactivity. It can capitalize upon the group process and yet not lose itself in the academic extremities of group dynamics. It can experiment with the new without discrediting the good in the tried and true.

But this middle ground is not to be found for the asking or by the mere

verbal profession of its acceptance. Supervision can't do any of these things unless those who carry the responsibility become real students of their jobs.¹ They must first recognize the issues if they are to reconcile them eventually in their own supervisory actions. Snap judgments made from one's own vantage point are not the answer.

¹ Harold Spears, *Improving the Supervision of Instruction*. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc. October 1953, 477 pp.



THE ASSOCIATION FOR CHILDHOOD EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL

invites you to attend the

1954 ACEI Study Conference

April 18-23, Saint Paul, Minnesota

Theme: "EFFECTIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL CHILDREN"

★ *For teachers, parents and others concerned with the well-being of children from nursery school through intermediate grades.*

★ *Discussion forums, interest-discussion-laboratory groups, school visiting, general sessions, excursions and functional display of materials and books.*

For information write to ACEI headquarters:
1200 Fifteenth Street, N. W., Washington 5, D. C.



Copyright © 1954 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.