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An Approach to Evaluation of Supervisory Practices

Described here is an attempt to evaluate certain supervisory practices within a state.

HELPING schools to improve instruction is generally recognized as an important function of school supervision. In many school systems throughout the country, instructional leaders and other curriculum workers are participating in projects aimed toward increased understanding of their own function in the instructional program and toward the improvement of their skills in this respect. Cooperative as well as individual study of research findings and of the judgments of authorities in the field have contributed to the improvement of teaching and pupil learning in many schools. A number of evaluation studies¹ testify to this positive effect.

For obvious reasons, however, an evaluation of supervisory practices and especially of the effects of supervision on teaching practices and pupil achievement is no easy task. The process becomes increasingly complex for the investigator who hopes to find clear relationships between certain kinds of practices and the results achieved. Which practices produce what results, for

example, is a problem of common concern, but sound answers to questions like this are especially difficult to come by. Perhaps no definitive answers, generally applicable, can be found.

However, the purpose of this article is to describe an approach toward evaluation of supervisory practices which seems to have promise. It was developed by a group of supervisors in a research project sponsored by the Louisiana School Supervisors' Association in cooperation with the State Department of Education and Louisiana State University. As a next step in a continuous program of study and evaluation of supervisory practices, a focus on practice in close relationship to outcomes anticipated or achieved seems to have merit.

Need for Sound Answers

For several years, Louisiana supervisors have participated in a number of projects aimed toward bettering their own work in the improvement of instruction. Studies in supervision have been conducted. Useful information to help evaluate and to improve practice has been secured. But adequate evaluation of practice in relation to outcomes is difficult to achieve. However, the po-

¹ Office of Education. *Supervision in Rural Schools*, Bulletin 1955, No. 11. Washington, D. C.: Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1955, Chap. III.

tential worth of such knowledge, if it could be found, the supervisors believed, would contribute much to an increased understanding and improvement of their work.

In addition to a desire to increase their own effectiveness in helping schools achieve their objectives, there was a growing need, the supervisors observed, for sound answers to questions of common concern to many other educators and also to lay citizens. Examples of such questions were: What are Louisiana supervisors doing to improve instruction? To what extent are they successful in accomplishing this purpose?

Substantiated answers to questions like these were needed. And so the search for fruitful ways of evaluating supervisory practices continued. Eventually, a new approach evolved. Its main feature was the development of a systematic plan for: (a) recording descriptive and time log data on supervision at work; (b) examining these data to identify common practices; and (c) for evaluating the supervisory practices reported in the data.

The account which follows will tell how this study was conducted.

The Study

Each participating supervisor prepared a time log of his activities on a

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certain day each month during the year and wrote a detailed description of at least one incident of which he was a part on this day. These time logs and descriptive materials were analyzed for the purpose of identifying the most common supervisory practices reported in the data. The practices which were found to be most common were evaluated by checking them with the judgments of recognized writers in the field and with evidence in available research studies.

This is an example of a time log submitted by one of the supervisors:

8:00 Arrived at office; collected materials to be delivered to school.

8:45 Arrived at school; checked-in with the principal. (The principal was busy helping lunchroom worker with October report.)

8:55 Visited a classroom of 1st and 2nd grade pupils and observed the lessons taught. First graders were engaged in a reading group. Second graders busy doing various things—drawing pictures, reading library books.

9:15 Principal arrived in the classroom. Principal and supervisor observed that one group of children worked independently while teacher worked with another group.

9:40 Talked with teacher and principal about the work observed, commenting especially on the teacher's ability to foster interest in reading.

9:45 Visited 2nd and 3rd grade classrooms and observed an arithmetic lesson. Assisted the teacher with a spelling lesson.

10:20 Recess—informal visiting.

10:30 Visited 5th and 6th grade classrooms and observed a geography lesson.

11:20 On invitation, talked with 5th and 6th grade children and the teacher about a visit to Norway the previous summer.

11:30 Visited 7th and 8th grade classrooms and observed part of an arithmetic lesson.

11:45 Visited the gymnasium and observed a physical education class.

12:15 Lunch.

The following paragraphs quoted from Supervisor A's record illustrate the method of anecdotal or descriptive reporting of supervisory activity: the supervisor and the principal discuss plans for a workshop.

The principal, serving as chairman of the over-all committee charged with planning the August workshop, requested the help of the supervisor on a job to be done. An appointment with the supervisor had been made by telephone.

The job was to name committees, state their functions, and to list personnel for each. All of these had been discussed in the large planning committee meeting and the problem now was mainly one of preparing a list of directions for all members.

The function of each committee was discussed fully and a brief statement was written for each; likewise the personnel of each committee including the chairman was listed. The sheet was then left with the supervisor to be mimeographed and to be sent to committee members.

An example is given to illustrate the method of handling and interpreting data. One of the recurring patterns (or common practices) found in the data follows: "Many activities of the supervisors involve the principal and the supervisor working together." A summary of the evidence recorded in the time log and anecdotal data supporting this statement follows:

Out of some 100 time log and anecdotal recordings written by supervisors, it was found that work with the principal was mentioned at least once in each of 71 recordings. The supervisors' most common type of activity with the principal was the individual conference. The individual conferences between supervisors and the principal dealt with approximately 35 different topics. The subject of the individual conference mentioned most often was the supervisor's visits to the classrooms, before and after visitation.

Other topics dealt with often in the individual conference with principals were materials of instruction, curriculum and teaching problems, testing and interpretation of scores, needs of individual pupils, annual reports, and in-service education activities.

Another common type of activity which involved the supervisor and principal working together was the group conference. Examples were: curriculum workshops for teachers, principals' meetings, and faculty study groups.

Visiting classrooms together was another fairly common practice of supervisors and principals.

Evaluating Supervisory Practice

As indicated earlier, the kind of activity revealed by the data as common practice (recurring pattern) was evaluated by testing it in light of the findings of research and the judgment of authorities in the field. "Is this a good supervisory practice?" This inquiry was dealt with by seeking answers to at least two more questions: "What does research say?" "What do the authorities say?"

Take, for example, the common practice reported earlier: "Many activities of the supervisor involve the principal and the supervisor working together." A summary of the evaluation follows:

According to research findings and authorities in the field, activities that involve the principal and the supervisor working together represent desirable practice.

There appears to be little doubt about the desirability of cooperation between the supervisor and the principal. However another important factor to take into account is the relative role of each.

A recent trend in the thinking of writers and researchers in the field indicates that the school building principal should assume the key educational role in his school. He should be the leader of a team responsible for the total educa-

tion of each child in his building. In such case a supervisor on the central office staff is a consultant or resource person but without authority to make decisions about what should be done in a school. In some situations, the supervisor is the recognized authority. The anecdotal and time log data in the Louisiana study do not clearly show what the common practice is in this regard. Examples of both are found throughout the data. In some of the records it is not possible to tell which of the two individuals has more authority than the other, especially in matters relative to the school curriculum and teaching practices.

Each of the common supervisory practices identified was evaluated in ways similar to the ones reported above. Several such practices are listed below.

Common Practices Identified

Space here does not permit an evaluative report on each practice identified. However, examples of summary statements on some of the most common practices identified are these:

Although there was considerable variation in what was done by supervisors while in the room, visiting classrooms was identified as common practice.

Evidence indicated that questions and suggestions from teachers and principals were taken into account in determining what the supervisory services would be. Evidence also indicated, however, that ideas and activities were often initiated by the supervisors.

Serving as consultants to individuals and groups relative to topics of mutual concern was identified as common practice.

There was evidence to indicate that the supervisors in this study generally, though not always, provided opportunities for people to share in planning and in making decisions about matters that affect them.

Many activities of the supervisor involved his working with the principal.

Limitations of the Study

In this study getting data about the effects of supervision on pupil learning or teaching practices was not possible. Until more information in this respect can be secured the outcomes noted are based on two assumptions: (a) To the extent that the practices revealed by the data illustrate good principles of supervision, the chances are that the learning opportunities provided for pupils are improved and that pupil achievement is increased. Other research studies report support for this generalization. (b) It is further assumed that cooperative, voluntary, highly motivated self-examination, in light of certain tested principles of supervision, facilitates progress toward improved practice.

Concluding Statement

Projects aimed toward further evaluation of supervisory or in-service education practices are under way in several of the school systems represented in the study just described. In some schools, the same approach to evaluation is used, that is—a systematic attempt to examine practice in relation to outcome.

In some situations, curriculum leaders are proposing plans which include examination of practices in light of available research but in addition the plans propose study of changes in teachers and pupils.

No final conclusion can be drawn about the usefulness of this approach toward evaluation of supervisory practices. As indicated in this report, however, there is reason to believe that the approach used in this study facilitates progress toward improved learning experiences for pupils.

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