

## ● Research in Review

### Knowledge About Supervision: Rationalization or Rationale?

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WOULD schools be as effective without formal supervision? In what way or ways does supervision contribute to the total educational structure? What are the most effective procedures in supervision? These questions (and many others) are unanswered, at least in terms of research findings today. What do we know about supervision? Where is the research that provides knowledge about the supervision process?

This year the ASCD Research Institutes are focused upon this concern—Research and Development in Supervision. As noble as this theme appears to an organization with a major commitment to supervision, the truth of the matter is disturbing. The institute planners were hard pressed to find research in supervision.

The ASCD 1965 Yearbook, *Role of Supervisor and Curriculum Director in a Climate of Change*, was a special disappointment in this search. One would assume that a yearbook devoted to this topic would refer to and/or note the research on supervision. Little mention was made of research studies or research efforts in the area. This is not to say that the yearbook failed in its

specific intent, but rather it indicates dramatically the essential folklore, personal experience, philosophical and/or psychological derivation of most supervisory practices. The conclusion seems warranted that in comparison with other aspects of educational concern (e.g., teaching and administering) supervision has less basis in fact.

Common sense tells us that teachers need and can use help and/or guidance, perhaps even direction. Research tells almost nothing about how to implement these aims. We are left with the still unanswered question of whether supervision has any value at all.

### Evidence of Change

From a rational viewpoint one would expect supervisory efforts to result in desired changes in teacher behavior. What evidence is there that these changes take place? Certainly, supervisory or even teacher testimonials, well intended and honest to be sure, do not provide a solid base of evidence.

There is, in fact, little sound evidence that teachers change at all, to say nothing about changing in relation to supervisory efforts. Flanders (2; 3), and Bowers and Soar (1), for example,

have reported studies which demonstrate changes in teachers. Still the change was minimal, it was not clearly predictable; and the procedures for promoting change were not the usual types of supervisory activity.

A few short years ago the Wisconsin ASCD Research Committee attempted to develop a study on supervision in the state. The committee hoped to examine the effects of supervision in groups of teachers versus supervision on an individual instruction basis for beginning teachers. The study never was begun, primarily because of the inability to get subjects (supervisors). As one supervisor put it, "We already know that individual classroom visitation is far superior." . . . The evidence? "Anyone who has supervised for a long time knows that."

It was the writer's definite impression that many supervisors and central administrative personnel were not anxious to research supervisory practices. This is understandable in the sense that supervisors are busy people and overloaded in terms of present day concepts of function. Yet the truth of the matter was that many supervisors did not appear very anxious to find out about their activities.

### **Wings of Wax**

Supervisors seem to be soaring on ideological wings stuck together with wax, and they may be getting too close to the sun. In many ways the supervisory credo is open to the same criticism that some psychologists make concerning psychoanalysis. Hardheaded psychologists are prone to remark that  $\frac{2}{3}$ 's of the patients improve with psychoanalysis and  $\frac{2}{3}$ 's without.

Further, one finds little discussion of failure in supervisory literature. It is not even clear whether one actually knows when one has failed in the supervisory process. There appear to be no rationales for explaining why goals are not achieved, but primarily after-the-fact explanations of success. Surely there is something to be learned by the error of our ways.

Supervisors, as have many functionaries in education, have moved firmly toward the mental health myth as a rationalization of their practices. This phenomenon should be a clear warning signal.

This is not to say that supervisory personnel should be unconcerned with the mental health of teachers, but is to say that they are not trained to do this and are in danger of sliding over into a comfortable rationale which justifies the lack of specifiable results.

There can be little doubt that there is an "art" of human relationships. Some persons are more capable than others in this respect. It further makes good sense to have supervisors who are able and comfortable in their human relationships. What is not at all clear is what difference it makes in terms of some clearly defined goals of teacher behavior change.

Why has not anyone brought all the supervisors into a central office for a year or two (and put them to work on curriculum tasks), while they test to see what difference it makes?

There is some partial evidence that automated and/or audio-visual feedback via television, tape recorder, etc., can be a useful agent for teacher change. Why have these procedures not been tested against interpersonal supervisory

practices, or in addition to live practices?

What does a supervisor need to know about teachers in order to work effectively? Is observation of teaching the most important source of information for constructive supervisory function?

If teachers may become obsolete in the next fifty years, at least in terms of present conceptions of their function, then perhaps traditionally conceived supervisory activities may also become anachronistic.

### Status and Role

How do status and role in the school system affect the achievement of supervisory goals? Are principals with line authority (when they supervise) more effective or less effective than supervisors with staff authority?

Should supervisors be chosen or elected by teachers? Should the role of supervisor be rotational and earned as a symbol of staff acceptance and reward? Would this make any difference in supervisory outcomes? How much is enough supervision? How much is too little? What are the critical incidents in supervisory activity?

Lest there be misunderstanding, let us hurry to add that our research knowledge of most aspects of education is open to considerable improvement. Yet supervision ought to be a central concern of ASCD members, and research knowledge ought to be one solid base for professional activity. At present there is very little evidence that either ASCD or supervisors in general are very much concerned about research knowledge in supervision.

What we need are many more attempts to visualize varieties of super-

visory patterns and the necessary trial and error and systematic evaluation of these patterns in operation. Further, although most educational functions, such as supervision, are "long" on goals and "short" on evidence, it would facilitate matters a great deal if the values applied to the supervisory process were clearly identified and related to some kinds of operational criteria that could be evaluated.

If supervisors are to be "product" oriented, then we must clearly specify the changes in teacher behavior and/or teaching conditions that are possible and desirable. If supervisors perform an essentially political function of communication and/or facilitation of school ideology and goals, then these functions ought to be objectified for evaluation purposes. Or, if supervision is essentially a humanistic function providing help and support for humanizing the bureaucratic aspects of schooling; then this should be specified clearly.

It is the hope of the ASCD Research Commission that this year's Research Institutes will serve a useful purpose by helping ASCD members and others involved in supervision to clarify needed knowledge, focus values, and become aware of promising research in the field.

### References

1. N. D. Bowers and R. S. Soar. "Studies In Human Relations in the Teaching Learning Process." V Final Report: Cooperative Research Project No. 469, 1961.
2. Ned Flanders *et al.* "Helping Teachers Change Their Behavior." Terminal Contract Report, Title VII, N.D.E.A.
3. Ned Flanders. "Teacher Behavior and In-service Programs." *Educational Leadership* 21 (1): 25-30; October 1963.

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