Supervisors: A Vanishing Breed?

THE supervisor's role, which has always been afflicted by vicissitudes in its halting progress toward professionalization, now conceivably faces extinction. This could result from two new trends in the educational scene: teacher organizations' negotiations and the commercial production of the packaged curriculum. There is a certain quality of irony in the appearance of these threats to the supervisor's existence at a time of considerable ferment and heightened interest in the theoretical analysis and practical application of supervision. However, there is cause to believe that some of the current emphasis in supervisory practice and preparatory programs may be a prime contributor to the role obsolescence of the supervisor.

In the historical development of supervision, the role of the supervisor has become synonymous with the effort to improve instruction. Parallel with the acceptance of improvement of instruction as the raison d'etre of supervision is the formation of an accompanying professional mandate: those acting in a supervisory capacity must work in close relationship with the personnel most directly connected with the teaching-learning act, the classroom practitioner. Acting upon this mandate, the college preparatory programs and the ideal role behavior of supervisors as found in the literature have in the past two decades emphasized interpersonal relations as the principal route of instructional improvement. Consequently, the role of the supervisor is not infrequently equated with being a human relations expert with a strong commitment to humanistic values in the instructional program and in professional relationships.

A New Era

There is indeed reason to question whether the supervisor's role, as it has been defined, can be maintained in the face of the twin emergent forces—the teaching profession's new militancy in negotiating with school boards, and the extensive introduction of the prepared packaged curriculum as the major approach to curriculum development. Consequently, supervision predicated

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upon human relations techniques emphasizing good intentions and mellow feelings toward classroom practitioners is not likely to eventuate in professional practices which can be effective in the face of these formidable countervailing forces. And although prophecy always entails a degree of risk to the prophet, it would not seem terribly presumptuous upon the examination of the data on trends in the operation of teachers' professional organizations, and the designing and preparation of curriculum, to predict that supervision is entering a new era where the old pattern of direct teacher-supervisor transactions will disappear.

Supervision, as we have known it, may be a dying role. The possible demise of supervision, like the personal confrontation with the inexorable destiny of each individual, is not viewed with pleasure by the supervisory ranks, and a perusal of the literature and activities of supervisors finds that in the main, as a professional group, they have simply denied the existence of this unpleasant though highly probable eventuality.

Supervision is brought to this confrontation by the intersection of two movements, both taking place outside the traditional sphere of the supervisor, but having wide ramifications for his operation. In the new realignment of political power, the classroom teaching staff negotiates directly with school boards on items and areas which were once the province of the supervisor. These negotiations have expanded the areas of determination for the teachers and eroded the functions of the supervisor. Space does not permit a point by point analysis of negotiated agreements between school boards and teachers, but the realignment of traditional relationships of classroom teacher and supervisor is extensive and indicates that the hallowed practice of direct face-to-face operation with classroom teachers is on the wane.

The traditional techniques of supervision which involved a defined relationship of superior and subordinate, the required classroom visits and conference, the detailed supervisory report, and the requirement of attendance at supervisor organized meetings, are constrained and circumscribed through contracts drawn up between school boards and classroom teachers. Furthermore, the areas of authority that are not restricted in the contract are frequently inhibited by the psychological climate that prevails, especially if a supervisor works for a politically hypersensitive superintendent who prefers dealing with handcuffed supervisors rather than aggressive teacher grievance committees.

The second combination of forces restricting the supervisor's role are the current approaches to curriculum development which again take place largely outside the school system. Prepackaged programs of instructional materials bypass the supervisor and are directly implemented through the teacher. The teacher receives the packaged program of instruction and in some cases is trained by an outside-the-school system agent.

Present developments would suggest that future instructional designs will elaborate the closed system of prepackaged materials even further, locking the supervisor out as effectively as the teacher is locked in. Thus the supervisor's position and role are drastically altered and can be eliminated, if he is adamant in persisting in operating in the conventional, traditional mode. And many of the "live" issues forming the substance of supervision theory classes (line vs. staff positions, authoritarian vs. democratic supervision) are obsolete for projecting the future role of supervisors.

Unfortunately, the practice of the past and accumulated research evidence on supervision do not hold much promise of assistance in mapping the future position of the supervisor. Despite the broad general agreements that have historically evolved (the stress on instructional improvement through interpersonal relations). an examination of university graduate programs of preparation and state certification requirements underscores the confusion and limited agreement on the theoretical basis and conceptional definition of the task function.1

The supervisor's work can only be handicapped by this lack of professional role clarity. When the field of supervision is viewed in practice, the task function seems to be governed by a practical pragmatism, i.e., a person is needed to tidy up unfinished tasks and shore up obvious instructional weaknesses, and the role behavior is guided by a store of conventional wisdom. In a professional world where technical competence is increasingly mandated by the complex nature of professional tasks, and consistent with this general trend, the research on learning and instruction and human organizations systematically exposes greater subtlety and more profound complexities, supervisors are by training ill-equipped.

A Relevant Program

What then is a relevant program of preparation for the supervisors if they are to carve out a role which will make a meaningful contribution to curricular practice?

First, it is imperative that if a supervisor is to have a role in the newly emerging patterns of curriculum and instruction, he will be required to have an understanding of, and the technical ability to cope with the realities of the new social system of the school where authority relationships and power balances are being radically restructured. Essential to the ability to understand and cope with the new power balances is the competency in assessment of social systems: defining their boundaries, identifying the norms of behavior governing their participants, gauging the influence of power forces, and projections of consequences of the system as it shapes curriculum and student behavior.

In a sense the supervisor requires the skills of a systems analyst with special concern for the total effects of the social system on the curriculum. This, then, is the unique function that a supervisor can fulfill—designing the curriculum in a comprehensive sense. Where the curriculum is moving into the negotiation-bargaining arena, outcomes are being shaped by other criteria than have been used in the past. The classic approach of proceeding to curriculum construction through an initial statement of objectives is being redefined by the negotiations at the bargaining table. In this process one of the major contributions of the supervisor can be a preservation of concern and a gathering of evidence on instruction and its outcomes within the school system during the present power conflicts. Moreover, if curriculum construction is to advance to a stage where it receives its rightful primacy, new skills for resolution of conflicts and cooperative procedures for program development will need to be supplied. While research data on the technical competence needed is scarce in education, a considerable body of literature is accumulating in related behavioral sciences which suggests how human organizations can be moved from confrontation and conflict to mutuality in determination of goals and objectives.

As for the second cluster of forces, the packaged curriculum programs bypassing the supervisor as a curriculum development specialist, there exists a great unmet need in putting these programs into a total design. These programs developed independently of each other are only fragments of the total experience of the learner in the school. Therefore, the supervisor as a specialist tak-


In an analysis of teacher negotiations, Foster recommends: “Scope of bargaining should be defined as clearly as possible. School districts should be encouraged but not required to bargain over issues of broad educational policy as curricula and textbooks” (p. 12). Nevertheless, the National School Boards Association has listed one area of bargaining as the curriculum, and many of the negotiated contracts have specifics written in which very clearly and directly affect the curriculum: class size, number of hours of instruction, assignment of personnel, and even definite programs of instruction.


These are only two examples of a growing body of behavioral science literature which offers very solid evidence on the organizational approaches needed for productive use of human resources.
ing the outcomes of the total curriculum as his province must deal with the macro or total design of the curriculum, concentrating on the configuration of the separate curriculum programs and their impact on the students. Scant attention, indeed, has been paid to the total effect of the present separate micro-centered curriculum on the learner.

In brief, some macro-curriculum design problems that can be readily identified are:

1. Curriculum dissonance: contradictions, incompatibilities in teaching methods and subject matter in separate subject areas, experiences which produce conflict at a level to cause students to reject the curriculum

2. Coordination: concern for commonalities as well as duplications with emphasis on wholeness in the curricular experiences for the student as he pursues the various subject areas

3. Balance: concern for relationships of general education to special education, vicarious and firsthand experiences, product and process learnings

4. Hypertrophy of areas of experience: overexpansion of curricular offerings, excessive commitment of students' time in premature specialization, exploitation of students in areas of experiences for purposes other than personal growth

5. Continuity: preserving and expanding threads of experiences from grade level to grade level and lower school to upper school, observing principles of learning in concept presentation allowing for structural development of fields of inquiry

6. Application of analogous developments in separate subject fields: for example, "learning by discovery" techniques developed with mathematics applied to health education or natural science

7. Evaluation of total curriculum design: gathering data on the total influence of the school experience, investigation of dysfunctioning in general or special education areas, desirability of adding or terminating curricular offerings on the basis of contribution to the total design

8. Assessment of internal and external pressures to effect change in parts of the curriculum and the impact on the total curriculum design.

Problems of this range are not receiving attention in present curriculum development efforts, and preparatory programs for supervisors are needed to develop the technical competencies which will be required to study macro curriculum design. An analysis of preparatory programs finds that few give major attention to preparation along these lines.

The research evidence supporting the contribution of supervision to the improvement of instruction is negligible. However, the function of supervision has wide acceptance and there is a demand for and employment of supervisory personnel which appears to be rising at a slightly faster rate than the employment of classroom teachers. These figures may be deceptive if interpreted as forecasting an unusually bright future for the supervisor and, correspondingly, overlooking some of the other trends which will temper if not dramatically change the supervisory function.

Supervisors can play a viable role, but the technical ability needed to pursue the future role as it is being shaped by powerful forces is far different than most supervisory personnel have at their command at this time. Whether supervisors can gain command of these technical abilities and contribute to the design of the curriculum may mean the difference between survival of the supervisor's role, and more importantly, the emergence of a more meaningful curriculum design than now exists.

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