

# WILL PEER SUPERVISION WORK?

Robert J. Alfonso

*A veteran educator looks keenly at some of the objectives, limitations, and promises of peer supervision. He acknowledges that the peer approach can make some important contributions but sees it as no substitute for "formal, organizationally directed supervision, expressed through a wide array of complex behaviors."*

The question of whether peer supervision will really work tempts one to make a flippant reply: "Well, yes or no; it depends on what you want it to do." In recent years, peer supervision has undergone a considerable amount of discussion, has made a modest appearance in professional publications, has had a limited number of apparently successful attempts, but has been subjected to almost no critical analysis. The available literature on peer supervision as a formal concept is pretty thin, although the educa-

tional record is rich with accounts of ways in which teachers have been involved in both local and systemwide efforts to improve instruction. The general notion that professional peers ought to be of assistance to each other is a very appealing one—whether in schools or in any other organization.

Although not described as peer supervision, teachers have, historically, always exerted influence on the behavior of their peers. This has probably been most dramatically expressed by the induction process through which each new teacher passes. Older and more experienced teachers instruct the beginning teacher about how to behave, what is expected, what is "right" or "wrong" with the school, and what to expect from administrators and supervisors. In a recent study of this acculturation process, Migra<sup>1</sup> traced

<sup>1</sup> Ethel D. Migra. "The Transition From Theory Into Practice: A Microethnography of Student Teaching As a Cultural Experience." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 1976.

the shift in expectations and values of student teachers during a ten-week span as they were influenced by the school faculty. This study described the trauma of novice teachers and the way in which cultural accommodation took place when they found their own educational values in conflict with the norms of the established faculty. It might not be argued that this is peer supervision, but it is influence. Such coercive influence exists in all organizations; it is a very powerful and pervasive force. It has no formal direction, may work either for or against the goals of the organization, and the presence of strong group norms may either frustrate or support supervisory efforts.

It is interesting to note that the majority of such peer influence attempts have been made with little direct knowledge about others' classroom performance. In fact, teachers for generations have maintained a colossal and almost studied ignorance about the classroom behavior of their peers. It is only in more recent years with the development of team teaching, microteaching, the analysis of classroom interaction, teacher centers, and the adding of teachers to supervisory teams that teachers have begun to get a look behind their peers' classroom door. Even now, teacher peers have only a limited knowledge of each other's classroom practice; and the higher one goes up the educational ladder, the less frequently such knowledge is available. Proponents of peer supervision believe that teachers can supervise each other, that classroom doors can be opened, that one's practices and problems can be shared. Proponents also suggest that supervision can be a valuable adjunct to, or—depending on one's point of view—even a substitute for, formal, organizationally directed supervision.

### The Nature of Peer Supervision

Peer supervision is still a disturbingly slippery concept. One is not sure whether a user of the term is describing a loose arrangement of interpersonal influence, a system in which teachers are organized into helping teams under the direction of an administrator or supervisor, or whether the term is used to imply total teacher responsibility for the improvement of instruction.

Clearly, the growth of teacher militancy has caused teachers to seek greater control over their

own world of teaching. In the early days of teacher unionization in New York City, the suggestion was made that if supervisors were hired to help teachers be more effective, then perhaps the teacher organization and not the school board should hire and pay the supervisors. This point of view continues to be pressed by the National Education Association, which would like to give teachers more of the responsibility for in-service education, evaluation, and other supervisory tasks. It is an understandably appealing idea, but professionally quite naive in that it fails to recognize the nature of formal organizations and the complexity of the total array of supervisory responsibilities.

An examination of the very small amount of literature available on peer supervision shows that, in general, writers are not describing teachers engaging in supervisory activities across a broad spectrum of needed behaviors in a school, but instead they are defining peer supervision within a very narrow confine. Numerous recent writers have given renewed emphasis to the clinical, advisory, or helper nature of supervision. The work of Goldhammer,<sup>2</sup> Cogan,<sup>3</sup> Manolakes,<sup>4</sup> Abramson,<sup>5</sup> and Blumberg<sup>6</sup> gives major attention to the kind of supervision that is highly personal, clinically evaluative, and classroom-based. It is from such descriptions of the essential character of supervisory behavior that the concept of peer supervision derives its appeal.

If supervision is primarily a process of observation, analysis, and feedback, then it can lead to the proposition that teachers might, in fact, be their own best supervisors. Who knows best what goes on in a classroom and how it can be made better than teachers themselves? And

<sup>2</sup> Robert Goldhammer. *Clinical Supervision*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Morris Cogan. *Clinical Supervision*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Manolakes. "The Advisory System and Supervision." In: Thomas J. Sergiovanni, editor. *Professional Supervision for Professional Teachers*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Abramson. "When Teachers Evaluate Each Other." *Scholastic Magazine*. September 1972, pp. 26-28.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Blumberg. *Supervisors and Teachers: A Private Cold War*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974.

who is it that can evaluate good teaching better than one's peers? It is only a short step to move from a conceptualization of supervision as being predominantly in-class, clinical supervision, to the conclusion that committed, intelligent, and trained faculty can take over major responsibility for improving instruction through a process of peer supervision—observation, analysis, feedback, and evaluation of classroom performance.

The evolving definition of peer supervision is one that seems to be, at least in these its primitive stages, of limited perspective, focusing almost

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exclusively on observation of teaching and on evaluation. Blumberg, for example, devotes an entire chapter to peer supervision in his book *Supervisors and Teachers: A Private Cold War*.<sup>7</sup> Yet in dealing with the topic, he is restricted to drawing almost totally from two published articles, one on "group supervision" and the other on "peer evaluation." These articles focus chiefly on the involvement of teachers in observing and assessing classroom behavior by means of peer and self-analysis of verbal interaction.

Reavis,<sup>8</sup> in an article on clinical supervision, summarizes the work of several authors who make a strong case for self-evaluation and peer evaluation as an alternative to a supervisor-dominated or -directed system. While Reavis recognizes the move toward peer evaluation as a natural outgrowth of teachers' dissatisfaction with the quality of supervisory visits to the classroom, his support for peer responsibility is quite guarded; instead, he makes a strong case for supervisor-directed clinical supervision that targets on problems that are of concern to the teacher.

It is a little unsettling that peer supervision is being made to appear virtually synonymous

with evaluation, for most supervisors, while recognizing the importance of evaluation in any list of supervisory responsibilities, would not identify it as the central focus nor would they single out the classroom as virtually the only location in which supervision was given expression. Some supervisory activity is directed at a teacher in a classroom; in other cases, attempts at improving instruction may need to be buildingwide, or systemwide. Curriculum development, in-service education, goal setting, evaluation, selecting materials, long-range planning, staffing, public relations, research, and many other tasks may all from time to time become activities in which the supervisor engages in order to improve instruction. The number of different competencies needed by a supervisor is large. For example, in a study done by Ben Harris, 24 basic competencies were identified.<sup>9</sup> By describing supervision in such narrow terms as "in-class evaluation," proponents of peer supervision show a serious lack of understanding and appreciation for the complex array and levels of activities that are needed in any school system in order to support instructional improvement.

One might speculate that the interest of teacher organizations in peer supervision stems in part from their long-standing concern about controlling access to the profession—selection and retention of staff members. It is through the process of evaluation of classroom behavior—although not exclusively—that supervisors and administrators have collected data on which year-end assessments and recommendations for tenure have been based. Evaluation of teachers and teaching has long created a dilemma for supervisors, and only recently when surveyed they identified the issue of "evaluating teachers" versus "being responsible for evaluating instruction only" as the most critical issue for themselves from among a list of 17.<sup>10</sup> This has been a trouble-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Charles A. Reavis. "Clinical Supervision: A Timely Approach." *Educational Leadership* 33 (5): 360-63; February 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Harris, editor. "Special Education Training Project." *Professional Supervisory Competencies*. Document #7. Austin: University of Texas, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> ASCD Working Group on Supervisory Practices. "Issues in Supervisor Roles: What Do Practitioners Say?" *Educational Leadership* 34 (3): 217-20; December 1976.

some area for teachers, too, and they have often been perplexed about whether a supervisor's visit was for the purpose of administrative evaluation, instructional improvement, or both.

In the minds of many classroom teachers, supervision and evaluation become synonymous. It is not surprising, then, that the current state of the art in peer supervision reflects the same misconception and narrow focus. While suffering from narrowness, this concept of supervision has additional serious limitations, including the possibility that its over-zealous proponents may delude teachers into believing that they can take possession of supervisory responsibility to a degree which is, in fact, impossible.

### The Limitations of Peer Supervision

Under the current organizational form of most schools, it would be extremely difficult to implement a system of peer supervision. While there are physical and organizational forms and some staffing models that open up teaching to the eyes of one's peers, most schools today present major barriers to peer supervision. Only when teachers interact in a natural way, when their professional work is shared by others, and when it can be observed as part of an ongoing process of collaborative teaching can peer supervision be effective. To attempt to implement a peer-supervision model in schools that are cellular and in which teachers carry out their work in splendid isolation would be to impose a model that is as uncomfortable, incongruous, and as ineffective as the isolated and routine classroom visits that still characterize the style of many supervisors.

Peer supervision presumes a model of school organization and behavior that exists in too few places. While it can be argued that peer supervision would help break down such barriers—and it would—peer supervision needs at least a crack in the shell of traditional school organizations and staffing if it is ever to begin to have a chance of success. Supervisors might be reluctant to give up or share part of their domain, but the typical school organization is a still more formidable barrier, one which for years stymied genuine efforts at collaboration. In the day of the typical teacher, there is scarcely time to reflect even briefly on one's own instructional successes

and failures, to say nothing of involving oneself in analyzing and evaluating the work of a peer.

Peer supervision implies a degree of openness and trust. With exceptions, schools are not generally places in which teachers share their ideas, their frustrations, their successes. They live, often deliberately, in a private world. There is also a surprising air of competition among teachers in many school systems. Lionberger has pointed out the unhappy consequences of such a climate, noting that in competitive occupations people typically do not share information.<sup>11</sup> Doc-

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tors share new techniques; but restaurant owners do not share new recipes. It is possible that the press for accountability in schools and the demand for performance and attainment of objectives may continue to create in the school a competitive environment that will detract from honest attempts at peer evaluation and sharing.

Probably the most serious weakness of peer supervision—including peer evaluation and peer-directed in-service—is that it runs the risk of being random activity, unrelated to other instructional improvement activities and without any necessity to be directly related to the goals of the school. Informal systems of teacher influence sometimes thwart the schools' attempts to change; in a peer-directed supervisory system, there are no guarantees that it will operate in a way that supports the goals of the organization.

What gives peer supervision direction? Who designs, coordinates, and gives focus to it? In

<sup>11</sup> Herbert F. Lionberger. "Diffusion of Innovations in Agricultural Research and in Schools." In: Robert R. Leeper, editor. *Strategy for Curriculum Change*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1965. p. 36.

what way is it targeted to support systemwide efforts at instructional improvement and curriculum change? Or is it a piecemeal, uncoordinated, random effort existing outside of the formal school structure? If the latter is the case, then how will such peer efforts be related to—if at all—the organizationally authorized work of the formal supervisory staff?

Is peer supervision a serious move to improve instruction, or is it a thinly-veiled attempt by teacher organizations to garner more power unto themselves and to gradually remove from administrators and supervisors the responsibility to evaluate performance and to prescribe programs of professional development? Granted that supervisors have been frequently cavalier in their treatment of teachers and in their disdain for involving them in decision-making, exchanging one power bloc for another is not educational progress.

Supervisors have good reason to view the development of peer supervision with some chariness. In the battle between teachers and school boards, supervisors and their concerns for improved instruction are frequently bypassed by both groups. Boards on one hand may impose quite arbitrarily their own version of accountability; teacher organizations on the other hand may bargain away instructional improvement time and funds in exchange for increased benefits. In the light of such developments, supervisors are probably well advised to keep one wary eye fixed on peer supervision, which threatens—unless directed—to be just one more incursion into their responsibilities.

Peer supervision, if uncoordinated and if not part of a larger system-directed program of instructional improvement and professional growth, is severely limited in its potential. Supervisors have been described as important linking-pins between the goal system of the school and the teaching system.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible for teachers (or for any organizational employee at the implementation level) to be the actors or implementers of goal decisions as well as to be the linking-pins—the transmitters, the translators, the institutional levers—who ensure that organizational goals and priorities are understood and carried out. Without such linkage, any system of supervisory behavior runs the risk of being self-

serving, unproductive, and even counter-productive. It is supervisors who, through their own interaction with organizational goal systems, are able to give expression and interpretation to those goal decisions in such a way that they can have meaning and importance for teachers, and can be translated into effective instruction in the classroom. By its isolation and lack of connectedness, peer supervision is incapable of performing this critical role.

An additional limitation of peer supervision is that in placing a strong emphasis on evaluation it is going to run head-on into the reality of school systems in which tenure density is dramatically increasing each year. With fewer teachers entering the profession and fewer leaving each year, schools will be faced with the prospect of a relatively stable, tenured, senior faculty. If supervisors have been unsuccessful in dealing with senior, tenured faculty, and if they have been frustrated in their efforts to effect changes in such persons, how successful will peers be? Will they even try? Teacher power—and peer evaluation as an expression of it—may be successful in policing and monitoring the entry and the retention in the profession of newcomers, especially in a time of few jobs. But will they evaluate their established, tenured peers with the same fervor? I think not.

### The Promise of Peer Supervision

As a substitute for formal, designated supervision, it is unlikely that peer supervision can ever be very effective, but as an adjunct to a broad-based program of instructional improvement, it can be highly useful. First of all, the ratio of supervisors to teachers in most school systems precludes the kind of supervision that is truly needed. Ratios vary widely, but they are all large, and it is not unusual to have a ratio of 1 to 200. Clearly, the involvement of teachers can vastly expand the potential of instructional improvement activities. Given the current disastrous supervisor-teacher ratios, some means need to be found to broaden the sphere of supervisory influence; peer supervision, as an adjunct to a formal program of supervision, does offer much promise.

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Alfonso, Gerald R. Firth, and Richard F. Neville. *Instructional Supervision: A Behavior System*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975. pp. 3-12; pp. 140-41.



As has been argued above, all supervision does not take place in the classroom; yet much does—or should—and existing ratios make it very unlikely that supervisors can do little more than respond to emergencies, pay occasional visits, and make only a casual and superficial contribution to a classroom-based, clinical supervision effort. Peer supervision, as an extension of formal supervision and not as a substitute for it, can greatly enhance the scope of instructional improvement, and properly developed and directed, can offer a realism, freshness, and an immediacy that would be hard to duplicate in traditional supervisory efforts.

The limited number of successful demonstrations of peer supervision, the growth of teacher centers, and the growing involvement of teachers in determining staff development activities all provide evidence that teachers can contribute to the supervision and improvement of instruction. William Gray has described an effective effort at clinical supervision by peers in Baltimore County, Maryland. From his work he found that peer supervision could bring about important changes in teaching, even among senior teachers, and that there were also important side benefits of greater self-confidence and increased admiration and respect for fellow teachers. Gray's conclusion is that this peer effort "is suggested to supplement the existing supervisory and evaluative practices currently carried on, not to supplant them . . . coupled with the feedback and input that is received from other sources, peer supervision could be a valuable addition in the effort to improve instruction."<sup>13</sup>

It is even possible that—given the existence of the right climate—teachers may share problems with peers that they hesitate to share with supervisors. It is understandable that teachers are reluctant to admit inadequacy and the need for help when the person to whom they appeal is also their evaluator and judge. Trained peers, serving as surrogate supervisors, can be a valuable source of immediate and relatively nonthreatening assistance.

The greatest promise of peer supervision is not what it can do alone, but what it can do as part of a larger, formal effort. Few school systems

<sup>13</sup> William L. Gray. Unpublished paper. University of Maryland-Baltimore County, Baltimore, Maryland, 1977.

*"Proponents of peer supervision believe that classroom doors can be opened, that one's practices and problems can be shared." Photo: Joe Di Deo, NEA.*

have tapped all the resources available to them in improving instruction; often a mammoth task is undertaken with only a skeleton crew of supervisory help available. Too often such attempts fail for lack of the critical mass needed to ensure success. Typically, school systems use the same number and quality of human resources regardless of the size and nature of the change effort. Seldom do they organize according to the task and still less often do they draw on the multitude of potential available skills. The use of peers represents such an untapped resource.

The key to effective peer supervision is to perceive and utilize this resource as one element in a system-wide effort, and as one component of a multilevel instructional supervisory team. When so linked, it is not in danger of being a fragmented and random activity. Rather, it has focus; it is an expression of organizational concern and priorities; and it has the advantage of both formal endorsement and support. This means that peer supervision, as an extension of the formal system, might still be expressed in several forms—from the most modest examples of help and influence, to clinical analysis and feedback, to shared responsibility for evaluation. Peer supervision can make a strong contribution in each of these areas, but it must be consonant with organizational goals, and it must supplement and not attempt to displace formal supervision if it is to hold any promise at all.

The concept of the professional supervisory team opens up and extends the formal structure of supervision; it recognizes the unique contributions that can be made by teachers and by other school personnel. Supporters of this concept recognize that it is difficult to manage, but believe that its potential power—because of the diversification and skill of its membership—makes it an arrangement that can dramatically enhance the responsiveness of supervision.<sup>14</sup> Such a concept also suggests new competencies and management skills for the supervisor.

Peer supervision can also help breed a new sense of responsibility among teachers, a responsibility both to help one's colleagues and to enlist the aid and analysis of others in improving one's own instruction. Peer supervision, when linked with formal supervisory efforts, may also help bridge the gap between sporadic supervisory

efforts and isolated, unrelated instructional improvement activities of classroom teachers. Peer supervision does hold the promise of linking teachers and supervisors in efforts that are of high and common concern.

## Conclusion

Teachers need a new sense of professionalism and autonomy, but they are not independent agents, and they must operate within some guidelines and respond to organizational goals. Formal supervisors provide this interpretive link, one that is essential in all organizations. It is clear, however, that the influence of supervisors and instructional improvement can be enhanced by the legitimate involvement of teachers in improving instruction. Properly directed, peer supervision can be a part of that process. Much of the current discussion of peer supervision suffers from being too limited in its conception of supervision and too sweeping in its assumptions about what peer supervision can achieve. Peer supervision can make some important contributions; but it has its limitations, and it cannot be a substitute for formal, organizationally directed supervision, expressed through a wide array of complex behaviors. [E]

<sup>14</sup> Alfonso, Firth, and Neville. *op. cit.* pp. 291-94.



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