

# Permitting Access:



Cartoon by Gary Howard

# The Teacher's Control Over Supervision

Supervisors, of course, may visit any classroom, but they must be psychologically accepted by the teacher while they are there if the process is to be anything more than a ritual.

## Interoffice Memo

*Date: Any day of the school year  
To: Any supervisor  
From: Any teacher  
Re: Your request to go swimming in my pool*

*Please be advised that it is my pool and that I issue invitations only to those people with whom I feel comfortable.*

This interoffice memo is a metaphor with a message. It illustrates our belief that the teacher, not the supervisor, controls supervision. It is the teacher who permits or refuses access to self, and it is the supervisor who needs to obtain an invitation "to go swimming."

We need not list here the litany of studies that suggests that teachers tend to view the structure and process of supervision as something rather considerably less than efficacious. Although some teachers do value the help they receive from other teachers and supervisors, a great many seem to feel that observation is a meaningless ritual. Indeed, many of them may prefer it that way. Why this state of affairs? We cannot hope to answer that question here, but we propose to lay out a broad framework within which the notion of "permitting access" seems

to fit and then to present the results of some initial inquiry into the concept's empirical validity.

Two other points are central to this discussion. First, we believe that most teachers want to be better than they already are. Increasing mastery of one's work leads to a confirmation of self-worth. Helping teachers become better, then, does not require helping them to become motivated. And while we acknowledge implicit motivation as a positive article of faith, we also recognize that it does not apply to all teachers (or supervisors).

Second, we are concerned about how a teacher thinks about what he or she does in the classroom. Teachers who are concerned about high-quality performance tend to have a deep intellectual and emotional stake in what they do—a deeply ingrained belief system about the process of teaching. It is not so much that veteran teachers, for example, do not want to alter the way they do things. Rather, any changes need to fit their established belief system about good teaching. Thus, if supervision is to be more than ritualistic or cosmetic, the supervisor must earn access to a teacher at the level of belief system. It is the teacher who, metaphorically, permits the supervisor to "swim in my pool." It is the supervisor who must attend to things that will result in a much-sought-after "invitation."

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### **Legitimate Access and Interpersonal Access**

The structure of supervision makes explicit supervisors' legitimate access to teachers. Not only may supervisors go into classrooms, but they are expected to “play” supervisor during and after those visits. So, too, do school organizations sanction group- or school-based supervisory activities, such as staff development programs. These givens and expectations say nothing about what transpires between the supervisor and teacher or teachers and whether what occurs has any meaning for either party.

Two things seem clear concerning physical and role access to teachers by supervisors. First, all teachers know that they cannot refuse access as mandated by the supervisory system. They also know that acceding to it is all they have to do. That is, once a supervisor is in a classroom or once teachers are seated at an inservice session, the question of access changes. Legitimacy of access does no more than open the structural door, thereafter teachers decide whether or not to grant access to their teacherhood.

Second, teachers may or may not explicitly realize their prerogatives for granting access, but they generally behave as though they implicitly accept such prerogatives. Picture, for example, a postobservation discussion between a supervisor and a teacher. The teacher may not be terribly interested in the supervisor's comments but realizes that a facade of interest needs to be created for the purpose of civility, if nothing else. For example, the teacher may pretend to listen intently to the supervisor or listen without intending to act on any of the suggestions. The situation is not unlike an experience with door-to-door salespeople. They ring our doorbell. We open the door, listen politely to the sales pitch, and then say, “No, thank you” or “I'm not interested” while closing the door. The big difference between the consumer and the teacher, of course, is that teachers' refusal to “buy” involves behavior that is more complex than a simple word or two.

Our experience and interpretation of the research led us to pose this question: Is there any empirical support for the idea that a teacher con-

trols access to the supervisory setting?

To answer our question we interviewed 12 teachers. So as not to prejudice the interviewees, we did not broach the idea of access as we began our discussions. We asked teachers to recall, in as much detail as possible, circumstances in which they felt a supervisory experience had been highly productive for them. We defined a “productive” supervisory relationship as one from which they had derived both a sense of professional effectiveness and of deeper insight into self.

After the teachers had described their experiences, we asked each one to think about it in terms of the concept of access. We asked, “Did the supervisor do anything that said to you, in effect, ‘It's okay to open the door?’” After they had reflected, all 12 teachers indicated that the concept made sense. Further, they vividly recalled things their supervisors had said or done that had led them to conclude that it would be all right to “open the door.”<sup>2</sup>

We analyzed the interviews with the idea that categories of access-inducing behaviors might emerge from teachers' comments about their experiences. Our analysis resulted in 41 descriptions of supervisor behavior, which we further grouped into 11 themes and finally into 3 categories. These categories are presented below with illustrative comments from the teachers.

#### *1. The supervisor's task-oriented approach toward the teacher.*

● The supervisors gave immediate, nonpunitive feedback about the teaching:

“It wasn't critical. It wasn't, ‘You're doing a lousy job.’ It was, ‘You might alter this. Let me know how it works out.’”

“It was the character of his immediate feedback. He never talked about technique. He talked about how I felt about my experience, was it good for me and the students, was I getting enough out of what I put in.”

● The supervisors took a collaborative approach to problem solving:

“The door got opened by her saying, ‘I'm new at this; I need your help; we're in this together.’ And she was as good as her word.”

"He had a collaborative approach to helping solve my problems."

● The supervisors made teachers feel they were the experts on teaching:  
"She made me feel I had something to offer; that I was intelligent."

"He was new. I had more experience than he. He asked me to talk with him about what I did in the classroom. He made me feel very much the expert on what I was doing."

● The supervisors were genuine in their relationships with teachers:  
"He didn't simply go through the motions."

"I knew, through our discussion, that he was really attending to my problems."

● The supervisors made the teachers feel that they are intelligent:

"She made me feel I had something to offer; that I was intelligent; that I could handle it."

"He'd give me insights about a problem. He made me feel that I was smart enough to handle it."

### 2. *The supervisor's interpersonal set toward the teacher.*

● The supervisors made the teachers feel that they were always available to them:

"He always had time for me."

"He was always there, not to criticize, but to reinforce. . . ."

"He would take a walk down to see us. It was always at the right time. He made himself very visible, but in a family kind of way."

● The supervisors made the teachers feel that they were being listened to:

"He's an excellent listener. I'm attuned to that. If someone's really listening, I'll tell him things."

"Things became more and more comfortable because I could tell he was listening."

● The supervisors were open about what they knew or didn't know:

"It was his openness about himself. He risked a lot of himself in the beginning."

"He modeled an open relationship with me. He never held back from

saying 'I don't know,' that he didn't have all the answers."

● The supervisors made teachers feel that they were interested in them as people:

"He'd go out of his way to come and see me. He was always giving me stuff to read."

"He made me feel that, as a person, I could continually develop, learn, and grow. I think he cared about me as a person."

● The supervisors made the teachers' interests their interests:

"I had the feeling that my problems, professionally, were his problems."

"He had a sense of what I was talking about. It was like my problem became his problem."

### 3. *The supervisor's own competence as an educator.*

● The supervisors gave the teachers a sense of their own competence:

"I had a great deal of respect for his competence and expertise."

"She was 'there' professionally. Her knowledge and competency made me respect her."

### **Granting Access**

From those teachers' reflections, we begin to develop an array of factors that influenced them to permit access by their supervisors. Several additional comments are in order. First, our idea of access seems to make sense; that is, the teachers whom we interviewed were able to relate to it directly. Further, they did not have to search their memories long or hard to provide vivid examples. From this we surmised that granting access to self is an experience both gratifying and rare enough to be memorable. Clearly, it seems to be an antidote for the loneliness that often accompanies teaching. This is no small matter.

Second, we could hypothesize that without access, there can be no effective supervision. Although teachers are able to be specific about their access-granting experiences, it would be foolhardy for a supervisor to seize on one or the other behaviors with the idea that "If I do X, I will get Y." Life in schools is much too complicated for that. What does make sense, however—and this could be thought of as a rule of thumb—is that supervisors

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need to devote central attention to the matter of access in their relationships with teachers. It is not so much a case of manipulating an invitation to "go swimming" as it is of considering the character of relationships between supervisor and teacher as well as among teachers.

Third, there are probably some general principles involved—for example, one can hardly doubt the "rule" that all teachers want to be listened to and understood by their supervisor. It is probably also true that many idiosyncratic interpretations of the rule need to be considered. For instance, a teacher who has real difficulty coping with complex classroom problems might not be expected to open up to a supervisor who projects the image of an expert. More likely, such a supervisor would come across as phony and uncaring. The conditions and behaviors of supervision relate to and affect each other.

Fourth, the teachers responded positively when they sensed that their

supervisor and they were operating on the "same wave length." It's an elusive idea and may well be a result of having granted access, rather than be a precursor to it. Sensing the pervasive and deep-seated views of another develops from relatively intense conversation between people over matters of common concern. We also suspect, however, that such congruence forms the ground on which mutually satisfying work relationships rest.

Fifth, much of what we have said here transcends the issue of productive supervision in the schools. That is, to be considered competent, to be listened to, to be asked to collaborate with one's organizational supervisor, particularly when that person is highly competent, produces a feeling of being valued. There is a vital mental health component attached to our notion of access, which probably should not be ignored.

Finally, though our focus was primarily on the relationship between supervisor and teacher and the teacher's control of that relationship, we noted earlier that a similar type of teacher control exists in schoolwide developmental activities. Therefore, just as a supervisor needs to attend to the problem of access when working with an individual, so must he or she attend to the same matter when working with a school staff. It is the faculty that owns the swimming pool. □

1 We do not equate the notion of access with that of rapport, which typically is used to describe how well people relate to each other. One may have good rapport with one's supervisor and still not permit access in our terms. On the other hand, it is hard to conceive of granting access to another with whom one does not, minimally at least, "get along."

2 A side note is appropriate here. The teachers whom we interviewed were not the first 12 we encountered. We approached many others, but we did not interview them because they could not recall having had a productive supervisory relationship as we defined it. Casual questioning revealed that there had been no granting of access.

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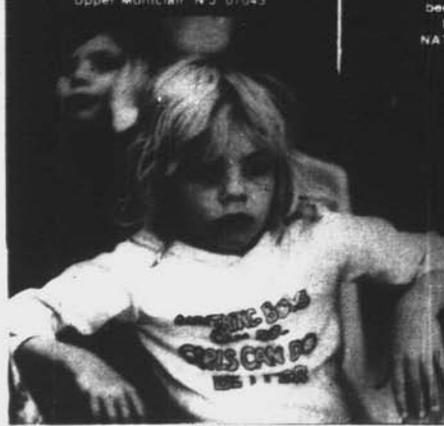
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