A Research Agenda

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE EFFECT OF SUPERVISION
ON TEACHER BEHAVIOR

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In preparing this article, I became increasingly aware of the enormous range and complexity of work being done in the related categories of general supervision, staff development, instructional improvement, instructional leadership, teacher effectiveness, teacher empowerment, and teacher improvement. I would even include teacher evaluation, although I have a strong bias against placing primarily administrative functions under the umbrella of the term supervision in the literature. Soon I realized that a broad cataloguing of needed research was not appropriate and that a more selective discussion of issues and concerns was my only manageable option. The process of seeking, sorting, and sifting materials from this exploding field was an "awesome" experience (to quote my teenage neighbors), and my respect for the enormous talent and energy going into supervision studies has increased.

To help the field move forward more intelligently requires more than listing unanswered questions. In truth, hardly any of the supervision-related questions we have pursued over the past quarter-century have been settled. The mention of a few will make that sad fact clear: What legitimate relationship can there be, or should there be, between supervision as helping and supervision as judging? Which personnel-support functions properly belong to line officers in school systems or districts and which to staff officers? What is lost or gained when both functions reside in the same role (e.g., building principal)? Which job descriptions clearly fall under the rubric supervisor, and which fall under administrator? In what ways does the widespread emphasis on rating and evaluating teachers contaminate the supervisory relationship? In what specific respects does work in curriculum development differ from work in supervision? How much and what kinds of energy should be budgeted in the central office of a school district for supporting and managing personnel-development activities, including supervision? Or for the budget of each local school? What are the most cost-effective ways for central office personnel to make a difference in how much and how well children learn? What supervisory activities on the part of school-based leadership seem to pay off in pupil learning?
Most of these familiar, even timeworn questions remain timely and important. More questions arise when relatively recent educational trends are taken into account. Is there, for example, a best or most legitimate version of clinical supervision? What has the concept of situational leadership, which suggests that teachers have varying levels of maturity or skill that call in each case for type-specific attention, contributed to supervisory practice? What are the teacher-growth contributions being made by peer coaching, mentoring, and other same-level helping arrangements? What are the implications for the work of supervisors, as collegial support-and-feedback systems become a significant force in expanding and upgrading teacher skills and understandings? Does the current emphasis on restructuring, a multipurpose term whose meanings include teacher empowerment, create new opportunities or mechanisms for influencing teachers’ classroom behavior? What if any contributions to supervision practice can be traced to research on teaching styles, learning styles, effective classroom management, mastery learning, at-risk students, and perhaps hundreds of other nostrums, programs, and proposals in which major investments are being made? What lasting benefits, ultimately reflected in teacher behaviors, can be traced to any or all of the institutes, workshops, conferences, and other intensive training programs being offered by local units, state departments, state and national organizations, and for-profit trainers?

MEASUREMENT PROBLEMS

Thinking about all these questions, and about how difficult tracing cause and-effect relationships is, leads to the realization that the measurement systems available to us at this late point in the 20th century are only a little bit relevant, a little bit effective, and a little bit useful. The education profession depends too much on research designs and procedures that better fit the needs of the hard sciences. The profession also depends too much on measures that provide politically loaded scores for a limited range of educational outcomes. Virtually no data are being systematically collected on how children feel about themselves and about schooling or how they are learning to cope with the complex problems of growing up in a deteriorating society, or what they know and believe about the many worlds (political, social, economic, physical, spiritual) that surround them. No good measures are in general use about enthusiasm for life, or optimism about the future, or healthy moral and spiritual development—all things that teachers, often with the urging of supervisors, seek to nurture. When teachers try to help children live together in constructive harmony, no record of success or failure is recorded by the batteries of tests on which teacher evaluations are sometimes based. Other important things that teachers do, and supervisors encourage, go undocumented and therefore unappreciated.

Of course, the prevailing data-gathering systems have many more shortcomings. When supervisors work with teachers, the focus is often on problems
conceptually different from, and often far more important than, raising math or reading test scores. Also, a supervisor who succeeds in helping a teacher deal more effectively with discipline problems, turned-off students, ethical issues in the classroom, or latchkey children may never be able to produce evidence of that success. Neither his employer nor the reader of supervision journals will know the effect that supervisors can have in many situations. As part of personnel and budgetary decision making, especially when school boards are tempted to reduce supervisory staff, more information must be available about supervisors’ contributions, and teachers’ successes must be examined across the whole spectrum of school goals rather than the small part test scores now represent.

Teacher morale is reflected in turnover statistics. We must stop our teachers from dropping out. A plausible hypothesis is that teachers who receive expert, sympathetic supervision, whether one-on-one or through the groups they belong to, will be more inclined to remain employed as teachers than those who do not. Designing studies to test this hypothesis should not be too difficult. Confirming that investment in the work force can be capitalized by paying more attention to workers’ needs and heightening their satisfaction could be useful, as well as beneficial to children.

**MIND-SETS OF TEACHERS**

Teachers, probably more so than all other workers for whom the term professional is commonly used, behave and perform as they do for reasons mostly unrelated to the preservice preparation they receive, the administrative and supervisory services provided for them, and the various inducements or societal pressures for doing a better job. Future nurses, physicians, attorneys, engineers, tax accountants, architects, and social workers enter into their training programs virtually in awe of the enormous knowledge base they will be required to master. They remain in those programs far longer (in fact, far, far longer in most cases) than do students in education, and they encounter many difficult hurdles along the way. The transition from academic studies to (clinical or equivalent) salaried practice is carefully paced and managed, and entry into the full fledged role is usually gradual. Once certified and in legitimate practice, most of these professionals function within a collegial unit that offers support, protection against error or failure, and access to necessary resources.

Houle has observed that compared with teachers, most other professionals possess a far greater data base at entry level. He also notes that these professionals in their day-to-day work experience deal mostly with discrete, manageable, and solvable problems. Furthermore, they have significant opportunities for continuing education, which they earnestly pursue. They

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1Cyril O Houle, *Continuing Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1980)
believe that control of state-of-the-art knowledge and skills is essential to their professional survival and responsible performance. Their pride in their knowledge is reflected in the diplomas, certificates, and other awards that adorn their offices.

Future teachers, in contrast, are rarely if ever in awe of their educational knowledge base, although they may harbor concerns about their ability to accumulate enough substantive knowledge and to succeed in doing the things that teachers do. They bring to their preservice coursework a body of perceptions, information, assumptions, values, and operational definitions of teaching that has been accumulating in their consciousness ever since they entered preschool or kindergarten. These definitions and assumptions, geared largely to conventional practices not currently valued by professional scholars, have been reinforced in their other university courses. Not uncommonly, their professors have expressed negative views of preservice or graduate-level education courses, thus diminishing the students' respect for the knowledge base around which the teacher-education program is supposedly built.

Before formal preparation, therefore, the would-be teacher has been socialized into a view of the teacher's role that accepts well-established repertoires and that makes teacher-education experiences seem in advance like something to be endured, rather than an opportunity to learn exciting, necessary things. The lengthy, formative experience of growing up in elementary and secondary schools, most of which have a conservative, even hidebound atmosphere, represents for future teachers what Lortie calls an "apprenticeship of observation." 2 Ost notes the stable "culture of teaching." 3 Interest in a teaching career results from a process of natural selection that covers 15 to 20 years and that tends to favor compliant behavior, accommodation to existing patterns in schools, resistance to educational reforms, and commitment to well-established repertoires. 4 According to Ost, survival in the existing conservative culture is given high priority by beginning teachers and continues for those who remain after some years. Therefore, he concludes, "the quality of teaching in America will only improve when attention is directed at the singly most powerful barrier to change—the culture of teaching." 5

TEACHER EDUCATION

In all the current noise about upgrading American schools, we hear only whispers about transforming teacher education into an enterprise that Abra-

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ham Flexner, or his 1990 clone, could be proud of. The relatively trivial proposals of the Holmes Group, especially when compared with Cremin’s 1978 call for doctoral-level preservice preparation, seem unlikely to open legislative purses, counter public mind-sets, or break the stranglehold of anti-educationist professors and administrators at colleges of education. Possibly, as Orlosky contends, gradual modification of teacher-education programs will be less stressful than comprehensive revision. Therefore, we must continue to accept, at least for a few more decades, the probability that beginning teachers will not have radically different preparation and will enter the schools with their lifelong suppositions and conceptions mostly unchanged.

EFFORTS AT UPGRADING

It would be unfair to ignore important changes that are taking place in teacher education, especially the building partnerships between colleges and school districts and the strengthened apprenticeships, internships, and orientation arrangements. The continuing effort of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education to define the knowledge base of teaching is a major contribution, many current teacher-preparation programs are doing a good job, considering their operating restraints. All the same, few beginners can be expected to be “safe” practitioners, and most will soon be swallowed up by a culture that tends to define supervision as more a nuisance than a necessary, valuable service.

Staff-development and inservice programs, unpopular and ineffective in the past, have become more vigorous, more focused, more data-driven, and more influential in moving the culture in necessary directions. State and national professional associations have been offering an array of workshops, seminars, institutes, and conferences about important and timely topics on a scale that would have been unimaginable just a decade ago. Furthermore, thanks in part to a quantum jump in the literature of supervision, coaching, adult learning (as applied to practicing professionals), and the analysis of teaching, the atmosphere in many schools is friendlier to the idea that teachers not only need but want to receive help in growing professionally.

In recent years, there has been a spurt of writings about how adults learn (e.g., Brookfield) and about continuing education in the professions (e.g.,

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Related to such writings is an enormous literature, much of it in discussions of successful corporate management about how workers can be helped, inspired, or empowered to function at higher levels. Three common threads emerge: (1) most adults prefer to learn and work in a social context, (2) helping work groups function well is a cost-effective, productive activity for managers and supervisors; and (3) work cultures are healthy when members value group and organizational goals and when day-to-day decisions related to the goals are made at the operations level.

Working one-on-one with teachers may be an obsolete supervisory pattern, and educational supervisors can probably affect teachers' behavior most by helping teachers to team together and by coaching school working units (teaching teams, departments, committees, and task forces) and helping them solve problems together. Nurturing the professional leadership development of teachers who carry, or will carry, leadership responsibilities in the school is one of the smartest ways for supervisors to influence what goes on in the classroom. Measures of supervisory effectiveness, then, would be designed to detect evidence of effective team leadership, harmonious and productive teamwork, group goal orientation, group productivity (vis-à-vis goals), and quality of group decision making.

HOW MUCH?

Our goal is to examine how supervision affects teacher behavior. If future teachers do bring a strongly fixed conservative posture to teacher preparation, if teacher preparation is only a minor force for reshaping attitudes and behaviors, and if the culture of teaching does resist change as Ost claims, how powerful must the interventions be to succeed in changing how teachers approach their work? Can a work force denied access to sufficient preservice preparation attain a respectable level of professional practice through on-the-job efforts alone? What should be the nature and the amount of our efforts?

We must find part of the answer to these related questions in the rare places that see a significantly greater amount of supervision. In most schools, the amount of time and energy that goes into instructional supervision, compared with administratively necessary classroom visits and related conversations, is so close to zero that research about the efficacy of supervision is senseless. Even in funded research projects and doctoral dissertations, the amount of attention paid to the treatment group is usually small. Hardly ever can we claim that the treatment was not only faithful to the concept or theory being tested but of sufficient duration and intensity so that the evaluation of

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results has meaning. Little wonder statistically significant findings are so seldom found or that benefits, when discovered, seem to have such a short life.

Are supervisory activities, consistent qualitatively with particular supervisory philosophies or constructs, in sufficiently common use on a large enough scale so that useful measures of their effect can be taken? The answer, I believe, is no. I only hope the answer to the next question is yes: Does the supervision profession care enough about the problem to press for a larger role?

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This collection of essays focuses on Donald A. Schön's concept of reflection-in-action. These analyses and critical assessments greatly expand the debate on the value and implications of Schön's work for the practice of teaching and supervision. Authors include Schön, Shulman, Fenstermacher, Glickman, and Jean Hill.