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Supervision in Rural Schools[1]

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This is a report of teachers' responses to the Survey of Supervisory Practices (SSP) in four rural, central Pennsylvania school districts. Six factors, which are statistically significant (.05 level), are related to teachers' perceptions of the helpfulness of supervision in the improvement of their classroom instruction.

There are differing views about the current reality of supervisory practices in schools. Blumberg [2] compared this process to a "cold war" between teachers and their supervisors. Goldhammer, Anderson, and Krajewski [3] suggested it is directed toward the improvement of instruction. But the literature is vague about supervision in the context of rural schools [9]. And the "multiple realities" [7] of rural schools may prevent the comparison of rural schools to urban and suburban schools when talking about supervisory practices.

Before one can be prescriptive about the necessity of change in certain procedures and how to change them, it seems only reasonable to first check descriptions of current practices. This paper describes one such attempt—a description of current supervisory practices and teachers' perceptions regarding their helpfulness in four rural schools. Finally, there are some suggestions based on implications from the data.

During the 1982-83 school year four rural school districts in central Pennsylvania participated in the Survey of Supervisory Practices (SSP). This survey recorded both teacher and supervisor perceptions of the supervision conducted in their schools.

Two types of rural school districts were represented in our population. One type was the small, single-campus K-12 school district. The other was a large, county wide, multi-campus K-12 school district. All four districts were comprised of primarily small agrarian communities with the two multi-campus districts each encompassing a small town of approximately 10,000 people.

It was speculated that systematic differences between these two types of school districts might exist. That is, there might be some trends that were true for single campus schools that were not apparent for the multi-campus districts and vice versa. This did not prove to be the case as intra-school district type differences in supervisory practices were as pronounced as inter-school district type differences.

Findings

Demographic Information

For the purpose of the report, the two single campus districts are referred to as Type I districts and the multi-campus districts as Type II. More specifically, the two single campus school districts are referred to as District IA and IB and the two multi-campus, county wide school districts as District IIA and IIB. Six hundred ninety-three of the 1,010 (69%) teachers in these districts who received surveys provided usable responses. The return rate varied: IA at a 55% response; IB a 96%; IIA a 63%; and IIB a 71%.

Fifty-six percent of the respondents were women. Sixty percent of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree, the rest, a Master's degree. Most teachers (55%) had ten years or more experience in the school district.

Patterns of Observation and Conferral

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they were supervised by a building administrator—either the principal or assistant principal. Another 25% were supervised by some type of district supervisor.

Thirty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they were observed teaching two or fewer times during the year and 39% indicated that they were observed five times or more. It should be noted that all 270 teachers who reported being observed five times or more were from Type II (multi-campus) districts.

Thirteen percent of all respondents reported at least one meeting with the supervisor prior to an observation. Five times (65%) as many teachers reported meeting with their supervisors in at least one post-observation conference during the academic year.

Two-thirds of the responding teachers reported observations and related conferences to be either "very helpful"

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Table 1

Perceived Helpfulness of Observations and Related Conferences for Improving Teaching

	District IA (N = 22)		District IB (N = 66)		District IIA (N = 280)		District IIB (N = 325)		Totals (N = 693)	
	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)
Very helpful	1	(5%)	8	(12%)	39	(14%)	81	(25%)	129	(19%)
Somewhat helpful	4	(18%)	31	(47%)	128	(46%)	169	(52%)	332	(48%)
Not helpful	10	(45%)	27	(41%)	94	(34%)	61	(19%)	192	(28%)
No response	7	(32%)	0	(–)	19	(7%)	14	(4%)	40	(6%)
TOTALS	22	(100%)	66	(100%)	280	(101%)*	325	(100%)	693	(101%)*

*Percentages do not always sum to 100 due to the imprecision of rounding.

(19%) or "somewhat helpful" (48%) for improving teaching. The differences among the districts seem noteworthy: 23% of District IA teachers reported this district supervision was helpful, compared to 59% of IB

Table 2

Descriptors of Supervision Received

	District IA (N = 22)		District IB (N = 66)		District IIA (N = 280)		District IIB (N = 325)		Totals (N = 693)	
	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)
1. continuous	3	(14%)	23	(35%)	127	(45%)	159	(49%)	312	(45%)
2. collaborative	1	(5%)	16	(24%)	59	(21%)	104	(32%)	180	(26%)
3. threatening	9	(41%)	1	(2%)	8	(3%)	11	(3%)	33	(5%)
4. rational	1	(5%)	24	(36%)	108	(39%)	138	(42%)	271	(39%)
5. arbitrary	5	(23%)	4	(6%)	26	(9%)	26	(8%)	61	(9%)
6. meaningful	0	(–)	30	(45%)	101	(36%)	177	(54%)	308	(44%)
7. constructive	4	(18%)	39	(59%)	145	(52%)	230	(71%)	418	(60%)
8. supportive	4	(18%)	54	(82%)	195	(70%)	266	(82%)	519	(75%)
9. discouraging	11	(50%)	9	(14%)	16	(6%)	15	(5%)	51	(7%)
10. disorganized	13	(59%)	3	(5%)	19	(7%)	9	(3%)	44	(6%)
11. stimulating	0	(–)	7	(11%)	35	(13%)	82	(25%)	124	(18%)
12. useless	7	(32%)	5	(8%)	51	(18%)	23	(7%)	86	(12%)
13. intuitive	0	(–)	5	(8%)	13	(5%)	37	(11%)	55	(8%)
14. encouraging	2	(9%)	31	(41%)	144	(51%)	213	(66%)	390	(56%)
15. systematic	1	(5%)	14	(21%)	75	(27%)	107	(33%)	197	(28%)
16. destructive	6	(27%)	1	(2%)	1	(1%)	5	(2%)	13	(2%)
17. uniform	1	(5%)	17	(26%)	74	(27%)	106	(33%)	198	(29%)
18. productive	1	(5%)	28	(42%)	80	(29%)	155	(48%)	264	(38%)
19. sporadic	10	(45%)	18	(27%)	69	(25%)	52	(16%)	149	(21%)
20. boring	1	(5%)	2	(3%)	16	(6%)	13	(4%)	32	(5%)
21. directive	3	(14%)	17	(26%)	46	(17%)	117	(36%)	183	(26%)
22. varied	9	(41%)	14	(21%)	60	(21%)	75	(23%)	158	(23%)
23. organized	1	(5%)	19	(29%)	110	(39%)	165	(51%)	295	(43%)
24. trivial	10	(45%)	9	(14%)	34	(12%)	31	(10%)	84	(12%)

teachers, 60% of IIA teachers, and 77% of IIB teachers (Table 1).

Description of Supervision Received

Most teachers perceived the supervision they received as positive. From a list of twenty four descriptors, the majority of teachers viewed supervision as: supportive (75%), constructive (60%), and encouraging (56%). At the other end, descriptors such as threatening, discouraging, disorganized, and destructive all received less than ten percent responses. In fact, no negative response was selected by more than 20% of the teachers (Table 2).

It should be noted that teachers from District IA had a generally negative perception of the supervision received: the two descriptors selected by at least 50% of the teachers in this district were "disorganized" (59%) and "discouraging" (50%). These responses were chosen by less than 8% of teachers in each of the other districts (except "discouraging" in District IB which was chosen by 14% of that district's teachers).

Improvements Attempted

Teachers were asked whether they had: (1) tried out a least one change identified during the supervisory process and found it to be worthwhile; (2) tried out at least one change and did not find any suggested change worthwhile; (3) not tried any changes; (4) had no changes identified. Forty percent of all the teachers responded that no changes had been identified. A substantial percentage of teachers in each school district selected this fourth option: IA (59%), IB (42%), IIA (50%), IIB (31%) (Table 3).

When responses of the 364 teachers who *had changes identified* were examined, 84% had tried at least one and found it worthwhile. This appears relatively consistent across the districts involved: IA (100%), IB (86%), IIA (87%), IIB (82%).

Helpfulness of Supervision Received

Over two-thirds of the teachers responded that the supervision received was either helpful (19%) or somewhat helpful (48%). A little over one-fourth felt the supervision received was not helpful. Taken separately, only 23% of District IA felt the supervision was very helpful/somewhat helpful. Conversely, in Districts IB and IIA, 59% and 60% found the supervision very helpful/somewhat helpful while 41% and 34% did not perceive it as helpful. In District IIB 77% selected either very helpful or somewhat helpful: only 19% found the supervision not helpful.

A second "helpfulness" item was in Likert form: the supervision I received was helpful to my improvement as a teacher. Respondents marked a continuum ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The tendencies of teachers by districts were: District IA was "disagree," Districts IB and IIA were "neutral" and District IIB was "agree." This consistency in teacher response to both "helpfulness" items emphasizes the reliability between the measures.

Relationships Among Variables

The two items dealing with the perceived helpfulness of supervision received were used as dependent variables to try to determine whether or not specific aspects of

Table 3

Improvements Attempted

Regarding the changes discussed in item H above:*

1. I tried out at least one of the changes and found it to be worthwhile.
2. I tried out at least one of the changes but did not find any suggested change worthwhile.
3. I did not really try any of the recommended changes.
4. No changes were identified.

	District IA (N = 22)		District IB (N = 66)		District IIA (N = 280)		District IIB (N = 325)		Totals (N = 693)	
	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)	freq.	(%)
1. Tried and found at least one to be worthwhile.	5	(23%)	30	(45%)	108	(39%)	163	(50%)	306	(44%)
2. Tried but did not find any suggested change worthwhile.	0	(−)	3	(5%)	11	(4%)	23	(7%)	37	(5%)
3. Did not try any change.	0	(−)	2	(3%)	5	(2%)	14	(4%)	21	(3%)
4. No changes were identified.	13	(59%)	28	(42%)	140	(50%)	99	(31%)	280	(40%)

*Item H on the survey reads: "As part of the observation and related correspondence or conferences: (1) My supervisor independently recommended changes which might improve my teaching, (2) My supervisor and I jointly identified changes which might improve my teaching, (3) I identified changes which might improve my teaching *and* discussed these changes with my supervisor, (4) I identified changes which might improve my teaching *but did not* discuss these changes with my supervisor, (5) No changes were identified.

supervision were significantly related to the teachers' responses as to supervisory helpfulness. Six items which represent components that have been associated with effective supervision were selected as independent variables.

The following six independent variables were tested for their relationship with the dependent measures:

1. the existence of one or more post-observation conferences;
2. the purpose of the observation (i.e., to establish a formal rating, to improve teaching, to comply with the law);
3. the supervisor's awareness of the lesson plan;
4. source of recommended changes (i.e., the supervisor independently, the supervisor and teacher jointly, teacher identification and discussion with supervisor, teacher identification and no discussion, no changes identified);
5. stimulation of teacher thought (a Likert item);
6. supervisor stressing student achievement (a Likert item).

Each of these six variables was found to be statistically significant at the .05 level with analysis of variance (see Table 4).

When the ANOVA yielded significant differences for the Likert-type dependent variable, a follow-up Duncan's Multiple Range Test was performed for mean separation. For the six independent variables the following answers were most likely to produce a favorable response (agree) on the Likert-type dependent measure: (1) the presence of at least one post observation conference; (2) the purpose for observation being to assist in the improvement of teaching; (3) the supervisor being aware of the purpose and plan for the observed lesson; (4) joint identification of potential improvements (not identifying any potential changes was perceived at least helpful); (5) stimulating teacher thought; (6) stressing student achievement.

Table 4

Analysis of Variance Results of Six Factors for the Item: "The supervision I received was helpful to my improvement as a teacher."

Source	Sum of Squares	*DF*	*F* Value	*P*≤
Post-observation conference	6.99	1	4.19	.05
Purpose for the observation	75.58	3	15.10	.01
Awareness of lesson plan	14.82	1	8.88	.01
Identification of possible improvements	32.20	4	4.82	.01
Ability to get the teacher to think about teaching	269.57	2	80.77	.01
Emphasis on student achievement	53.81	2	16.12	.01

Discussion

Rural supervision does not seem to be uniform in practice. What is experienced by one teacher in one rural setting may be completely different from that experienced by another teacher in another similar setting. This may be related to the "dearth of information" [9] regarding supervisory practices in rural schools. It may also reflect the vagueness and generality of the available literature in describing the tasks and expectations or rural principals [6; 10].

It was anticipated that there would be significant differences in the teacher perceptions of supervisory practices based on the school district size, i.e., single campus vs. county wise, multi-campus. However it became apparent that this generally was not the case. True, teachers in one of the small, single campus districts reported negative perceptions of supervision while teachers in the other three districts typically reported positive perceptions. And, it should also be noted that the district had just settled a long and bitter teachers' strike—a factor undoubtedly influencing the findings more than the size of the district.

There are four areas that seem significant as beginning points for improving rural supervision and its practice.

First, except in the district suffering from a teachers' strike, teachers did not perceive the supervision they received as negative or as a "cold war" between themselves and the supervisor. Instead, there seemed to be a type of peaceful coexistence. This is supported by the high percentage of teachers who selected positive descriptors to describe their supervisory experience and the very low percentage of responses on the negative items. Also, on a separate item entitled "Accuracy of Final Appraisal," 79% of all the teachers in these rural districts felt the final appraisal of their teaching performance was "fair and accurate," (only 1% indicated that they found it was overly negative.)

Second, it is very important to identify change if instruction is to improve. Eighty-four percent of the teachers who indicated that a change had been identified tried it and found it worthwhile—a powerful suggestion of the meaningfulness of the changes to the teachers. Yet 40% of the teachers indicated no changes had been identified.

In a companion research study [5], which included data from this study as a subset of a larger look at supervisory practices, *all supervisors* responded that they identify possible changes for improvement of instruction. This is not the perception of 40% of the teachers in rural school districts. It becomes obvious that there is some problem —either in communication or ownership. A re-examination of the data indicates that when teacher and supervisor jointly discuss and identify possible teaching

improvements, the teacher is more apt to perceive the supervision as helpful.

Third, six factors were found to have a significant effect on a teachers' perception of the positive nature of supervision. They were: 1) a post observation conference; 2) the purpose of observation being to improve instruction; 3) the supervisor's awareness of the lesson plan; 4) the identification of possible changes; 5) the stimulation of teacher thought by the supervisor; and 6) the stressing of student achievement by the supervisor. None of these items suggest the need for a superordinate-subordinate role relationship. That is, for these six factors to occur, the supervisor need not be in hierarchal position above the teacher. In fact, they could be found in a peer supervision model.

The concept of clinical supervision would encompass these six factors. The teacher's focus on analysis of data collected in the classroom, reflection for the development of possible changes that might improve instruction, and the deliberation of this process with a supervisor would assume all six factors listed above. Given the multiple roles [8] and lack of personnel support in rural schools [1], supervisors are hard pressed to find the time necessary to practice a clinical supervisory model. It also seems that it is no mere coincidence that the most positive responses came from teachers who worked in a system where there was a team of central office supervisors, (whose major responsibility was in-class supervision), rather than from teachers where supervision was one of many tasks of the building principal.

The fourth area concerns peer supervision as one possible solution to increase supervisory effectiveness in rural schools. With training in data collection techniques, joint analysis, and reflective thinking teachers agree that teachers can act in supervisory roles for the improvement of instruction [4]. This concept can be augmented by the fact that both supervisor and teachers "would welcome the opportunity to observe other teachers teach *and* believe . . . teaching might profit from it" [5]. In fact, this was the only Likert item in the survey where the means of teacher responses *in all four school* districts were in the "agree" range.

Rural schools suffer under many burdens. Unable to employ full time individuals due to financial constraints or given the limitations of a rather low population density over a wide area, the prospect for improving instructional practices through direct supervision seems bleak. The practice of peer supervision seems to be one way of overcoming this particular set of burdens and increasing the effectiveness of rural schools.

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