

"Undervision" Instead of Supervision

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WHEN I ARRIVED TO VOLUNTEER in a public elementary school one day last year, the teacher was sitting at a table with a central office supervisor. They were finishing a post-observation conference, so I went about my normal volunteer activities. Thirty minutes after the supervisor left, my host teacher approached me and asked, "Why do I feel so empty?"

I did not know what to say, but I could guess the reason for her question. She explained that she was a veteran teacher, that she had to go through these observation/evaluation sessions three times each year, and that she felt insulted by the supervision experience. She went on to ask rhetorically, "How can they assess my teaching when they come in only three times a year? Isn't this a huge waste of resources - they pay these people's salaries but they take away our teaching assistants."

Blumberg (1980) found this type of attitude to be so prevalent among teachers that he characterizes teacher-supervisor relations as a "Cold War." To Blumberg (1980) teachers' feelings of indignation, anger, resentment, suspicion, and distrust amount to the "supervisory problem." He explains that the causes of this problem are complex, having to do with "the way the larger educational system behaves, organizational factors associated with schools, and the behavior patterns of individual supervisors..." (Blumberg, 1980, p. 10).

I agree that several causes of the "supervisory problem" are complex, but I believe one of the causes is right in front of us - in the phrase itself. I contend that teachers would not resent instructional improvement efforts so much if this process were not called "teacher supervision."*

The problem with terminology has become especially apparent recently, since educational leaders have emphasized the need to empower teachers and build collegial school cultures. Over the past few years we have sought to redefine professional relationships in schools, but we have been hampered by the language we use and the traditional assumptions underlying our terminology. The language of teacher empowerment and collegial school cultures contrasts sharply with the connotations of teacher "supervision."

The phrase "teacher supervision" reflects assumptions which contradict the spirit of teacher empowerment and collegiality. If schools are to become collegial institutions, a new term must be found to describe how educators work together to improve instruction. This is necessary because the terms we use not only reflect our assumptions, but also drive our practice.

The purpose of this article is to propose that educators replace the term "supervision" with undervision" - a term which coincides with current notions of collegiality and instructional improvement. The meaning of this new term will become clear in the next four sections, as it is contrasted with the meaning of "supervision." The first section reviews the problems educators have experienced with the term "supervision." The second section describes the assumptions underlying this term. The third section contrasts supervisory assumptions with those of "undervision." The fourth section explains why "undervision" is an appropriate term to describe efforts to improve classroom instruction.

Definitional Problems with "Supervision"

For many years educators have struggled with the meaning of instructional supervision. In 1967 the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Commission on Supervision Theory recognized that "supervision" may not be the most appropriate term for describing instructional improvement efforts. Anderson (1967) writes,

"Supervision," a term for which we have long sought a more suitable alternative, ordinarily refers to those things that are done by appointed officers of a school system to influence (and presumably to stimulate improvement in) the instructional behavior of the teaching staff. (pp. 31-32)

This report goes on to point out that authoritative supervision may be offensive to teachers, thus suggesting that we seek a more suitable term in order to send a less authoritative message to teachers. More recently, but for the

same reasons, Carl Glickman (1992) bemoaned the fact that we use the term "supervision" to describe how teachers and others work together to improve instruction. We have recognized the "supervisory problem" for 25 years, but we have not been able to eliminate the language and accompanying assumptions at the root of the "supervisory problem" (Blumberg, 1980).

A second definitional problem involves the lack of a clear consensus on the meaning of instructional supervision. John Daresh (1989, p. 7) begins his supervision textbook by writing, "Educational supervision is a field in search of a definition." He goes on to explain that, for many years, the term supervision accurately reflected what it was originally intended to describe -- inspection, or what some have called "snoopervision."

Over the last two decades, primarily due to the influence of Cogan's (1973) clinical supervision model, much of the literature on supervision has endorsed a collegial approach. The shift from "snoopervision" to collegiality is based on the premise that administrators ought to consider how instructional supervision affects teachers' attitudes and feelings. It is assumed that establishing positive relations with teachers softens their resistance to supervision, thus opening avenues for teachers' professional growth.

This emphasis on collegiality has evolved into what Glatthorn (1987) calls "peer supervision" teachers working with other teachers - as a way to improve instruction. Programs of this type are based on the belief that supervision of teachers by teachers is the next step in making instructional supervision more collegial.

Notice, though, how we struggle with terms, especially when collegiality is emphasized. "Supervision" doesn't fit the concept of collegiality. Strictly speaking, "collegial supervision" is an oxymoron. Goldsberry (1986) makes the same point regarding "peer supervision."

Educators must recognize that the terms we use carry great significance, especially in the area of instructional supervision. Sergiovanni (1985, p. 7) points out the importance of supervisory language and metaphors:

Views of supervision and evaluation are typically revealed in the language systems that supervisors use. Language frames our thinking by focusing attention on some aspects of a supervisory problem and by excluding others.

Metaphors are powerful exemplars of language, which influence the framing of supervisory problems ... Once a problem is framed within a given supervisory mindscape, those involved in analyzing this problem are locked into a particular way of thinking and forced into a particular course of action ... As Greenfield (1982) reminds us, "Language is Power. It literally makes reality appear and disappear. Those who control language control thought-and thereby themselves and others. We build categories to dominate the world and its organizations."

Because language is so powerful, we need a new term. Only then will we be able to replace the supervisory metaphor.

Supervisory Assumptions

The supervisory metaphor is revealed in the assumptions underlying "supervision." Whether we call it teacher supervision, clinical supervision, or collegial supervision, the following assumptions undergird current educational practice: (1) Specially trained personnel are needed to help teachers improve instruction. (2) Research on teaching has enabled us to define the elements of good teaching. (3) Teachers can be persuaded that supervisors are their colleagues.

Assuming that trained clinical supervisors are needed to help teachers improve is a cornerstone of instructional supervision in today's school districts. The best evidence of this is the amount of time and money devoted to hiring and training supervisors. It would be foolish to spend resources this way if educators did not believe in the need for trained, instructional supervisors.

The second assumption is that we know the elements of good teaching. Plenty of evidence indicates that this is a fundamental assumption of supervisory practice. Many lists have been developed which identify the components of a good lesson. Recent research into effective instruction has meant proliferation of such lists, which have had a powerful impact on instructional supervision.

In North Carolina, for example, the Formative Observation Data Analysis (FODA) form is based on this body of research. The FODA is a classroom observation instrument used throughout the state by those who supervise classroom instruction. This instrument specifies that a lesson ought to include: (1) focus and review, (2) stated objectives, (3) teacher input, (4) guided practice, (5) independent practice, and (6) closure.

Other states and many individual school districts use similar observation instruments (Wirsing, 1991). It seems that descriptions of effective teaching have led to the belief that we can *define* good instruction. Observation instruments like the one used in North Carolina are evidence that this belief has found its way into supervisory practice.

The third assumption involves the concept of collegiality. Current supervisory practice assumes that teachers can be persuaded that supervisors are their colleagues. Once again, the evidence for this assumption is plentiful. Supervision texts and manuals consistently encourage supervisors to establish collegial relationships.

Two examples will suffice. McGreal (1983, p. 25) writes,

Both of these definitions [of clinical supervision] stress the importance of a close and intense relationship between teacher and the supervisor. This relationship puts a heavy emphasis on a collegial rather than an authoritarian orientation.

Likewise, Foley (1988) stresses that the relationship between the clinical supervisor and teacher ought to be mutual and cooperative. She writes,

In the clinical supervisory process, both supervisor and teacher are assumed to be instructional experts. The teacher identifies the problems and the supervisor assists him/her in analyzing the lesson and in developing improved lessons. They work as colleagues respecting the contribution of each other. (p. 81)

Although recent prescriptions for supervisory practice stress collegiality, teachers seldom report that their supervisory experiences are collegial ones (Blumberg, 1980; Smyth, 1988). Why is this? One reason is that the assumptions underlying the term "supervision" are hierarchical in nature--something teachers understand intuitively. Consequently, in order for true collegiality to emerge, we need a new term and a new set of assumptions to describe how administrators and teachers work together to improve instruction. Understanding and promoting an "undervisory" metaphor is the first step in building truly collegial relations among teachers and other school professionals.

Undervisory Assumptions

The following "undervisory" assumptions contrast with those of supervision:

- (1) Optimal instructional approaches are most likely to be identified by classroom teachers.
- (2) Good teaching is an art, not a set of step-by-step procedures that can be transferred from one situation to another.
- (3) Teachers are not (and will not be) persuaded that "supervisors" are their colleagues.

The first undervisory assumption reflects the belief that the teacher--the professional who is with the class from the beginning of the year--is the one most likely to possess the knowledge and experience necessary to determine optimal instructional approaches. Undervision assumes that reflective practice is at the core of a teacher's responsibilities (Schon, 1983). "Undervisors" recognize that teachers' own analyses, professional backgrounds, and readiness for new approaches influence their instructional decisions (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Hopkins, 1990). Therefore, "undervisors" seek opportunities to encourage teachers to reflect on their instructional approaches and develop alternative ways to accomplish instructional goals. They do this by asking incisive questions, encouraging risk-taking, and providing the support that instructional improvement efforts require.

It is important to note that the kind of reflection "undervisors" promote is not limited to technical matters. "Undervisors" recognize that teachers must explore the historical, social and political contexts within which they work. Only reflection and collegiality in the exploration of these issues truly empowers teachers and administrators to act toward school improvement (Smyth, 1989; Gitlin & Smith, 1989).

This assumption is in sharp contrast to the belief that instructional improvement results from observing classroom instruction, diagnosing technical errors and prescribing cures. Palmer (1990) points out, "Good teaching cannot be equated with technique ... They (teachers) discover and develop methods of teaching that emerge from their own integrity--but they never reduce their teaching to technique." "Undervisors" recognize this by assuming that instructional improvement emerges from teachers' experiences, not supervisors' experiences.

In contrast to the second supervisory assumption, "undervision" assumes that good teaching is an art, not a set of step-by-step procedures that can be transferred from one situation to another. Like artists, teachers integrate an enormously complex set of factors into a whole, final product--the guided learning experiences of their students. Teachers employ their art as they develop and implement learning experiences that begin in September and are built upon throughout the year.

To view teaching as an art shows respect for teachers' work and recognizes the complexity of good teaching. When "undervisors" respect the complexity of teaching in today's schools, and when they promote discussions of the historical, social, and political issues affecting education, they are communicating with teachers in much the same way artists communicate with each other to improve their work.

The third difference in assumptions concerns the issue of collegiality. Supervisors sometimes believe they can hold supervisory assumptions, yet function as teachers' colleagues. "Undervisors," however, understand that terms carry powerful meanings for teachers. "Undervisors" realize that "supervisor" implies a hierarchical relationship, and that the essential meaning of this term is not lost on teachers. Consequently, "undervisors" believe that, in order to make schools more collegial and professional, we must use terms which reflect collegial relationships between teachers and administrators. "Undervisors" assume that, as long as we use terms, which suggest hierarchical relationships, teachers will never be convinced that supervisors are their colleagues.

Why Change Now?

So, why should educators eliminate "supervision," a term that has been used for so long? The main reason is that "supervision," and the assumptions which undergird its practice, contradict the spirit of three recent school improvement approaches--promoting reflective teaching, promoting teacher professionalism, and developing professional school cultures. Insofar as the supervisory metaphor contradicts these improvement efforts, it may also impede their implementation. We need to remember that supervisory assumptions have generated teacher resistance and resentment in the past (Liftig, 1990), and they are likely to generate even more as teachers become increasingly involved in the administration of schools.

On the other hand, "undervisory" assumptions coincide with recent school improvement efforts. "Undervisors" expect and encourage teachers to be reflective practitioners. They also realize that teachers are the professionals who have the potential to contribute the most to building professional school cultures. It is time to replace "supervision" with "undervision," a term which appropriately describes the relationships between teachers and those who help them improve instruction.

But Why "Undervision"?

Still, some may ask, "But why 'undervision'? Isn't there a better term?" This is the reaction I received from several reviewers of this article. Apparently some educators are uncomfortable with a term that seems to reverse the role relationships between teachers and supervisors. Consequently, we have a dilemma when it comes to finding a new term. We want to describe role relationships, but we object to a term which connotes higher relative status for teachers. But a new term which would connote lower relative status for teachers would not be a true alternative. The reactions of those who reviewed this article suggest to me that, although educators bemoan the use of the term "supervision," many are not ready to embrace a term which threatens their status. Consequently, the "Cold War" continues.

The primary purpose for writing this article is to persuade educators to use the term "undervision" in place of "supervision." Since I have received consistent objections to this term, however, I have concluded that, although educational administrators, supervisors, and college professors may not embrace "undervision" because it suggests lower relative status for those who "supervise" instruction, teachers may be willing to accept this new term and its

underlying assumptions. Therefore, I ask teachers to begin to use this term in an effort to begin to forge the collegial relations that are being recommended by those who seek to empower teachers and build collegial school cultures.

In conclusion, I offer three reasons why teachers should adopt the term "undervision" to replace "supervision." The first reason is that the meanings of "undervision's" two parts suggest what administrators and others ought to do as they work with teachers to improve instruction. "Under" suggests that principals, central office staff, and other teachers should support instructional improvement efforts. Notice that the focus is not on who provides the support, but on the idea that support is the dominant function. "Vision" reflects both the importance of educational vision, and the importance of having another set of eyes in the classroom. As McPherson and Rinnander (1988) suggest, efforts to improve instruction should be supportive and visionary. The term "undervision" reflects both of these functions.

The second reason why "undervision" ought to replace supervision is to focus attention on the contrast between the two metaphors and their underlying assumptions. In other words, whereas "supervision" suggests higher status relative to teachers, "*undervision*" suggests lower status. Although some educators do not like this alternative, the idea of valuing those who "do" above those who supervise is common elsewhere in our society, particularly in the performing arts and professional sports.

Tennis is an example of a professional sport where the skills of the performer are valued over those of the supervisor. In professional tennis, the player-coach relationship develops in the following way. The coach gets to know the player by studying his/her unique skills. Then the coach watches the player in competition and analyzes effectiveness. Finally, the coach offers advice and assistance because, from the sidelines, the coach can see things the player cannot.

The relationship between teacher and "undervisor" is akin to the relationship between tennis player and coach. Teachers could benefit greatly from the assistance of other educators who value their skills, and who can see things in the classroom that they cannot. The classroom observation is where the "undervisory" relationship begins. It can develop into a positive professional relationship as teacher and "undervisor" explore the historical, political, and social conditions which affect them and the students. The possibilities that can be envisioned under this model contrast sharply with the incident described in the first paragraph. "Undervision" is enriching, not insulting.

The final reason that "undervision" should replace "supervision" is that it does not have connotations from being used in another field. If we searched other fields for a term that could be shared with education, we would have to argue about whether or not the connotations developed in the other field were appropriate or inappropriate for education. No other field uses "undervision," and this is a good reason to use it in education. If teachers adopt this term to describe how others help them improve instruction, "undervision" will come to describe the unique relationships among teachers and their colleagues in schools.

Teachers can play a key role in eliminating "supervision" and the supervisory metaphor from the language of instructional improvement. They are the educators most likely to adopt "undervision" as the term which best describes how they work to improve instruction. Only when teachers use this term will the supervisory metaphor begin to be rejected, setting the stage for the end of another "Cold War."

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