CAN SUPERVISORY PRACTICE EMBRACE SCHÖN’S VIEW OF REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION?

JAMES F. NOLAN, The Pennsylvania State University

In coaching reflection (Schön’s preferred term, although he also uses reflective supervision), the coach encourages teachers to reflect on their own practice, to make explicit to themselves what they are seeing, how they interpret it, and how they might test and act on those interpretations. To be successful, coaches of reflective teaching must carry out three independent but closely related tasks. (1) make sense of and respond to the substantive issue of learning and teaching in the situation, (2) enter into the teacher’s way of thinking about the substantive issue, tailoring their descriptions, language, and demonstrations to their sense of the teacher’s understanding of the issue at hand, and (3) do these things in a way that makes defensiveness on the part of the teacher less likely.

As Schön sees it, the coach can accomplish these three tasks successfully by joining the teacher in reflecting on the teacher’s reflection-in-action. The coach attempts to enter into a collaborative process of on-the-spot research and, in so doing, creates a “hall of mirrors” in which coaching illustrates what the process of reflection is all about. This coaching relationship is inherently collaborative. “Both the reflective teacher and the reflective coach are researchers in and on practice whose work depends on their collaboration with each other.”

Can supervisory practice embrace this notion of reflective supervision? Schön’s conception of reflective supervision is by no means new or revolutionary. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of Goldhammer’s Clinical Supervision. Special Methods for the Supervision of Teachers. Goldhammer envisioned clinical supervision as a vehicle for transforming schools from places where teachers act out age-old rituals in an unthinking

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2Ibid., p. 23.
3Ibid.
manner to environments where teachers participate fully in the process of supervision and where the process of supervision provides adequate illumination for teachers to understand what they are doing and why. The model of clinical supervision that Goldhammer, Cogan, and others have championed over the last 20 years is now inextricably linked with the promotion of teacher reflection. "Reflection is regarded here as being at the heart of clinical supervision." In this context, the function of the clinical supervisor is to provide the teacher with collaborative help that encourages the teacher to become the primary knowledge generator."

Now, 20 years after Goldhammer, practitioners have a much wider variety of tools for promoting reflective behavior in teachers. Journal keeping, biography and autobiography, picturing, document analysis, story telling, letter writing, teacher interviews, and participant observation have all helped teachers become more reflective practitioners. Case histories of the supervision process have also provided much evidence that clinical supervision can help teachers become more thoughtful and reflective about what they do, change their thinking on teaching and learning, and change their teaching behavior. The literature also provides a set of conditions that seem critical if supervision is to succeed in encouraging reflective behavior:

- a collegial relationship in which teachers feel safe, supported, and respected
- teacher control over the supervisory agenda
- continuity in the supervisory process over time, that is, prolonged engagement
- descriptive records of actual teaching-learning events as a basis for reflection
- problem reframing and reflection by both teachers and supervisors as the heart of the supervisory process
- time to develop the skills necessary for reflection

The close similarity between Schön's view of reflective supervision and the concepts embedded in clinical supervision is striking. In some schools, clinical supervision has been and continues to be practiced; there, clinical supervision has significantly affected the lives of teachers and students. But

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*Ibid., p. 18.
*Ibid., p. 143.
the purveyor of the landscape or mindscape of instructional supervision in contemporary schools must conclude that 20 years of thinking, writing, and inquiry about clinical supervision have had minimal impact on supervisory practice. Nominal supervision—supervision in name only—in which the supervisor conducts a perfunctory, once-a-year observation of the teacher's performance for the purposes of summative evaluation, continues to be the most widely practiced model of supervision by far. Even peer coaching, which seems to offer the potential for enhancing reflective behavior, is often prescriptive and directive in practice, targeted at perfecting prescribed skills rather than at enhancing teacher reflection and self-direction.

What stops practitioners from using reflective supervision, clinical supervision, and collegial peer coaching? At least eight interrelated barriers prevent Schön's views from having any significant effect.

1. **The belief that meaningful change can occur quickly** Teachers cannot learn to be more reflective overnight. Asking teachers to replace tried and true practices with risk taking and experimentation and to expose their experimentation to the scrutiny of another professional can be an overwhelming request. Teachers have been isolated professionally from each other from the beginning of their inservice careers. From case histories of the clinical supervision process, we know that it often takes five or six cycles of supervision before teachers are even willing to bring up any real issues of concern.

Also, teachers function in a classroom setting where temporary uncertainty, confusion, and lack of action can lead to disruptive behavior and disorder (in the midst of an institution that seems to value order above all else). Mistakes are made publicly in front of 20 to 30 students. Thus, most teachers feel compelled to push on, acting as if they know and are confident, instead of suspending action momentarily to reflect on perplexing situations. Adopting a reflective, thought-driven approach to teaching takes time.

A corollary to the belief that significant change can occur quickly is the belief that the supervisor can use magic words, phrases, or techniques to bring about change with a minimum of effort. Some supervisors act as if they believe that if they can just read the "right" book, or attend the "right" workshop, or hear the "right" speaker, or buy the "right" videotape, they will find a magic wand to wave over teachers, transforming them into a supervisor's dream. Such miracle cures do not exist. Books, workshops, speakers, and videotapes can be enlightening and helpful to the supervisor, but there are no shortcuts, no magic wands. Coaching reflection requires patience and a commitment to a long-term relationship with prolonged, face-to-face interaction between teacher and coach. The investment especially of time on the part of both teacher and coach is great, as is the potential payoff.

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2. **The belief that the primary goal of coaching and supervision is changing teacher behavior.** The goal should be to help teachers become more thoughtful, reflective, and analytical about their behavior, more capable of monitoring, understanding, and learning from their own teaching; and more self-directed. Focusing on behavior change is likely to produce incremental changes in specific areas of instruction; teachers are likely to do exactly what they have always done but perhaps a bit more effectively or efficiently. Focusing on thinking and reflection, however, may lead to revolutionary change in a teacher's total approach to teaching and learning. Also, even if a coach or supervisor observes an average (in terms of teaching load) secondary teacher 20 times during a school year, that coach or supervisor has seen only 1/45 of the classes the teacher will teach that year. Therefore, coaching and supervision must be aimed at helping teachers become more self-directed and skilled in self-coaching.

3. **The belief that the supervisor is the teacher and the teacher is the learner in the coaching relationship.** Reflective supervision demands a relationship of equals. Each partner brings expertise to the relationship. The supervisor's expertise lies in the ability to collect observational data, to view the classroom situation from the teacher's perspective, to interact with teachers in productive conferences, and to understand the teaching-learning process in general. The teacher's expertise lies in instructional skills and knowledge; in the ability and willingness to articulate and examine beliefs and behavior, both espoused and actually practiced; and in knowledge of the particular learning-teaching situation. During the process of reflective coaching or supervision, each partner becomes both teacher and learner. The relationship is dynamic and evolving. When either partner leaves the relationship absent of new learning, reflective supervision has not been productive.

4. **The belief that we can find answers to the problems inherent in the teaching-learning process outside the actual teaching-learning situation.** Research and theory, no matter how powerful, how insightful, how well-documented and replicated, do not provide solutions to the particular, individual problems of practice. By their nature, research and theory yield principles and generalizations that are context-free and general. The problems of teaching and learning, however, are context-bound and specific. Research, theory, and the accumulated wisdom of practice are helpful in attempting to solve the problems of practice. They yield suggestions, hypotheses, and general exemplars that may prove enlightening in studying unique problems, but hypotheses and suggestions must always be applied in a tentative and even skeptical manner. We must carefully assess results, intended and unintended, that come from applying research and theory. We will find solutions to the context-bound problems of practice only through careful study and reflection in the actual teaching-learning situation.
5. The belief that the same person can carry out the roles of both teacher evaluator and reflective supervisor. "Reflective supervision opens a teacher to confusion, to not knowing, hence to vulnerability, and to defensive strategies (often automatically) to protect against vulnerability."\textsuperscript{13} When reflective supervisors function as organizational superiors who summatively rate or evaluate teachers, it is unlikely that teachers will be willing to expose themselves to situations of confusion and vulnerability. When our position and professional career may be on the line, it is much more intelligent to stick to safe, comfortable ground. The roles of teacher evaluator and reflective supervisor are by nature incompatible. They must be separated.

6. The belief that "doing" reflective supervision means following a prescribed set of steps. Reflective supervision is not marked by a series of activities or by some rigid sequence of events. Like clinical supervision, reflective supervision comprises a set of deeply held, interrelated values and beliefs rather than a set of procedures. The conceptual foundations of clinical supervision proposed by Garman—collegiality, collaboration, skilled service, and ethical conduct—serve equally well as the core concepts of reflective supervision.\textsuperscript{14}

7. The belief that reflective supervision is best accomplished through a one-to-one relationship. As more and more teachers participate and become skilled in the practice of peer observation and conferencing, we must recognize and use the benefits of group supervision. Many constraints limit the usefulness of one-to-one supervision. Little time, few perspectives from which to examine teaching-learning practices, and lack of feedback for the supervisor. By involving groups of teachers in the supervision process, many of these limitations disappear. Establishing group norms on the importance of reflective practice can have a tremendous effect on the culture of an individual school.

8. The use of the term supervision to refer to the reflective-coaching process. Supervision denotes a hierarchical relationship in which an organizational superior inspects the performance of an organizational subordinate. Implied in the term is the legitimate right of the superior to intervene and prescribe changes in the subordinate’s behavior for the good of the organization. For most classroom teachers, the term supervision connotes a relationship in which a superior pops unannounced into the teacher’s room with a “hit me with your best shot” attitude, then retreats to the office to compose a somewhat standardized set of strengths and suggestions for improvement.


Most teachers suffer this yearly ritual as simply part of the job; a few teachers who are accustomed to hearing glowing praise for their performance even welcome the ritual. Such ancient, well-internalized scripts are difficult to erase. Replacing the term supervision with a more appropriate term would be an important step toward helping teachers to expect something different, toward changing those unproductive scripts.

What should be the nature of the new term? It must imply a relationship of equality, of mutual vulnerability, of mutual leadership. It must describe a relationship marked by unconditional professional regard, the professional competence of both partners accepted as a given; a relationship marked by skilled service, ethical conduct, curiosity, a willingness to suspend disbelief, and a genuine desire to achieve a greater understanding of the teaching-learning process on both parts. We might choose one of the terms now used coach, consultant, peer observer, we might engage a Madison Avenue firm to create a catchy, high-tech label, or we might conduct a "name that process" contest. However it is chosen, no label will be perfect. On the other hand, no other label will carry the excess baggage and unfortunate connotations that accompany the label supervision.

These eight barriers are interrelated. They form a complex whole. Changing one without changing the others will have little effect. For example, if the observer believes that the answers to the problems of learning lie outside the teaching-learning situation in the prescriptions of some researcher or theorist, it makes little difference whether we call her coach, consultant, or supervisor, her approach is likely to be prescriptive and nonreflective. We must be willing to confront all eight barriers. Removing these eight barriers will not be easy. If supervisory practice is ever to embrace the notion of reflective supervision, we must reexamine our most deeply held beliefs about supervision.

JAMES F. NOLAN is Assistant Professor, Division of Curriculum and Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University, 143 Chambers Building, University Park, PA 16802