

SCHOOL SUPERVISION: ROLES AND DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract

Access to education and quality in education are the major issues for the nations of the developing world. Consequently a spurt is seen in endeavors to promote quality in education through differed means and mechanism. School supervision is seen as an effective mechanism for quality assurance in the schools as is evident form the roles assigned to the supervising officers. However, the supervisory functions to be performed by the education officers are found to be impeded by several factors that should be redressed to make school supervision contributory to quality improvement endeavors. The present paper discuss the variegated roles of school supervisors to establish the complexity of their roles. Consequently, it presents a review of the major impediments that prevents school supervision from achieving its goal of enhancing school performance.

Key-words : School, Supervision.

Introduction

Access to and quality in education are two main objectives of all major educational policies of different governments since independence. However, the last three decades have witnessed a shift in focus from issues related to educational expansion to a focus on quality in education. This shift is an obvious reaction to a decline seen in the performance of the schools lagging far behind the rate of expansion of the schools. It was felt that merely expanding the system and injecting more resources into the system could hardly meet the goals of education and fulfill the national aspirations. Rather, the more fundamental issues are those related to the use of these resources at school level, in a way that enhances performance. Consequently, a simultaneous shift is observable in the conception of school supervision. Supervision when interpreted in the context of quality in education connotes a mechanism of improvement rather than as a means to exercise control. New dimensions are added to the process of school supervision and its relationship with in-school actors that is now seen as of great significance in assuring quality in education. The formative aspects of supervision are highlighted as substantiation of its salience to ensure quality in education.

The sections that follow provides a brief sketch of the meaning assigned to supervision in contemporary era to establish its relationship with quality in education. Consequently an outline of major roles of the education officers are discussed. Finally the major problems that impede the utilization of supervision functions in improving performance of schools are highlighted.

Quality issue and School Supervision

The global initiative for educational expansion has already treaded its path over a long period of time. However, studies conducted globally with special focus on quality in terms of students' performance reveals a declining status of the educational microsystems viz. the school, in developing nations with respect to achievement of the goals leading to a growing concern over quality of the educational microsystems the basic unit of expansion.

Deliberations over the quality issue within the educational microsystem in terms of its

performance, essentially centers around three significant aspects that determine the quality of the microsystem in a cumulative way. The significant aspects are: (i) the material (infrastructure and equipments) and human (learners, teachers and institutional heads) resources (ii) the relationships within school, between the school and the community, and between the school and the administrative level immediately above the school and (iii) the daily interaction between teachers and learners that are the direct determinants of performance of a school. Further, the performance of the school through the teacher student interactions are mediated by both the resource as well as the relationship factors.

The issue of educational expansion had its focus on the resource factors thus facilitating access to education. However, pumping in of resources within the educational system is essential to take care of the access issue. The relevance and hence quality issue need attention toward the other two aspects as well. School supervision emanates out of the relationships of the educational microsystem with the administrative level above the school level in the overall educational macro-system and is thus an important component of the relationship aspects of the educational microsystem. As such school supervision has a mediating impact on quality in the microsystem. The quality concern thus leads to concern with how the input factors are organized and managed rather than on the strength of the resources provided. Since school supervision is related to ensuring organization and management of the resources and is a major element of the factors determining quality, it has emerged as an important phenomena attracting serious discussions and providing a largely unexplored area for empirical investigations with the aim to make it more effective and efficient.

Supervision as a Service

The origin of school supervision could be traced back to Wood's dispatch of 1854 when the fundamental aim of bringing into existence the very concept of school inspection was to exercise authority and control. The aim of control reflects the traditional sense of supervision more commonly referred to as inspection. Supervision, then in its traditional sense refers to overseeing by someone the work of another personnel. Thus ipso facto every administrator is a supervisor. However such a conception of supervision presents a narrower vision limiting it to control and evaluation of resources and personnel that could hardly satisfy the developmental and formative needs of the complex and dynamic educational microsystem requiring continuous change and modification under expert guidance and control in a systematic, effective and efficient way, to sustain its relevance and vitality. In other words, to ensure quality in the educational microsystem it is necessary that there exists mechanism for effective guidance along with good teaching.

Consequently, the authoritarian conception of supervision with a focus on control has given way to a democratic conception of supervision with a focus on human relations and cooperative efforts of administrative personnel, teachers and headmasters, to enhance quality (Tyagi, 2011). The democratic perspective on supervision led to a conception of supervision as a service aimed at the improvement of the academic aspects of school, the existence of which, in almost all nations and at central, regional and local levels substantiate its significance as a quality improvement mechanism.

Supervision as a service functions both to control as well as to support the schools from outside through regular visits by the officers endowed with the task. As a service it serves a two-fold purpose. Whereas on the one hand it serves to "interpret to teachers and the public the education policies of the authorities and modern educational ideas and methods", on the other hand it also serves to "interpret to the competent authorities the experiences, needs, and aspirations of teachers

and local communities (Pauvert, 1987,p. 48). Educational supervision thus catalyzes quality assurance programs by shaping, supporting, operating and controlling the educational microsystem thereby deciding the quality of education to a very great degree.

Education Officer: Key Roles

The person assigned the function of supervision is termed as education officers. The supervision function are externally performed at different levels such as at the district level and at the block levels. The education officers are bestowed upon with three distinct categories of tasks. First, they function to control and evaluate the education staff and the material inputs at the school level thereby making supervision connote with inspection. Second the education officers are mandated to provide support and advice teachers and head teachers regarding different aspects of curriculum and instruction thereby broadening the scope of supervision to include improvement in quality at its core. The third function or role naturally takes shape in the process of performing the role of control and support. The education officers serve the control and support functions through regular school visits. It is through these regular visit to schools that the education officers exercise their control and support in accordance to the decisions taken by the district office and to inform the district office of the realities at school level for further guidance and assistance. Thus the education officer performs the role of a liasoning agent between schools and the administration at different level (Support services).

Specifically, the support function of supervision is closely related to the quality concern in education. The education officers provide the required guidelines for the implementation of the policy decisions, helps prepare the development plan for each school, ensures establishment of standards, assess performance assessment and examination etc. Through their variegated tasks the education officers aim to ensure that the curriculum is being followed in every school, good practices are being promoted, and that children and students are helped so that they may obtain in the best possible manner the set learning target and necessary skills. Helping, stimulating, suggesting, informing, advising, convincing, harmonizing, guiding, cooperating, discussing etc. are the key action verbs associated with the roles determined for the education officers. It includes supporting schools on a range of issues, working with head teachers to help them resolve specific problems, serving as means to develop and maintain a positive relationship between schools, the community and the local authority, providing advices pertaining to appointment of head teachers, taking initiatives to help organize in-service training and personal development programs, evaluating teachers and resources and playing a significant role in promoting, developing and supporting anti-discriminatory practice.

The range of action verbs related to the roles of the education officers provides a synoptic view of the complexity and variations in tasks for the officers spelled out in the constitution of their job. However, merely mandating the importance of supervision and the roles of supervising officers is not a guarantee of achieving the stated goals of supervision. There exists difference between the roles mandated and the extent to which those roles are actually performed. Further, the discrepancy in the role performance could be attributed to a number of factors are several impediments that impedes the discharge of responsibilities by the officers as expected and that need deliberate reprisal to sustain the salience of supervision to improve quality in education.

Impediments to Role Performance:

Supervision as a quality assurance tool, faces a wide range of challenges and threats to its

effectiveness, extending from more practical matters related to the working condition through management issues such as inappropriate recruitment procedure and poor training opportunities, to what is arguably the most crucial challenge; lack of its impact on schools. Any inquiry into the challenges and hurdles in the path of smooth performance by the education officers is therefore of significance in the endeavor to promote quality in education although indirectly. In this context it is important to investigate the problems as perceived by the real players viz. the education officers in performing their roles. The direct relationship between effective supervision and quality in schools further substantiates the salience of such inquiry to the quality improvement effort. A review of literature suggests that the difficulties perceived by the education officers are numerous, that could however be classified into the following broad categories:

Work overload

The norms, in almost all states of India, prescribe that every school is inspected once a year and visited two to three times a year by the inspecting (education) officer (Singhal, 1986) entailing both control as well as support functions for the education officers. The tripartite division of their roles are perceived as incompatible with the number of schools under the jurisdiction of each educational officer. For example the number of schools assigned to the district education officer was surveyed to be 182 in Uttar Pradesh and 288 in Gujarat (Tyagi, 2011). The large number of schools and the variety of functions leads supervision more an auditing and controlling mechanism rather than an improvement and formative enterprise for quality assurance of education.

Further, the working conditions of supervisors are bad, from several points of view. As an intermediary officers (as is evident from their liaisoning role), they are often made "to fit into them every conceivable intermediate function" (Olivera, 1979, p. 51), a fact that has been empirically established (Singhal et al., 1986; Lillis, 1992; Olivera, 1979). Although the additional functions, are of less important than the mandated supervision tasks, nevertheless urgency of such tasks leads to relatively little time spent on supervision. As a result the time spent in supervision tasks are pathetically low ranging from one tenth to one third of the total time reported nationally (Singhal et al., 1986) as well as internationally (Perier, 1995).

The task overload makes school visits merely a ritual, leading to grievances among the education officers about the spending of valuable supervision times on unrelated tasks that could have been used for advice and support to the teachers (Christ, 1995). The education officers are undoubtedly overloaded by the complexity of their roles on the one hand and by the number of schools assigned to them on the other hand leading to much valuable time and energy spent in report writing and administrative duties thereby reducing the time dedicated to professional contacts with the teachers and for academic improvement.

Training

The international conference on Education has emphasized a long back on the need and importance of training for the supervising officers. It claimed that "no one should be appointed to the inspectorate who has not previously shown an interest in, and an understanding of general educational problems, either in a period of probation or by following a special course organized by a postgraduate institution" (Pauvert, 1987, p. 47). The pre-service and in-service programs to train the officers are however unsatisfactory, few, far between and certainly not well organized in accordance to the needs of supervision service and are thus inefficacious in providing opportunities to reflect over the goals and get initiated into the methods of supervision.

Manual and Database

The effectiveness and efficiency of supervising officers are enhanced by the quality of support provided in form of two important supervision tools viz. (i) a manual of supervision and (ii) regularized rich database regarding schools and teachers. These tools at the disposal of the education officer helps them to prioritize their entire control and support tasks. The detailed Handbook on Inspection/Supervision and the Framework of Supervision prepared by OFSTED in UK is considered as the most comprehensive one till date (OFSTED, 1994). Although states in India like Andhra Pradesh, have developed their manuals, nationwide the situation is not so appealing and need more effort to make the manuals useful and supportive in real sense (Tyagi, 2011).

Lack of an appropriate database concerning the performance and quality of schools and teachers is yet another factor that creates hurdle in realizing the quality in schools through supervisory services. Lack of such database means lack of such indicators that could be used to identify schools and teachers in needs such as; destinations after primary school, the percentage of children repeating a class, the number of educationally disadvantaged children in each institution, and socioeconomic data on the school population and staff characteristics, relations with parents and in-school student evaluation (Gray and Wilcox, 1994). Lack of need indicators therefor prevents the officers from identifying needy schools and teachers for a more intense monitoring and to prepare themselves for their visits (OECD,). The entire situation seems paradoxical when it is acknowledged that supervisors play a role in many countries in collecting data base related to schools, teachers and performance that are communicated to the higher levels without any mechanism to use the same in chalking out their own supervision tasks only to send them immediately through to the central authority.

Role incompatibility

Supervision as a service includes two distinct functions of control and support along with the function of liasoning. Control function connotes with the term inspection, referred to a systematic evaluation of schools including teachers and students. Generally inspection is “a review and reporting on a school's work by the local authority, personnel, inspectors, and advisors who play an important role in reviewing performance, with varying combinations of audit and support” whereas, the support function, more closely associated with the term supervision is “concerned with the assessment of academic aspects of an institution.” (Tyagi, 2011). Thus the controlling and supporting roles to be performed by them are often viewed by the supervising officer as apparently incompatible. For example, there is an understandable tension between giving guidance and support to teachers and at same time using control and discipline. The conflict between the core task of visiting schools and the less important but equally urgent duties such as administration & report writing are also considered as incompatible to each other.

However, it has been reported that there exists a tension between control functions, on the one hand, and their support and development functions, on the other hand. Existence of such role conflicts was acknowledged as a fundamental problem related to supervision (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1974) and has been endorsed internationally (Bude et al., 1995; Hopes, 1992; Gazieli, 1979).Existence of role-conflicts eventually becomes a source of role-based occupational stress.

Follow up

Another important characteristic of supervision service is related to the findings of the school visit, its' feeding into the system of relationships and consequently maintaining a follow up

procedure to make practical use of the findings. Findings refers to the information obtained by the officers through their school visits and related to curriculum, instruction and input factors. Such information are to be communicated and discussed with those higher in the system as well as with those related to the educational microsystem at the ground level. Thus the information is to be fed into the system of relationships among the schools, administrative personnel and the liasoning agents. However, the most useful aspect of supervisory services is ensuring a structured form of follow up of decisions taken. It is through such follow ups that the supervision serves the support function.

However, research findings suggests that although the supervisors enter their findings and remarks in the school inspection book, the supervisors rarely monitor the decisions through regular and planned visits to the target schools and thus maintaining a proper follow up (Singhal et al., 1986). A study related to the supervision of schools reported that the rural schools specifically in remote areas are worst hit in terms of school visits and support provided to them specifically owing to the workload due to which the education officers find no time for regular visits (Govinda and Varghese, 1993). Thus, answers to such questions as whether adequate follow-up action is being ensured and how is it ensured are crucial to understand the degree of efficiency of a given supervision system and its real impact on the quality of the education system and hence the issue of reporting and follow-up should receive systematic attention. Further, little attention is paid to the crucial question on the response of the recipients of the feedback reports and whether their actions are in conformity with the decisions taken.

Support

Support from the schools (including teachers and headmasters), administrative authorities above them in hierarchy and the support from the community that serves as context for the supervision services are essentially justified owing to the nature of the supervision functions that includes variety of tasks. Similarly the education officers have to identify resources required by the schools, initiatives to be taken for curricular and instructional improvement etc. and report the same to their immediate authorities and seek support from them. Thus co-operation from their immediate authorities are essential in making them efficiently discharge their responsibilities.

The actual situation is however quite disheartening where it has been reported that even those educational supervisors who work hard with teachers and head teachers seldom get positive response from them.

CONCLUSION

Supervision is justified as a mechanism to insure the growth of the educational microsystem in general and of the human input factors in particular. It acts as a process of linking the teachers' previous preparation to their actual professional context. It also serves as a mechanism to possibly keep the education workers abreast of current developments and providing creative suggestions informed by analyses and discussions of research findings. Logically, supervision aims at improving curriculum and instruction thus reflecting the support functions of supervision. Supervision when conceived as a control and support service has the immense potential to enhance quality of education provided that the mandated functions of supervision are implemented effectively. However, supervision, like any other profession, is influenced by several problems or impediments that prevents it in achieving the stipulated goals. The impeding factors includes both internal as well as external factors that together determine the extent of overlap between what the officers perform and

what are expected of them.

A considerable decline has, however, been observed in external supervision practices by educational administrators. More specifically the academic supervision, that has a direct bearing on improvement in the teaching-learning practices and the overall quality of school, has been subdued by the importance given to the control functions. Thus, there is need to rethink the supervisory systems and procedures need to be rethought so that they respond to the quality concerns of school education (Mac Beath et al. 2002). Specific attention need to be given to the problems of supervision if it is to be used as a quality improvement tool.

Improvement in school supervision needs concerted effort. There is need of rich empirical data regarding the roles of education officers and the hurdles as perceived by them to improve their working conditions, delimit their roles and thus make them more efficient and effective. Development of such a data base needs committed research into the area. On the other hand the training programs to professionally develop the education officers is a dire need of the time. Since the professional contexts of the education officers are variegated, there is a justified need to train them to improve professionally through reflective practices. Thus they are required to become an action researcher if they are to meaningfully contribute to the larger goal of assuring quality in education in their own capacity.

Finally, there exists a lack of sufficient research inquiry into the status of supervisory functions in Indian context and specifically in context of the northern India. There is a justified need to investigate into the status of supervision functions specifically at the block level, with respect to their mandated functions and at the same time to identify the problems faced by the block level education officers in their endeavor to discharge their responsibilities. Future studies related to supervision and its different aspects are expected to surely help in the improvement of supervision functions and insure its role in quality improvement of the schools.

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