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Reflections on Supervision in the Time of COVID-19

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Reflections on Supervision in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 has completely disrupted the normal patterns and schedules of the American public school system. While schools have shifted to online teaching, an alarming amount of students have disengaged from the instruction provided by teachers. As educators consider the question of why upwards of 40% of students are choosing to not engage in regular instruction, supervisors and teachers across America will need to take long looks in the mirror and ask questions about how and in what ways we have failed our students over the past 20 years since the inception of the federal accountability movement and No Child Left Behind. The negative impact of COVID-19 has had on BIPOC students should be considered, specifically as it relates to income loss, digital connectedness, and current or impending housing insecurity, however educators also need to consider the importance of pedagogical practices used to engage BIPOC students in meaningful and transformative learning experiences.

Keywords

supervision; COVID-19; politics of education

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Introduction

Since early March of 2020 the PK-12 education world has been completely disrupted from normal patterns and schedules as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Largely turned upside down by the inability to instruct in person, COVID-19 has forced American public school systems to pivot to various forms of online instruction and attempt to reach students through screens, including both synchronous and asynchronous forms of instruction. However recent studies suggest only 60% of students regularly engaged in online learning throughout the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Barnum & Bryan, 2020), numbers that have alarmed teachers and instructional leaders alike when considering the negative impacts of the longest summer slide schools will have experienced in modern times (Towers, 2020). Perhaps the biggest question that supervisors and instructional leaders should be considering is why is this happening? When students are not required to physically attend school (due to the valid health guidelines to combat COVID-19), why are so many student choosing to not engage in the curriculum and instruction provided by America's public school systems?

As America starts another year of schooling, there promises to be plenty of challenges, including developing remote learning that is engaging and goes beyond teaching in a time of crisis. This year educators and supervisors across the country will need to provide instruction that is meaningful, engaging, and that meets the needs of all students and families. However, as we consider the question of why students are choosing to not engage in instruction at alarming rates, supervisors and teachers across America will need to take long looks in the mirror and ask questions about how and in what ways we have failed our students over the past 20 years since the inception of the federal accountability movement and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). Since that time, standardized testing has compiled a track record of discrimination against BIPOC students (Soares, 2020), highlighting the reality that it is not the inability of BIPOC students to academically excel on par with their white peers, but instead that the pedagogical practices we use to engage BIPOC students is grossly underestimated and largely lacking application in practice (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This will be particularly important as we consider how communities of color have been disproportionately and negatively impacted by COVID-19, specifically as it relates to income loss, digital connectedness, and current or impending housing insecurity (Mitchell, 2020).

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House

If we are intended to meet the needs of students, and meet the needs of all students, we need to acknowledge that we are going about education in the wrong way. This has been true of the entire accountability movement, which has largely ignored the impact of race and socioeconomic status (SES) on achievement (Garman, 2020), has negatively impacted our ability for supervisors to serve as experts of pedagogical practices (Hazi, 2020), and has perpetuated the 'deficit gaze' often applied to poor students and BIPOC students throughout the American PK-20 education system (Yeigh, 2020). As supervisors of instruction, it is critical that we reclaim the importance of educational supervision, the role it can play in providing both theoretical frameworks to rethink education, and the practical and hands-on application to improve learning outcomes for students.

While the COVID-19 pandemic did not cause social, economic, and racial inequalities, it did highlight how the accountability system of education we have accepted over the last 20 years has largely been built on principles of whiteness and privilege (Mette & Glickman, 2020). Literally, when NCLB was developed and implemented, over 90% of all US policy makers were white and certainly almost all enjoyed social and economic privilege as a result of their whiteness (Bialik, 2019). Now that students are required to learn from home, research is showing not only that the opportunity gap between peers is widening, but also that the limitations of standardized testing has once again highlighted the labeling of children based largely on access to resources and specialized instruction (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

While some schools and pre-service teaching (PST) programs have begun to more closely consider social, historical, and place-based aspects of how students learn best (Capello, 2020), pedagogical and instructional beliefs are often disconnected in the supervision practice of today's principals (Sterrett et al., 2020). As such, our work as educational supervisors can no longer be grounded in 'catching people up' through accountability structures. If we are ever to achieve equity for all American children, and if we are to help address the historical inequities of our society, the change will have to come through interdisciplinary and integrated lessons that connect students to the environment, the discriminatory history of our country, and the social conditions in which they live, whether that be rural, suburban, or urban. And the change will have to come from within, not from the tools of state and federal accountability systems.

So how do we, as supervisors of instruction, help dismantle a system that has largely perpetuated racial and economic inequalities in our society? What is the introspection we need to take as supervisors to acknowledge our whiteness, the institutional racism that is so entrenched in America, and the harm, pain, and despair that BIPOC students feel when they consistently do not seem themselves in the curriculum? Perhaps most importantly, how might we utilize the massive disruption caused by COVID-19 to realize we can change what we do in education?

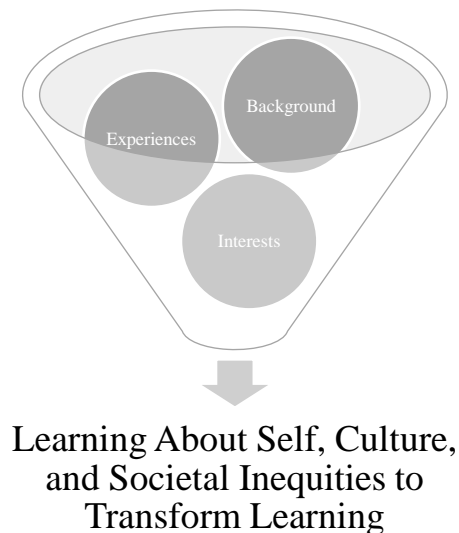
One approach is what Haberlin (2020) calls a mindfulness-based approach to supervision, where supervisors meet the present challenges of instruction by being consciously aware and connected to their students and their communities, as well as their own inner struggles. By accepting that we have much (un)learning to do about how we can best approach education, we can be non-judgmental with ourselves and let go of instructional practices that have not supported deep, meaningful, and transformative student learning over the last two decades. In short, we must be patient with ourselves as we meditate on how to continually improve instructional outcomes for all students.

We also need to be more active in how we shape the supervision narrative. As Sterrett et al. (2020) describe, teacher and preparation models continue to be isolated from each other and often operate in silos. This negatively impacts how preparation programs might be better able to align educational outcomes and address issues of equity through the supervision provided to pre-service educators and aspiring principals. For university supervisors, this means actively disrupting the deficit-lens that is often applied to teacher candidates, and instead empowering teacher candidates to address issues of whiteness and equitable educational outcomes for all students (Yeigh, 2020). For many institutions who engage in teacher and principal preparation, this will require reimagination of how clinically-rich experiences are provided, how supervision

is applied and valued in practice, and how inquiry and reflection foster deep learning and professional development opportunities (Capello, 2020).

Understanding the factors that complicate instructional improvement is also of great importance (Hazi, 2020). As Hazi points out, this has been particularly defined by the restrictive process of teacher evaluation protocols that overvalue the ‘expertise’ of a principal and largely ignores the professional opinion of teachers to respond to the individual needs of her/his students. Thus, the ultimate job of the supervisor of today is help educators keep inquiry, not performance, at the center of supervision and to ensure issues of fairness and social justice remain the focal point of the feedback exchange between teachers and supervisors (Garman, 2020).

Figure 1: Supervision as a tool to transform learning



Moving Forward

The only way we will be able to dismantle the inequitable education system is to look towards the transformation of educational outcomes for students, and to use supervision as a tool to help promote transformative learning (see Figure 1). The disruption to our education system as a result of COVID-19 has given educators a once-in-a-century gift – to closely examine the realities of inequities our students experience as a result of the system we have helped maintain and perpetuate. As such, our job as supervisors is to empower both teachers and students to address the societal inequities that are experienced, as well as to help educators think more critically about the role education can play in institutionalizing opportunities in schools to create more democratic outcomes for all students (Glickman & Mette, 2020). I strongly encourage the *Journal of Educational Supervision* readers to examine all of the pieces in this issue to help guide them in this imperative process.

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Author Biography

Ian M. Mette is an associate professor of educational leadership and the program coordinator of the educational leadership program at the University of Maine. His research interests include teacher supervision and evaluation, school reform, and bridging the gap between research and practice to inform and support school improvement efforts. Specifically, his work targets how educators, researchers, and policy makers can better inform one another to drive school improvement and reform policy. He is the founding editor of the *Journal of Educational Supervision*, is the current president of the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision, and has served in various leadership roles for the American Education Research Association Supervision and Instructional Leadership Special Interest Group. His first book, *A New Leadership Guide for Democratizing Schools from the Inside Out: The Essential Renewal of America's Schools*, coauthored with Carl Glickman, was published in 2020. You can follow him on Twitter (@IanMette) to see more of his work and interests.