Empowering Teachers Through Instructional Supervision: Using Solution Focused Strategies in a Leadership Preparation Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how students in an educational leadership preservice program perceived the effectiveness of solution-focused supervision (SFS) taught in an instructional supervision class. Interviews, observations, and artifacts, and a case study design, were applied to address two primary research questions. Findings revealed the use of solution-focused (SF) strategies produced positive outcomes, but required dramatic paradigm shifts from study participants. Moreover, the researchers found that respondents used a wide range of SF strategies in the clinical cycle exercise. Participants, furthermore, affirmed that SF structures and language promoted reflection, conversation, and empowerment of teachers. These positive dispositions toward solution-focused supervision, however, did not come without difficulties and initial doubt.

Keywords

instructional supervision; educational leadership preparation; solution-focused supervision; clinical supervision cycle

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Introduction

Contemporary studies increasingly note the significance of principals serving as instructional leaders (Day et al., 2016; Jimerson & Quebec Fuentes, 2019; Robinson et al., 2008; Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020). Fink and Resnick (2001) suggest that principals and assistant principals are well-positioned to provide the intellectual leadership necessary for schools to thrive as vibrant learning communities, essential for improvement. Stein and Nelson (2003) caution that if not leading for the purposes of teaching and learning, what, precisely are campus administrators leading for?

Recent actions at state and local levels echo and reinforce the principal's role in instructional leadership. Recast in 2015 by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, the PSEL or Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (standards formerly known as ISLLC), reveal an even stronger focus on student learning and sustained educational improvement. According to the introductory section of the PSEL document, the new professional standards "elevate areas of educational leader work that were once not well understood or deemed less relevant but have since been shown to contribute to student learning" (2015, p. 2).

In the fall of 2017, the education agency in the state in which the present study took place conducted regional forums in anticipation of implementing a new standard certificate and revised assessment process for the *Principal as Instructional Leader* certificate (State Board for Educator Certification, 2018). As noted on the state education agency's website,

> Given the evolving role of the principal as an instructional leader and the needs of schools and communities, the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) adopted new principal standards…the new standards emphasize the critical role of the school principal with an increased emphasis on instructional leadership. (Texas Education Agency, 2018)

After decades of ambivalence about the importance of their role, the principal as a leader in the instructional program is now bolstered by empirical evidence, present in standards, and codified in law.

We concur that campus leaders can and should play essential roles in the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, both philosophically and intentionally, through their leadership actions. That said, if principals and assistant principals are to successfully practice instructional leadership, preservice programs bear major responsibility for aspiring leaders' learning and experiences toward that end (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Grissom et al., 2019; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). What remains somewhat elusive, however, is *how* to promote the knowledge and skills necessary for program graduates to effectively serve as instructional leaders with teachers and in classroom cultures that may be unfamiliar or unknown to them. It is quite likely that new-to-profession administrators, who serve in both supervisory (formative) and evaluative (summative) capacities, will initially lack the ability to address instructional-related issues within a specific content or grade-level if it resides outside their teaching discipline or area of expertise (Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020). Yet these responsibilities will fall to them nonetheless (e.g. PSEL; state principal standards; administrative job descriptions). Preparing future leaders with

skills and strategies they can use directly out of their preparation programs will benefit administrative neophytes as well as the teachers who rely on their guidance and leadership.

Now, more than ever, teachers, most of whom are the sole professional responsible for their classroom, must be capable, independent decision-makers on behalf of themselves and the students in their charge (McGhee & Stark, 2018). This follow-up study is part of a multi-year initiative in which a counseling and an educational leadership faculty member worked in collaboration to teach aspiring leaders asset-oriented, strengths-based supervisory practices in which curiosity, listening, and questioning are central. We sought to understand how a group of graduate students enrolled in an educational leadership program might implement solution-focused supervision strategies in the instructional supervision of a teacher, as well as how they anticipate using a solution-focused approach in their future leadership work.

Literature Review

In order to adequately situate and foreground this piece, we offer the following on developmental supervision and the clinical cycle, solution-focused supervision, and constructivism. Together, these areas provide a foundational basis on which to build this ongoing line of inquiry.

Developmental Supervision and the Clinical Cycle

Developmental supervision, rooted in adult learning theory and teacher development (Glickman, 1981; 1985; Glickman et al., 2018), suggests that working effectively with teachers in a supervisory capacity is anything but a "one-size-fits-all" endeavor. "Administrators must be mindful of their behaviors as they engage in instructional supervision work, selecting the procedure, techniques, strategies, and language appropriate for the individual and the specific situation" (McGhee & Stark, 2018, p. 6). Given the needs of the teacher and the specific circumstances, the supervisor can engage the teacher in ways that are directive, collaborative, or nondirective in nature. According to Zepeda (2017), using differentiated techniques allows the leader to focus time and energy on those most in need of assistance and affords individual teachers a degree of autonomy and control regarding their growth and development choices.

When developmental supervision is coupled with the clinical supervision cycle, a form of direct assistance to improve instruction based on a teacher's areas of interest and need (Glickman et al., 2018), the pre- and post-observation conferences play central roles, allowing teachers to share information, voice concerns, negotiate understandings, pose questions, and express curiosities regarding their own professional growth. A purely formative endeavor, this practice should not be confused or conflated with summative teacher evaluation systems used for contract extension or renewal purposes.

Solution-Focused Supervision

Similar to expectations for teachers with their students, counselors are required to assess and facilitate growth in their clients. *Solution-focused supervision* (SFS; Thomas, 2013) is an adaptation of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT; de Shazer et al., 1986) that involves noticing and expanding on what supervisees (i.e., students and new professionals) are already doing well,

rather than focusing on errors or deficits. Researchers have demonstrated the effectiveness of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT; de Shazer et al., 1986) in schools (Franklin et al., 2008; Kim & Franklin, 2009; Kim et al., 2017). Additionally, school counselors and social workers may use a solution-focused coaching intervention called *Working on What Works* (WOWW; Berg & Shilts, 2005) that involves three stages: a) observing a class and giving positive feedback to both teachers and students, b) facilitating a goal-setting discussion, and c) working with the class to scale progress and set new goals. Brown et al. (2012) evaluated student outcomes with this approach in a primary school and discovered increased team work, respect toward adults, positive peer relationships, and enhanced listening skills. Over two decades ago, Davis and Osborn (1999) posed that SF concepts be similarly used by school administrators, but our literature search produced scarce research with this population.

Practitioners of SFBT describe it as "an approach of useful practice techniques" rather than a specific psychotherapy model (Korman et al., 2020, p. 47). Indeed, Shennan (2014) suggested that a solution-focused approach may be used by anyone tasked with helping others reach goals in education and business. Thus, the application of this approach to supervision extends beyond the field of counseling and social work. Whether teachers or counselors, new professionals must quickly learn to be independent decision-makers, carrying out their responsibilities with minimal oversight. Using the SFS approach, the supervisor (often a school administrator) assumes some level of competence in teachers and acknowledges the expertise they have regarding what is happening in their classrooms.

Solution-focused supervision strategies include a not-knowing stance (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), goal-formation questions, scaling questions, amplification of strengths, and encouragement of specific goals (De Jong & Berg, 2013; Shennan, 2014). When using a not-knowing stance, the supervisor seeks to reduce the power differential by remaining curious about the teacher's aspirations and practices, as opposed to adopting an expert position instructing them on what specific improvements are required. Supervisors might use a technique called hedging (Thomas, 2013), using tentative language such "it sounds like . . ." or "could it be . . .?" to communicate that it is acceptable for the teacher to express different ideas. Goal formation questions guide teachers in describing their ultimate situation at a macro-level (e.g., exceptional educator, perfect classroom) or micro-level (e.g., class response to a specific lesson, hoped-for outcome of a supervision meeting).

These questions might ask them to imagine a miracle or simply a future date in time; the point of the questions is for the teacher to describe a preferred future in detail. Once this description has been obtained, the supervisor may ask the teacher to scale their current level, with 10 being ideal and 0 being the opposite end of the continuum. Using follow-up questions that solicit detailed descriptions, the supervisor obtains information about what the teacher has already tried, what has been successful, etc. "How did you come to be at X rating and not lower?" and "What might you notice if you were nearing the next higher number on the scale?" are examples of follow-up questions. Whenever possible, questions that amplify the teacher's strengths (along with direct compliments) should be asked to strengthen the relationship and to motivate the teacher toward self-initiated goals. Finally, the supervisor encourages them to set small, specific goals that will bring them closer to the ideal. Stark et al., (2017) provided a template by which solution-focused supervision strategies are embedded in a clinical supervision cycle for a blended model of

instructional supervision, but educational leaders may also adopt a solution-focused approach in many aspects of their work (e.g., brief conversations in the hallway, running meetings) to create a positive school climate.

Constructivism

Both developmental clinical supervision and solution-focused supervision are nested in a theoretical framework of constructivism. And, because constructivism is a theory of knowledge acquisition and learning (Narayan, et al., 2013), it is a good fit for the teacher-supervisor relationship as they engage in the improvement process. Classroom teachers and their instructional supervisors who participate in developmental clinical cycles using solution focused strategies can be considered communities of collaborating agents who are working to develop competency through recursive, reflective processes (van Geert, 2017). A constructivist paradigm also illustrates the mutually beneficial relationship of the supervisor *and* supervisee using SFS—the teacher receives data of her/his choosing to assist in and improve instructional decision-making, whereas the supervisor gains essential information about the teacher's thinking and practices through the structured inquiry processes of SFS (see Appendix A).

What is more, co-constructing knowledge and understanding offers both members of the teacher-supervisor dyad the opportunity to bolster professional competency. By asking, "What would need to happen today (and from my observation) to make it a good use of our time?," the supervisor initiates teacher reflection on past and current practices—what works well and what deserves revisiting or adjusting. Moreover, the supervisor opens his/her mind to new thinking and possibilities by flattening the relational hierarchy (Thomas, 2013) and pushing aside preconceived notions about the teacher's needs. As noted in van Geert's (2017) discussion of constructivism, similar instances create "…processes involving active agents performing processes of construction…" (para 5) and, we espouse, expanding the capacities of both educational actors.

Establishing intentional activities and setting goals is yet another way constructivist thinking aligns with a solution-focused protocol. Because SFS is both future-focused and action-oriented (Thomas, 2013), no structured post-observation conference ends without crafting goals and proposing measures to move toward a purposeful end. By closing the conference with questions (e.g., "What is a small step that would better the odds of you moving up the scale [of improvement toward the teacher's selected goal]? Is that something you could do tomorrow?"), the supervisor promotes action within 24 hours by reinforcing the teacher's ability and empowerment to oversee his/her own classroom and instructional environment. van Geert notes, "The developing person may then act intentionally on the result of these emergent processes, thus creating a continuous and recurrent loop of emergence and intentional action" (2017, para 20). The constructivist ethos made possible through clinical solution-focused supervision are ideal for today's educational settings as they promote strengths, empower classroom teachers, and enhance the shared responsibilities of teachers and their instructional supervisors. As Parker and Goicoechea remind us, "School has a relational and cultural character without which problem solving, skill acquisition, and intellectual inquiry would not occur…" (2000, p. 239).

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how students enrolled in an educational leadership program perceived the effectiveness of solution-focused supervision (SFS) strategies taught in an instructional supervision course. Using interviews, observations, and artifacts, a collective case study design (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009) was applied to answer the following research questions: 1) how do students perceive the effectiveness of solution-focused supervision strategies as practiced in a clinical supervision cycle, and 2) what solution-focused supervision techniques are used by aspiring educational leaders?

Setting and Participants

The setting for the study was a graduate course taught in an educational leadership preparation program at a private institution in the northern region of Texas. The two-year program admits annual cohorts of 10-14 students from area public school districts. Classes are taught in the evenings because students work full-time as classroom teachers in their home districts. Offered during the second semester of the first year, *Instructional Leadership B: Supervision* focuses on how the concepts of supervision and instructional leadership "connect to the complex relationships among teacher growth and development, professional development, and school and instructional improvement" (Graduate Catalog, 2019, p. 137). The capstone assignment in the course requires students to engage in a formative clinical supervision cycle (Glickman et al., 2018; Goldhammer et al., 1993) with a fellow practicing classroom teacher. Specifically, they conduct a pre-observation conference, an observation, data preparation, a post-observation conference, and a critique of the entire clinical cycle.

The research team consisted of two white, female faculty members in the College of Education. The first author and course instructor had a long career in educational leadership, learning about SF approaches over the previous six years through professional interactions with the counseling faculty. Conversely, the second author had no professional PK-12 experience but teaches in the university's counseling program (which emphasizes a solution-focused approach), and regularly engages in scholarly research and professional service related to SFBT. Coming from different perspectives, these colleagues met regularly to discuss and bracket their assumptions (Hays & Wood, 2011).

Study participants included four female and two male graduate students ($N = 6$) enrolled in the instructional supervision course during the spring semester of 2019. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 3.5 to 15 years, and all were employed in urban or suburban public school districts. Four of the six schools employing the participants are considered diverse campuses that serve large numbers of students living in poverty. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Experience	School District Description
Allison	Female	Latina	7 years	Diverse, urban high school
Amy	Female	White	5 years	Diverse, urban high school
Emily	Female	Black	5 years	Diverse, urban middle school
Faustino	Male	Latino	3.5 years	Diverse, suburban high school
Jack	Male	White	15 years	Suburban high school
Josephine	Female	White	13 years	Suburban elementary school

Procedure

Approximately midway through the semester, the counseling faculty member served as a guest lecturer. Prior to this meeting, course content had included developmental supervision and the clinical supervision cycle (Glickman et al, 2018; Goldhammer et al., 1993). In preparation for the session, students were assigned to read two articles co-authored by the researchers, discussing SFS and its application to the supervision of teachers in a clinical supervision cycle.

Training

The counseling faculty member provided an overview of SFS and specific strategies to apply in a clinical supervision cycle, including maintaining a not knowing stance, looking for the teacher's preferred future, *complimenting* to amplify strengths, *goal formation questioning*, and *scaling* (De Jong & Berg, 2013; Shennan, 2014), as well as *hedging* (Thomas, 2013). Additionally, she created and shared a handout (see Appendix A) which applied the structure of a SFBT session (Pichot & Bushek, 2014) in a clinical supervision cycle. Finally, students engaged in a series of practice exercises to apply the learning.

To further reinforce the SF approach, approximately one hour and 15 minutes of two additional class meetings were devoted to supervised role-play and practice. Students acted out real-world

school issues encountered in their own experiences or anticipated encountering at their future field sites. Two doctoral students from the university's counseling program (both of whom had previously demonstrated proficiency in practicing, teaching, and supervising the solution-focused approach) were present to provide additional feedback during the practice sessions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via interviews and analysis of assignment artifacts. After receiving clearance from the university's institutional review board, possible participation in the study was introduced by the course instructor/educational leadership faculty member. She explained that participation in the study was completely voluntary and would have no impact on students' grades or standing in the program. The counseling faculty member, who had no pre-existing relationship with the students outside of being a guest lecturer for one class meeting, later contacted students by email to solicit their participation and secure consent. The counseling faculty member interviewed the participants, whereas the course instructor had no knowledge of participants' identities until after grades were posted and the academic semester had ended.

Interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were conducted face-to-face (four interviews) or by using Zoom virtual meeting technology (two interviews). A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B) guided each discussion. Recordings were transcribed and returned to participants for member checking (Maxwell, 1992) to verify accuracy; no corrections or additions were deemed necessary.

The researchers used a method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the interview data. Reviewing each transcript line-by-line and using colored font and highlighting, participant responses were labeled with descriptive codes. In many cases, the codes were determined a priori from solution-focused supervision strategies recommended by Thomas (2013; theory-driven; see Appendix C), whereas other codes were subjectively developed a posteriori (data-driven; Constas, 1992). The researchers compared their independent coding and engaged in discussion to reach consensus before collaboratively organizing the codes into themes. Additionally, they tallied the frequency of codes to ascertain the concentration of each theme (i.e., classical content analysis; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Assignment Artifacts. Clinical supervision reports and audio-recordings of the participants' pre- and post-observation conferences served as additional artifacts for analysis and provided opportunities for triangulation. After the semester ended, the research team reviewed the written reports to note any mention of the solution-focused (SF) strategies and listened to conference recordings to determine how the strategies were actually utilized.

Trustworthiness. In addition to following Patton's (2002) Ethical Issues Checklist (e.g., obtained informed consent, maintained confidentiality), the researchers implemented member-checking, persistent observation, and triangulation to maximize descriptive validity (Johnson, 1997) and provided verbatim quotations so that readers may "experience the participants' actual language" (Johnson, 1997, p. 285) for interpretive validity. Further, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing, regularly sharing how their previous experiences and values might influence interpretation, to mitigate potential bias (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008).

Findings

Qualitative analysis of the interview transcriptions yielded 22 codes which were organized into four overarching themes to answer the research questions.

Research Question #1

The first three themes addressed the first research question: *how do students perceive the effectiveness of solution-focused supervision strategies as practiced in a clinical supervision cycle?* Participants perceived their use of the strategies to produce positive outcomes, but reported this required a challenging paradigm shift on their part. They further indicated plans to use SF approaches in the future.

Positive Outcomes

The codes used to indicate positive outcomes included *empowerment/encourages reflection*, *facilitated conversation*, *builds cohesiveness*, *importance of relationships*, *increased confidence*, and *no responsibility to have all the answers*. With 33 occurrences, empowerment/encourages reflection was the most frequently-referenced code. Participants appreciated that the approach empowered the teacher to make his or her own decisions and to assume responsibility for growth. Allison explained "if it's a growth process, they can be themselves, instead of me putting forward expectations for them. With a solution focus, they will come up with their own expectations—the thing they want to grow on." Amy elaborated on the importance of allowing teachers to take the lead:

> The teacher in general is going to be the expert, because they're interacting with the content every single day and with the students in their classroom, who they know, every single day. So, getting them to…think more deeply about that—rely on resources they already have and know—will help me be helpful to them.

Participants also noted that the strategies helped to facilitate the conversation (11 instances) and build cohesiveness (six instances). As opposed to a supervisor *telling a teacher what to do*, participants enjoyed a collaborative conversation with their teachers, which resulted in an improved relationship. Faustino described it as "more of a conversation than a soliloquy." He observed a shift as the teacher "slowly started coming around and talking a lot more. By the time we got to the second session [post-observation conference], it was just buddies sharing information and seeing how to get better." Like Faustino, some participants perceived the strategies as facilitating the relationship, whereas other participants described the relationship (six instances) as an integral part of the approach. Allison explained how the relationship informed the approach, stating, "I think I have to get to know the teacher first, then think about the questions to ask."

Finally, participants described an outcome of increased confidence, both for the teacher and for themselves (six instances each). The participants reported observations of increased confidence in the teachers with whom they worked, and found this confidence to be a worthy goal. Amy explained, "that seems to me more important than the little things that I know will change over

time." Along with the teachers, the participants became more confident in their ability to be helpful to their supervisees. By recognizing the expertise of the teacher, the participants did not have to be content experts themselves. Empowering teachers to come up with their own solutions gave study participants a sense of freedom. Faustino noted, "learning that there was a different way was a weight off my shoulder. It's not all on me."

Challenging Paradigm Shift

Despite the participants' positive perceptions of the approach, they did not necessarily find using SF strategies easy. It is important to note that perceptions of challenge were specifically solicited in one of the interview questions: "Which aspects of solution-focused strategies did you find to be the most challenging for you?" (see Appendix B). Two codes, *challenge* and *mechanistic use*, comprised a theme of participants experiencing a difficult paradigm shift in their conversations with supervisees. In 30 instances, participants described challenges with preconceived notions, either the teachers' or their own, and previously formed linguistic habits. Teacher observations regularly conducted in the study districts follow a state-sanctioned system and rubric (Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System, or T-TESS), and both administrators and teachers have become accustomed to following an evaluative form and structure (as opposed to a formative stance). Jack mentioned struggling to keeping the conversation open and focused on teacher-developed goals, because his teacher "was so focused on how people do the T-TESS [teacher appraisal] conversations…she was sort of frustrated…that she couldn't give me something specific for that lesson, because she was thinking of a T-TESS observation." Likewise, some participants experienced difficulty adjusting their own philosophy of what supervisory, or formative, conversations should look like. Faustino commented, "it was really hard for me not to revert to old ways and just take over." In particular, participants found it more difficult to trust the observed teacher's expertise when he/she was less experienced. Jack pondered, "the teacher I observed was a first- year teacher, but I feel she was a pretty solid teacher. But any other teacher I think I would struggle with, if they're struggling to generate some ideas or some solutions." Other participants echoed this sentiment (that the approach is more difficult with certain teachers) with "she's just a special case."

In addition to a change in philosophy, participants were challenged to adapt their linguistic patterns. Emily described "fumbling over my words." In six instances, a code of mechanistic use was assigned as participants described their language as unnatural or "clunky" and that they had to ask questions in a certain way. Allison, Emily, and Faustino all mentioned needing to follow a script. Just as participants had to adjust their way of thinking, they had to adjust their way of talking in the pre- and post-observation conferences.

Plans to Use SFS in Future

Despite the challenges, all participants indicated plans to use the SF approach in the future. This theme was the result of four codes: *skeptical at first*, *looks forward to using SFS in future*, *desire for additional learning/practice*, and *already using the approach outside of assignment* indicated in 27 instances. Emily mentioned "I definitely will utilize solution focused structure," and Jack shared, "I'm definitely planning on using this going forward. It's just a matter of carving out the

time and really making the time for it amidst the other responsibilities that I know I'll have as an administrator."

In 12 instances, participants expressed a desire for further practice and learning. Five of the participants mentioned a "need to practice more," and some indicated they were already seeking opportunities to practice the approach outside of the clinical supervision cycle (21 instances). Although Josefine did not specifically mention a need for more practice, she communicated that she was already practicing the approach: "I've actually used this on my daughter too, my teenager . . . just with having…teenage issues and things like that . . . So [it] works as a parent too." Emily described other uses within the school setting:

> I actually would love to use it in every conversation every day with teachers, students, and just with everyone, because I really think they're good strategies . . . even when dealing with student discipline. 'Okay, Johnny, I understand. You said Miss Smith made you upset. On a scale from one to 10, how many times have you been this upset at Miss Smith? Have you ever been happy with Miss Smith? Well, let's talk about that. What made you happy? What happened?' So, I've been role playing in my mind about ways to utilize a solution based [approach].

Research Question #2

The final theme that appeared in the data was that of SFS Strategy. This theme was purposefully sought through the interview protocol to answer the second research question: *what solution-focused-supervision techniques are used by aspiring educational leaders?* The researchers noted the following theory-driven codes: *goal formation questions* (19 instances), identified strengths/complimenting (14 instances), scaling questions (12 instances), amplified success with follow-up questions (7 instances), not knowing stance/hedging (6 instances), and goal setting (5 instances).

Interview Codes

The most frequently mentioned strategy involved asking goal formation questions. The purpose of these questions is to ascertain the teacher's *preferred future* (De Jong & Berg, 2013) for his or her classroom and teaching. Having a clear picture of that preferred future then guides discussion about goals for improvement. In some cases, this strategy took the form of a miracle question (de Shazer et al., 1986). Josephine explained:

> She'll tell me a problem, and I'll be like, 'Okay…if you have used a strategy and went to sleep tonight, and woke up tomorrow and things were exactly the way you wanted, how would you know? …What would it look like?'

Other times, participants asked teachers to examine a future scenario that exemplified their preferred future. Jack asked his teacher, "If I were to come into your classroom a year from now, how would things be different? How would I see evidence that you continued to grow?" As the participants sought their respective teachers' preferences and perceptions, they indicated maintaining a not knowing stance, in which they allowed the teacher to take the lead in both describing goals and methods for achieving them. Amy, Emily, and Josefine all mentioned an

effort to "stay curious." Even when the participant had ideas for what the teacher should do, they tried to maintain this stance by using tentative language. Jack described:

> I know that some teachers do this in writing conferences; do you think that would work in your classroom? And, so, phrasing it in that way, I think allowed her to mull over the ideas and not necessarily be threatened. . . because I don't have all the answers.

This technique, called hedging (Thomas, 2013), allows the supervisor to work collaboratively with the teacher by offering ideas rather than telling him/her what to do.

The second strategy most frequently mentioned was complimenting (De Jong & Berg, 2013), or more specifically, amplifying the teacher's strengths. This strategy helped build a positive relationship in addition to facilitating a conversation about how the teacher might build on identified successes. Amy described the positive impact this strategy had on the teacher she was supervising:

> I really like the complimenting. And she even said to me in our post conference, just having someone to…sit with her and talk about her strengths and what she's doing well, lets you know . . . I see you and I see the work that you're doing…you're doing great. What can I do to help that be better?

Scaling is another SFS skill that was frequently discussed by participants. Emily communicated:

> I asked her as far as transition…on a scale from one to 10, how did she currently rate herself on transitions? And she told me, I believe, it was like five or six, somewhere in there. And I said, why not a ten? Why not a one?

The scaling question strategy was often accompanied by follow-up questions that amplified the teachers' success and goal-setting questions that helped them to build on that success. Allison and Josefine shared that they used a *wow and how* strategy (Nims, 2007), in which they expressed appreciation for something the teacher did and then asked how they were able to achieve that success. Others reported listening for instances of success and merely inquired, "tell me more." As referenced earlier, when Emily asked her teacher "Why not a one?" she facilitated the teacher identifying her own strengths and successes. And by asking "Why not a 10?" she encouraged the teacher to describe steps between what was currently happening and her preferred future. Faustino described this process of goal-setting as "Basically [we] got something tangible that he can work on that he came up with. It wasn't something that I came and said 'This is what I need you to do to make it work.'"

Observed SFS Skills

To triangulate these data, the researchers listened to audio-recordings of participants' clinical supervision cycle conferences and made note of which SFS strategies were utilized. Appendix C presents these findings. All of the strategies mentioned were identified in the recordings. In addition to the techniques described in interviews, the researchers noted two additional SFS strategies. At the beginning of the pre-conference, every participant asked the teacher about *their*

best hopes for the clinical supervision cycle. From the first interaction, the participants encouraged their respective teachers to be proactive in the process and consider how they might benefit from supervision. At the end of the post-conference, all of the recordings (note that one participant did not submit a post-conference recording) indicated that participants solicited feedback from the teacher to learn what was useful about their collaboration. To reinforce the collaborative relationship, the participants ended the exchange on a level-playing field by allowing space for a critique of their own (supervisory) skills.

Discussion

As noted above, the aspiring educational leaders in this study reported positive outcomes from using SF strategies within the clinical cycle. Consistent with a previous study (McGhee & Stark, 2018), they regarded SFS with value, credited the approach with improved confidence as instructional supervisors, and saw themselves using the strategies in their future leadership work. Moreover, participants affirmed that the SF structures and language nurtured reflection and conversation, and empowered teachers to assume greater responsibility for their own classrooms. However, these positive dispositions toward SFS did not come without challenges and doubt.

Initial Skepticism

Amy was dubious of SFS, both philosophically and practically. In her interview, she passionately remarked, "[I thought] this is ridiculous. I don't have a solution. If I had a solution, we wouldn't be in this meeting." In her written reflection, part of her clinical supervision report, she expressed that her lack of initial skill with SFS made her confidence waiver. However, by the end of the semester, she had experienced a complete turn in thinking—a profound paradigm shift. She rationalized that teachers are the sole professionals in the classroom "99% of the time" and must be empowered to make sound instructional decisions on behalf of their learners. In the same semester in which Amy was learning about SFS, she served as a cooperating teacher for a student in a teaching field placement. As she began using SF strategies in her conferences with the student teacher, she saw his confidence grow, evidenced by the way he worked with the students in his teaching capacity. With time, practice, and confirmation of results, Amy's perspective completely shifted. In her written report, she noted, "Helping teachers become confident problem solvers will create a positive culture on a campus."

Smoothing Out the Process, Learning to Conference, or Both?

While clearly supportive of and interested in SFS, using the language within the clinical exercise was not particularly natural for the participants who described their speech as *clunky,* and reported feeling like they were *fumbling over their words*. Unlike a previous study in which participants self-reported their experiences, this inquiry included audio recordings of actual conferences, allowing for accurate determination of strategies used and opportunities to gauge ease of use. Despite numerous in-class practice sessions across the semester, some participants were mechanistic and halting sounding when using the protocol. Based on paper rustling and specific words recited, it was apparent some participants were reading verbatim from the training handout. This sense of discomfort and unease was perhaps best illustrated in the shortest conferences—a pre-observation conference of 5:18 and post-observation conference of 7:16.

These examples were reminiscent of ticking through a list of requirements versus engaging in an exchange about desired instructional goals. In the aforementioned post conference, the supervisor stated, "I need to do a 'wow and how,' 'the next question is…,' 'the last two questions are….'"

Struggling to learn and use the SF protocol makes sense in this context as it was new learning for all study participants. However, it is also true that preservice leadership students are not likely to have had extensive experience conferencing with colleagues or peers on matters of instructional practice. With the exception of one participant with a bilingual education coaching background, conferencing with and observing peer educators was a wholly new endeavor. That said, additional practice with solution focused language *and* in using the clinical cycle (conferencing, observing, collecting, preparing, and sharing data) is warranted. Because study participants were in the second semester of a five-semester preparation program and each had a full-time paid practicum in year two, ample time for advanced practice exists. Considering that no research actually ties teacher evaluation processes to improved outcomes (Hazi, 2012, 2014, 2016), allocating more time in leadership development programs to rehearsing formative interactions that encourage teachers to consider a preferred future and craft steps toward improvement is worthy of our attention and action.

The Supervision-Evaluation Tussle

In each of the post observation conferences, it is of note the teacher-supervisee, the focus of the clinical cycle, did more of the talking than the supervisor (see Appendix C). While it is encouraging to see supervisors allow teachers to take advantage of professional air time, several study respondents reported how difficult it was not to "take charge" or "offer clear expectations," behaviors consistent with interactions between classroom teachers and their evaluator/appraiser. We suspect more directive approaches are modeled by administrators in the participants' schools during annual teacher appraisals. Educators regularly report that classroom observations for the purpose of evaluation are more common than formative acts of support for growth and improvement of teaching and learning (such as clinical supervision cycles; Zepeda, 2017).

Considering that the participants in this study were veteran educators, with an average of eight years of classroom experience, we surmise most of the teacher-supervisor interactions related to in-class observations in their own careers had been more hierarchical and directive in nature, with the appraiser/evaluator assuming the role of expert. It follows that participants might be emulating such behaviors when placed in the supervisor role.

The role of instructional expert can be confounding for administrators (Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020), especially those new to the profession. Both Amy and Faustino expressed that using SFS provided them with a sense of "liberation," as they were not expected to have all the answers. In a related aside, Jack, a study participant who is now employed as an assistant principal, recently reached out for advice on integrating SF strategies into his required teacher appraisal conferences. During our conversation, he noted that SF approaches are teacher driven and valuable; they communicate that the teacher is capable of seeing his/her needs and crafting plans for improvement, whereas in the appraisal system (in which he had just been trained), the administrator is in full control of suggesting improvements in a phase called "refinement."

Again, we do not condone conflating evaluation and supervision; the two are separate endeavors with separate purposes and outcomes (McGhee, 2020; Gordon & McGhee, 2019). However, despite the inextricable link of teaching to the human resources function of evaluation, indicating the annual practice will not likely end soon (Firestone, 2014), we are encouraged assistant principals such as Jack are looking for ways to flatten the hierarchy and make the required conferences more teacher-centered.

Co-constructing a Preferred Future

The most frequently mentioned SFS strategy was asking goal-formation questions. More than any other strategy, asking questions that encourage supervisees to envision a preferred future is the essence of the SF approach. McKergow (2016) described a "2.0" version of the approach, describing the approach as evolving to be more focused on description than action. Rather than a therapist (or supervisor) devising interventions, their role is "to help the client expand the details of their descriptions, which then become more and more littered with tiny specifics which might easily suggest themselves as actions for the client" (p. 4). Without any knowledge of the history or current discussions in the SF community, the participants gravitated toward this idea. They appreciated how the strategy empowered teachers in coming up with actions for themselves.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

All research studies have limitations, and this one is no exception. The participants in this study engaged in the clinical supervision cycle with a selected teaching peer, rather than someone over whom they have authority. It is possible that the supervision dynamics are due to the previously-established relationship with the peer rather than to using the SFS approach.

Additionally, a class assignment that will be evaluated by a faculty member holds a different value than a practice that is one of many performed by a practicing educational leader. When the participants graduate from their program, they will deal with many new responsibilities in their administrative positions. As such, they may not use or value the SFS approach in the same manner. Future research is needed with experienced school administrators to determine differences in their perceptions, as well as to see how the approach is adapted as they gain experience in their leadership role.

Conclusion

Although we believe this study brings us closer to understanding the utility of SFS and how future school leaders perceive its effectiveness in practice, this line of inquiry requires additional and expanded investigation. To date, our studies have focused on graduate students within a leadership preparation program and limited to tasks within an instructional supervision course. As noted earlier, a reasonable next step is exploring SF strategies with in-service administrators as they engage in actual supervisory practice, probing the experiences of new-to-profession campus leaders (and the teachers they work with) as well as those veteran to leadership work.

Considering the evolving landscape of communities and the schools which reside within them, better equipping instructional supervisors, and the teachers for whom they are responsible, with

strategies for innovative instructional decision making is worthy of our continued scrutiny. We submit that teachers, the primary professionals responsible for the classroom setting, who experience supervision from a stance of presumed competence and empowered to shape a preferred future, will be more enthusiastic about and committed to this demanding, yet essential work. Given the rigors of teaching in today's world, enthusiasm and commitment may be more crucial now than ever before.

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Appendix A

SFS Structure for Clinical Supervision Cycle
Pre-observation Conference

1. Visit. "Before we dive in . . ." (Especially important for new relationship).
➢ What's important for me to know about you? What else?
➢ What strengths do you bring to your teaching?

2. What does teacher want? Encourage teacher to set agenda and generate supervision topics.
➢ How can I best help you meet your goals?
➢ What would need to happen today (and from my observation) to make it a good use of our time?
➢ For a moment, let's pretend that we have reached the end of our supervision and you have found this process to be beneficial, what will you say was most helpful to you?

3. Check it out – use their words

4. Preferred future/Goal formulation question
Note: the majority of time spent on description and the how
➢ Miracle question (best with quality, skill, or trait) – If a miracle happened overnight, and when you woke up in the morning, you had teaching super powers, what are the first things that you would notice that would tell you the miracle had occurred.
➢ Fast Forwarding question (best with events; takes out element of immediacy contained in MQ) – Let's fast-forward to the day of my observation. Tell me what an effective lesson will look like.
➢ Suppose . . . -- Suppose Johnny did stay in his seat, what difference would that make?

5. Scale current progress (present-focused) -- On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating not very successful and 10 indicating your ideal, how would you rate your achievement of the goal we've discussed?
➢ Assist teacher in evaluating where he/she is in relation to desired goal.
➢ Never scale the problem--put more emphasis on the solution.
➢ 10 is always the goal, but 10 doesn't have to be perfection. 10 could be description of how teacher would feel if problem was gone (e.g., pretty good day and teacher is able to handle whatever comes up).
➢ Remember your not-knowing stance—you don't know if they consider the rating to be high or low.
➢ Follow-up questions:
    o What lets you know you are here [provide visual] and not lower?
    o How did you get to_____? How are you doing that?
    o Have you always been a person who . . .? (refer back to strengths discussed earlier)
    o Is that helpful or something to keep?
    o What else lets you know?

      o   Where would _____put you on the scale? (RQ)
      o   Discuss logistics for observation (time, place, your level of involvement in the class)

6. Give a noticing task—between now and our next meeting, I'd like for you to notice when parts of that preferred future/goal has been achieved, even just a little bit. I'll do the same when I come observe you.

Observation and Prep

1. During Observation – gather data. Keep list of specific behaviors that were performed well, particularly those that are related to the teacher's specified goals.

2. Planning – Review observation notes and read materials related to the goals set by the teacher.

Post-observation Conference

1. What's better? – When we last met, I asked you to notice times when your preferred future/goal was occurring. So what did you notice? How do you think this was reflected in the class I observed?

2. Share data gathered during your observation. Be sure to identify and amplify successes that were observed using "Wow and How." -- Wow, Jimmy really tried to distract the class with his antics, but you were able to redirect him quickly and keep their attention. How were you able to do that?

3. Revisit scale. Use scaling questions to help teacher to report perceived progress toward goals and identify what he or she might do to make further progress using presuppositional language (assuming the positive).
➢ When we last met, you scaled yourself at a X. How would you scale yourself today?
➢ An X? Wonderful! Tell me about X. What do you think attributed to you to reaching that level? You might add additional evidence that you noticed from your observation.

4. Assist teacher in evaluating other instances of success.
➢ Are there times when you are higher, even a little? In those times, how do you get yourself there? What else? When you're higher on the scale, what lets you know that you don't have to worry about [problem]?
➢ Are there times that you are lower on the scale? What pulls you out of it? How do you know when it's time to do that?

5. What's next?
➢ If we were to do this again in a year, what would I observe that is different?
➢ What will you have done to make that happen?
➢ What will tell you that it was a good move? How will you have done it in a way that you feel good about?

➢   24 hour goal -- What is a small step that would better the odds of you moving up the scale? Is that something you could do tomorrow?

6. Ask for feedback on the supervision process. -- How was this helpful? Do you have other questions for me?

7. Feedback – compliment teacher strengths and encourage them to try out (or build on) identified solutions.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

In this interview we will focus on the pre- and post-observations conferences you conducted as a part of the clinical cycle in the spring semester of 2019.

1. In your pre- or post-observation conferences, did you use any of the SF strategies presented in the class? If so, which strategies did you use?

2. Which aspects of SF strategies did you find to be most helpful to you? Please explain.

3. Which aspects of SF strategies did you find to be most challenging for you? Please explain.

4. To what degree do you anticipate using SF strategies in your future work as an instructional supervisor?

5. Do you see any other uses for SF strategies in your work as an instructional leader?

6. Is there anything else you would like to say about the use SFS strategies?

Appendix C

Participant	Length of Meeting	SF Skills Utilized								
		Identified Strengths/ Complimenting	Best Hopes for CSC	Goal Formation Questions	Scaling Questions	Scaling Follow - Up	Not-Knowing Stance/ Hedging	Amplified Success/ with Follow-Up Questions	Goal-Setting	Solicited Feedback on CSC
Amy										
Pre-conference	13:04	X	X	X			X	X		
Post-conference	21:59 14:11 (teacher)	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Allison										
Pre-conference	25:04	X	X	X	X		X			
Post-conference	18:52 10:20 (teacher)	X		X	X	X	X			X
Josefine										
Pre-conference	5:18	X	X		X					
Post-conference	7:16 4:00 (teacher)			X	X					X
Jack										
Pre-conference	25:37	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Post-conference	23:40 13:52 (teacher)	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Faustino										
Pre-conference	9:30	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Post-conference	21:19 10:08 (teacher)	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Emily										
Pre-conference	7:24	X	X	X	X					

Notes: Emily did not submit post-observation conference recording; (teacher) indicates the amount of time teacher-supervisee talked in the post-observation conference