

Supervisors, Teachers, and the Post-observation Conference: How to Improve the Quality of Supervision

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Stephen P. Gordon¹, Noelle A. Paufler², and Mary Lynne Derrington³

Abstract

This article reports on the qualitative component of a survey on teachers' perceptions of positive supervisor qualities displayed in post-observation conferences. Additionally, teachers who had negative experiences with supervisors described those experiences. Participants also suggested ways for improving the quality of supervision in the post-observation conference.

Keywords

supervisor qualities; post-observation conference; teacher perceptions of supervisors; supervision; instructional supervision

¹ Texas State University

² Clemson University

³ University of Tennessee

Corresponding Author:

Stephen P. Gordon (Educational and Community Leadership Program, CLAS Department, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, Texas, 78666, USA)
email: sg07@txstate.edu

Dedication

The authors dedicate this article to the late Dr. Jim Brandon, who was a member of the research team that initiated this study.

Introduction

This article reports on the qualitative component of a survey on teachers' perceptions of supervisor qualities displayed in post-observation conferences. The authors first conducted a review of the literature in which they identified seven qualities of effective supervisors. The full review of literature, briefly summarized below, also identified specific indicators of each supervisor quality. A survey on teachers' perceptions of supervisor qualities displayed in post-observation conferences developed by the authors included both a quantitative and qualitative component. In a separate paper the authors report quantitative survey results on teacher ratings of the importance of each of the supervisor qualities identified in the literature review. In this article, the authors report on results from the qualitative component of the same survey in which respondents were asked to provide open-ended comments on supervision in post-observation conferences. This request allowed teachers to go beyond the rating of various supervisor qualities and describe both helpful and unhelpful supervision they have experienced.

Qualitative analysis revealed that most of the respondents' comments related to the identified supervisor qualities. These responses included teacher-perceived indicators of the presence or absence of each quality in post-observation conferences and, in some responses, suggestions for improving the quality of supervision. Additionally, "miscellaneous" teacher responses, those not related to any supervisor quality, included doubts about whether formal supervision is needed as well as critiques of summative evaluation and state-mandated evaluation systems.

Literature Review

Seven qualities of successful instructional supervisors discussed frequently in the literature include relational trust, authenticity, sharing of meaningful observation data, facilitation of teacher reflection, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge of generic teaching skills. The following briefly summarizes each quality as described in the literature.

Relational trust requires both supervisor competence (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021) and honesty (Anderson, 2012; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Supervisors in trusting relationships with teachers prioritize teacher and student growth (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021). Trusted supervisors show respect for teachers' ability and ideas (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021). Relational trust involves supervisors caring for, supporting, and collaborating with teachers (Anderson, 2012; Walsh, 2005).

Supervisor **authenticity** means that the supervisor understands their own strengths and weaknesses and seeks feedback from others to improve their performance. The authentic supervisor openly expresses their ideas, encourages others to express their ideas, and is willing to admit mistakes. In decision making, the authentic supervisor gathers and analyzes relevant

information and considers the opinions of other stakeholders. Finally, authenticity means that the supervisor sets high moral standards for themselves and lives up to those standards (Bird et al., 2012; Elassy, 2023; Peus et al., 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

The supervisor's *sharing of meaningful observation data* is dependent on the purpose of the observation, which scholars argue should be related to the improvement of teaching (Glickman et al., 2024; Gordon & McGhee, 2019). The supervision literature calls for the supervisor and teacher to agree in a pre-observation conference on the focus of the observation and the data to be collected (Glickman et al., 2024; Sergiovanni et al., 2014; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013; Zepeda, 2017). The supervisor needs to spend adequate time in the classroom to gather meaningful data (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013), and the data should be consistent with the agreed-upon purpose of the observation, descriptive rather than judgmental, and free of bias (Glickman et al., 2024; Sergiovanni et al., 2014; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013; Zepeda, 2017). In planning for the post-observation conference, the supervisor should make sure the data is displayed in a concise and meaningful manner (Sergiovanni et al., 2014). The sharing of data in the post-observation conference should promote dialogue, teacher reflection, and joint interpretation of data (Gordon & McGhee, 2019). The discussion of observation data should be the basis for an instructional improvement goal and a plan for meeting that goal (Glickman et al., 2024; Sergiovanni et al., 2014; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013; Zepeda, 2017).

Facilitating teacher reflection is “a process that helps practitioners make sense of and attempt to resolve dilemmas and challenges that arise in their work” (Camburn & Han, 2015, p. 514). The successful supervisor allows the teacher to identify a concern, and the supervisor takes a dialogic approach, asking questions to better understand that concern (Kim & Silver, 2016; McGhee & Stark, 2018). The supervisor then facilitates a problem-solving process, assisting the teacher to define the problem, reflect on their educational beliefs and classroom practices and the relationship of those beliefs and practices to the problem, and consider new perspectives and new teaching behaviors (Grimmett & Crehen, 1990; McGhee & Stark, 2018).

Scholars argue that it is important for the supervisor to possess *content knowledge* in the teacher's subject area (Zepeda & Mayers, 2004), but research indicates that school administrators providing supervision often lack content knowledge in some subject areas and thus tend to deemphasize content and focus on general pedagogy in their classroom observations (Lochmiller, 2016). Research also shows that many administrators realize they lack content knowledge in some subjects and believe this lack of knowledge reduces their capacity to provide instructional assistance to teachers in those content areas (Ford & Lavigne, 2023). Scholars' recommendations to address the problem of school administrators' lack of content knowledge include peer supervision by teachers in the same content area as the teacher being observed (Ford & Lavigne, 2023) and professional development to improve administrators' content knowledge (Steele et al., 2015).

Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) enables the teacher to integrate content with pedagogy specifically designed to teach that content. According to Lee Shulman (1987), who created the term, “teachers cannot be adequately assessed by observing their teaching performance without reference to the content being taught” (p. 20). PCK includes organizing and adapting the content to match the characteristics of the learners, highlighting content and choosing examples that

match students' learning levels and styles, and predicting and addressing barriers to students' understanding (Russ et al., 2016; Shing et al., 2015; Shulman, 1987). Fuentes and Jimerson (2020) found that teachers highly valued but seldom received PCK-focused feedback from supervisors.

The supervisor needs to possess *knowledge of generic teaching skills* in order to discuss those skills with the teacher in a post-observation conference. A variety of generic teaching skills are discussed in the literature, including skills for lesson planning (Hatch & Clark, 2021), creating a positive classroom environment (Pickett & Fraser, 2010), classroom management (Haydon et al., 2019), differentiating instruction (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson et al., 2003), lesson delivery (Hatch & Clark, 2021), monitoring student learning (Cunha, 2017; Vaccaro & Sabella, 2018), student assessment (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020), and providing feedback to students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). Which of these teaching skills to discuss in a post-observation conference depends on the observation data, the discussion of those data, and the teacher's concerns for future lessons. The important things are that the supervisor possesses knowledge of what the research says about those skills relevant to the observed lesson and can engage in dialogue with the teacher about the application of those skills in future lessons.

Purpose of the Study

The overall study was designed to explore teacher perceptions of supervisor qualities displayed in post-observation conferences. The survey included a quantitative component with items asking respondents to rate the importance of specific supervisor capacities and actions representing seven general supervisor qualities: relational trust, authenticity, ability to present meaningful observation data, facilitation of teacher reflection, knowledge of generic teaching skills, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. This article is focused on the second, qualitative component of the survey: teacher comments on the quality of the supervision they receive and suggestions for improving that supervision. This component of the study is classified by Merriam (2009) as basic qualitative research. The specific qualitative research questions follow:

1. What do teachers perceive as supervisor qualities necessary for a successful post observation conference?
2. What do teachers perceive as indicators of the presence or absence of these qualities?
3. What suggestions, if any, do teachers have for improving the quality of supervision in a post-observation conference?

Methods

Respondents invited to complete the survey were PK–12 public school teachers in South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. Teachers invited to participate were randomly selected from publicly available lists of teachers, and the invitations to participate and survey were sent to their institutional email addresses. A total of 83 teachers chose to respond to the request for open-ended comments on supervisor qualities, including 40 teachers from South Carolina, 32 from

Tennessee, and 11 from Texas. Teachers who chose to participate emailed their responses directly to the researchers through Qualtrics. The Qualtrics feature that collects IP addresses was turned off to keep the survey responses anonymous.

Data analysis of the open-ended responses began with reading through those responses several times. Next, a hybrid approach was used in coding teacher responses. A hybrid approach includes both inductive coding, based solely on the data, and deductive coding, based on previous theory or research (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2019; Swain, 2018; Xu & Zammit, 2020). Coding was carried out in two cycles. In the first cycle, coding was deductive and open, with each complete thought of each respondent assigned a code summarizing that thought. To test for intercoder reliability (Bernard et al., 2017), two of the authors independently coded all responses and, although different terms occasionally were used in coding, the meaning of those terms in most cases was equivalent, and the overall consistency of the coding was extremely high.

The second cycle of coding was deductive, using codes for supervisor qualities found in the literature and measured in the quantitative part of the survey. Since the teachers who completed the survey did not differentiate between content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, these two qualities were combined under a single deductive code, “content knowledge.” Additionally, a “miscellaneous” deductive code was assigned to teacher experiences and opinions not directly related to any single supervisor quality. The deductive codes, thus, were relational trust, authenticity, sharing of meaningful observation data, facilitation of teacher reflection, content knowledge, knowledge of generic teaching skills, and miscellaneous perceptions.

The authors were interested in identifying themes *within* each supervisor quality the respondents had discussed as well as within teachers’ miscellaneous perceptions of supervision. To do this, a data display was created for each of these broad areas, and all previously determined inductive codes were assigned to one of the data displays. The relevant codes, the number of times each code had been assigned to different teachers, and numbers identifying individual respondents who had shared the relevant perception all were entered on each data display. Closely related codes and the aforementioned information concerning those codes were grouped together in the data displays (Naeem et al., 2023).

The next step in data analysis was to review related codes and determine themes that traversed those codes. According to Naeem and associates (2023), “Themes may include patterns, trends, or relationships between different codes in thematic analysis and provide insight into the research questions or phenomena being studied” (p. 10). In addition to identifying themes, the authors also reviewed codes to identify teacher perceptions that did not rise to the level of a theme but that they found interesting and informative.

Results

Qualitative results are reported here under six supervisor qualities: relational trust, authenticity, ability to present meaningful observation data and feedback, facilitation of teacher reflection, content knowledge, and knowledge of generic teaching skills. Additionally, we report respondents’ perceptions of supervisors and supervision not specifically related to one of the six

qualities. We describe themes within each category as well as some non-thematic teacher perceptions that we found interesting and informative.

Relational Trust

A theme across the comments of teachers who wrote about relational trust was that it developed when the supervisor supported teachers. Such support was based on supervisor care for, trust of, and respect for teachers. As one respondent stated, “the best administrator that I could imagine would support me as I become a better teacher, respect me as a professional, and help me as I try to reach all of the students that I can reach.”

Teachers reported that supervisors in supportive, trusting relationships with teachers possessed strong interpersonal skills, including listening skills. One respondent wrote, “I need my administrator to listen when I share thoughts and ideas.” Another teacher explained that supervisors should be able “to have conversations with teachers so they [can] explain connections that the supervisor may not know are there.” Additional supervisor interpersonal skills were described by a third respondent as “knowing how to convey knowledge to teachers in a way that it will be received positively. Tact and empathy are also important traits for supervisors to possess.”

Teachers perceived that a positive personal relationship between a supervisor and teacher was necessary for long-term supervisory support leading to relational trust. A respondent commented, “the relationship between teacher and supervisor is very important. This relationship can help immediately and in the future. This relationship should be fostered so that the teacher always has that supervisor as a resource.” Teachers stated that to develop relational trust supervisors need to be available on a regular basis, focus on teacher needs, and assist teachers’ professional growth. An interesting comment by one of the respondents concerned the need for teacher autonomy: “What is important to me is that the supervisor gives me the freedom to do the job that I was trained for and that I know how to do.”

A related perception shared by teachers was that teacher-supervisor collaboration fostered relational trust. A respondent proposed the following:

If operating under a growth mindset, the teacher and support staff member (administrator or instructional coach) should work collaboratively to examine the learning and instruction that is happening...and identify strengths and weaknesses to develop a jointly agreed-to plan for achieving growth.

Another teacher stated,

I teach art and not all supervisors are as deeply familiar with my content, materials, techniques, etc. as an art educator may be. I don’t expect my supervisor to have an art or art education degree, but when they are willing to listen, learn, and collaborate we can learn from each other.

A third respondent proposed supervisor-teacher collaboration in the form of team teaching: "It is helpful to team teach lessons to demonstrate various practices and to give the teacher another perspective."

One perception shared by a minority of the teachers who commented on this topic concerned a low level of relational trust due to their supervisor's lack of professionalism. A respondent describing their supervisor wrote, "she rarely offers the grace she expects the teachers to extend to their students. It makes it difficult to be respectful and loyal." A second teacher lamented, "our principal displays favoritism toward some and not others, which is NOT professional at all." Another respondent commented, "you assume that the supervisor knows more than the teacher just because they're a supervisor. In my experience, the opposite is mostly true.... I don't have a lot of faith that my supervisor's observations or comments will be helpful."

Supervisor Authenticity

One ingredient for supervisor authenticity discussed by teachers was supervisor awareness of the teaching context. A respondent discussed the need for understanding changes in the learning environment: "Before observing a class, the supervisor should make sure they understand how much the classroom culture has changed." An example of classroom change shared by this teacher was the increased use of technology. A different respondent wrote, "It is very important for supervisors to be aware of the individual teacher's background, teaching experience, and previous training." A third teacher's comment concerned the need for the supervisor to be aware of challenges due to changes in the student population: "Many more students are entering our classrooms with mental health issues, poverty, and abuse."

Another perception shared by several respondents was that an authentic supervisor was a responsive supervisor. An example of responsiveness described by a teacher was the supervisor going beyond discussing the need for improvement to sharing suggestions for achieving that improvement:

Supervisors should be able to give suggestions for how to improve if they say a teacher needs to improve in an area, especially if the teacher feels as if they have tried everything or asks for suggestions. A supervisor should never give an area of "needs improvement" and then not be able to give suggestions.

Other characteristics of responsive supervisors described by respondents included being knowledgeable, approachable, an effective communicator, a critical thinker, and a strong leader.

Some teachers reported their supervisors were inauthentic, and these negative comments centered on the supervisor being unmindful. A respondent wrote, "the observation process where I work is more of a routine because it is required as opposed to an actual tool for success" This concern with the routinization of supervision was expressed by another teacher as follows: "My experience has been that administrators just want to come in and get it over with. Nothing productive actually comes out of the process." Unmindful supervision also can take the form of observing and conferencing on a lesson inappropriate for supervision, as illustrated by a third respondent:

(My) administrator stayed for a class during testing and independent work once students were done. There was no preconference.... Feedback consisted of “students were not engaged. I know it is a difficult class. Let me know what I can do to help.

Yet another example of unmindful supervision expressed by a teacher was concerned with some supervisors’ general dispositions rather than the teacher’s instruction determining the feedback provided:

You could teach exactly the same thing the same way and an administrator happy with their job and a positive mindset about teachers as part of their team will give you positive and useful feedback while administrators that hold a negative view of their staff will many times try to find anything negative and ignore all the good happening in the lesson. It is too subjective to be helpful in any way.

Meaningful Observation Data and Feedback from the Supervisor

For survey respondents who discussed them, meaningful observation data and feedback were those relevant to their individual interests and needs, including such areas as the classroom environment, student discipline, and student learning. Another teacher’s perception was that feedback should be specific:

Teachers are more likely to grow professionally from feedback that is specific and goal oriented and focused on incremental change. Often, I have seen supervisors throw everything that they think needs to be improved at teachers at the same time and teachers get overwhelmed. Instead, supervisors need to look at the things that need to be improved and choose the one or two that will have the greatest impact and start there.

An additional participant suggestion was for the supervisor to gather a variety of information about a teacher’s instruction, using multiple observations to do so.

Although teachers valued meaningful observation data and feedback, a number of them made it clear they were not receiving worthwhile data and feedback in their post-observation conferences. One reason for this problem perceived by some respondents was that their classroom observations were too short, with only a small part of a lesson observed. Other teachers blamed the standardized instruments used to gather observation data. One of these teachers objected to the observation checklist used in their district: “Teacher evaluations in the last couple of years have put great emphasis on checking boxes in a standardized form, overly critical of the teacher’s own approach without offering any useful information.” Another respondent decried their district’s overly complex observation rubric: “Every lesson does not contain every single point on the rubric. Many of my lessons take a couple of classes to cover, practice, assess, and reteach if necessary.” A third teacher disapproved of an evaluation instrument they believed required a particular teaching style: “Teachers have a style of instruction that may not be like the way the evaluation form (that the state created) says how they should teach.”

Another concern expressed by some respondents was that feedback from different supervisors was inconsistent. This problem included inconsistent feedback from different principals: "Today I was observed by my principal for approximately 10 to 15 minutes, and I received two 'needs improvements' and two 'proficients.' My other principal gave me exemplary ratings. The one who rated me poorly is hostile. Tell me why I should care what she uses to rate me." Inconsistent feedback also might come from a school-based and a central office supervisor: "One evaluator told me that my turn and talk strategy was too chaotic and not effective. That same year I was trained and evaluated by a district-level curriculum specialist, and he commented on how it was recommended and effectively used." The problem of inconsistent feedback may occur even if two supervisors observe the same lesson: "Observation scores vary drastically between supervisors. This is true even when you have more than one observer in the same class at the same time. It is very difficult to buy into feedback when you have completely different reports from people who observed the exact same lesson at the exact same time."

Supervisor Facilitation of Teacher Reflection

Teacher comments on this topic focused on what they meant by facilitation of teacher reflection and the benefits of such reflection. One respondent described the difference between inauthentic and authentic reflection:

If [the supervisor] guides the teacher in the way they want them to go...then it isn't an authentic reflection. [If] the teacher reflects and chooses the direction for improvement, then it is authentic and gives meaning to the teacher's improvement.

Another teacher predicted positive effects of the supervisor facilitating a teacher's reflection on new teaching strategies:

These ideas the teacher will more likely be able to carry out because the teacher came up with them as a result of the conversation with the supervisor. This will also place the supervisor as someone who can help the teacher grow rather than cause fear of criticism without a pathway to solutions.

An additional respondent's comment, "being a reflective practitioner is important for both the teacher and supervisor," indicates awareness of the power of reciprocal supervisor-teacher reflection.

Supervisor Content Knowledge

Teachers who made comments on the value of supervisors possessing content knowledge were divided on this topic. Respondents who did not believe supervisors needed content knowledge in the subject taught by the teacher shared different reasons for that opinion. One reason shared was that it was the supervisor's understanding of effective teaching strategies and not content that was important. One teacher with this view wrote, "the content being taught should not be the focus of the supervisor. Rather, [the important thing is] the ability to recognize effective and efficient teaching strategies so that relevant and reflective conferencing can occur."

A different respondent's view of why supervisor content knowledge was not necessary was that the teacher already possessed adequate content knowledge:

The supervisor doesn't really need to be involved in our specifics. I know my content well after being a math teacher for nearly 30 years. I would not be very receptive to a supervisor offering specific content related suggestions when many supervisors can't do the math themselves and don't have the experience I have.

Another teacher was more concerned about the supervisor's understanding of the teaching context: "It is more important to me that my supervisor is familiar with the teaching environment of an elementary school rather than the specific content knowledge of what I am teaching."

A supervisor's relationship with teachers was more important than supervisor content knowledge for one respondent: "The principal just needs to know how to motivate, retain, and love staff; they do not need to know content." Another teacher's comment centered on the supervisor's dialogic skills: "Supervisors are not expected to be experts in all content...but should have the knowledge on how to have conversations with teachers so they explain connections that the supervisor may not know are there."

Other respondents believed that supervisor content knowledge was necessary. One math teacher wrote that it was important for the supervisor to possess knowledge of *both* content and effective teaching methods: "For an observation to be most valuable to a teacher, the supervisor really needs to have a good grasp on content and current teaching methods. Teaching math with supervisors who do not have this background can cause issues." Another math teacher shared examples of why supervisor content knowledge was important:

It is important to me as a teacher that supervisors conducting observations are competent in the subject being taught/observed. The unfortunate reality in public schools is that supervisors are administrators who at best have basic knowledge of the subject, if that, but are still expected to evaluate teachers with advanced degrees in their field. Most observers I had could not even get through the lesson I taught without making basic content mistakes, but they were tasked with evaluating my depth of knowledge, instructional content, and planning. I had an observer tell me once that my math lesson was not completed because I did not teach the students how to find "x" after simplifying algebraic expressions. She did not believe me when I explained the difference between expressions and equations.

Some respondents recognized that detailed knowledge of every content area was not always possible, but they believed that at least a general understanding of content was necessary. One teacher wrote, "The administrator doing our observations might not have the in-depth knowledge of everything being taught [but] they should have an overall understanding of what is being taught." Another respondent taking this view stated, "Possessing broad knowledge of the content area is important when supervising a teacher."

Other teachers assumed a middle ground on the issue of supervisor content knowledge, suggesting that if a supervisor did not possess adequate knowledge in a subject area, they could

arrange for others to provide content-related assistance. One respondent recommended, “If the supervisor does not understand the teacher’s content, then they should recommend someone in the building that can provide any assistance/recommendations they are unable to provide.” A second teacher suggested, “In cases where a teacher needs content-specific assistance or feedback, it should be okay to have the supervisor connect the person observed with a content expert for difficulties specifically in this area of teaching and learning.” Another respondent stressed the communal aspect of instructional leadership: “The supervisor does not have to be the expert in everything, but they need...to know who on the faculty is and point the teacher in that direction. Knowing your people and helping grow students and teachers takes a village.”

Several teachers’ comments on this topic were quite negative. For example, one respondent stated, “Some observations are done by administrators who don’t have a clue of the subject matter.” Negative comments on supervisor content knowledge tended to come from teachers in particular content areas like math and physical education. A math teacher lamented, “In the last 15 years, I have not been evaluated by anyone with basic knowledge of my content or anyone qualified to teach my classes, though I am in one of the four largest districts in the state.” A physical education teacher exclaimed, “As a PE professional, I cannot count the times a supervisor has come in over the course of my career and had no clue as to what an effective class would look like.”

Supervisor Knowledge of Generic Instructional Skills

Respondents shared their belief that supervisors needed knowledge of generic instructional skills to be effective. As one teacher put it, “It seems to me that, in order to have credibility, a supervisor must have a strong command of sound pedagogical practices.” Another respondent considered this type of knowledge to be an essential part of instructional leadership: “A supervisor should be an instructional leader. Asking teachers to do things they do not understand or have not experienced is not acceptable.” A related teacher perception was that supervisors needed to not only understand but also demonstrate generic instructional skills: “Anything a supervisor expects when they are observing, they should be able to do.”

Respondents also believed that extensive classroom teaching experience was necessary for supervisors to develop knowledge of instructional skills. A teacher commented:

If supervisors have never taught, they certainly can’t relate. The best supervisors are the ones who have taught multiple grades and subjects before entering a supervisory role...those folks can relate more to situations that come up during observations and are more likely to have feedback that is relative to the situation.

One concern related to the need for extensive teaching experience was what a respondent referred to as “fast-tracking” of some teachers into supervisory roles:

An educational supervisor should have multiple years of classroom experience. The fast-tracking of teachers to administrative positions detracts from the understanding of classroom management, curriculum content, student diversity, and instructional

planning/implementation. The lack of experience is also evidenced in observation data [and] ability to assist in a crisis.

A related concern was about the supervisor who does have teaching experience but has not been a classroom teacher for several years. One teacher's recommendation for addressing this concern was for the supervisor to teach lessons at different grade levels:

Administrators who have been out of the classroom for many years lack the ability to understand today's students. It is essential for administrators to find the time to teach a lesson in all grade levels they supervise to be able to show empathy with a teacher's daily struggle. My philosophy is you cannot understand what a person is going through unless you are willing to get into the "trenches" with them.

Summary of Teacher Perceptions of Supervisor Qualities

Respondents agreed that five of the six supervisor qualities they discussed were characteristics of effective supervisors and were divided on whether supervisor content knowledge was a necessary quality. Table 1 (see next page) lists the supervisor qualities discussed by teachers and teacher-perceived indicators of the presence or absence of each of those qualities.

Miscellaneous Teacher Perceptions of Supervisors and Supervision

Some perceptions of supervisors and supervision shared by respondents were not directly related to supervisor qualities. One minority perception was that the teacher did not see the need for assistance from a formally designated supervisor. Rationales for this perception varied, with one rationale being the respondent's extensive teaching experience: "After 34 years, I have different needs than a beginning teacher. I can reflect on my own progress and success without the help of my supervisor." Another rationale, voiced by a different teacher, was that it is the teacher who is in constant contact with the students and thus the teacher who should make decisions about classroom teaching and learning: "Teachers have been with these students every day for however long school has been in session, making them experts on the students they are teaching." A third rationale was that other teachers were more likely than supervisors to provide meaningful assistance with classroom teaching. As one respondent phrased it, "I don't generally need an administrator to know how to teach or manage my classroom. When I seek help with teaching and reaching students, I tend to reach out to my fellow teachers first."

Another miscellaneous teacher perception was that summative teacher evaluation was not productive, with the implication that summative evaluation and formative assistance should be kept separate. One specific teacher comment was that the negative effects of summative evaluation were not worth the effort: "Evaluations put a ton of stress on teachers and I'm not sure they yield the results some 'higher-ups' think they do. They also take a ton of time." A different respondent described their disappointment with such evaluations: "I taught for many years in universities, and when I started teaching in an elementary school, I thought the evaluations would be interesting and helpful; however, they aren't." A third teacher argued that combining summative evaluation and formative assistance was both unproductive and dishonest: "Judgment is necessary for evaluative purposes but trying to mix evaluation (which is by definition

judgment) and supportive coaching is completely ineffective and seems disingenuous to teachers.”

Table 1

Respondent-Perceived Indicators of Presence and Absence of Positive Supervisor Qualities

Positive Supervisor Qualities	Indicators of Presence	Indicators of Absence
• Relational trust	• Supervisor support • Supervisor collaboration	• Unprofessional supervisor behavior
• Authenticity	• Awareness of teaching context • Responsive to teacher's needs	• Unmindful supervisor behavior
• Sharing of meaningful observation data and feedback	• Observation data and feedback relevant to teacher's interests and needs • Feedback is specific	• Observation too short • Observation instrument inappropriate for lesson • Feedback from different supervisors inconsistent
• Facilitation of teacher reflection	• Authentic reflection (based on teacher choice)	• Inauthentic reflection (based on supervisor choice)
• Content knowledge*	• Supervisor accurately discusses lesson content	• Supervisor avoids discussion of or inaccurately discusses lesson content
• Knowledge of generic teaching skills	• Supervisor displays instructional expertise • Supervisor has adequate teaching experience	• Supervisor fails to display instructional expertise • Supervisor lacks teaching experience or instructional skills are outdated

* Respondents were divided on whether content knowledge was an important supervisor quality.

A final miscellaneous respondent perception was that supervision systems mandated by the states were the underlying causes for some teachers not valuing the supervision they received. One teacher expressed the belief that state-mandated systems reflect deficit thinking: “I have been teaching 26 years, and this current system seems to set you up to fail.... Why have a system in place that doesn’t help you grow? Another respondent asserted, “This failure is a CHOICE that has been made by our legislature and allowed to continue by our districts, and it is inexcusable.... Our students are miserable and unmotivated due to increasingly scripted requirements put on teachers.” A third teacher suggested that state evaluation systems were antithetical to teacher *and* supervisor professionalism. “The supervisor will treat evaluating teachers professionally when we all are treated like professionals instead of data sets.”

Discussion

Respondents’ comments on the need for supervisor support and collaboration were consistent with the literature on relational trust (Anderson, 2012; Walsh, 2005). Teachers said they trusted teachers who respected them (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021), especially in regard to their professional autonomy. Respondents stated that to develop a trusting relationship with them a supervisor would need to focus on their professional needs (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021). Some teachers described reasons for low relational trust, including a supervisor’s lack of professionalism and failure to provide helpful observation data and conferral.

Regarding supervisor authenticity, respondents’ comments varied from the literature on authenticity, which tends to focus on personal qualities like understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses, being open and honest, encouraging and considering the opinions of others, setting high personal standards, and seeking feedback to improve (Bird et al., 2012; Elassy, 2023; Peus et al., 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Teachers’ descriptions of authentic supervisors were centered on two general themes: the supervisor being aware of the teaching context and being responsive to the teacher’s needs. Some respondents gave examples of inauthentic supervisors who practiced unmindful supervision either by routinizing the supervisory process or assuming negative dispositions toward their supervisory responsibilities and the teachers they supervised.

Teachers did not describe many of the specific suggestions for meaningful observation data called for in the literature on clinical supervision (Glickman et al., 2024; Gordon & McGhee, 2019; Sergiovanni et al., 2014; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013; Zepeda, 2017). However, respondents’ general comments were consistent with that literature. For example, teachers stated that observation data and feedback should be relevant to individual teacher interests and needs, specific, and goal-oriented. Negative perceptions shared by some respondents were that their supervisors’ observations were too short to gather meaningful observation data, the observation instrument used by the supervisor was inappropriate for the lesson observed, and feedback from different supervisors was inconsistent.

Teachers’ comments on supervisor facilitation of teacher reflection were strongly consistent with the literature on that topic (Grimmett & Crehen, 1990; Kim & Silver, 2016; McGhee & Stark, 2018). Respondents discussed the need for the supervisor to foster *authentic* teacher reflection by

engaging in dialogue with a teacher that assists the teacher in choosing their own improvement goal and strategies for working toward that goal. The teacher-perceived need for *supervisor* reflection during the post-observation conference also is consistent with the literature (Arikan, 2004; Grimmer & Creehan, 1990; McGhee & Stark, 2018).

Despite a consistent line of literature that a lack of content knowledge can lessen a supervisor's effectiveness (Ford & Lavigne, 2023; Lochmiller, 2016; Steele et al., 2015; Zepeda & Mayers, 2004) respondents were divided on whether they believed supervisor content knowledge was necessary. Those who did not believe supervisor content knowledge was vital prioritized other supervisor qualities such as knowledge of effective teaching strategies, developing a positive relationship with the teacher, and dialogic skills. Other teachers believed that a supervisor needs at least a basic understanding of the teacher's content area, and that a lack of content knowledge severely limited the supervisor's ability to assist them.

Respondents did not describe specific instructional skills described in the literature but did write about the need for supervisors to possess a general knowledge of pedagogical skills. Teachers made it clear they did not find supervisors who lacked knowledge of generic instructional skills to be credible or relatable. Respondents were especially critical of supervisors who had never been teachers or who had very little teaching experience. Also, the instructional skills of supervisors with teaching experience who had not taught for many years were viewed as out of date. One proposed way for a supervisor to update their knowledge of instructional skills was to teach lessons at different grade levels.

Miscellaneous comments by a few teachers were not directly related to the qualities of individual supervisors but shared a common theme that the supervision available to them was not helpful. One minority view was that teachers did not need a formal supervisor to assist them with their teaching. Another perception expressed by some respondents was that supervision attempting to combine summative evaluation with formative assistance was unproductive. A third view shared by some teachers was that it was not so much individual supervisors as state and district mandates that reduced the value of supervision.

Some general conclusions on teacher perceptions of supervisor qualities can be drawn from this study. First, respondents clearly valued five of the six supervisor qualities they discussed in their qualitative comments: relational trust, authenticity, sharing of meaningful observation data, facilitation of teacher reflection, and knowledge of generic teaching skills. Although teachers had differing perceptions on the value of supervisor content knowledge, given the strong negative views some respondents expressed about supervisors who lacked content knowledge, it seems unwise to dismiss the idea that supervisors need to possess such knowledge. Suggestions—found in both the literature and our survey responses—for professional development to improve supervisor content knowledge or for peer coaching to make up for a lack of supervisor knowledge in some content areas seem worthy of consideration.

Second, some of the teachers who said they valued a given quality also stated that quality was not present during post-observation conferences with their supervisor, indicating a need for the improvement of supervisor capacity in some schools and districts. Third, it appears that some obstacles to high-quality supervision may be the result of a system problem rather than simply a

problem with individual supervisor quality. For example, the frequent referral to standardized teacher evaluation forms and ratings used in classroom observations indicates that many of the post-observation conferences teachers referred to were either focused on summative evaluation or attempted to combine summative evaluation with formative assistance. A summative approach to supervision contradicts the focus on formative assistance that characterizes clinical supervision (Cogan, 1973; Glickman et al., 2024; Goldhammer, 1969; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013; Zepeda, 2017), a supervision model that calls for the supervisor to exhibit all the positive qualities explored in this study.

Recommendations

This exploratory study, in conjunction with existing literature, points to tentative recommendations both for leadership preparation and PK–12 practice. We provide these recommendations here, along with proposals for future research.

Recommendations for Leadership Preparation

It is clear from the qualitative data that most of the supervisors referred to were school administrators, which indicates a need for an emphasis on instructional supervision in administrator preparation programs. In recent years there has been an increasing number of graduate programs in instructional leadership and teacher leadership, and we recommend a strong emphasis on instructional supervision in those programs as well. All programs that prepare instructional supervisors need to focus on leadership qualities like relational trust and authenticity, skills for the facilitation of teacher reflection, and knowledge of generic teaching skills. We also recommend that preparation programs take Zepeda and Mayers' (2004) advice and assure that future leaders develop a broad understanding of the various content areas as outlined by associations focused on academic disciplines. Finally, providing teachers with helpful classroom observation data and feedback is a *sine qua non* of instructional supervision and thus learning to do so is a critical part of supervisor preparation.

Because the quality of supervisor performance in a post-observation conference is closely related to supervisor performance in a pre-observation conference and classroom observation, supervisor qualities needed for successful post-observation conferences are best developed within the framework of the clinical supervision cycle. Authentic clinical supervision is formative rather than summative; thus, the study of clinical supervision must make that distinction. Although a knowledge base on clinical supervision is essential, field-based practice in the clinical model, including pre-observation conferences, classroom observations, post-observation conferences, and post-process critiques also is critical.

Recommendations for Practice

We propose that the qualities of effective supervision developed in leadership preparation programs need to be reinforced and extended in professional development for practitioners. Another recommendation is for supervisors to separate formative instructional assistance from teacher evaluation. Summative evaluation in some form will always be necessary, so the key here is to clearly distinguish formative from summative and to find time to provide formative

assistance. More specifically, time needs to be provided for clinical supervision on a regular basis for all teachers.

In clinical supervision, the pre-observation conference is necessary for the supervisor to understand the teaching context, students, learning content, planned teaching strategies, and teacher's concerns or interests about the lesson. Adequate time must be spent in the observation to gather meaningful data. In the post-observation conference, the supervisor and teacher need to discuss and interpret the data, establish an improvement goal, and develop a plan for meeting that goal. And the post-process critique enables the supervisor to receive feedback to assess and improve their supervision. One way to provide adequate time for clinical supervision is for the school administrator to provide such supervision to a chosen number of teachers and to coordinate other teachers engaged in peer supervision, with those teachers implementing the clinical model. Peer supervision would be especially appropriate for subjects in which the school administrator does not have adequate content knowledge. Effective peer supervision will require teachers to be provided sufficient professional development in the clinical model and adequate time to conduct supervision cycles.

Clinical supervision, if properly conducted, can not only improve teaching but enhance the qualities of the effective supervisor discussed by this study's respondents, thus providing reciprocal positive effects. There are additional ways to improve supervisor quality. One way is for the supervisor to team teach lessons with teachers. Planning, teaching, and assessing the effectiveness of a lesson with a teacher provides the supervisor with opportunities to increase each of the qualities examined in this study. Active, side-by-side engagement with teachers in professional development on academic content and/or instructional skills is another path to improved supervisor quality. Also, inviting and reflecting upon feedback from teachers can provide the supervisor with improvement goals and strategies for enhancing the quality of their supervision.

Recommendations for Future Research

We recommend both quantitative and qualitative teacher surveys that compare teacher perceptions of their supervisors' qualities with teacher perceptions of the level of instructional improvement they have experienced as a result of post-observation conferences with their supervisor. We also recommend that supervisors be surveyed to explore their perceptions on the importance of each of the supervisor qualities the present study explored. Supervisors also can be asked to self-assess the level to which they possess each of those qualities, and which qualities they need support to increase.

Beyond survey research, both individual and group interviews with teachers and supervisors could add to the knowledge base on supervisor qualities displayed in the post-observation conference. Another interesting study would include teachers and supervisors interacting with each other on their perceptions of the need for and presence of specific supervisor qualities in post-observation conferences. Finally, we recommend case study research in which teachers and supervisors are observed throughout clinical cycles and then interviewed on the presence and importance of supervisor qualities as they review video recordings of pre-observation conferences, observed lessons, post-observation conferences, and post-process critiques. This

last type of study would include teacher and supervisor perceptions but go beyond perceptions to explore actual supervisor behaviors and teachers' real-time responses.

Conclusion

Scholars have described each of the leadership qualities addressed in this study in considerable detail, but this survey allowed teachers to relate these qualities to their supervisor's performance in the post-observation conference. Respondents discussed the degree to which their supervisor possessed the qualities, what specific behaviors indicated the presence or absence of those qualities, and suggestions for how supervisors could further develop such qualities. This exploratory study lays the groundwork for additional research on the importance of the various supervisor qualities and how supervisors can enhance the overall quality of the instructional assistance they provide to teachers.

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Author Biographies

Stephen P. Gordon is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Educational and Community Leadership at Texas State University. His areas of research and writing include educational supervision, professional development, action research, and school improvement. Steve's latest books are *Developing Successful Schools: A Holistic Approach* (2022) and *Supervision and Instructional Leadership: A Developmental Approach*, 11th Edition (2024), with Carl Glickman, Jovita Ross-Gordon, and Rachel Solis.

Noelle A. Paufler is an Associate Professor, Assistant Department Chair, and the Program Coordinator for the Doctor of Education in Education Systems Improvement Science at Clemson University. She is a Co-Director of the Leading Educational Administrator Development for Excellent Rural Schools (LEADERS) Center of Excellence. Her research interests include K-12

leadership development and systems improvement with a focus on preparing leaders to improve education systems in ways that positively impact high-needs school communities.

Mary Lynne Derrington, a former principal and superintendent, is an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. She is the coordinator of the EdD program in K–12 leadership. Her areas of research and writing include teacher evaluation, supervisory feedback, and the role of reflection. She is the recipient of the 2023 AERA Supervision & Instructional Leadership SIG Distinguished Research Award.