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ABSTRACT

Conflicts or disagreements between student teachers and university supervisors in the Extended Practicum program, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, are often attributed to factors such as "personality clash," laziness, stubbornness, authoritarianism, prejudice, stereotyping, dogmatism, or malice. In reality, many of these problems result from improper understanding or ineffective supervision of student teaching. One way to enhance supervision is to use a Contextual Supervisory (CS) approach. CS is a developmental process by which supervisors adjust their leadership approaches to match the demands of the specific situation. These contextual demands include such variables as the development level of the student teacher as well as the goals of the practicum program and the various conditions and constraints of the specific case. CS is founded on the principle that the Extended Practicum supervisor should match one of four general supervisory styles (directing, coaching, supporting, or delegating) with one of four basic developmental levels of student teachers for particular skills or tasks being practiced. This report applies the CS approach to a particular case study and demonstrates its usefulness as a conceptual tool for bridging the theory-practice gap. (LL)

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Abstract

Conflicts or disagreements between participants in the Extended Practicum program are often attributed to factors such as "personality clash," laziness, stubbornness, authoritarianism, prejudice, stereotyping, dogmatism, or malice. In reality, many of these problems result from improper understanding or ineffective supervision of student teaching situation.

One way to enhance supervision is to use a Contextual Supervisory (CS) approach. Contextual Supervision offers a clear conceptualization of the supervisor student-teacher relationship and provides strategic skills for supervisors in assisting future teachers to develop professionally. The goal of CS is for supervisors to adjust their style to match the development or maturity level of the teacher-intern within a particular context. The following describes the CS approach as applied to a particular case of study and demonstrates its usefulness as a conceptual tool for bridging the theory-practice gap.

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A Dilemma

How would you deal with the following situation if you were a faculty supervisor in the Extended Practicum program?

One evening, during your "itinerary circuit of visits" in the 16-week program, you receive a telephone call at your motel room. It is from Doug, one of the "teacher interns"* among the 27 pairs of interns and co-operating teachers with whom you are working. He states, "I've decided to pull out of the program . . .I've talked with my co-operating teacher and the principal, and everyone agrees that it's best if I quit."

From the perspective of the supervision process, why did Doug withdraw? Could or should his leaving have been prevented? Why or why not?

To help answer these questions, we will apply a Contextual Supervisor approach to reflect after the fact, on Doug's specific situation. This will:

1. provide a conceptual framework for understanding the overall supervisory relationship as it existed and
2. offer a guide to help resolve the dilemma.

The ultimate goal of the CS approach -- as with all supervision -- is to assist the student teacher to develop professional skills and attributes (University of Saskatchewan, 1991; Johnson, 1987; Ralph, 1988, 1990).

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*"Teacher intern," "student teacher," "intern," and "student of Extended Practicum" are synonymous terms.

Contextual Supervision

Contextual Supervision[1] is a developmental process by which supervisors adjust their leadership approaches to match the demands of the specific situation. These contextual demands include such variables as the "readiness" or development level of the teacher intern, as well as the goals of the practicum program and the various environmental conditions and constraints of the specific case. Contextual Supervision is founded on the principle that the Extended Practicum supervisor matches one of four general supervisory styles (varying combinations of both "task"--directing and guiding-- and "supportive"--relationship and collaborative--behaviours) with one of four basic development or readiness levels of teacher interns for particular skills or tasks being practised. (Figure 1).

The four supervisory approaches are:

S1 (Directing). The supervisor combines high-task and low-relationship behaviours to direct, tell, guide, and control the teacher intern's progress;

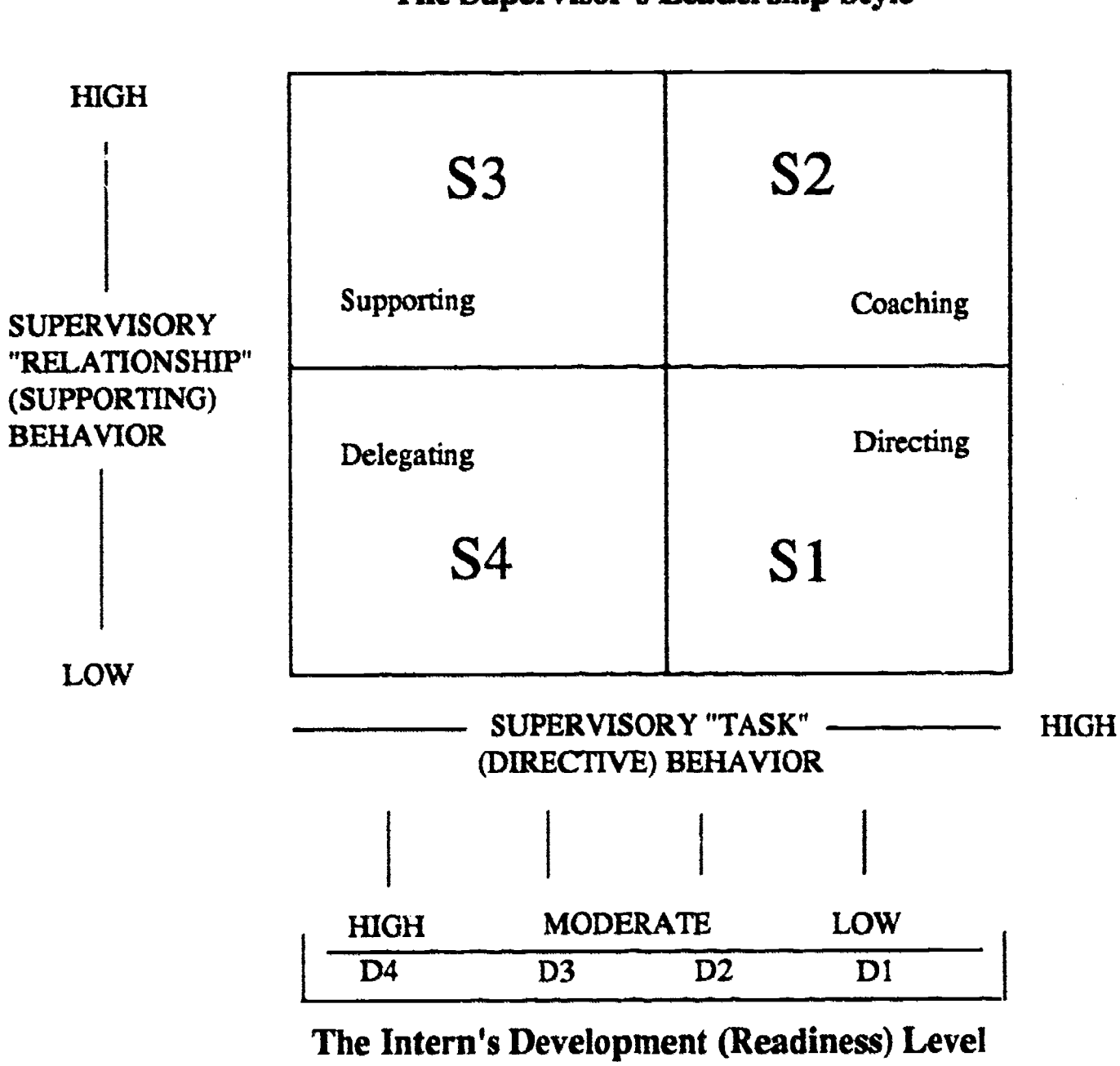
S2 (Coaching). The supervisor uses high-task and high-relationship actions, using more interpersonal interaction, sharing, and careful explanation than in S1;

S3 (Supporting). The supervisor uses a similar level of relationship behaviour as in S2 but reduces the amount of directive behaviour; and

S4 (Delegating). The supervisor combines low-task and low-relationship activities to enable the teacher intern to accept personal responsibility for performing the task in question.

The four general development levels of student teachers as they encounter specific teaching tasks consist of varying combinations of willingness (confidence,

Figure 1. Contextual Supervision (Adapted from Blanchard, Zigarmi & Zigarmi, 1987; Carew, Parisi-Carew & Blanchard; Glickman, 1990; Niehouse, 1988a; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988.)



The supervisor's leadership style (consisting of varying combinations of "task" and "human" elements) matches the intern's similarly numbered readiness level (consisting of varying degrees of task-specific competence and commitment). S1 goes with D1, S2 with D2, and so on.

motivation, commitment) and ability (competence, skill, experience) to perform these tasks. The four levels are:

D1. A low level of competence, with varying levels of confidence (ranging from enthusiastic to fearful);

D2. Low to moderate competence, with varying levels of confidence (ranging from eagerness to disillusionment);

D3. Moderate to high competence, with varying levels of willingness (fluctuating from reluctance or self-doubt to a moderate level of confidence); and

D4. High levels of both competence and confidence.

The CS approach is initiated by supervisors who synchronize, their leadership styles with the student teacher's development level (matching S1 with D1, S2 with D2, and so on), as shown in Figure 1. While this process is occurring, the Extended-Practicum supervisor is also sensitive to other environmental variables which may influence the supervisory relationship.

How does the CS model provide understanding and possible solutions in the case of Doug's dilemma?

Application of CS: Doug's Situation

The Case

Doug was placed at the high-school level of the K-12 school in a small town for his fall internship. His co-operating teacher, Mr. Larson, was also the assistant principal of the school and was not only experienced but respected by students, staff, and the community.

Doug was assigned to teach Grades 10 and 11 Social Studies and English with Mr. Larson and began in September with normal feelings of excitement and apprehension. However, at the first inservice, one week into the internship, Mr.

Larson was expressing some concerns.

What was the nature of those concerns?

Doug's Readiness Level D1.

Like the majority of interns entering the Extended Practicum, Doug began the year at the D1 level (lacking competence, but being moderately enthusiastic). Within a few days, however, Mr. Larson noted that Doug's confidence and competence did not advance. In fact, they seemed to regress -- especially in the Grades 10 and 11 Social Studies classes. Mr. Larson had first detected weaknesses the previous June, when Doug telephoned the school to find out the subjects and units he was to teach. Doug did not drive to the town to make personal contact with the staff, nor had he prepared for teaching over the summer, as many interns do.

Because of his lack of preparation and planning, Doug began his internship that September at a disadvantage--hurriedly trying to organize the teaching of several heavy-content subjects at once. Lack of adequate planning, both for units of work and for lessons, resulted in Doug presenting several unclear, uninteresting, and disorganized lessons [during the final few days], which in turn led to increased classroom management problems. This soon affected Doug's sense of confidence, security, and motivation. Consequently, his initial readiness level declined to a low D1 level (more insecurity and lack of competence).

Mr. Larson's Supervisory Style S4.

Mr. Larson's preferred style of supervision reflected his basic personality and values: he expected students, colleagues, and interns to know what to do--and do it! Anticipating in advance Doug's potential problems, Mr. Larson, during the first two days, had advised Doug, ". . . where the problem was and what to do about it . . . I told him two or three times--and he agreed; but he doesn't seem to know how to really change it . . . It's not too good." Mr. Larson was functioning from an S4 mode.

Moreover, he advised Doug, "I'm not going to do it for you." Mr. Larson's

attitude seemed to be "a word to the wise should be sufficient." He had also expected that Doug would have already possessed the basic teaching skills of planning, structuring, and presenting upon arrival at the school. When he realized that Doug did not possess these prerequisite abilities--compared to other interns with whom he had worked previously, he was "not prepared to teach him now what he should have learned before." In fact, in a subsequent letter to the University after Doug had withdrawn, Mr. Larson recommended:

> It should be mandatory that interns actually go out to meet with their supervising teachers prior to the start of the practicum. If this is not possible, it could also be a requirement that the intern have one unit plan ready on the first day . . . Closer screening of potential candidates might also be a consideration.

In September, Mr. Larson offered Doug some suggestions and encouragement (an S4 supervisory style), but tended not to be very directive (S1). Mr. Larson stated, "I will not interfere, take over, or bail him out." He believed that Doug would demonstrate the maturity and responsibility shown by other interns and teach, as was expected. However, Doug was simply not ready. In fact, Mr. Larson admitted that if Doug had been in a city high school, "it could have been a disaster." On two occasions before Doug withdrew from the internship, both Mr. Larson and the principal discussed with him his available options. Doug also stated, "I am just not prepared enough." Although the school administration felt that he could have possibly succeeded in the lower grades, all agreed that it would be in everyone's best interest for Doug to take advantage of the University's withdrawal procedures[2] and terminate the internship.

In terms of CS theory, Mr. Larson could have adjusted his leadership style from the S4 "delegating" mode (low-directive and low-supportive action) to the S1 "directing" mode (high-directive and low-interactive style. This would have provided Doug with specific and detailed procedures, structures, and tight supervision to match his declining D1 development level in lesson-unit planning, preparation, and presentation. Mr. Larson did not do this, however, but rather continued to operate from an S4 style, while Doug continued to struggle at the D1 level.

Discussion

The CS model helps solve our initial dilemma: The key problem was the mismatch of Mr. Larson's supervisory style (S4) with Doug's development or readiness level (D1) in instructional planning, presenting, and classroom management. Given adequate time, a co-operating teacher using an S1 style consistently no doubt would have helped Doug to develop his teaching skills so that his withdrawal could have been prevented. This was not to be the case, however, because of other contextual variables related to the question of whether Doug's withdrawal should have been prevented.

A major factor affecting Doug's case was that CS theory was not formally part of the Extended Practicum. Thus, Mr. Larson was not officially prepared to match his supervisory style to the teacher-intern's maturity level.

A second variable is related to the fact that teacher-interns are considered to be "guests" in schools and co-operating teachers volunteer the extra time and energy (without pay) to supervise interns. Because of these constraints, it is generally felt that requiring the co-operating teacher to devote even more effort, through implementing a sustained S1 approach with the teacher-intern, would simply be asking too much. Rather, student teachers who are too weak in their professional

skills are generally counselled out of the Extended Practicum program.

A third variable which influenced Doug's decision was the university policy allowing students to withdraw without penalty from the Extended Practicum and providing opportunity for them to repeat it the following year.[2]

A fourth factor is the ethical responsibility of the educational system to screen prospective candidates for admittance to the profession. Educators must balance their "gate-keeping" role with that of encouraging young people to enter teaching and assisting them in their professional development. On the one hand, teachers have a primary duty to ensure that their pupils' daily learning does not suffer from exposure to a weak student teacher. But on the other hand, they are expected to promote professionalism in prospective candidates in the field. Thus, another advantage of the CS model is that it sensitizes the supervisor to be on the alert for various contextual factors which may influence the practicum.

Two Further Examples

In addition to generating solutions for Doug's situation, supervisors of student teachers could also apply the CS model to seek effective resolutions to two other types of problems arising in the supervision of practicum students. For example:

Realizing that Aboriginal cultural tradition emphasizes respect for family and community ties, the co-operating teacher need not overreact negatively if an Aboriginal teacher intern arrives at school at 8:45 one Monday morning without having prepared assigned lessons. In one such case, the reason was that the intern had been hostess to a houseful of relatives who had come to the reserve for the funeral wake of an extended-family member. The intern had to fulfill her expected role to entertain the guests for the entire weekend. In this instance, the CS model would alert the supervisor to (a) the possible influence of such contextual factors

and (b) the moral obligation (of both the intern and the supervisor) of mutually respecting individual and cultural characteristics.

Realizing that development levels of interns can change and that supervisory style should be adapted to correspond to these changes, in another example, the co-operating teacher raised his initial S1 style (high task, low support) to an S2 style (low task, high support) to match his very capable intern. The intern progressed rapidly from a D1 (low competence, moderate confidence) to a D2 (moderate competence, moderate confidence) to a D3 level (high competence, moderate confidence) level. In this scenario, the use of the CS approach helped prevent the co-operating teacher from remaining fixed in an "overleading" (Niehouse, 1988b) mode, but instead guided him in the gradual reduction of his supervisory task orientation as the intern gained professional maturity.

Problems arising during the Extended Practicum can never be resolved by the application of a single leadership theory or approach. Supervisor need to analyze situations and develop appropriate solutions to problems encountered by teacher interns. The leadership style practiced by the supervisor needs to parallel the changing readiness level of the intern, and Contextual Supervision provides a valuable model.

Footnotes

1. The Contextual Supervision approach is based on the work of: Blanchard, 1991; Blanchard, Zigarmi & Zigarmi, 1987, 1985; Carew, Parisi-Carew & Blanchard, 1986; Caskey, 1988; Glickman, 1990; Glickman & Gordon, 1987; Gordon, 1990; Hersey, 1985; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; Niehouse, 1988a, 1988b; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988.

2. The University's provisions for early withdrawal from the internship include: (1) designation of a "W," not a "W/F" (withdrawal failure) on the student's transcript, (2) opportunity to take the internship a second time without failure or penalty, (3) withdrawal to be completed before the mid-point in the practicum, and (4) past statistics show that approximately 90 percent of repeaters of the internship are successful on their second attempt.

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