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Problems in Supervision

JOHN E. STOUT, PH. D.*

The purpose of this discussion is to state as clearly as may be some of the outstanding problems in the supervision of week-day religious education. Before proceeding to our main discussion it seems desirable to call attention to two things which render supervision very difficult.

The first difficulty arises out of the fact that people quite generally are not used to thinking of religious education in the same way in which they think of education of other kinds. They have come to understand, although they have reached this conclusion rather slowly, that administrative and supervisory functions in public education are extremely important. They are therefore willing to bear the expense of securing such supervision and to submit to the formulation of educational policies and the carrying out of these policies by persons employed for that purpose.

Let it be repeated that in the field of religious education we find a very different situation. In a number of cases with which the writer is familiar a considerable number of people have agreed reluctantly to the employment of persons for this purpose and rather grudgingly furnished the financial support necessary to secure and retain them. In cases where the public schools are coöperating, the influence of superintendents constitute a large factor in securing proper recognition of the necessity of systematic supervision. They understand with entire clearness that administrative and supervisory functions must be performed in any successful educational enterprise.

One other thing should be said by way of preliminary statement. This field of endeavor is so new that there is no semblance of standardization. We are not agreed even in any detail upon what we want these schools to accomplish. Much less is there any agreement upon means and methods of accomplishment. For this reason problems relating to supervision can be stated only in a general way and detailed statement must await further development. This situation, however, should not deter us from attempting to state as clearly as may be the supervisory problems inherent in any well conceived program of week-day religious education.

The following classification and analysis rests upon the assumption that there are certain fundamental principles which underlie all successful educational administration and supervision. For example, there are certain functions which supervision must perform, a few rather well defined methods and means of performing supervisory functions, and certain fundamental principles determining efficiency. It should be said here that we shall think of these problems as they have become clearly defined in connection with educational institutions already having considerable degree of standardization. In other words, the public schools furnish the best example by way of illustration at our command. Let us have a clear understanding at this point. No thought is entertained that a statement of principles as related to the public schools will serve as related to religious education without proper adaptation in their application. Adaptation will have to be made and can be made if we have people who on the one hand are familiar with the principles underlying all successful supervision, and on the other hand sufficient intelligence to apply these principles wisely.

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Within the brief time allotted for this discussion nothing more will be attempted than to indicate the nature of four outstanding supervisory problems.

1. *Determining the relations in which supervision should be exercised.* One of the important tasks of the supervisor is to discover the relations in which supervision is needed. He must discover potential needs and difficulties, and thereby prevent acute situations from arising. Conditions of disorder and dissatisfaction and inefficient teaching are prevented by anticipating their causes. In short, it is the problem of laying out his work—of defining his job. A few typical relations will be indicated.

(1) *Classroom work.* Poor classroom work means a poor school. The week-day school of religion is of course no exception to the rule. The recitation is the vital point of contact between teacher and pupil. Here is where lessons are assigned, instruction given, certain types of responses secured and methods of testing and drilling applied. A brief analysis of the classroom situation reveals the following:

a. Teachers need help in keeping their objectives constantly and clearly before them. Aims must not only be clearly defined, but they must be made constantly dynamic.

b. The selection and right use of methods and devices requires supervisory oversight. To be sure, teachers need inspiration, but they also need information, insight and guidance. At no other point are they in greater need than in the technique of teaching.

c. Teachers need guidance in the assignment of lessons. This is particularly true in the case of week-day schools. Much material is not organized into well defined lesson units. In some of it where such units are well defined they are not wisely defined. Constant readjustments are necessary with respect to amount of subject matter and its degree of difficulty. In this connection it need not be said that the way in which assignments are made determines in large measure success and failure in the preparation of lessons.

(2) *Social and recreational activities.* The program of religious education is coming to include more and more of these activities. This is as it should be. But in no other respect, perhaps, are children and youth in greater need of intelligent and sympathetic direction. This task cannot be left to individual teachers unaided. There must be a definite policy for the school as a whole and it must be wisely administered. Supervision is needed which will secure to the children the largest possible degree of freedom and initiative and at the same time provide the necessary sympathetic direction.

(3) *Physical conditions.* To provide suitable buildings and adequate equipment is not enough. Their proper use requires constant attention. In view of the fact that buildings are frequently unsuitable and equipment inadequate, supervisory attention is all the more necessary.

(4) *Determining the functions of supervision.* The inclusive function of supervision is to correlate and direct all the forces relied upon to attain the objectives for which the school is maintained. The problem of coördinating the work of the school with that of the home, the Sunday School and the public school in itself constitutes an important task. Plans for doing this will not work automatically. Some of the more specific functions will be indicated.

(2) *Determining the functions of supervision.* The inclusive function of supervision is to correlate and direct all the forces relied upon to attain the objectives for which the school is maintained. The problem of coördinating the work of the school with that of the home, the Sunday-school and the public school in itself constitutes an important task. Plans for doing this will not work automatically. Some of the most specific functions will be indicated.

(1) A school at its best requires not only that each teacher be successful in doing her particular work, but that all the teachers work together as a unit. This is another way of saying that education is a coöperative enterprise. To secure coöperation requires a directing mind capable of seeing the necessity of unity of effort and capable of securing it.

(2) In any coöperative effort proper stimulus is necessary to unity and regularity of effort. Teachers, like all other workers need this stimulus. To know that some competent sympathetic person is passing judgment upon our work for the sole purpose of making it more effective stimulates us to do our best unaided and to keep us up to a high level of efficiency. It is a source of great encouragement to have a part in a common endeavor where unified effort is accomplishing more than could possibly be accomplished if we were only one of a mere aggregation of workers. Supervision is the unifying force.

(3) One of the primary functions of supervision is to secure immediate and accurate diagnosis of difficulties. But this does not state the whole case. Lying back of this necessity for diagnosis is the need of clear recognition of difficulties. A knowledge that things are going wrong must precede diagnosis. Further than this, remedy must follow diagnosis.

(4) An important function of supervision is to secure proper testing of results. Standards must be intelligently determined and wisely applied. This constitutes one of the imperative needs in religious education. Intelligent supervision is essential to securing it.

(5) No statement of functions, however incomplete, should omit the training of teachers in service. The limits set for this discussion will not permit comment, except to say that intelligent supervision is the greatest single agency in the training of teachers.

3. *The selection and use of methods and devices.* The insistent question which the supervisor constantly faces is, *How can I direct all the forces of the school to the best advantage?* The means to be used are of course determined by the nature of the task of supervision itself. Stated negatively, let it be said that it can not be done by sitting in the office—it isn't a sitting job. The situation demands active participation.

(1) Direct, constant contact with the activities of the school is essential. Frequent visitation is therefore necessary. This of course consumes time, but to an efficient supervisor the only excuse that time has for existing is to be wisely consumed. Visitation offers opportunity for demonstration work, but this method has to be used wisely and even sparingly.

(2) Individual and group conferences are highly useful. They afford close range contact and give opportunity for securing mutual understandings. The former provide for the personal needs of teachers. The latter serve to broaden the outlook of teachers and secure unity in the work of the school.

(3) Teachers' meetings constitute one of the most effective means of supervision, if properly conceived and conducted. As distinguished from a conference, a teachers' meeting is more formal in the sense that a program is prepared in advance and carried out in accordance with a definite plan. The fact that teachers' meetings are proverbial time wasters does not alter the fact that they may be made one of the most effective agencies in supervision.

(4) Written suggestion and direction should be used more than is usually done. This method can in no case take the place of the other methods enumerated. It is, however, necessary to supplement them. Certain advantages are inherent in this method among which are that it saves the teachers' time, compels clear, explicit statements of suggestions and directions, and in written form they serve more or less as permanent guides.

4. *Formulation and application of sound principles of supervision.* In any successful attempt to state and solve the many problems involved in the supervision of a school, it must be recognized that certain principles are a fundamental necessity. They serve as the supervisor's chart and compass. The formulation and application of these constitute a problem of considerable magnitude. Here, as elsewhere, no attempt will be made at complete statement.

(1) Supervision must be systematic and consistent. A well defined supervisory policy must govern. Consistency in this relation is more than a jewel—it is a life saver. It establishes confidence and insures steadiness. Teachers and pupils know what to expect and what is expected of them.

(2) Criticism should be constructive. Teachers and pupils alike must learn what not to do and causes of failure must be pointed out. But their attention needs to be directed particularly to causes of success. The negative criticism not infrequently is interpreted as fault finding. The more one plays on an instrument out of tune the more discord is produced. The remedy is to tune up the instrument.

(3) Help should be given when and where it is most needed. Weak spots in a school are like weak links in a chain. And like a chain it is finally judged by its weakness. Strengthen the weak spots and do it now.

(4) Successful supervision allows the fullest possible measure of freedom and encourages initiative and originality. The personal factor is a most important consideration in an educational enterprise of any sort. Its purpose is to develop personality. In religious education this is particularly true. Supervision of teachers should result in an increased ability on their part to carry on their work unaided. They should become increasingly self-reliant and have an increasing sense of personal responsibility for the results of their teaching. The results should be the same for pupils. They should become increasingly responsible for regularity, punctuality and self-control. None of these results are possible unless both teachers and pupils are encouraged to achieve freedom in choice and execution through increasing ability, gained by practice in self-direction.

(5) Matters of routine should be mechanized. Habit saves time and energy, makes skill possible and leaves workers free to direct attention to things which require conscious effort. Uniform ways of doing things which profitably can be mechanized should be insisted upon and persisted in until habits are established.