

Supervision Encounters “That Are Not So Nice”: Experiences of Teachers in Guyana

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Abstract

Expected positive outcomes of teacher supervision in Guyana are not always achieved. This qualitative study explores forces that may be hindering desirable outcomes of supervision provided by Nursery Field Officers (NFOs) and is intended to be an attempt to improve practice. Through thematic analysis of interviews with 30 teachers, five critical areas of undesirable encounters were discovered. These encounters were framed as fault-finding, controlling and mechanically oriented, unproductive, emotionally unsettling, and disruptive. Caution about the danger of identification of pedagogical weaknesses in the absence of accompanying solutions and recommendations is flagged, and remedial strategies are identified. The findings reframe, reinforce, and complement existing knowledge about educational supervision, serve to chronicle Guyanese teachers' experiences with the supervision of NFOs, and might be informative to professional development programs that rely on supervision to sustain pedagogical growth. Program providers and other stakeholders might find the teachers' experiences a reference point to consider critical issues regarding the quality of and approach to supervision.

Keywords: Guyana, Nursery field officers, professional development, supervision

1. Introduction

Supervision of teachers in Guyana contributes to essential pedagogical growth. There is evidence of improved competencies of teachers in the type and quality of teacher-child engagements and methods used to discipline children (Semple-McBean, 2017; Semple-McBean & Creighton, 2018; Semple-McBean & Rodrigues, 2018). For example, Semple-McBean and Creighton (2018) found that teachers who experienced practicum supervision as part of an early childhood professional development program in Guyana continued to give high credit to the impact of that exposure on their interaction practice three years after graduating. One of those teachers thought that “almost all the effective strategies observed [by the researchers] were direct results of her tutor’s interventions, recommendations, and illustrations” (Semple-McBean & Creighton, 2018, p. 1227). The nature of positive associations between supervision and improved pedagogical practice in Guyana was further corroborated by practicum tutors in the professional development program (Semple-McBean, 2017).

Whereas desirable supervision outcomes have been explored and documented in Guyana, the undesirables are less known. Informal conversations with teachers suggest that some supervision programs in Guyana might not be producing the kinds of desirable outcomes they were designed to achieve. This claim was specifically associated with the supervision provided by Nursery Field Officers (NFOs). Research in Guyana appears to have yet to tap into the undesirables associated with professional development programs that rely on supervision. On the other hand, if there has been some recognition of undesirables, the opportunity to offer them in sufficient detail has been missed.

This very gap in research stimulated interest in this investigation. We thought that understanding the undesirables of supervision is needed if NFOs (and, by extension, supervisors of other programs) are to fulfill the mandate for which their position was created. An initial search of the archives did not produce evidence of documented or published research on the impact of NFOs in Guyana. The most recent evaluation of the Nursery program in Guyana (UNICEF, 2018) offers some insight into the NFOs' program. However, these are in generic

areas, such as the description of the NFOs' program, responsibilities, and training. The following, therefore, become topical to explore:

- what NFO practice looks like,
- the impact their practice might be having on teachers' professional growth and
- which elements of their practice are successful or need to be better?

Reporting on the overall nature and impact of the NFO program is undertaken by the second author. Only those elements of practice that need to be better are captured in this article. We have prioritized undesirable elements due to the absence of such data about supervision in Guyana and the need to provide evidence for guiding immediate remedial interventions.

1.1 Description of NFOs and the Program

UNICEF (2018) describes NFOs as teachers who have been dedicated field-level functionaries responsible for program monitoring, technical support, and professional development at the Nursery school level. The Nursery program is a free 2-year early childhood development service for all children attaining three years and three months at the start of the academic year (September). The Nursery program was introduced by the Government of Guyana in 1976. Before its introduction, a trained workforce was not required (Anderson & Sukhdeo, 2005); therefore, the NFO program commenced as a response to the low level of qualified staff who serviced the Nursery sector. For example, when the Nursery program was introduced, only four schools in Guyana were served by professionals trained in the "English Montessori and British Infant School tradition" (Taharally, 1988, p. 28). With the introduction of professional training, such as the bachelor's in early childhood education in 1992 at the University of Guyana, the qualification status of the workforce has improved. The most recent report on training indicates that in 2013, 68.5% attained trained-teacher status (Ministry of Education, 2013). Nonetheless, the NFO program remains a critical professional development component for all Nursery teachers.

Established principles govern the designation of NFOs. They must demonstrate "good" classroom and administrative competencies as determined by senior officials of the Ministry of Education. Possession of a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field, plus a minimum of eight years as a trained classroom teacher, is additionally prescribed. The NFOs also undergo 18 months of training. Training elements include approaches for promoting numeracy and literacy, using classroom observation and monitoring tools, and developing stimulating learning spaces (UNICEF, 2018). It is anticipated that the training sufficiently prepares NFOs to positively impact the professional development of teachers whose supervision they are responsible.

The NFOs' role is two-fold: (1) supervising and mentoring Nursery teachers in a particular geographical area and (2) providing teaching or leadership services to the schools where they are employed (Ministry of Education, 2018). Every month, each NFO supervises five teachers in their district. During supervision, NFOs are expected to select specific sessions for observations and operate as mentors by offering guidance and support about improving practices (if required) and providing recommendations, which are monitored during subsequent visits.

1.2 Justifying Investment in Supervision

In this study, supervision refers to overseeing, assessing, and guiding teachers' classroom practice to sustain and advance professional growth. Internationally, this type of supervision has correlated with positive outcomes for teachers and children's development (Brandon et al., 2018; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; Taylor et al., 2022). Additionally, supervision such as the kind offered by NFOs that incorporates elements of mentorship and coaching (demonstrations, dialogue, discussion, fair and consistent decision, questioning, reciprocity, reflection, respectful corrective feedback) attracts benefits for both supervisees and supervisors (Bell et al., 2022; Schwan et al., 2020; Semple-McBean & Creighton, 2018; Wold et al., 2023).

For example, in the USA, Schwan et al. (2020) recorded benefits for new teachers in improved instructional and interaction skills, resulting in better child outcomes, confidence building through collaboration with a professional confidant, and a sense of community. For the mentors, benefits include opportunities for self-reflection, avenues for collaboration on new pedagogical ideas, improved instruction, and fueling the desire to help others in the professional community. The more critically significant effect was the relation between the retention of new teachers and those who participated in the initiative. Compared to the average 41% of new teachers who leave teaching within five years, Schwan et al. (2020) reported that "Almost all (93%) of the new teachers who participated in their study remained in the same job in the second year" (p. 203). In a follow-up study of the same participants, the retention rate was recorded at 99% (Wold et al., 2023).

Although relationships between supervision and specific outcomes are not always easy to establish, as observed

by Perlman et al. (2020), the association remains strong (e.g., see the studies of Brandon et al., 2018; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008; Taylor et al., 2022). In a study in Canada, Brandon et al. (2018) found that supervision improves the quality of teaching and learning, and outcomes of supervision are much better when multiple pathways, approaches, and strategies for conducting supervision are available. In the Caribbean Region (Trinidad, for example), relationships have also been found between supervision and enhanced teaching and learning (Thomas-Hunte, 2014). Similar positive results in Guyana are documented in Semple-McBean's (2017) study of an early childhood professional development program.

At present, there is no known published report available on NFO's supervision practices in Guyana. However, not unlike Semple-McBean (2017), the observations of the authors here suggest that the supervision provided by NFOs assisted teachers in improving competencies when specific strategies are employed. Semple-McBean (2017) and Semple-McBean and Creighton (2018) discuss strategies that appear to be effective during supervision in Guyana. These include (1) tutor's interventions, demonstration, and illustrations, (2) questioning that stimulates thinking, (3) respectful corrective feedback, and (4) theatrical reflective-practice-focused engagements. The demonstration approach, referred to as "on-the-spot demonstration—spontaneous and relevant to the practice observed at the time of supervision," was identified by teachers in Guyana as the more significant factor in fostering positive supervision (Semple-McBean, 2017, p. 364).

The supervision strategies that seem compelling in Guyana have been recognized internationally. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Teacher Evaluation Framework (2009, p. 8) notes that effective processes involve "helping teachers learn about, reflect on, and improve their practice." The Centre for Teaching Excellence (2023, n.p.) stresses the need for "balancing of the feedback content"—providing feedback regarding strengths and opportunities for growth. Supervision that incorporates mentoring and coaching, and is grounded on the principles of "partnership," "collaboration," and "equitable relationship" has also been recognized as impactful (Bell et al., 2022, p. 287). In explaining how these principles work, Leeper et al. (2010, p. 21) state that supervisors "sometimes be the leader and sometimes be the follower—roles that shift as needs change and know[ing] when these shifts need to occur." With regard to the supervisee-teachers, Alila et al. (2016) emphasize the important attribute of adopting the role of a learner, which requires their dedication as life-long learners. See Taylor et al. (2022) for illustrated details about how these aspects collectively contributed to successful outcomes in teachers' professional growth and development.

A tailored, inclusive, and needs-based approach is also a requirement. In the USA, Kale and Selmer (2014) and Palandra (2010) found that revisiting supervision and professional development practices in the context of district-specific and school-contextualized needs significantly impacted the quality of instructional delivery. In highlighting the importance of paying attention to specific training needs, Macias (2017, p. 76) puts forward a "bottom-up model" that permits teachers to make decisions, select topics, and have a voice in the kinds of activities that they consider to be of importance to their professional growth. While Macias warns that the model should neither be considered prescriptive nor applicable to all programs aimed at improving practices, the crucial elements of such an approach were emphasized. It "allows [teachers] to engage in a neutral space and therefore authentically tackle issues" (Macias, 2017, p. 76). In other words, this approach offers a "... democratic ... sphere to encourage [teachers] to question, share ideas, and collaborate openly" with their supervisors (Macias, 2017, p. 85). Or, as described in the Finnish study by Alila et al. (2016, p. 303), such supervision approaches "serve as a kind of a learning laboratory in which [supervisees and supervisors] can reflect on the new practices with each other." Studies continue to show that when these elements form critical features of the supervision framework, many desirables have been reported (e.g., Schwan et al., 2020; Semple-McBean, 2017; Taylor et al., 2022).

1.3 Problematic Aspects of Supervision

While conducting supervision in Guyana, the authors recorded anecdotes by some teachers that indicate the NFOs' program might not be producing the projected desirable outcomes. The anecdotes suggested that some teachers view the supervision by NFOs as a "witch-hunt," an activity "that is not so nice," and a process that does not yield much benefit.

Observations about undesirables of educational supervision that share educational structures similar or comparable to Guyana's have been observed and recorded elsewhere. For example, in Lebanon, Nabhani et al. (2015) documented undesirables related to supervision from both teachers and supervisors: "Many teachers are supervised, so this is exhausting to supervisors (Supervisor)"; "Many observation tools need to be modified (Teacher)" (p. 124). Antonio's (2019) study about supervision practices in Papua New Guinea shows that some teachers there are also of the view that supervision practices could be problematic: "Supervisor comes once in a

term which is not good. I am not really motivated to work because no one is recognizing my time and effort in what I put in my work” (Antonio, 2019, p. 443). Additionally, there are indications that some teachers in Pakistan perceive supervision as synonymous with only record-keeping (Behlol & Parveen, 2013).

There are yet other dimensions of pitfalls. These involve such elements as target group mismatch and inadequate supervision framework. An example from Onchwari and Keengwe (2008) in the USA shows how the mismatch resulted in unappreciated investments: “Teachers who indicated the initiative was not helpful stated ... that the initiative provided content they already acquired from the literacy classes they had taken in college” (p. 23). Furthermore, there is a danger if specific elements of the supervision framework (e.g., modeling and demonstrations of good practices, questioning, sharing ideas, and collaborating) are absent. Such danger was documented by Darwin (2000) and Taylor et al. (2022). Darwin, in writing about strategies to improve workplace learning, explained why these essential elements of supervision and mentoring frameworks might not have been popular: “Perhaps the notion of mentoring as a co-learning, interdependent activity—which encourages authentic dialogue and power-sharing [...]—is too utopian” (Darwin, 2000, p. 208). Twenty-three years after Darwin’s writings, research shows that this unpopularity is still evident.

While the search of the literature did not produce negative feedback from teachers about supervision in Guyana, Thomas-Hunte’s (2014) study in Trinidad and Tobago (Guyana’s Caribbean neighboring country that shares cultural and educational practices based on their colonial past) records negative accounts: “I think our relationship ... is basically impersonal and intimidating. I would say it is more supervisor-centred ... instead of developing a relationship with us or looking at our teaching practices to mentor us ... to become better teachers” (pp. 56–57). These findings might explain why some Guyanese Nursery teachers perceived supervision by NFOs as unproductive.

Addressing the problems associated with supervision needs to be prioritized for at least three reasons: (1) filling the gap about the absence of such data in Guyana, (2) providing evidence for guiding remedial interventions, and (3) cautions about the significant negative effect on overall supervision processes. One of the latest studies on mentoring suggests that negative encounters might be a stronger predictor of outcomes: “Although positive mentoring is important for mentoring satisfaction, it did not account for the effect of more supportive team climates ... [therefore, the need exists for] mentoring programs, and teams to consider ways to reduce negative mentoring” (Robotham et al., 2022, p. 1377). Given that the supervision by NFOs includes the element of mentoring, Robotham et al. (2022) advice is applicable. Once insights into the weaknesses of supervision are identified, the strategies recognized above might offer some guidance on how improvements can be achieved.

2. Research Questions

The questions addressed in this report are:

- What elements of the supervision provided by NFOs cause teachers to perceive the exercise as undesirable/unproductive?
- How might the undesirables of NFOs supervision be improved?

3. Methodological Considerations

As established in the introduction to this article, “Something is known conceptually about the phenomenon, but not enough to house a theory.... [we have] an idea of the parts of the phenomenon that are not well understood and know where to look for these things” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 17). This study required interaction with specific participants who had knowledge and experience of the supervision practices of NFOs. This constituted position of the study made the qualitative descriptive approach suitable. This approach facilitates understanding the phenomenon of interest, situations, or issues as experienced, lived, or interpreted by the participants (Bulbulia et al., 2019). The teachers’ views about supervision as a “witch-hunt” and “not so nice” activity cited in the introduction to this paper give a sense of the kinds of stories to be uncovered. These initial views revealed that teachers’ stories could be rich and insightful, allowing for the discovery of their voices (Nicholson et al., 2001). Voices that could serve to catalog their experiences with the supervision of NFOs.

3.1 Data Source

The participating teachers were from the district where two authors supervised practicum in their professional roles. Geographically, the district is considered rural or non-city. The selection was based on the following criterion: teachers must have been supervised at least three times by NFOs. This criterion was decided upon because we believed the teachers should have experienced encounters with the NFOs on three or more occasions to begin forming a pattern in supervision. Two hundred and twenty-three teachers were employed in the 33 Nursery schools in the district. This number was narrowed to 30 teachers in 12 schools where the field

researchers conduct practicum supervision for convenience and financial purposes. In medium-to-large schools (five staff and more), a junior and a senior teacher who met the selection criteria and had the highest number of visits were selected. All who met the selection criteria in schools with four or fewer staff sizes participated.

Figure 1 shows that of the 30 teacher participants, thirteen (43%) had five years of teaching experience and above. Seventeen (57%) had four years of experience or less. In this study, the group with four or fewer years of experience is called “junior” teachers. Those with five or more years are considered “senior” teachers. Concerning their levels of qualification, the majority (n = 15) had level one teacher training qualifications. Level one qualifications include the certificate or associate degree obtained from the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE). The CPCE is Guyana’s teacher training college for students with a secondary school certificate. Eleven had level two qualifications (Bachelor of Education) obtained from the University of Guyana upon completion of level one qualifications. The remaining four were not yet trained; they were enrolled in the in-service teacher training program at the CPCE. All the teachers who participated were females. This reflects the gender distribution of the Nursery school workforce in Guyana.

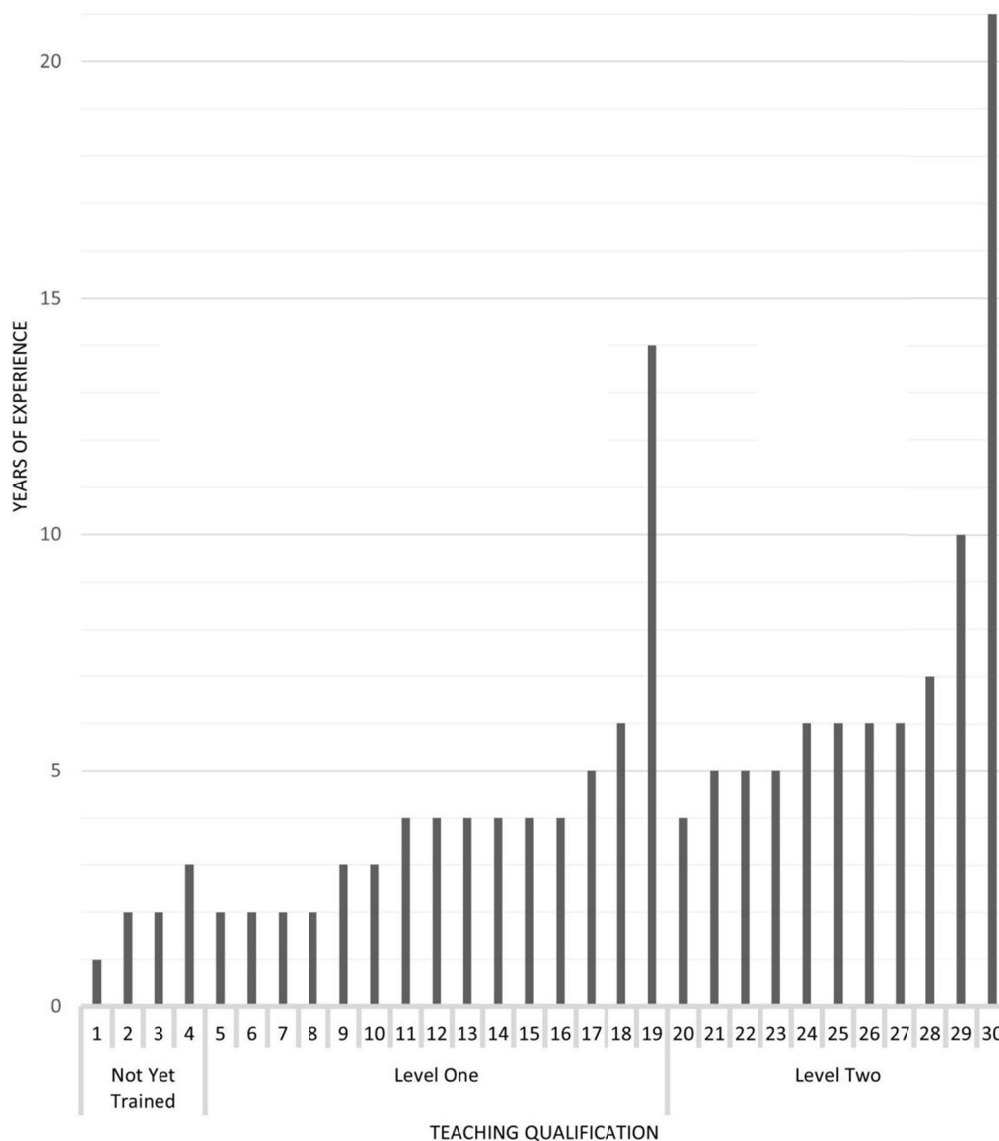


Figure 1. Experience and qualification of participants

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Protocols

We have already referred to the state of research and empirical data concerning the supervision conducted by NFOs in Guyana. No established baseline is available to explore. It was therefore considered appropriate to design semi-structured interviews to get a general overview of supervision practices. The data considered in this article takes only the deficit perspective by targeting problematic and unproductive supervision practices uncovered by the interviews. This decision to report early on the undesirable practices was made to provide the necessary evidence for implementing immediate remedial interventions. Another report about the overall impact of supervision by NFOs is forthcoming. That report includes an analysis of questionnaires that captured a more comprehensive account of the teachers' experiences, ranging from upbeat pedagogical delivery to classroom management and organization.

The first guiding statement for the interview that targeted undesirable practices was: "We are working to improve the supervision conducted by NFOs and would like you to share any information that you feel we need to know that could help improve the quality of supervision you are receiving." Based on the responses to the statement, follow-on questions were phrased around: "Can you think of occasions where you felt uncomfortable engaging with your NFO? If occasions were identified but not described, the teachers were encouraged to explain "why." For illustration purposes, the following is extracted from the transcript of the second researcher.

Researcher 2: ... It seems like your NFO has been helpful; you state that your science center is much more interesting ... and one point that stood out was how she helped you work better with the autistic child ... [In a jovial tone] Now for the hardest (most difficult) questions.

Teacher 19: [Chuckles] OK, I hope I can answer.

Researcher 2: I realized the program is helping to make you a better teacher, but there might be some things the NFOs can do much better. So, please share anything you feel your NFO might not be great at or where she could improve.

Teacher 19: [Paused for about seven seconds and in slower and a lower tone] Eh, yu really waan de truth (you really wish for the truth)?

Researcher 2: [Laughs] Oh yes.

Teacher 19: Um, where to start? [Paused for about four seconds] ... Once, she visited me while we were having a cook and game day in observance of Mashramani [a national festival celebrating Guyana becoming a Republic in 1970]. Would you believe that woman wanted me and Teacher X to take the children back to the class and teach so she could observe us? My Head Teacher had to plead with her to reschedule the visit for another day because the children were excited to cook outside. I am still puzzled by that situation. I was in total shock. I was thinking this is madness; how could I have taken the children away from the fun activity in the yard to do work inside? [Work refers to book-focused and other academic-related activities.]

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice on thematic analysis, analytical insights began early. Since the field researchers completed and transcribed the data, two sensitizing categories (fault-finding and controlling) were created through the patterns, trends, and commonalities observed after the transcription phase. The first author generated the remaining themes and re-coded them where applicable. For example, in the extracted transcript illustrated above, the first theme developed by the field researcher was "controlling." After reexamination, all authors agreed that the extract cuts across three significant themes and could be shared with "disruptive to special activities" and "emotionally unsettling." Each author scrutinized the data at least twice to eliminate any single author's misrepresentation or inadequate conceptualization of the themes. Where relevant, stories shared by the respondents during the interviews are placed as extracts to represent the themes generated. Stories that express similar ideas are not repeated.

The British Educational Research Association's (2018) ethical obligations were considered throughout the study. The authorizing body at the Ministry of Education approved the study. Considerations such as anonymity and confidentiality clauses were discussed before data collection began and discussed before each interview. Of particular importance was the consideration of the small population of Guyana and the district where the study was conducted. The most recent Population and Housing Census for Guyana (2012) recorded 747,884 people living in Guyana, of which 46,810 reside in the district where this study occurred. Therefore, participants' descriptions of the place of work or identifiable events/objects were scrutinized and expunged to prevent traceability. Some compelling extracts were excluded because removing or replacing traceable elements

distorted their meaning.

4. Findings and Discussion

The undesirable encounters are below in descending order from highest to lowest in the similarity of responses: (1) fault-finding; (2) controlling “fix it right”; (3) unproductive; (4) emotionally unsettling event; and (5) disruptive to planned/special activities. Table 1 summarizes the number of responses in each category.

Table 1. Distribution of reported undesirable encounters

Undesirable Encounters	Teaching Qualification			Years of Experience	
	Not Trained	Level One	Level Two	1–4	5+
Fault-finding	1	14	11	13	13
Controlling	2	6	9	9	8
Unproductive	1	5	9	5	10
Emotionally Unsettling	2	3	3	6	2
Disruptive	0	1	5	0	6

4.1 Fault-Finding Exercise

The view that supervision could sometimes be considered a fault-finding exercise that includes a process in which only weaknesses are identified was recorded as the most frequent undesirable encounter. Twenty-six (87%) teachers suggested this. Many teachers seemed to have been highly emotional when reporting on this issue. This conclusion was drawn from the tone of their voices and facial expressions. Noable, the four more junior teachers did not frame the experience as “fault-finding,” suggesting that this may not necessarily be perceived as unfavorable. Of the four teachers, three were enrolled at CPCE. The remaining teacher had just graduated from this program. Regarding the assignment of this category, a teacher with five years of experience and qualified at level one reported her dissatisfaction this way:

She [NFO] would be like “That’s not the right way to form letter “g” ..., you should know by now how to write your letters.... My NFO will find so many faults..., but what would usually upset me more is that when she finds faults, there is no solution. Instead of saying “this is not right, and that is not right”, why can’t she just show me how to do it.

It should be acknowledged that the “show me how to do it” might not always be possible, especially with demands on time for other tasks or burnout by supervisors. In Canada, Perlman et al. (2020, p. 517) suggested that directors’ “burnout” might have contributed to a low rate of modeling new lesson approaches versus the more frequent supervision practices such as observation and provision of information. However, such a strategy should not be overlooked. The study of Semple-McBean and Creighton (2018) in Guyana has shown the danger associated with identifying pedagogical weaknesses without accompanying solutions or recommendations. For example, Semple-McBean and Creighton (2018) found that tutors who encouraged teachers to restrict children’s Creole without offering specific strategies about teaching English as a second or an additional language negatively impacted children’s learning and language development.

To improve practice, three senior teachers (qualified at level two) expressed the view that the training content provided to NFOs should be revised to include topics such as “how to share disappointing news.” During the interviews, continuous training of NFOs was reported as a key to improving the quality of supervision the teachers received. The teacher, with ten years of experience and qualified at level two, maintained that she did not appreciate the action of her NFO that aimed principally at identifying weaknesses:

I know I [am] not perfect, but isn’t there any strength she [the NFO] can see? When she visits, I feel like all she identifies are weaknesses.... Some of the things she criticizes do not make much sense sometimes, such as, “How can I wear uniform when it is raining, and the tide is very high?” [At some schools, teachers dress in specific professional attire, even if traveling by a canoe.]

The comments offered by the teachers suggest that the conduct of NFOs is contrary to the OECD Teacher Evaluation Framework (2009, p. 8) about the improvement function of supervision: “helping teachers learn about, reflect on, and improve their practice.” The NFOs reported here are not yet offering the kind of feedback recommended by the Centre for Teaching Excellence (2023) regarding strengths and opportunities for growth—“actionable and tangible methods to enable the recipient to make necessary changes” (n.p). The principle of good supervision practice, “help teachers examine their teaching and grow their instructional toolkit to support student learning” (Bell et al., 2022, p. 287), is not yet a strong characteristic of the NFOs. The general tone in the

findings reported in this section suggests that the kind of feedback and support the teachers in Guyana seem to be in favor of was captured in the report by Taylor et al. (2022, p. 210): “They’ve (mentors/evaluators) been hands-on, very cooperative. They provide support by being there to listen and help find materials, activities, research articles, and sending different links to help with things you might be working on”.

4.2 Controlling “Fix It Right” Affair

Following fault-finding, more than half the teachers (n = 17) shared stories that convey supervision as controlling—a mechanically oriented process where the NFOs “fix it right” to their standards. When the responses in this category were disaggregated, nine were in the junior group. They explained that on many occasions, the guidance is directed to “telling them what they must do.” This group is concerned that even if they are doing “the things right,” NFOs ignore the teachers’ methods in favor of the NFOs’ approaches. One junior teacher who, in the year the research was conducted, graduated with a bachelor’s degree expressed dissatisfaction that might be interpreted as bullying:

I love to learn from others, but there are times when others must learn from us. My NFO wants us to learn only from her—“What she says to do, I must do.” There is no room for me to do things according to the ways that I have learned from UG [The University of Guyana]. She is like a bully and makes lots of commands: [e.g.,] “Remove chart ‘X’ ... place it near chart ‘W’ and name that area ‘J’ Corner”, without asking why I placed it that way.... To me, the power of being an NFO “fly to her head” [has gone to her head].

A junior teacher who lived within walking distance from her place of work, related her experience of the “fix it right” phenomenon this way:

My NFO is what I call a “miss fix-to-right”; everything must be done according to her way. Even when our District Education Officer visits and gives us good suggestions, she changes that.... One time, my NFO turned up very early to visit [before the teacher got to school]; well, when my Head Teacher called to tell me that she [NFO] was there, I just took off my clothes [official work attire] and stayed home.

The feelings expressed have been reported by others in the Caribbean (see, for example, the reports of Thomas-Hunte, 2014). Such models of supervision seemed to have had little or no significant positive outcome on enhancing Guyanese teachers’ competencies, or so it seemed to the teachers. It should be noted that teachers shared the belief that the supervision conducted by NFOs should be a process that is open to suggestions from both parties. The senior teachers, especially those trained at the bachelor’s level, shared views intended to suggest that they, too, may have some experience and skills to share with NFOs.

The anticipated quality of supervision expected by teachers in Guyana is described by Schwan et al. (2020), where mentors themselves explained how the collaboration worked: “I was inspired by my mentee.... Together we explored what worked, what didn’t, and used what we discovered to enhance our teaching” (p. 199). The experiences shared by this mentor exemplify that a “good NFO” should be able to “sometimes be the leader and sometimes be the follower—roles that shift as needs change and know[ing] when these shifts need to occur” (Leeper et al., 2010, p. 21). A “good NFO” embraces the principle of co-learning, “which encourages authentic dialogue and power-sharing” (Darwin, 2000, p. 208).

4.3 Unproductive Exercise

Half of the teachers (n = 15) suggested that they found the supervision of NFOs unproductive and minimally helpful. For this category, the seniors provided more responses (n = 10). A senior teacher (qualified at level two) offered justification for assigning the description of the exercise as “unproductive”:

First of all, my new NFO always turns up late. Then, she would sit at the table and observe the lesson, tick the forms, and sometimes make a few comments. And, soon after that [the NFO] would leave without even giving me other strategies.... The other NFOs I had were not like this; they were good at their job. Honestly, these days, I find this whole supervision business a big joke.

The observation about “ticking and checking boxes” for statistical and evaluative purposes is consistent with findings elsewhere (Behlol & Parveen, 2013; Thomas-Hunte, 2014). More detailed and illustrative guidance by NFOs might be needed during supervision sessions for teachers in Guyana to change their current perception of this aspect of practice. Guidance about supervision that is culturally relevant to the Guyanese context and that appears to have positive effects is described by Semple-McBean (2017) and Semple-McBean and Creighton (2018). In situations where supervision is seen as an “unproductive exercise,” two strategies described by Semple-McBean (2017) might be helpful: (1) reflective-practice-focused engagements through the dramatic lens and (2) on-the-spot demonstration. Schwan et al. (2020) show how reflective engagements benefited new

teachers: “Having her ... help guide me in reflecting ... I never would have seen or caught both good and bad to help make my instruction more effective” (pp. 195-196).

Another dimension for consideration of the activity as minuscule in offering help was its association with uncomfortable events. The most experienced teacher participant had this to say about her experience:

The situation is more uncomfortable than helpful ... my current NFO knows I am more capable than her. Even though I finished university a while ago, I still read a lot. Sometimes, I review the handouts and read some of my assignments to remind myself about some of the theories and so on [other issues related to teaching].

In situations where the NFOs might be at equal or lesser qualification or experience levels than the supervisee teachers, offering suggestions and recommendations to the teachers could become tricky. It seems that NFOs avoid situations where commendations ought to be given for fear of losing their “professional status” as NFOs. This implies that NFOs might need to (re)examine the level of tolerance they may need to possess for the impartial performance of their roles. Such tolerances were illustrated in the USA (see Schwan et al., 2020). Notwithstanding that the teachers involved in the study of Schwan et al. (2020) were new to the profession, the elements of openness and tolerance are adequate to illustrate the admired traits:

During this program I was forced to rethink many situations and theories.... I was able to take into consideration a viewpoint that was different than my own. This viewpoint opened my eyes to different ways that I could be doing things.... I also found that my new teacher had several ideas in which she shared that I absolutely loved. (Tale of a Mentor in Schwan et al., 2020, pp. 200–201)

The elements of openness and tolerance of supervisor might work even better if tailored to the teachers’ qualification and experience level, as explained by teachers in a coaching initiative that aimed to improve literacy in the USA: “Teachers who indicated the initiative was not helpful stated that the initiative was beneficial to teachers who had no specialized college education, suggesting future personalization of such initiatives to individual teacher needs” (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008, p. 23).

4.4 Emotionally Unsettling Event

A smaller number of teachers ($n = 8$) reported that supervision by NFOs is unsettling. Six junior teachers (1 qualified at level two; 2 undergoing in-service training; 3 qualified at level one) expressed the view that identification of faults in their performance is appreciated sometimes, but they experience feelings of hurt when they continue to get criticism after making great efforts to improve their practice. Often, too, as a junior teacher explains, the NFO’s continual modifications to decision-making upset: “She [NFO] said to do things one way before and is saying another now.” The teacher also experienced a ripple effect when her Head Teacher viewed feedback as unfavorable: “The Head Teacher gets irritated and increases my workload to satisfy the NFO.”

The teacher with 21 years of experience added an attitudinal characteristic leading to the emotionally unsettling process:

One of the NFOs who supervises my school does not know how to speak to teachers; her tone is rough, so the teachers [junior teachers] at my school cry sometimes because their feelings are hurt.... That cannot happen with me because she knows I would tell her point blank to watch her tone when speaking to me ... she knows which “tree to bark up” [which teachers she could address in that manner].

Teachers need NFOs to be gentler and motivating when giving suggestions and feedback. The pain experienced by teachers might be pacified if NFOs incorporate a culturally appropriate dramatic-based element in their practice. This strategy has been appreciated by teachers supervised for other programs and seems to have had long-lasting effects on teachers’ knowledge and skills (Semple-McBean & Creighton, 2018). Regarding consistency in decision-making and feedback, Robotham et al. (2022) argue that this is key for improving the mentor-mentee, or in the NFOs’ case, supervisor-supervisee climate and enhancing their relationship. If the supervision of NFOs continues to be fraught with tensions, the “sharing of professional insight, knowledge, and materials” (Leeper et al., 2010, p. 23) and the ultimate growth of teachers’ professional competencies might be compromised.

4.5 Disruptive to Planned/Special Activities

Six teachers shared views to suggest that NFOs operate like “secret agents,” turning up to monitor at unexpected and inappropriate times. This category was created from responses given by the seniors. Based on the common thread running through their responses, this concern was raised because of experiences of disruption to their schools’ special activities. The teachers seemed disappointed that NFOs would choose to conduct classroom

observation during particular activities. The senior teacher with 14 years of experience and qualified at level one reported an event at which such disruption occurred:

Once, she [the NFO] visited me while we were having a cook and game day in observance of Mashramani [a national festival celebrating Guyana becoming a Republic in 1970] ... My Head Teacher had to plead with her to reschedule the visit for another day because the children were excited to cook outside. I am still puzzled about that situation ... how could I have taken the children away from the fun activity in the yard to do work [book-focused and other academic-related activities] inside?

One concern about the vignette relating to the Mashramani activities is that the evaluative purpose of NFO supervision comes across as mechanical. Many of the competencies evaluated by NFOs could have been assessed in the open schoolyard “cook and game activities” if this NFO was flexible in thinking and approach. Competencies such as the type and quality of teacher-child engagements, strategies to support and manage children’s behavior, and approach to record-keeping could have been observed and assessed in the open schoolyard. Studies (e.g., Leeper et al., 2010) have reminded us that flexibility is critical to good supervision.

5. Conclusion

Negative implications are an anticipated aspect of teachers’ supervision. The overall purpose of this report was to establish the undesirables associated with the supervision provided by NFOs. Such shortfalls in supervision practices might be reduced if NFOs know the findings and systems for remedial interventions.

Undesirable practices of NFOs were identified by all groups of teachers, irrespective of their experiences and qualification levels. However, the junior teachers, especially those not yet trained, seem more concerned about the emotional burden and the controlling “fix it right” attitude of NFOs over issues such as disruption to planned activities or views that the exercise is unproductive. Notably, explanations and descriptions of the undesirables were offered more frequently by seniors, especially by those with qualifications at the bachelor’s degree level. There is also an indication that the NFOs are more critical of the practices of teachers trained at level one qualification, even when they have high years of experience.

The findings suggest the need to enhance identifiable areas in the supervisory process of NFOs. The application of continuous training was recommended by teachers who shared information about improving the quality of supervision they received. Workshops, seminars, and other training fora might have to be organized to update NFOs on conducting meaningful and engaging supervision. While the content of the NFOs training might be adequate, there seems to be some disconnect between its application to the classrooms and with teachers.

To mitigate the undesirable encounters, the following key points should be considered:

- Strengthening of the relationship between NFOs and teachers. The NFOs need to consider upgrading the relationship status to collegial rather than authoritarian.
- An open and cooperative approach between NFOs and teachers about the visitation schedule might reduce clashes with special events and reduce the tendency to describe the exercise as synonymous with “secret operations.”
- Examination or evaluation of the frequency of visits by NFOs to match teachers’ performance, ability, experience, and qualification levels could be an enhancement strategy. After all, the NFO program was introduced as a response to the low level of qualified staff who serviced the Nursery sector at its introduction. This is no longer the status quo of the workforce. The supervision process could allow for tailored and needs-based instead of a one-size-fits-all approach (Alila, 2016; Kale & Selmer, 2014; Macias, 2017; Palandra, 2010). Senior teachers, especially the holders of bachelor’s degree level qualifications, viewed this as a requirement.
- Modelling and demonstrations, in addition to feedback, might need attention, as explicitly stated by teachers. Identification of pedagogical weaknesses in the absence of modeling and demonstrations or accompanying solutions and recommendations seems to have impeded growth and encouraged vexatious relations between them and their NFOs.
- There is a sense that the supervision process of NFOs is mechanically oriented and might benefit from flexible and creative practices. Therefore, the selection criteria of NFOs might need (re)consideration for inclusion of abilities such as those put forward by Leeper et al. (2010) and Schwan et al. (2020). Abilities that encourage NFOs to “sometimes be the leader and sometimes be the follower—roles that shift as needs change and know[ing] when these shifts need to occur” (Leeper et al., 2010, p. 21).

This study demonstrates that irrespective of differences in cultural and education structure, the elements of

supervision favored by Guyanese teachers align with those at the regional and international levels that serve their systems well. Like universal languages such as play and childhood, there are elements of supervision that traverse international boundaries. Therefore, this study has served to reframe, reinforce, and complement existing and emerging knowledge about the characteristics and effects of undesirable practices of educational supervision.

6. Future Research

Given that this report was limited to the teachers' views, a further investigation that includes the voices of NFOs (and others involved in supervision in Guyana) might be necessary for the completeness of the story about undesirable encounters. Also, to draw more conclusive evidence, NFOs could be observed to see their supervision in action, and teachers' willingness to learn from and appreciate guidance and criticism by NFOs could be explored.

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Authors' contributions

The first and second authors designed the conceptual framework, the second and third authors collected the data, and all authors contributed to the analysis of the data. The first author wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and the other authors reviewed and extended the discussions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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