Responsiveness of student teachers to the supervision of associate teachers

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Everyone brings different experiences and perspectives to the classroom, and these perspectives and the many differing supervision practices and styles of associate teachers are important for preservice teachers in their developing teaching practice. A range of literature supports the importance and high stakes nature of that supervision. Within the context of preservice teacher education the importance of the practicum component for prospective teachers is well documented (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Mayer & Austin, 1999) and research studies such as (Dobbins, 1996) have shown that student teachers’ learning in the practicum is a complex business. One of the reasons it is complex is because the experience is different for each student in terms of their own learning and the supervision they receive.

Rationale

It is argued in this paper that different associate teachers’ supervision practices makes them more or less successful and student teachers more or less responsive to that supervision style in the practicum experience. In the wider field of literature it has been stated that the associate teacher has a responsibility to facilitate the effective learning of the student teacher in the practicum classroom. Mayer & Austin (1999) pointed out that helping student teachers to negotiate their own professional identities within a reflective and goal directed framework, is central to supervision practice. Therefore there is a need for positive, personal and professional relationships between the associate and student teacher, involving open and frank communication. It is a necessary prerequisite for a successful practicum that students have an associate teacher who is communicative, reflective and supportive and has clear beliefs and philosophies in regard to teaching and supervision. Learning to teach is an activity that depends upon social interactions, and for this reason associate teachers should supervise student teachers’ learning by being supportive of their acquisition of professional and practical skills. There is a clear link between a positive practicum experience and excellence in supervision (Beck & Kosnik, 2002) and it is important to identify those factors which make the greatest difference for student teachers.

Literature review

Much has been written and many studies completed about the role of the associate teacher and it is evident that they have a big responsibility in the supervision and mentoring of the student teacher. Not only should there be an open and frank relationship between the two but also a provision for student teachers to become more active and critical learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Pinder, 2003).
Active participation will help student teachers acquire the knowledge, thinking and behaviour associated with becoming a teacher and teach them the subtle and overt ways of acting like a teacher (Ovens, 2003). Turnbull (2002) stated that effective supervision begins with the development of common principles between the associate and student teacher from which a teaching philosophy can be derived. In relation to teaching, principles can be defined as the ethical guidelines for the philosophy and values that underpin practice. This means for student teachers they have to know how to interact with other adults including their associate teacher and other teachers at the school and work effectively with them asking for guidance and assistance where necessary and building up an effective teaching and learning relationship.

The role of the associate teacher has a number of inherent challenges. Associate teachers can be viewed by student teachers as instructional coaches who give physical and psychological space in their classroom to try out strategies while supporting student teachers with feedback, modelling and teaching materials (Fayne, 2007). Beck and Kosnik (2002) identified seven themes from interviews with student teachers about the supervision they said they required from associate teachers. These included emotional support, shared authority, collaborative planning, flexibility, feedback, modelling of effective practice and organizing challenging but manageable work loads. But equally the responsibility can be placed with the student teachers for the learning process to be successful. They need to be prepared to be open and responsive to suggestions, participate in discussions with associate teachers and reflect critically on their own progress (Ball, 2000).

One role of preservice education is to help student teachers develop and reflect on teaching skills so they can learn from these experiences. Learning from experience is an important teaching trait described by Schon (1983) as reflective practice. In order to observe quality teaching, student teachers need to be placed in an environment that encourages learning and where the associate teacher has clear supervision and mentoring practices. Hence associate teachers need to “think consciously about their role as teacher educators and engage in the same sort of self-study and critique of their own practice” (Zeichner & Gore, 1990, p.123). Most associate teachers involved in supervision are forced to bring their own practice under reflective analysis and find that this contributes to their own professional renewal (Blunden, 2000). For that reason then the supervisory relationship needs to be interactive, challenging and responsive so that individual student teachers’ learning differences, approaches and preferences can be accommodated within the supervisory relationship.

Student teachers are learners, and like the pupils they teach, they need knowledgeable others to help them on this journey. The knowledgeable others (associate teachers in this case) need to work with the student teacher helping them connect with prior learning experiences, reflect on them and interpret them (Hoben, 2006) and then use this knowledge to improve their teaching. In order for associate teachers to realize their own potential, they have to create significant learning experiences for future
teachers. They need to think about change in relation to empowering student teachers to want to learn, and being able to collaborate with associate teachers (McDonald, 2001) in the classroom. This argument aligns with the move over recent years from a teacher-student centred approach of associate teachers in student supervision to a more learner-dominated approach of inquiry and investigation. It has also led to a change from the associate teacher being the goal setter, problem solver and decision maker to the student teacher and associate teacher working in a collaborative, problem solving way with joint decision making and goal setting.

The focus of the research was to look at supervision practices and styles student teachers were more or less responsive to. Zimpher & Howey (1987) in their research delineate four types of teacher competence that should be addressed by supervisors: technical (skills), clinical (practical reasoning and problem solving), personal (intra and interpersonal abilities) and critical (recognition of social, ethical and moral issues). Each of these types of competence has a supervisory approach. The key to success is to know when to be prescriptive, interpretive or supportive - three types of supervisory behaviours (Zahorik, 1998). It is about getting the balance right.

The importance of supervision for student teachers cannot be underestimated, and processes that promote the involvement of student teachers in reflection and action are said to have the most successful outcomes (Gibbs, 1996). Price & Sellars (1985, p. 21) indicate that “excellent supervisors use basic principles of clinical supervision in that they are collegial, non-directive and supportive rather than coercive in style and seek to foster professional autonomy in students under their care” The skills of collaboration, reflection, feedback, and support are skills which result in more effective supervision practices by associate teachers and more responsiveness and active participation by student teachers.

Methodology
The current research involved a case study of six associate teachers working in collaboration with the Faculty of Education at The University of Auckland. These associate teachers had been identified as being effective in supervision by both student teachers and visiting lecturers. Three groups of six third-year students undertaking the last practicum volunteered to take part in semi-structured group interviews. Data were collected from associate teachers and student teachers by means of a semi-structured face-to-face audiotape interview. The interviews were transcribed by an independent person working outside the university. The questions asked related to interviewees articulating their own beliefs in relation to good practice in terms of being an associate teacher and in the supervision of student teachers. Other questions asked of associate teachers related to a model or style of supervision they might use and if they had changed this in any way in response to individual student teacher needs. Questions for student teachers were similar but they were also asked about the skills of supervision they preferred. Responses were analyzed and grouped into common sets of themes; for example, the importance of associate teachers as role models, personal pedagogy, reflection, feedback, communication
styles and relationships, personal professional qualities, self efficacy and successful associate teachers.

The study used interpretivism as a framework and approach to illuminate the importance of supervision in the professional growth and challenges for student teachers in their teaching practice. Denscombe (2007) wrote that case study is the examination of an instance in action: with a view to giving a more in-depth account of events, relationships and experiences which occur in an instance often in small scale research. Case study in these instances is not viewed as a standard methodological package: rather it is seen as a more eclectic approach to research and seeks to probe, observe and understand. Case study can thus, very usefully provide the data for reflection on detailed practice and its wider implications, in this case for supervision practices and associate teacher professional development.

Findings
The findings confirmed the importance of the role of the associate teacher in not only inducting the student teacher into the classroom and development of their teaching practice but also into the teaching profession. It was about the ‘bigger picture’. A number of associate teachers described this ‘bigger picture’ as the reality of day to day teaching. Associate teachers did this with student teachers by discussing professional matters, school management and community issues and they saw this as part of their supervision practice. A student teacher commented:

Before it was just about how to teach and now it seems to be more not just the actual teaching but all the other things that are involved in being a teacher. Like the meetings, talking to parents and all the assessment. (Student teacher)

A number of the associate teachers in the research commented that being an associate teacher is part of their professional responsibility. For them the dynamics of the interactions between themselves and student teachers was an important issue. This was evident also in the study where student teachers constantly indicated the importance of being able to “try things out” without worrying about repercussions. Associate teachers had to display certain attributes that would foster student teacher learning. As one associate teacher mentioned:

Just being a good listener, being approachable and friendly, being well organized and a good manager in your class as well, that’s what I think is an effective associate and supervisor. (Associate teacher)

In turn student teachers also talked about specific disposition qualities such as enthusiasm, flexibility, being supportive and approachable, and having a sense of humour as being characteristics of effective associates in supervision:

Having an enthusiastic, lively associate is wonderful- one who truly loves their job with a passion. It stands out in what they say, what they do and is so obvious. (Student teacher)

Two associate teachers commented that the response from the student teachers to their supervision was so rewarding. This is part of a reciprocal relationship which is so important.
I think supervision has changed since I started out as an associate. I think supervision now is about imparting your enjoyment to somebody else. I always look upon it as a two way process, because I always learn heaps from student teachers too. (Associate teacher)

Not only did student teachers appreciate an associate teacher who was supportive they also acknowledged that associate teachers had to have the necessary content knowledge to help them make sense of their experiences.

Associate teachers have to have content knowledge, because you’re trying to understand teaching and kids, and if associates don’t have the skills or experience to tell you what is happening, it makes a really huge gap. (Student teacher)

Associate teachers acknowledged that to assist student teachers in their learning they themselves had to be effective practitioners and role models for the students. They needed to know the skills of supervision.

It is so important for associate teachers to have the training in the required skills of supervision. They can’t be narrow in their approach. (Associate teacher)

Student teachers in the study expected the associate teachers to have read the practicum brief and been to a briefing meeting beforehand. These meetings were organized and run before practicum by lecturers at the schools or university, but it was not compulsory to attend. There were also courses available for associate teachers to attend on supervision and mentoring.

One of the main areas identified by both student teachers and associate teachers was the need for feedback. As one student teacher noted:

Student teachers love feedback both oral and written. We can go home and look at it and reflect on the feedback and when we’re planning we can refer back. (Student teacher)

This constructive, positive feedback and feed forward was appreciated by student teachers and was critical for the student teachers in their learning experiences and the supervision process.

It was evident from the findings that the associate teachers who were confident and competent in their own teaching and supervision style and had a high teacher efficacy were effective in supervising student teachers. They were credible role models and someone the student teacher could identify with and relate to. It was not only associate teachers talking about teaching but also modelling their practice and this assisted student teachers make sense of what they were seeing in a positive, constructive environment.
However two student teachers mentioned concerns about associate teachers who were directive in their supervision practice, and expected the student teachers to be “clones of themselves”

I felt at times it was watch me and then get up and do exactly that – there was no room for changing anything. (Student teacher)

In the current study, student teachers and associate teachers indicated that they dealt with and interpreted these difficulties in many ways. Some had success and saw the issues as a challenge. One commented-

Effective associates are ones who model their practice, are supportive of student teachers and attempt to reduce any anxieties we have about teaching and learning, and they are encouraging in their approach.
(Student teacher)

One student teacher in the current study mentioned another issue where it was felt that the associate teacher was being neglectful in their approach, through offering little guidance to them.

One associate I had, actually only allowed me to teach what she said I could teach. There was no collaboration and then I had to plan it all myself with no guidance. (Student teacher)

It could be said that such neglectful and directive styles are characterized by low student teacher satisfaction, and low communication between student and associate teacher. Students in the current study mentioned that, when presented with these styles, they had been afraid to take risks because there was little collegiality and support from the associate teacher and they were afraid of failing the practicum.

Both associate teachers and student teachers experienced a number of other issues and tensions. Associate teachers considered that student teachers should be prepared to assume some responsibility for their learning processes within the practicum by asking questions and for specific feedback related to their teaching. Likewise, student teachers considered associate teachers should be prepared to assume responsibility for their role in supervising and guiding student teachers into the professional role of teaching by giving them time for discussions and guidance.

In the current study associate teachers and student teachers indicated that the practices of excellent associate teachers in supervision included an ability to motivate student teachers and in most cases be motivated by them. This involved the teachers finding out about students teachers’ specific teaching needs, and discussing and critiquing their own perceptions about teaching practice. Student teachers mentioned that associate teachers need to be able to give regular feedback to student teachers, be supportive and reflective, and have a passion and enthusiasm for teaching. According to student teachers, this passion needed to be reflected in clear interpersonal skills of communication, being approachable and a good listener. The findings confirmed the importance of the supervision practices of the associate teacher and the way student teachers respond to that supervision. However it was clear from the findings that there
were a number of issues and tensions for both associate teachers and student teachers in the role of supervision.

**Discussion**

**Teacher efficacy and associate teachers in supervision**

The current study explored the responsiveness of student teachers to the supervision of associate teachers. The conceptual framework for this research is based on the premise that associate teachers who are more confident and competent in their teaching and have a higher teacher efficacy will be more effective in the role of supervising student teachers. Researchers in psychology and education have based their conceptions of teacher efficacy on the theoretical framework of self-efficacy developed by Bandura (1977).

Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief therefore is a basis of action (Bandura, 1997, p.3).

Poulou (2007) found that self-perceptions of teaching competence, personal characteristics, and motivation for teaching were important contributory factors to teaching efficacy. Because practicum involves an interpersonal and interactional process between student teacher and associate teacher, the teaching and learning that occurs are complementary concepts, and the activities of the student teacher and associate are therefore linked. In respect of student teachers it has been argued (Henson, 2001) that perceptions of efficacy may be more easily influenced during the formative years thus highlighting the significant role of the associate teacher in supervision. Associate teachers cannot instil feelings of teacher efficacy into student teachers but they may be able to assist student teachers strengthen their efficacy perceptions and teaching performance (Poulou, 2007). In the findings this was evident from a number of comments by both associate teachers and student teachers talking about the importance of role models, interpersonal skills, passion and enthusiasm.

Challenging student teachers can be difficult at times. One question is whether all associate teachers share a clear definition of challenge. Burgess & Butcher (1999) in their research on mentoring used challenge as a strategy for working dynamically with student teachers and were concerned with confronting their values, their previously constructed images of teaching and their understanding of the whole curriculum and subject knowledge. The purpose of challenge was then explicit – to move the student teacher forward in their learning to where they became more competent and confident. So at this point the role of the associate teacher is a vital one, if the student teacher is going to develop beyond a bare competence level. However the associate and student teacher relationship can also be a sensitive one and
at times may not withstand a more rigorous and challenging discourse as was shown in some of the comments by both associate teachers and student teachers.

Edwards & Collison (1995) commented that many associate teachers regard their role as complex and one that requires preparation and training, which in some cases may not occur because of lack of resources and time. There is also the fact that being a good classroom teacher does not always guarantee a teacher will be an effective mentor or associate teacher: What was evident in the findings was for associate teachers to be more successful in their supervision they need a set of skills which have to be learnt. This also includes a knowledge base which requires training (Sanders, 2000).

Personal pedagogy

The study revealed the importance of the teacher’s knowledge of subject matter and the skills necessary to apply that knowledge in the classroom and demonstrate them to student teachers. This links to what Shulman (1987) and Reagan (1993) highlight as the importance of associate teachers possessing a sound knowledge base that is clearly visible to student teachers. As was evident in the study, as student teachers gain experience they might begin to think differently about subject matter and in fact classroom practice may reshape their pedagogical content knowledge. Teacher education is characterized by concerns with quality and professionalism, and in order to achieve quality education there is a need for high quality teachers who have sound content and subject knowledge. The findings indicated it is essential that associate teachers are able to explain their pedagogy and practice to student teachers while at the same time being critical and reflective.

Role models

It was evident from all the comments in the study that the ability of the associate teachers to model excellent teaching practice and behaviour was extremely important. It inspires student teachers and the idea of having high standards and high expectations of children and achieving excellent outcomes is essential. As was evident in the study firstly the associate teacher needs to want to guide the student teacher professionally. Associate teachers should be talking about their own beliefs, and own thinking processes while at the same time encouraging student teachers to think more deeply about their own practice. Such a process, with the assistance of an associate teacher, helps student teachers understand and negotiate the process of socialisation, which is, as Zeichner and Gore (1990) commented, inherent in becoming a teacher. Martinez, Coombes & Rigano (2001, p.17) state practicum experiences should be where both associate and student teachers engage in a partnership with opportunities for “construction, reconstruction and renewal of the teaching profession”.

Reflection

It was generally recognized in the study that for student teachers to develop a critical awareness of their own practice the associate teachers needed to ensure that student teachers had opportunities to develop reflective practice. Klenowski (1998) suggested
that the process of reflection would encourage student teachers to be innovative and developmental in their teaching and learning, and that reflection practised within a supportive environment, encouraged them to take risks and be able to articulate on their actions. The importance of reflection is not for the associate teacher to demonstrate and explain how practice should be carried out, but for the student teacher to be given the opportunity for self-analysis and reflection. The focus is on how the associate teacher transfers that professional knowledge to the student teacher. This modelling focuses on scaffolding the learning and has the aim of self-reflection and building self-regulation (Schunk, 2001) which is an important part of the supervision practice.

Feedback

Regular, clear, constructive feedback from associate teachers was highlighted as essential in the supervision process as student teachers stated it helped them in their learning experiences. The feedback was given through formal, informal, formative, or summative methods. Feedback is, as Hinett (1998) suggested, not just looking backwards, but also about looking ahead to improve performance and learning. Associate teachers should be able to provide many experiences in teaching practice needed by student teachers to progress and develop with regular feedback given. It is often the continual communication between associate teacher and student teacher, and the constructive discussion and feedback that is needed for this to occur the student teachers commented.

From the feedback and discussion during the supervision process comes the goal setting. Goal setting and feedback are part of the core of self-management and the benefits of goal setting include the fact that it affects our choices and gives direction to what is needed (Latham & Locke, 2006). In fact it is important that during feedback in the supervision process between associate and student teacher, goals are set that are specific and challenging. It was clear from the study that linked together feedback and goal setting became a powerful catalyst for change.

Relationships

The importance of the relationship between associate and student teachers and staff in general at a school was shown to be vital and can only enhance the teaching and learning opportunities for all parties. It was commented that it needs to be positive, professional and collaborative involving open and frank communication. However the existence of a strong reciprocal relationship between associate teacher and student teacher is essential if constructive criticism be given and received more easily. Blunden (1994) commented that from a student teacher’s viewpoint, good supervisors should be friendly, approachable, and supportive and have pedagogic knowledge and advice to give.

Mayer and Austin (1999) suggested that an effective associate is not only committed to the teaching profession, but is an articulate upholder of that
profession. They go on to suggest the idea that the associate teacher is acting as a “gatekeeper to the profession” and that it is their role to build and maintain teaching as a high status profession. It is about showing a passion and love of teaching and being able to pass this on. All of these specific dispositional qualities were mentioned in the findings as very important. They relate to the guidance, mutual learning, and friendship between associate teachers and student teacher.

Conclusion
The importance of associate teachers as supervisors has been clearly identified in the research findings. Associate teachers’ views on teaching and learning, their curriculum and professional knowledge, and their interpersonal skills are vitally important for student teachers to experience. Observation of and working with successful associate teachers who effectively model excellent teaching, leads student teachers to innovation and development in their own teaching practice. Associate teachers are in a unique position because of their expertise and teaching knowledge to provide a powerful learning experience for student teachers through the supervision process.
References


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