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Supervision as Teaching Practice: Lessons from the Field to Enhance the Efficacy of the Supervision Triad

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Abstract

Practical field experiences are an important part of any teacher education program. Thus, the supervision provided student teachers while engaging in practicums is integral to their professional growth. In this case study research, the efficacy of supervision was investigated by exploring the experiences and perspectives of 33 student teachers and 17 university supervisors. The results highlight the importance of relationship building and the provision of specific, balanced, dialogic feedback to enhance professional learning. Above all, the findings demonstrate the importance of viewing supervision as an extension of one's teaching, requiring ongoing, critical reflection.

Keywords: teacher education; supervision; relationships; feedback; dialogic approach

Introduction

Literature in the field of teacher education emphasizes that practice teaching is important in the development of new teachers and that it is an influential experience in a teacher education program (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Zeichner, 2012). However, that influence can be variable often depending on the supervision provided by classroom teachers and university supervisors (Britzman, 2003; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010). This paper reports on the findings of a research project that aimed to explore the influence of supervision on practicum experiences and the professional growth of student teachers. The primary question addressed by the research was: How did the supervision dynamic influence the professional semester practicum experience?

Research Design/Methodology

A case study (Stake, 1995) approach was adopted so that specific attention could be paid to the depth and richness of the context in which university supervisors and student teachers experience practicum supervision. Data for the study was collected at a mid-sized teacher education program in western Canada during the Fall Term of 2016, with a total of 33 student teacher participants and 17 university supervisor participants. Data was collected over a five-week field experience practicum through reflective journal writing and semi-structured interviews. Student teacher and university supervisor participants completed five weekly reflective journals and individual exit interviews after the practicum experience had concluded.

The data collected from the interviews and reflective journals were analyzed for themes and patterns using the thematic network technique as a tool for identifying, reporting, and analyzing patterns within that data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to data analysis was used because “the thematic networks technique is a robust and highly sensitive tool for the systematization and presentation of qualitative analyses” (Attride-Stirling, 2001 p.1).

Results

The thematic analysis of data resulted in a number of themes being identified that influenced the experience of student teachers in the field and their opportunities for professional growth. This paper will focus on two of the themes that were prominent among many of the respondents and had an impact on the practicum experience: relationships matter and balanced, dialogic feedback facilitates professional growth.

Relationships Matter

Relationship building is generally recognized as an important aspect of a productive learning environment (Stengel, 2004). While it is most often applied to a classroom setting, the respondents in the study overwhelmingly articulated the significance of supervision as a relational endeavour to promote professional learning. Throughout this paper we use the term ‘relational’ to conceptualize the application of relational pedagogy to the realm of supervision (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). One important area that was influenced by the adoption of a relational approach was the communication between members of the supervision team. Establishing a relationship with students prior to the practicum facilitated easier communication. For example, Dale¹, a university supervisor, commented: “Communication ultimately happens better through established relationships than it would kind of as a cold delivery.” Alyssa, a student teacher, echoed the sentiment: “I think it made it easier ... I knew him before, so going into this I knew what he expected.” Understanding expectations also assisted with the process of receiving feedback. Isabella explained: “When you are receiving feedback, you know how to take it or how they mean it a little bit more.” Hence, developing a relationship enabled more precise communication to take place, thus minimizing interpretive discrepancies. This, in turn, inevitably contributed to enhancing the atmosphere of professional growth. Relationship building was not only important in enhancing the communicative process, but also enabled broader conversations about education to take place. Jacob stated: “I felt that we could really talk about not just how my teaching is going, but we could talk about the education system in general or issues,” For this student teacher, having a well-developed relationship with his supervisor enabled him to engage in conversations that enhanced his understanding about the profession.

Another aspect of supervision that was enhanced by a relational approach was in making students feel more comfortable making the transition from student to student-teacher. Engaging in field experiences is a time of transition in which students’ identity and personal assumptions/beliefs are challenged on an ongoing basis, making it a very stressful experience (Danyluk, 2013). Supervisors and student practitioners from our study commonly expressed the importance of developing strong bonds to reduce anxiety related to performance during the practicum. For example, Louise, a supervisor, commented: “*I think just the fact that I know them as students and as people makes it more relaxed, and they feel comfortable knowing the fact that their [supervisor] is somebody that they know already.*”

¹Self-selected pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

According to Louise, the comfort promoted through having established a relationship with students resulted in a smooth transition into the practicum: *“It facilitates an ease of moving into that practicum, which is already fairly stressful.”* This notion was also supported by a number of student teachers. Alyssa commented: *“I feel since my [supervisor] was also my seminar instructor, I feel that we have built a good relationship... I feel as though he knows me quite well and so when I was teaching the lesson, I was not as nervous.”* Reduced anxiety as a result of relationship building was attributed by Alyssa as leading to improved performance, while for other students a strong relationship with their supervisor provided them with confidence. For example, Phoebe articulated: *“Knowing that I have people to support me, makes a difference and gives me confidence.”* Phoebe further articulated that the relationship with their supervisor encouraged risk-taking: *“[The supervisor] gave me a safe place where I could see what works best for me and for my students – even if this meant that some of my lessons might have flopped.”* Hence, a relational approach allowed students to *“take risks and challenge their comfort zone”* as articulated by a supervisor named Wilbur.

In addition to supporting affective dimensions of the practicum, relationship building also contributed to improved teaching during the practicum. One benefit of having already established a strong relationship was that it facilitated productive professional growth immediately. Leo, a supervisor, commented: *“I think that an established relationship really expedites the process of getting down to what needs to be worked on.”* Rather than having to establish a rapport with students prior to engaging in meaningful professional discussion, Leo felt developing a relationship prior to the practicum enabled a deeper level of dialogue about professional practices early on. Relationships also facilitated adaptations to be made in the supervision approach adopted. In commenting on the feedback provided after a particularly difficult lesson, Phoebe stated: *“[My supervisor] would often call me a perfectionist and say that I was my own worst critic. So, he didn’t really emphasize it [my struggles] more because he knew I would give myself grief.”* In this example, familiarity with the student enabled the supervisor to adjust his approach so as not to overly discourage the student, thus creating a positive learning environment.

Balanced, Dialogic Feedback Facilitates Professional Growth

In addition to establishing professional relationships with students, another area where supervisors can have an important influence on the practical experience of students is in the feedback provided. In contrast to most educational settings, field experiences are very unique in that the supervisor typically has limited opportunity to engage in explicit instruction prior to the student completing practical tasks. On the contrary, field experiences typically follow extensive instruction at the university so that the application of the concepts learned does not occur until a substantial amount of time has lapsed. Hence, one of the primary means through which university supervisors influence professional development is the response provided to performance, as it can address the gap between what is understood (the current state of practice) and what is aimed to be understood (the desired practice) and, therefore, has an instructional quality. Thus, carefully crafted feedback provides an ideal opportunity for supervisors to support the professional development of students.

One of the key characteristics of feedback to foster growth is the specificity of the information provided. For a number of the students in our study, the absence of detailed feedback undermined the potential for growth during the practicum. For example, Phoebe commented: *“I desire to grow in my teaching abilities but if my feedback is consistent with ‘you are doing well’ then I do not know if I have been equipped to grow.”* The generic nature of the feedback provided, thus, did not provide clues to

facilitate professional development. For other students, the lack of specificity was manifested in the absence of judgment statements as part of the feedback. Blanche explicated that meaningful feedback was not received, but rather *“just a recap of what I did.”* Blanche further explained: *“I had hoped for more criticism and room for improvement, however, all [my supervisor’s] notes were simply watching what I was doing instead of commenting on what I was doing.”* Therefore, the absence of guiding statements undermined the ability of the student to identify gaps in practice that could be addressed.

Another characteristic of effective feedback is that it includes a balance between the identification of positive characteristics of performance and areas for growth. Birkenmaier and Timm (2003) labeled areas of growth as “growth edges” and defined the concept as “areas just beyond current abilities where growth could most easily occur” (p.13). Therefore, the identification and utilization of growth edges as the basis for feedback was deemed essential to stretch students’ abilities to new levels. However, equally important was the provision of positive comments to balance the feedback. The absence of a balanced approach can adversely affect the emotional state of students and their relationship with the supervisor. One student, Bijan, relayed: *“My [supervisor] made me feel as though I was not doing anything right... She would continuously focus on one thing I would do wrong in a lesson and not really comment on things I did right.”* Rather than instilling a sense of hope for future progress and empowering the student to improve practice, the feedback had a demoralizing effect. Similarly, Ally felt personally compromised by the feedback received from their field-based instructor. In commenting on the feedback received, Ally stated: *“It’s a new perspective that could help me become a better teacher, but I also felt a little attacked. There were few positives when she gave me her review, she never told me the lesson was crap, but I felt that that is how she saw it.”* Although Ally recognized the value of the feedback in promoting growth, the absence of affirming comments detracted from the positive character of the feedback and led to a generally negative perception of performance. This affirms Birkenmaier and Timm’s (2003) assertion that “an imbalance in either direction [positive or negative] has the potential to prevent change, as the receiver of feedback can discount either the growth edges or the positive feedback provided as unimportant in light of the large amount of contrasting feedback provided” (p.13). Based on the findings of our study, an imbalance can also inhibit change by diminishing trust in the supervisor and promoting a defensive disposition among students.

Balance in the feedback provided also needs to be struck between a focus on contextual and holistic information. Participants in the study strongly articulated that university supervisors and mentor teachers have different strengths in the type of feedback they can provide. A university supervisor, Pepper, exclaimed: *“I personally believe that my students get more from their teacher associates than they do from me. I also believe they respect their [mentor teachers’] comments and feedback more.”* This sentiment was grounded in the fact that mentor teachers have intimate knowledge about the school context, enabling them to provide feedback that could support students’ immediate performance in the classroom. While feedback on performance in a particular setting is important in the teacher induction process, so is support that helps student teachers reflect on larger educational concerns and make connections between theory and practice. This is where university supervisors’ feedback can be important. In commenting on the feedback provided to the students, Louise stated: *“I am not challenging what they are doing as much as I am challenging them to look at their teaching and to see how they can continue to grow as a teacher.”* Similarly, Hermione commented on their role in promoting praxis: *“Hopefully, I have been that bridge between theory and practice for them.”* Thus, for feedback to foster professional growth, it needs to focus on performance in the specific setting as well as more holistic growth as an educator.

A final characteristic of feedback that promoted professional growth was an interactive, dialogic approach. Jane commented that the approach adopted by the supervisor helped Jane to flesh out the reasoning for practices adopted. Jane explicated: "Most conversations with my [supervisor] were more discussion based and not just a list of do's and don'ts... I was very appreciative that my [supervisor] was able to turn these sorts of things into open discussions rather than a direct 'yes' or 'no' about it." For Jane, the dialogic approach adopted by the supervisor legitimized Jane's knowledge and led to mutual exploration of ways to improve practice. This provided a much more productive avenue to investigate professional practices than passively listening to a list of suggestions. The dialogic approach also helped students to consciously analyze their practices. Alyssa reported that the supervisor "pointed out some other things I had been doing that I was aware of, but questioned me on the reasoning behind them. The feedback he was giving me helped me realize that I need to question myself." Therefore, a dialogic approach helped Alyssa to be more cognizant about the foundations supporting their practices. This supports the assertion in Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (2006) that "one does not learn through experience, but through reflection on experience and through interaction with others" (p.1025). The deeper learning fostered through this approach was apparent to Duncan, a university supervisor: "It's the probes and the thought-provoking ideas that I jot down... That kind of thing dropped in can kind of spark their thinking, their reflective thinking on the lesson." Duncan did not view his role as simply providing technical support, but rather encouraging reflection to help students identify "why they are doing, what they are doing."

Conclusion

Historically, the supervision of teachers began with lay committees periodically inspecting schools to ensure that instructional standards were being maintained. As the size of schools expanded beyond the one classroom schoolhouse, the role of supervising teacher performance was assigned to a more senior teacher within the school, known as the 'principal teacher' (later to be shortened to 'principal') (Acheson & Gall, 1997). Although supervision has evolved, the evaluative, directive, hierarchical practices associated with this early form of supervision continue to influence the support provided novice teachers. Ironically, the data from this study suggests that such traditional practices need to be critically analyzed, as university supervisors and student teachers articulated the effectiveness of dialogic engagement, relationship building, and specific, balanced feedback in promoting professional growth. This further suggests that supervision be viewed as an extension of teaching, requiring ongoing critical praxis to ensure high quality teacher education is taking place during all facets of programs.

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