

Assessment in the early childhood practicum: A triadic process

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The classical model for supervision in practice is known as clinical supervision (Acheson & Gall, 1992; Stones, 1984; Turney et al., 1982). There are five stages in this model. These include a pre-observation conference regarding student-selected goals, observation of the student teacher working with children, reflection on the observed lesson by the supervisor and student teacher, and a post-observation conference and analysis of the observed practice. Although the model is entitled clinical supervision, it appears to include the notion of assessment as well. The model describes a one-to-one interaction between supervisor and student. It does not encompass the reality of three key people being involved in the supervision and assessment of the student teacher's work during the practicum. The three main participants are the associate teacher, the visiting lecturer, and the student teacher.

Smyth (1991), from a critical perspective, viewed the model as a source of potential "hegemony and exploitation" (p. 32). He advanced a notion of "collaborative learners" (p. 83) as a model for supervision in practice. This was in opposition to what he perceived as an opportunity for an authoritative expert to impose standards of desirable teaching on the learner.

In this paper, supervision and assessment in the practicum is presented as a triadic process with the student teacher supported to be an active agent in the process. The paper is informed by a qualitative case study research into some of the Auckland College Education (ACE) Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (BEd (Tchg)) early childhood student teachers' perspectives of their initial practicum (Turnbull, 1997). First, I present a brief critical review of the literature on supervision and assessment in the practicum. Second, emerging from some critical reflection on prior practicum procedures, a triadic supervision and assessment model underpinned by adult learning theory is described. Third, I report briefly on the research findings about the use of the oral and written triadic assessment model during the initial practicum of the ACE BEd (Tchg) early childhood student teachers. In conclusion, I argue that through processes such as the triadic assessment process student teachers need not live with

“compliance and conformity” (McGee, Oliver & Carstensen 1994). Rather, they have opportunity to be active agents in the discourse of their practicum.

Supervision and assessment: Perspectives from the literature

As might have been predicted by Smyth (1991), the effects of power within the supervision relationship is a dominant issue emerging from the research into the supervision and assessment of student teachers during the practicum (Clyde & McNaughton, 1993; Cooper, Lang & Schon, 1994; Edwards & MacNaughton, 1991; McGee et al., 1994; Snook 1992). The power dynamic is also raised by Curtin (1995) when, from the position of student teacher, she stated, “the interaction between student teacher and teacher is caught in a dichotomy of ‘novice’ and ‘expert’ often with little regard to collaborative practice” (p. 1). Lack of collegial or collaborative practice is a theme explored by Cameron and Wilson (1993). In addition, Fleet and Clyde (1993) considered that the student teacher is an adult learner who would, in due course, be a colleague in the field. Based on that premise, they urged that collegiality, openness, and mutual respect should mark the relationship between the student teacher and the associate teacher.

Nevertheless, the notion of collegial practice between the associate teacher and the student teacher is problematic. Colleagues in the field might engage in self and peer feedback on their practice. If mutual trust has been established this process could be collaborative and collegial. However, the student teacher, visiting lecturer, and the associate teacher are not peers. A hierarchy of roles exists. Both the associate teacher and the visiting lecturer, by virtue of their knowledge and experience, are in positions of power in relation to the student teacher. As well, power operates through their positions. The visiting lecturer, as agent of the accrediting institution, applies her professional judgement in assessing the student teacher’s practice. The associate teacher, a professional in the field, does likewise. In relation to the student teacher, they function in an ambiguity of role, that of guide, mentor, and assessor.

A key issue in the supervision processes reported in the Australian literature was that the associate teacher had the greatest influence in the assessment of the student teacher’s work. In some instances she or he allocated a grade to the student teacher’s performance. Thus, the potential for the associate teacher to dictate the path of the

practicum was privileged by the fact that she or he determined the student teacher's achievement at the conclusion of the practicum.

Defining the issues in assessment of the practicum in teacher education is a focus of a number of studies (Edwards & MacNaughton, 1991; Healy & Bradbeer, 1995; MacNaughton, 1991; Sudzina & Knowles, 1993). Sudzina and Knowles (1993) concluded that student teacher failure could be reduced to a "mismatch of models among the key players and contexts" (p. 260). However, they did not offer a model for matching the key players and contexts.

Gibbs (1995) proposed a model for assessment suggesting the need for an assessor other than the triadic participants. I argue that assessing the student teacher's work during the practicum is a complex, social process that calls for not only written evidence, but also the professional judgement of those involved (Gonczy, 1993). To engage an independent assessor could negate the social process and question the professional judgement of the key players. On the other hand, Blunden (1995) stated that the assessment of the practicum required a qualitative approach based on individual and group interviews with carefully structured discussion and open questions to provide a "gestalt" view (p. 35). I concur with Blunden's notion of a gestalt or holistic perspective and see this occurring through supervision as an on-going opportunity for the formative aspects of assessment culminating in a triadic oral and written assessment process.

A change in perspective

With the development of the ACE BEd (Tchg) it was timely to critically reflect on our supervision and assessment processes in the practicum. We considered that we had moved some way to improve our communication processes with regard to supervisory practices. However, although we wished the student teachers to articulate the theory that underpinned their practice and to reflect critically upon their practice we did not give them a voice in the assessment of their practice. The associate teacher and the visiting lecturer determined the summative assessment. Subsequently, as a result of reflecting critically on those assessment practices, the triadic supervision and assessment was set in place.

The key players

In the early childhood practicum at ACE, the main actors or key players in the practicum are the student teacher, the visiting lecturer and the associate teacher. Within the philosophy of the BEd (Tchg) the student teacher is acknowledged as an adult learner who is expected to be self-directing in the development of their learning teaching process. Practicum is a mandatory requirement of the degree programme and currently all student teachers undertake 21 weeks of practicum. All ACE academic staff are required to supervise and assess student teachers' work during the practicum. In this role they are known as the visiting lecturer. The associate teacher is a teacher in an early childhood centre. Preferably she is a registered teacher. However, although all kindergarten associate teachers are registered teachers, this is not so in some childcare centres.

The triadic supervision processes

In seeking to balance the issues of power in the practicum and engage in collaborative practice, the practicum processes are as open as possible. We wished to avoid the student teacher having to live with "compliance and conformity" (McGee et al., 1994, p. 14). However, it is easy to replace one "regime of truth" (Gore, 1993, p. 134) with another. The very act of instituting new processes involves a regime of truth. Nevertheless, a number of processes for the supervision of the practicum have been put in place with the view to giving more voice and power to the student teacher. It is envisaged that the processes will provide opportunity for the student teacher to build upon existing knowledge and make sense of new knowledge.

The practicum supervision processes include several procedures or responsibilities for each of the key participants. The *student teacher* receives the Practicum Brief at the beginning of the semester. This is to provide focus on the link between the practicum and the BEd (Tchg) Modules. Prior to the practicum there is a mass briefing with the Head of Practicum for the early childhood sector (HOP ECTE) followed by meeting with the relevant visiting lecturer. The student teacher is expected to meet the associate teacher, the other staff and the children prior to the placement. This meeting allows for general introduction to the socio-political context of the practicum. There is opportunity for further discussion with the visiting lecturer and associate teacher during the first supervisory visit by the visiting lecturer. Apart from daily oral

feedback the student teacher receives weekly written feedback from the associate teacher. This feedback is considered as formative assessment for the student teacher. Although first year student teachers go on placement in pairs for mutual support and critique, second and third year student teachers have individual placements.

The *associate teacher* receives the Practicum Brief prior to the practicum and is invited to attend a practicum briefing meeting with the HOP ECTE. The purpose of the meeting is to clarify learning outcomes, performance criteria, and other practicum requirements and processes. Further opportunity for clarification occurs at the supervisory visit with the visiting lecturer. The associate teacher is expected to be supportive to the student teacher, to facilitate reflective practice by engaging in serious dialogue about teaching and learning, and to give weekly written feedback as formative assessment.

The *visiting lecturer* receives the Practicum Brief at the beginning of the semester in order to be informed about the practicum. She is expected to attend a visiting lecturer briefing with the HOP ECTE to clarify the learning outcomes and performance criteria in order to establish as consistent an approach as possible. She briefs the student teacher prior to placement and clarifies any issues and concerns. There is further opportunity to clarify practicum procedures and learning outcomes with the student teacher and the associate teacher at the practicum site during the first supervisory visit. The visiting lecturer is responsible for facilitating the reflective oral triadic assessment process at the conclusion of her second visit to the practicum site. She is expected to be supportive to the student teacher.

As a support to the above supervisory processes, ACE offers a Higher Diploma in Teaching paper, *Supervision in Practice ECE*, to all associate teachers and visiting lecturers. This course examines the roles of the student teacher, the associate teacher, and the visiting lecturer; critically appraises issues in giving and receiving feedback; and analyses the political, philosophical, and psychological dimensions in supervision and assessment of the practicum.

The triadic assessment process

During the week one supervisory visit, the visiting lecturer arranges a subsequent formal observation visit. The summative assessment takes place after that

observation. At this time, the student teacher, associate teacher and visiting lecturer engage in an oral reflective process. The student teacher begins the oral process by reflecting on how she perceives that she has met the learning outcomes. She then reviews her practicum and explores how she might have done things differently, and why. The visiting lecturer and the associate teacher follow the same pattern.

The oral process was adapted from Heron's (1991) model of self and peer feedback. Each member of the group has an opportunity to speak without interruption from the other members. It is acknowledged that the associate teacher and visiting lecturer are not peers of the student teacher. Nevertheless, if the model is followed, the process enables the student teacher, the visiting lecturer, and the associate teacher to engage in a reflective process based in Smyth's (1989) paradigm. The oral reflection allows the student teacher a voice, and an opportunity to articulate her practice. In addition, the process affords the student teacher an occasion to develop competence in assessing her work (Gipps, 1994; Barker, 1995).

Following on from the oral process each participant presents her or his written assessment and the visiting lecturer facilitates discussion to achieve consensus. Decisions must relate directly to the performance criteria and be supported by evidence. Evidence from the student teacher includes a Practicum File containing all documentation and a written self-assessment report with specific examples as evidence. The associate teacher writes weekly reports on student teacher progress and a written summative report based on daily observation and interactions as well as evidence from the student teacher's Practicum File. The visiting lecturer's written assessment report is based on her interactions with the student teacher, her observation of the student teacher's work and her analysis of the student teacher's Practicum File.

Issues of validity and the triadic assessment

Gonzci (1993), in discussing performance assessment suggested that it is the "process of gathering data by systematic means for making decisions about an individual" (p. 25). He went on to state that, "informed professional judgement will play an integral part" and that, "the reliability and validity need not suffer as a result" (pp. 28, 29).

The following processes also facilitate validity in the triadic assessment. All participants work with the same Practicum Brief, which documents the same learning

outcomes and performance criteria, specific to each practicum. All student teachers, associate teachers and visiting lecturers are briefed by the HOP ECTE. Triangulation processes support validity, too. These include observation of the student teacher's practice by the associate teacher and visiting lecturer, reflective interviews between associate teacher and student teacher as well as among all three, and evidence of achievement against the learning outcomes documented by all three participants. Their consensual result is accepted by ACE, the accrediting institution, and their professional integrity is protected by a visible audit trail.

As the process of supervision and assessment of the student teacher's work in the practicum is a purposeful sample, immediate generalisability is impossible. However, in attending to the particular, generalisability will become evident (Merriam, 1988). In other words, in order to gain the BEd (Tchg) degree the student teacher will, over a period of three years, engage in a number of practicums within different learning environments and with different associate teachers and visiting lecturers.

To grade or not to grade?

The practicum development team deliberated whether or not to grade the practicum. Should high quality practice be rewarded with high grades? This was considered to be an important issue. We noted evidence from Mahmood (1996) to suggest that some student teachers put every effort into their practicum while other student teachers view it as a time to engage minimally. Other studies illustrated that grading increased stress for student teachers during the practicum (Cameron & Wilson, 1993; Healy & Bradbeer, 1995). After internal debate it was decided that the practicum would not be graded but that this decision would be reviewed at a later date.

The summative assessment shows *learning outcomes achieved* or *learning outcomes not achieved*. The quality of practice is indicated by the assessment terms *consistently*, meaning "unchanging, reliable, regular, steady" (not necessarily 100%); *often*, meaning "many times, frequently"; and *sometimes*, meaning "occasionally" (Chambers Dictionary, 1994). To attain *learning outcomes achieved* student teachers must achieve *often* for each of the learning outcomes. For student teachers who achieve less than *often* for each of the learning outcomes, areas to be developed are identified and opportunity for redemption may be given during: (i) the remaining time on the practicum module or; (ii) additional time for the practicum module as

negotiated through the HOP ECTE, in consultation with the student teacher, visiting lecturer and associate teacher, or; (iii) a full resit of the practicum module as scheduled through the HOP ECTE.

All assessment reports are placed on the student teacher's practicum file in the ECTE practicum office at College. If they are completed on the day of the visiting lecturer's visit, she will collect them and bring them to College. Otherwise, they may be posted or given to the student teacher to return to College. Based on continued consistency of practice, confirmation of the final result is made on the final day of the scheduled practicum.

Student teacher perspectives of the triadic assessment process

In this section of the paper I present glimpses of research findings about the ACE BEd (Tchg) early childhood student teachers' perspectives of the triadic assessment as experienced during their initial practicum. The interviewees comprised ten student teachers. They were from groups X, Y, and Z. Their ages ranged from eighteen to mid-forties. They were Pakeha New Zealanders from various European backgrounds, Māori, Pasifika, and Asian student teachers. Although all the student teachers were female, the pseudonyms that they chose included male gendered names.

I begin with their perceptions of the observation process. For some student teachers, the process of being observed appeared to be welcomed as an opportunity to affirm the skills they had developed. The following comments by Jane and Bob are examples:

Jane: I ended up doing it (an experience in movement that she had planned with the help of her associate teacher) when the visiting lecturer came to see me. And I was really pleased with it.

Bob: The observation itself was fine. My visiting lecturer was there for half the day, seeing both of us. And she would sit with us, for most of the time. But she wasn't dominating, and it made it easy for us to carry on as normal. And the oral was great actually. I think because it was so positive, it made it very easy to do it.

Another student teacher, Isabella Rosellini, appeared to be pragmatic about the process of the observation visit. Although she felt the power of the "gaze" of the observer she realised that the observer could not be too remote from the situation. Gaze is a term used by the French philosopher Foucault who describes surveillance as, "at root the gaze of one in power upon one who is less powerful, the subject of the gaze" (Foucault cited in Shumway, 1989, p. 129). Isabella Rosellini appeared, also, to appreciate the observer's apparently supportive stance:

Isabella Rosellini: I understood that in order for X (the visiting lecturer) to capture my own and children's conversations she had to be reasonably close. The feeling of being under a magnifying glass comes to mind. (I believe this feeling subsides with learning and experience). I appreciated her input during the observation, supporting me by assisting me with scaffolding a child's language acquisition.

In contrast, the process of being observed proved traumatic for Angus:

Angus: It was horrible! It was horrible! Like you knew she was coming. You just didn't want to go in. And I wasn't feeling that well that day either. So we went in and she did it. Just like she was two metres away all the time. I went, 'Help! Help! She'll be noticing every single word I make'. And there wasn't many children that day so I had to keep them all close to me. Otherwise there wouldn't be anything to do. So like I was always carrying them round and stuff because I didn't want them to run off and leave me. I wasn't really conscious of what I was doing. I was only conscious of her being there, rather than conscious of me being there.

With regard to the oral triadic process, nine out of the ten student teachers appeared to appreciate the process. The following are some of the student teachers' perspectives:

Jane: It was great to have such clear feedback both from my own perspective and from two other perspectives. It was amazing. The visiting lecturer had a special interest in X area and she was able to point out things. She went through my observations and told me things that were really useful.

Grant: *Because I had found the rest of the course difficult so far, it was quite nice to have things, good things, said about me. It was quite a boost.*

Lei Si: *I'm very nervous about it but when X (the visiting lecturer) came she was so kind and everything was okay. The associate teacher she tell me good things about my work that I had not even thought about. They were very supportive and gave me good feedback.*

Bob: *I really liked, I liked the triadic assessment. I liked the way it works. And, and I felt very comfortable with the whole observation day, the way it was all so open. I felt that nothing was kept from us. It was, 'Oh, but Bob you did very well'. I really liked that. Which made me feel more like an equal rather than a student. And that made me feel that I had equal input. I thought the practicum itself was really positive. I felt it was arranged in a way that we were encouraged to succeed.*

Sue: *I've found that specially at the triadic, they were very positive in their feedback. And I really liked the way that she (the visiting lecturer) talked to me the whole time. There was nothing at all like any sort of criticism, which was really good because I felt like it was a bit of a vulnerable, it was a new place and I probably wouldn't have handled too much criticism actually. But it was really nice, you know, the way things were said was really very positive. It was really interesting to hear their feedback. It felt very supportive actually, it didn't feel threatening. The oral talking felt really very supportive.*

Isabella Rosellini: *I found the process initially made me feel quite anxious, then turned into a rewarding experience. I felt the briefing with the visiting lecturer prior to the practicum, essential. The fact that I talked to my visiting lecturer in depth about issues, concerns, details gave me greater confidence when being observed. When I queried the process of the triadic assessment X (the visiting lecturer) suggested that I did not have to take a technician approach which I*

believed was the format. The actual triadic assessment was great. Relaxed and comfortable. A feeling of elation and achievement when we closed.

Erana: And it was really good, because I felt like, I wasn't just a student. But I was a student with a voice. And that was the important thing. It wasn't just danced around me, but I was part of it. So I felt that that was really good. That was a bonus to the practicum, having that triadic. Because you could voice your opinion and say, 'You know, I think I did really well. Even if they didn't. At least they could hear how you felt and you weren't just being basically dictated to. You had the opportunity to say, 'Do you think that was justified?' And yeh, I think that was a bonus.

But not everyone felt like Erana:

*Angus: I've always been incredibly independent. So I don't like being told what to do. And that was hard, like sitting there and listening to a set of comments about me. The triadic assessment didn't seem like it was triadic. It just felt like it was like, she was the main boss, the visiting lecturer. Because ahm, I, me and my associate teacher had signed, **constantly** and then **often**. And then the VL had **often** and **sometimes**. So that was like, it didn't seem to me any sort of like, 'Oh why do you think that was often? Why do **you** think that was often? Why do you think that was sometimes? It was like, 'Oh you've failed. You better, you have to do this, and this, and this, to ahm, like pass, by Friday. And I'll ring on Friday and see if you've done this. So that was like, it really came down to that she was the boss. And it didn't really feel like I had any say in it.*

Only two student teachers mentioned the written process. Koreka commented that in order to meet the lecturer's time frame, she felt pressurised to write her self-assessment report. Also, Angus complained that the visiting lecturer did not facilitate opportunity to discuss the triadic perspectives of the written reports.

Concluding perspectives of the triadic assessment process

It seems that, when the oral review was carried out in the intended manner, the student teachers appreciated the opportunity to have a voice and to receive supportive feedback. And yet, according to Wajnryb (1996), no judgement can be made on the genuineness of feedback. She suggested that, "people generally seek to avoid unpleasantness and confrontation. Thus, the fact that the event is achieved without breakdown is not testimony to its robustness" (Wajnryb, 1996, p. 138). It would appear that this is an area that needs further research.

Nevertheless, underpinned by Edwards and Brunton's (1993) notion of teachers as active agents in the discourse of education, I would theorise the student teachers as active agents in the discourse of their practicum. It could be said that due to the higher status of the associate teacher, the student teachers experienced some limitation in their political capacity and moral choice. On the other hand, through engaging in the language and practice of the practicum, through dialogue with the relevant personnel during the practicum, through engaging in reflection on their practice, and through having a voice in the assessment process, the student teachers apparently did not live with compliance and conformity. Rather, they were active agents. I suggest that the triadic supervision and assessment processes supported this perspective of student teachers as active agents in the discourse of their practicum.

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