EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BLENDED SUPERVISION MODEL: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT TEACHERS LEARNING TO TEACH IN HIGH SCHOOLS OF ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The main idea behind this research work was to come up with a model of students’ supervision that emancipates the student teacher and simultaneously makes the student feel that he/she has a chance given to him to learn how to teach. The study was premised on making the students work collaboratively with the mentor, fellow students, college/university tutors using the “blended model”.

The model was tried through a cyclical pre-lesson discussion, observations during the lesson and discussions after the lesson. The method used to operationalize this model was not a straight jacket since the researchers could start from any point in the cycle. It was found out that the blended model to teaching and learning instills self-confidence in the teacher. It urges the student to try out own theories about learning and teaching. The blended model can be adopted as an alternative approach to supervision.

Introduction

It seems there is no universal theory on how students learn to teach despite the fact that there is an abundance of research literature on learning to teach (Teacher Education and Learning to Teach, 1999). Carr and Kemmis (1986) call for the development of a critical educational science, based on forms of reflection, that aims at involving teachers, tutors, parents and school administrators in the joint critical analysis of their own situation with a view to transforming them in ways that lead to improvement of educational situations for pupils.

Some research studies, however, suggest that teachers do learn from their individual and collective experiences (Furlong and Maynard 1995). Since
teaching practice is regarded as the most valuable part of teacher preparation, an attempt was made, during the students’ teaching practice (T/P) period, to try and observe ten student teachers in eight different schools learning to teach in a collaborative way. Accordingly, a model termed ‘Blended Supervision Model’ was developed and became the operational framework within which student teachers exercised own interpretations and developed theories about what works in their classroom, in a collaborative manner. This supervision study was therefore planned to develop a teaching practice supervision strategy that helps to emancipate student teachers from a traditional learning and supervision system, to a more reflective learning approach that is sustainable.

Problem

Current T/P supervision practices are segmented and isolated. On one hand, the college ‘doses’ students with theories of teaching based on written literature. On the other hand when student teachers go to schools for practice teaching they receive traditional advice from practising teachers based on practical experience. There is a barrier between teachers’ colleges/universities and schools. The initial teacher-training course involves student teachers trying to learn in different sites, that is, colleges/universities and schools with two sets of personnel, a tutor and school mentor. This poses problems for a student teacher who perceives a lack of coherence in the learning on two sites (Furlong et al 1998). Practices in schools do not influence theories in colleges and, theories in colleges are not fully welcomed in schools, hence development of college/school conflicts as reported by some students who, according to Shumba (1997), reported negative T/P experiences. Supervision of student teachers by college lecturers is mainly based on theories of teaching and learning from various authors, whereas in schools, most mentors/heads base their supervision on practical experience. The supervised students seem not to offer any input to the supervision process, but are supposed to conform and accept mentor/headmaster’s supervision model, and also supposed, silently, to accept comments from college tutors without question, otherwise they risk getting mediocre marks/grades.

It is against such a preceding background problem that a blended supervision model was developed (Figure 1).
such an interactive cyclical approach to supervision of student teachers is premised upon what Cogan (1973) and Goldhammer (1969) espoused, that reflective practice, collegiality and collaboration are the major cornerstones of any strategy which is likely to succeed in improving teaching. Similar sentiments were echoed by Berlak and Berlak (1981:246) who noted that, “We have some evidence that teachers learn their craft largely from one another”. In the same vein Blumberg (1980:231) said,

‘... The number of times teachers call upon one another for help or assistance far outweighs the number of times they call upon their formal supervisors or consultants.’

**Conceptual Framework**

**Blended Supervision Model**

The starting point is to model/copy how the mentor/college tutor teaches. Slowly student teachers begin to develop their own practical theories. Through collaborative teaching, student teachers become ‘insiders’, planning along experienced teachers and discussing jointly taught lessons afterwards. Through collaborative teaching, student teachers have what the American anthropologists call legitimate peripheral participation (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Legitimate
Peripheral participation is a situation whereby a novice has a legitimate right to be an ‘insider’ to a complex process and is thus progressively guided to take over more and more responsibility for that performance. It is by reflecting on teaching, thinking about it and trying to express it in words that student teachers begin to transform the behaviour they have copied into concepts and theories which they ‘own’ for themselves.

However this reflective process is strengthened if it is systematically supported by an experienced teacher in the form of a mentor. As insiders, mentors are strategically well placed to take this role. Mentors have access to specific forms of practical professional knowledge; they know this school, these pupils and this curriculum. They have also established ways of talking about their practice. As mentors discuss with student teachers they are in a position to guide and make them see and to help them enter that language of teaching. With that growing insight comes an increased control of their teaching.

Focus of Study

In this study, emphasis was placed on collaboration and blended supervision model so as to harmonize the diversity of supervisory belief-systems between and among student teachers, mentors and college lectures. Such collective approach to supervision (blended supervision) is supported by most educational researchers as pointed out by Zeichner and Tabachnick (1987) that no model of supervision can meaningfully exist apart from the interpretations given to it by those who employ it. The central objective to any supervision process is therefore to develop shared and collaborative frameworks of meaning about learning to teach, never to take for granted that adoption of a particular supervisory model by mentors or college lecturers and to signify a significant degree of homogeneity in the intentions and motives of supervisors even if phenotypic behaviours of tutors or mentors appear to be similar.

Methodology

Participants:

Data for this study was collected from 16 student teachers, eight school based mentors and from four college lecturers. In total therefore, data was collected from 28 people and participant researcher. Also pupils who were taught during the supervision process contributed immensely towards the outcome of this study.
Methods used in data collection

Prior to practical supervision of students on T/P, 50 student teachers were approached just before their T/P period of 2003. The researchers offered them a student centred approach to teaching practices supervision, whereby the, students, collaborated among themselves in learning to teach, and also collaborated with college lecturers and mentors in the supervision process. Thus collaborative inquiry, reflective practices and collegial deliberation were to become the guiding principles to the supervisory process. 16 students accepted the offer of collaborating in learning to teach under a blended supervision model.

The acceptance was however, not without conditions. Students wanted assurance that there was not going to be any conflict between blended supervision and the traditional college/school assessment or expectations. The researchers managed to assure the students that, the supervision process, blended model, was to be based on agreement between and among mentor, college tutor/trainer, the student and the researchers. Therefore there was no room for any conflict.

16 students were therefore chosen, out of the 50. The selected students were chosen purely on the basis of their being close to the research group’s working place, hence that helped to reduce travelling costs and time needed to get to the school. The research team had to communicate with the heads of eight schools where students were to do their practice teaching, and both heads of secondary schools were quick to accept the novel approach to supervision and the collaboration approach to learning to teach. Communication was also done with the students’ college through the T/P section, and the ‘blended supervision model’ was seen and upheld as worth trying out.

Data collection procedure

Prior to teaching, the student teacher identified and explained to the ‘panel’, comprising mentor, student’s colleague, and the research team, and in some cases the college tutor, an aspect or area of teaching he/she wanted to be assisted/supervised in. The chosen area of teaching was referred to as the ‘Focus’. Students could choose to focus on questioning technique, emotional climate in the class and or use of group work. The collaborating team/panel, i.e. College tutor, mentor, student teacher and his/her friend and myself, discussed the chosen area of focus and made any necessary adjustments in agreement with the student
teacher. The collaborative process had to be very friendly and therefore not impede the diversity and complementary abilities and knowledge brought by each member. After discussion the teaching or supervision focus, the team had to discuss and agree on a supervision criteria to be used during the process of teaching. Experiences and practices of college tutors school based mentors, student teachers’ belief systems and theories of learning/teaching were all mixed and complimented each other, hence the term ‘blended supervision model’. See figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Blended Supervision Model

![Figure 3: Blended Supervision Model](image)

Figure 3 above helps to illustrate the interwoven style of blended supervision, which draws its approach to supervision from the collaborating team thereby nullifying the notion that learning to teach and supervision of teaching practice should be based on some form of monopolistic theory. All forms of ‘knowledge’, therefore, including people’s ideas or opinions must always be subjected to constant critiquing, in a collaborative manner, before adopting it for practice, and that is what blended supervision model sought to do.

If the team’s agreed area of focus was ‘interaction in class’, they could design the following supervision or observation criteria:

- Record the number of times — teacher interacted with the pupils
- Number of times pupils interacted among themselves
- Number of times pupils interacted with their textbooks or pupils not interacting with anyone.

The pre-lesson discussion was done either a day or just a few hours before the actual teaching in order to give the student ample time to make any alterations
that could help improve his/her teaching in view of the team’s contribution during the pre lesson collaboration. After the pre lesson discussion, the student conducted the lesson while members of the supervising team took down notes as per agreed supervision criteria (blended supervision model). The team sat at the back of the class and tried to be as unobstructive as possible, but at the same time being as precise as possible in making observation. The supervision study placed emphasis on supervision and not assessment, therefore no mark/grade was awarded to the student during and after the teaching process.

After the lesson, the mentor and the student teacher led the team to a quiet place where we discussed the way the student handled the lesson. Firstly, the student made a self-evaluation of his/her performance in view of the agreed criteria. After making a self-evaluation the student chaired the rest of the post lesson discussion by inviting comments/feed back from individual members of the team. Members of the team gave comments based on the agreed criteria for supervision. If any member of the team wanted to give extra comments outside the agreed supervision criteria, that was to be done with the consent of the student or when the student asked for extra comments. Both pre and post lesson discussion were done in a friendly way, maybe/more so because students knew that they were not going to be given any grade or mark at the end of the supervision exercise. All post lesson discussions were to end up with a word of encouragement. Students were encouraged to continue collaborating between and among themselves, and continue collaborating with the mentors and any other teacher in the school that they felt comfortable to work with. Post lesson discussions were concluded by setting the date for the next blended supervision.

There was no limit to the number of visits the student could get, but instead the student decided whether to continue with the exercise in the presence of college tutors and school based mentors, or continue collaborating among themselves as students. Written copies of areas of focus, supervision criteria, lesson observation notes and post lesson discussion notes were collected and presented in a summarized form. Written responses on place of collaboration in learning to teach and blended supervision model compared to the contemporary approaches to T/P supervision that are segmented plus either lecturer or mentor centred, were also sought from the students, mentors and college lecturer. The students who were involved in this collaborative approach to learning to teach were still subjected to normal college or school-based assessment. In some instances, college lecturers assessed the same student who was being supervised by the collaborating team at the same time as the team conducted its blended
supervision and that never posed any supervision problem or assessment problem. Assessment crits from college lecturers are also included in this study and were analysed to find out whether there is something common between and among students who were exposed to this collaborative approach in learning to teach under a blended supervision model.

A total of eight visits were made to the first pair of students and ten visits were made to the second pair, 9 visits to the third pair, 12 visits to the fourth pair, 8 visits to the fifth pair, 9 visits to the sixth pair, 7 visits to the seventh pair and 10 visits to the eighth pair. The difference in the number of visits is attributed to the student teacher’s decision on whether they felt they had time and still wanted to continue under blended supervision in learning to teach, or whether they felt they could continue collaborating as student teachers on their own.

During the data capturing process, audio and video tape recorders were used in order to compliment the written reports

**Results and discussions**

*Pre-lesson collaboration*

During the pre-lesson discussion the student chose the area of focus, and that made the student responsible for his/her own learning. Contemporary college T/P supervision practices are prescriptive, to the student, what teaching aspects to focus on, and that robs the student of the trust and responsibility which is necessary in developing own theories about teaching/learning. The supervising team under blended supervision model, decided collectively with the student on the supervising criteria. That meant that the student was entrusted with responsibility to influence his/her professional development in a collaborative way. The supervising team’s collaborative pre-lesson discussion helped to bring together the groups experiences and theories about teaching and learning. Also, the act of collaboration helped to remove any biases or prejudices the student teacher might have had about the way he/she was to be supervised thereby building confidence in the student, as one student said,

“A war is won a day before it is fought. ... The fact that the supervision process involved another student teacher, and even my English head of department, meant that a more appropriate environment for everyone to share his ideas with others was set....”
One of the mentors had this to say about pre lesson collaboration:

“The student teacher has the advantage of being availed of methods and ways of making his lesson more effective, thereby benefiting the pupils instead of suggesting the methods as a post-mortem.”

Lesson observation

During the process of teaching, the supervising team took an active part in the learning process as well as taking down notes, following the teams agreed supervision criteria. Whenever the teacher asked pupils to get into their groups and carry out some group tasks, members of the supervising team could help some groups in solving the given tasks or just facilitated group members in arriving at a solution of a given problem. Also the supervising team could even advise the teacher during the teaching/learning process, on how he/she could further improve presentation of the lesson in view of the prevailing classroom situation.

Cooperating mentors were, however, not very happy with the supervision process of strictly focussing on the agreed area of focus at the expense of some other ‘teaching flaws’ students made during lesson presentation.

“This method has an inhibitive effect on the supervisor as his/her comments or criticism will be toned down by the fact that he took part in lesson preparation and should therefore operate within the agreed framework”

However if T/P supervision programmes are to eliminate student dependency on lecturers and mentors, and develop trusted and responsible professional teachers who can direct their own teaching throughout their teaching career, then the value of trusting and sticking to the agreed area of focus during supervision outweighs any need to consider other teaching problems that might incidentally crop up, yet lie out-side the focus. Commenting on a similar problem raised by a mentor, in learning to teach under a democratic T/P model, Rudduck and Sigsworth in Neill (1989:147) said that,

“... If we do submit to the temptation to bombard the student with incidental observations there is the danger that the intensity of the focus will be lost, the student might become dependent on us and their trust in our ability to stick to the verbal contract will disappear”.
It therefore means that the unease of restricting oneself to a single focus stance is something supervisors have to learn to overcome, if this approach to supervision, blended supervision model is to be developed in teachers’ colleges. Almost all interactive, participatory approaches to teaching and learning that encourage development of sustainable critical thinking skills in teachers create condition for a ‘give and take’ (compromise). Even in the process of the student deciding and directing her teaching intentions, some collaboration takes place before and after teaching which means that the student is compelled to be flexible with his/her approach to learning to teach.

**Post lesson collaboration**

Almost all students agreed with comments made by the supervising team as discussed during the post lesson collaboration. Students were also very open and honest in their self-evaluation when asked by the supervising team. In almost all cases, students’ self-evaluation comments matched those of the supervising team, which meant that there was a common focus and same operational framework. Students opened up much more, giving their areas of weaknesses in teaching. One of the students said in an interview,

> “I feel happy after such a supervision. I know I did not fail but that you are just after helping me on how to teach. I feel free”

**Summary**

Mentors had this to say,

> “Despite a few hitches, the study was by and large a success. Collaborative approaches create an atmosphere of trust and the student teacher gains confidence quickly”.

The students, individually and collectively had this to say,

> “All the sessions were of paramount importance in my life as a student teacher on T/P. This (collaboration and blended supervision) prepared us for the actual assessments by the lecturers from college.

”I think this student supervision approach (blended supervision) should continue. I feel that it is important in preparing students for assessment. I think I have gained some great confidence in lesson delivery. I feel I am able to teach in the presence of any assessor or observer. The system
(blended supervision) is good, but at the moment it should work hand in hand with the traditional system of assessment until people get used to blended supervision approaches to learning to teach."

Mentors made some comments, on the problems incurred in trying to implement the system of collaboration in learning to teach under a blended supervision model:

"Student teachers did not get enough time to prepare especially after the pre-lesson discussion. They did not get the time to incorporate the discussion into their lessons particularly where pre-lesson collaboration took place a few minutes before the actual teaching. The after lesson conference therefore has to take the above into account”.

It is in view of the above summary comments, by mentors and student teachers that the following conclusions were made.

**Conclusion**

Reflective professional teachers are developed through collaborative learning activities where student teachers expose their ideas to critiquing by others and learn to synthesise and develop shared approaches to teaching/learning.

**References**


Rudduck and Sigsworth (1983) *Partnership Supervision: An exploration of the student-tutor relationship in teaching practice* (University of East Anglia School of Education)

