

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In Chapter Four the researcher gave a “thick description” (Denzin, 1989, cited in Patton, 1990) of the supervisors’ perceptions and views of clinical supervision and reflective practice, and the manner in which they supported and advised the student teachers during the three stages of clinical supervision, which were aimed at answering his research questions. In this chapter he will attempt to interpret the findings to gain further insights into their perceptions, views and practice in relation to the goal of clinical supervision during teaching practice that is, to promote the professional growth of student teachers and in this respect, ESL student teachers. The findings are based on the theoretical perspectives and research findings in the field of clinical supervision and reflective practice.

It is not the intention of the researcher to make evaluative judgments of the supervisors’ knowledge and competence, which is beyond the scope of this study. The findings are confined to the supervision of the two particular student teachers and do not reflect the way the supervisors would deal with other student teachers with different aptitudes and attitudes.

This chapter first discusses the findings of this study, which is followed by the implications. Then the limitations of this study are identified. Finally, some suggestions for further research are given.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The underlying factors in the analysis are the supervisors’ perceptions and views of clinical supervision and reflective practice on the way they conducted their practice.

The perceptions and views were found unique to the supervisors concerned, but their student's aptitude and attitude influenced their practice. They perceived to adopt the reflective model of teacher preparation and their approach to intervention was directive and non-directive (Gebhard, 1990). Their main focus was on the '*areas for improvement*' (Edge, 1992) and generally '*scaffolding learning*' through the counselling dialogues (Vygotsky, 1978 in Randall and Thornton, 2001). They used probing questions to get the students to think deeply about their lesson plans and reflect on their classroom teaching relating them to the theories of teaching and learning. During the counselling dialogues, most of the time they raised the students' awareness and stressed on pedagogical points, and got them to rationalize their choice of activities through their probing questions. Then they asked further directive questions, gave direct information or prescribed ways of improving their teaching skills. Only sometimes did they try to get them to explore their weaknesses to come out with ways to improve on their activities. From their discussions it was apparent that the students lacked pedagogical skills and so the supervisors felt the need to inform and prescribe ways as what McGarvey and Swallow (1986) and Randall and Thornton (2001) claimed to be essential for inexperienced teachers. The supervisors however did not perceive to be or practiced as evaluators as what Reitzug, 1997; and Zapeda and Ponticell in Zapeda and Ponticell, 1998) found. They were conscious that the teaching experience is a developmental process and were very concerned with the student teachers' development, except that the student teachers were beginners and lacked pedagogical skills and so they had to prescribe or give direct information most of the time.

In terms of professional development, the feedback sessions did not allow the student teachers to take charge of the exploration of their problems to become independent seekers of their own solutions, and develop their professional self (Randall and Thornton, 2001). It cannot be denied however, that through the interventions and

interactions the student teachers did become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their classroom practice, which to a certain extent, fostered their teaching competence. Nevertheless, as for their independent capacity to make decisions, it was not very supportive. The lack of opportunity to explore their weaknesses of their choice and come out with their own solutions resulted in them not owning the solutions to make the learning experience more meaningful to them, which is necessary to promote self-direction and their development as autonomous thinkers (Randall and Thornton, 2001).

As for negative affects of direct information and prescribing accentuated by Gebhard (1990) there was resentment in one of the students who detested her supervisor telling her what to do all the time, like she was a small child. She did not mind the supervisor giving suggestions, but preferred to be given a choice of whether to accept the suggestions or not. Consequently the student became dependent on the supervisor and only made changes when told to do so (related by CS2). This phenomenon is like what Abraham, Saeligmanand, and Teadsdale (1978 in Fanselow, 1990) observed and referred to as '*learned helplessness*'. From a '*developmental reflective perspective*' as discovered by Grimmer (1989); and Zeichner and Liston, (1996) it depended on the supervisors' objective. In this case, it was to improve the student teachers' '*technical competence*'. The researcher noticed that it was the manner in which the supervisors gave the directive feedback that determined whether the students accepted or rejected it. The students accepted feedback given in a supportive and empathetic manner and resented those given in an authoritative or threatening way (Heron, 1990).

A comparison of the interventions of the two supervisors also showed that in one, the student was more confident in responding to her supervisor and more open to the supervisor's guidance in search for a solution whilst the other was closed up and reluctant to explore her problems. This again is related to the approach adopted for the

interventions and the focus on the *'person'* rather than her teaching by the second lecturer (Heron, 1990).

In terms of developing the students' reflection of their lessons during the counselling dialogues, the supervisors' use of probing questions, and 'leading' and 'following' techniques (Heron 1990) did get them to explore their teaching knowledge and self-confidence. The success of the 'informing' and 'confronting' (Emery, 1996) techniques used however depended on the way they intervened. Confronting in an authoritative manner resulted in a threatening atmosphere, which raised the anxiety of both the supervisor and the student concerned. This led the student to become defensive in her responses, and she ended up not following the suggestions and pedagogical points raised by the supervisor just like what Heron (1990) described of high-handed interventions. It was not helpful in getting the students to think critically. However, the supervisor's interventions were triggered by the attitude of the students towards teaching practice. When the student showed a negative attitude and was too lazy to be resourceful the supervisor concerned became infuriated and used confronting interventions in a commanding manner, which sounded threatening, and the counselling was counterproductive. The same effect was seen for the written feedback, which was judgmental, evaluative and intimidating.

The counselling dialogues were conducted immediately after the observation and the researcher found that this practice has its setbacks. There was no doubt that the students were able to recall what had occurred in the classroom because it was still fresh in their minds, but the students were still under a lot of stress and worried about how their lesson went in the eyes of the supervisor as an evaluator, especially if a lot of things did not go well for them. This could make it quite difficult for them to reflect on their lesson objectively and explore their weaknesses to come out with their own solutions even if the supervisors were good in their probing. From the researcher's

analysis of the post observation dialogues, he found that the students were not able to give appropriate responses, and so the lecturers had to give directive information or suggestions. If they were given the time to reflect on the lesson on their own first, they probably could have come out with their own solutions for their problems. For this the supervisors could audio record the lesson and get the students to listen to their own teaching and reflect on it before the counselling dialogue. Alternatively, they could give written comments of the observations for them to reflect on before the counselling dialogue (Randall and Thornton, 2001).

As for written reflections of the lessons and journals the students were self-evaluative. However, what they wrote were merely what they recalled from the lessons and what the supervisors told them orally and in written forms. They did state in their reflections what they should do, but on how they were going to improve on their teaching skills, were not explicit. The absence of collaborative and negotiated action plans between the supervisors and the students, which are considered essential for the counselling sessions to be successful (Randall and Thornton, 2001), could be the cause of it.

The researcher also noticed that the monitoring system for checking whether the students actually worked on their previous weaknesses in their following lessons was not effective. The supervisors themselves were not able to monitor this because they had only two remote observations during the teaching practice and so left the monitoring to the mentor. The assessment element in the supervision also did not help this because the focus was on the overall lesson, which resulted in the supervisors not focusing on specific areas of the students' interest to improve on. If the assessment was to look at the students' progress in these specific areas of teaching skills then the monitoring would have been more focused and compulsory or the supervisors would not be able to assess them effectively.

Another important finding of this study was that the claim that mentors are in a better position to advise and support the student teachers, for this cases, is true. For one, they were in contact with the students more than the supervisors during the teaching practice, and also the students took their classes and so they were there when the students were teaching and monitored their progress. Their knowledge of their pupils and teaching experience also placed them in a better position to advise and support the students. The students too felt that the mentors were able to help them better because they were experienced primary school teachers and they knew their pupils and subject well. This phenomenon is similar to what Zeichner and Tabachnick (1982 in Slick, 1998) discovered, that is that student teachers often devalue or forget the knowledge acquired at the university when they go for teaching practice and often model the style and personality of the mentors (Freibus, 1997; and Stanulis, 1996 in Weaver and Stanulis, 1996). The supervisors thought similarly, but they felt that sometimes the school teachers held fast to what they believed was good teaching and imposed that on the students hindering them from exploring the different teaching techniques exposed to them in college, which in a way limited their opportunities to try out a variety of techniques and this was not helpful for their professional development.

Zimpher (1988) and Kirchhlof (1989) in Kauffman (1992) suggested that there is a need for supervisors and mentors to meet regularly working as a team and communicating consistently to help students' link theory and practice. This is especially true for this teaching practice as the supervisors and mentors did not meet often enough or communicated consistently to help and monitor the students' progress. Although one of the supervisors claimed that she made contact with the school mentor and headmaster to check on the student teachers, there was no evidence of a proper monitoring system to check the transfer of the discoveries in the counselling sessions to the students'

following lessons. The student's inability to or refusal to bring forth the suggestions could be proof of this.

To conclude, there is no doubt that the overall supervision process was a helping and problem-solving process with the student as the centre of the process, as proposed by Egan (1994). In one case the student was seen as a professional and the interventions were in a supportive atmosphere in a way helping the student to explore her problems and then offering help in a directive manner. The other case was similar in terms of approach and content, but the atmosphere was more tensed, as the supervisor was annoyed with the attitude of the student who did not follow her earlier suggestions and was using the same techniques over and over. The supervisor therefore used confronting interventions authoritatively and harshly, at times evaluating and intimidating the student. Nonetheless, both the lecturers were honest and truthful in giving feedback, probed and actively attended to what the students said, but one was a little punitive whilst the other created a more positive empathetic atmosphere of trust (Heron). The essential elements which were apparently missing in both these supervisions were the mutually agreed aspects to observe, the drawing up of action plans for transferring the findings to the students' future lessons and a proper monitoring system to see these being practised. From this study, it is obvious that the supervisors have played a crucial role in assisting the students link theory and practice. Their interactions with the students and interventions have also provided opportunities for the student teachers to develop their teaching competence. As for promoting their growth as autonomous thinkers, they have laid the foundation by making them reflect on their teaching incompetence.

5.2 Implications

The findings of this study have a few implications for college lecturers and the Teacher Education Division of the Ministry of Education.

Firstly, it is essential for supervisors to interact with student teachers and intervene appropriately during the counselling dialogues for the students to improve on their teaching skills. The interventions should be done in a positive empathetic atmosphere and not in a threatening, judgmental, evaluative or intimidating manner, no matter what the reason is otherwise the counselling would not achieve its goal (Heron, 1990). Giving direct information or being prescriptive can have positive and negative reactions from the students depending on the way the supervisors intervene and interact with the students. Wallace's (1991:) opinion that prescription should be given in a warm and friendly manner, with due recognition to the strengths and weaknesses of the student teachers, and views expressed clearly and in an organized way, could be applicable here. Giving negative feedback is very difficult but necessary to raise the students' awareness of their attitude towards the teaching practice but caution should be observed so that it does not end up being punitive, raising the anxieties of both the supervisors and the students, which would only prove to be counterproductive (Heron, 1990).

Secondly, to enhance the student teachers' professional development, the supervisors should observe the underlying principles of clinical supervision. For one, there should be a mutually agreed focus of a certain aspect of teaching to be observed and discussed during the counselling dialogues, which should be followed by an action plan and effective monitoring of the changes expected. Focusing on the students' choice of teaching aspect to improve on makes it a more meaningful experience for the students. The students should be given more opportunities to explore their problems and seek their own solutions for their teaching difficulties even though they are beginners.

Owning the solution would be more meaningful for the students than to be told what to do most of the time, which can also avoid the '*learned helplessness*' phenomenon (Abraham, Saeligman and Teadsdale 1978 in Fanselow, 1990).

A change in the concept of assessment too could help develop the students into autonomous thinkers. If the assessment focuses on the specific changes that had been mutually agreed upon, then the supervisors' monitoring of the changes would be more directed, thus forcing the students to reflect, plan and carry out their action plans. In the initial stages of learning to teach, the student teachers perceive weaknesses in every aspect of teaching and not all of this can be helped simultaneously. Too much of help or suggestions can confuse student teachers. The supervisor can help by negotiating with the student to establish priorities and targets. A time frame can then be given to check on their improvements in these mutually agreed areas. The assessment could then be the progress made by the students in these areas. The supervisors could of course evaluate the other aspects of teaching, but the focus should be on their progress in those specific areas.

An increase in the number of supervisions and feedback sessions by the supervisors too could add strength to the present monitoring system of the students' progress and their use of alternative ways of teaching to overcome their teaching problems. Besides the supervisors could become familiar with the classroom and pupils, which according to Wallace (1991) are important growth facilitators.

Thirdly, in terms of promoting reflectivity, one of the requirements for the teaching practice should be that the students have to observe the school mentors or other experienced teachers teaching. Although the practicing teachers would be reluctant to allow a student to observe them teaching, it is very helpful for the students in reflecting on their own teaching and the problems they face in class. Observing a good model of how a certain problem is handled is better than being told how to handle it (Gebhard,

1990). The college and the school can make arrangements for this to be possible. Besides that, the students should also be given additional guidance on how to write reflections of their lessons and journal entries of their classroom teaching. Their reflections and a proper action plan is essential in the successful transfer of their discoveries during the post observation dialogues to their future lessons which in turn is the determiner of the success of the counselling sessions (Randall and Thornton, 2001). Another way of promoting reflectivity prior to the counselling dialogues is to get the students to look at their own teaching by audio recording their lessons. This would give them insights into their own teaching (Randall and Thornton, 2001), which they can write as anecdotes (Loughran, 2002) to develop reflectivity

For better collaboration between the college supervisors and the school mentors in terms of monitoring the students' progress they should meet more often and consistently as suggested by Zimpher, (1988), Kirchhlof, (1989) and Kauffman, (1992).

5.3 Limitations

This limitation was realized after the data was collected and analysed and so it differs from those mentioned in Chapter One.

The researcher was not present during the counselling dialogues and the observations to be able to determine the non-verbal and verbal communications between the supervisors and the student teachers. This could have revealed the underlying feelings and the hidden agendas of the students' responses to the counselling, and the supervisors' sensitivity to these. The researcher had to thus rely on the intonation and the actual words used by the supervisors and student teachers in the audio recordings, the supervisors' field notes and the views expressed during the interviews. His absence also deprived him of the chance to see the changes in the student teachers' teaching

behaviours for himself. Taking the role of a non-participant observer would have rendered more conclusive results.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

This is a sample study on the communication between two supervisors and two student teachers during clinical supervision and as such the insights obtained are tentative. More empirical studies need to be carried out to discover the effect of the communication between the two entities on the latter's professional development to make generalizations.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative studies on a larger sample size would be ideal to come out with more conclusive and valid findings, which could also serve to confirm or disconfirm the discoveries in this study.

An area that would be useful to study is the collaboration of the school mentors and college supervisors in monitoring the student teachers' transferring of discoveries made during the counselling dialogues to their following lessons. This would give insights into the roles played by the two in ensuring the students' reflectivity and action planning towards their personal growth and autonomy.