

# **BETTER SUPERVISION BETTER TEACHING**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Towards Understanding the Supervision Process

### ISSUES

- How can we gain a clear understanding of the way supervision is conducted?
- What insights can we obtain in order to guide an improved future practice?

*Supervisors have always held sharp differences of opinion about schooling, teaching, curriculum, and the role of the supervisor. These differences mark the history of supervision, surfacing both in internal struggles over mission and a more external struggle for identity as a distinct field of practice.<sup>1</sup>*

Siens and Ebmeier (1996, p. 299)

At the outset, it must be emphasized that supervision lies at the heart of most initial teacher education programmes. Supervision is an integral part of the teaching practice or teaching practicum undertaken in schools by part-time and full-time students seeking professional initial teaching qualifications.

We have engaged in systematic research designed to clarify the practice of supervision and to collect evidence on which to base frameworks and guidelines to improve future practice. Details of the research programme are given in Appendix 1. Successful supervision is one of the most important keys to teacher



improvement, and with teacher improvement comes an improved education for school students.

Throughout this handbook we make reference to student teachers, and it is important to note that this term covers both experienced teachers on in-service programmes and pre-service students studying part-time for postgraduate or undergraduate teaching qualifications. Similarly, supervisors are either part-time or full-time staff in teacher education institutions. Our evidence has been drawn from supervisors employed in two Hong Kong universities. We have acknowledged that some teacher education institutions are engaged in experiments that include the involvement of full-time teachers, sometimes called mentors, teacher-tutors or cooperating teachers, in aspects of supervision. Many of our findings and recommendations will be relevant to the work of these school teachers and senior staff in schools who are in regular contact with student teachers.

Although our research focus has been on the education and training of student teachers on courses for secondary specialists, we anticipate that this handbook will be of direct relevance to supervisors engaged in teacher education courses for primary school specialists. The process of supervision, which is our focus, is the same in the training of primary or secondary specialists.

## **DEFINING SUPERVISION**

Supervision is a term that covers a wide range of teacher education processes and activities. It begins before a teaching practicum, intensifies through the practicum, and continues after the practicum has been completed. It is distinguished from lecturing, teaching, engaging in seminars and tutorials in formal curriculum and education theory courses. It includes aspects of advising, guiding, counselling, modelling, coaching, evaluating and assessing. It is a form of systematic, purposeful behaviour having

What is your present practice of supervision?
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clear aims and distinctive content and activities. For the individual supervisor, there is considerable scope to define operationally a personal practice of supervision, even though frameworks for good practice may be defined formally or informally by the teacher education institution to which he or she belongs. Currently, there are few published guidelines for supervision, and this means that there is little general agreement on what constitutes good practice in fulfilling the supervision role. This poses difficulties for both supervisors and student teachers in determining the fairness and equity of the supervision process. For new supervisors, this is particularly important when they may quickly find themselves engaged in fulfilling the supervision role without a great deal of induction and preparation.

There are no qualifications in supervision and, currently, supervisors appear to base their practices largely on their own experience gained when they were student teachers and from observing a small number of lessons alongside more experienced supervisors. The skills of supervision are currently caught, not taught.

While a supervisor may be responsible for a group of student teachers during teaching practice, the convention is generally for supervisors to engage with the whole group before and after the practicum, but during the teaching practice, supervisors observe a number of lessons taught by individual student teachers or pairs of teachers — the process of supervision is mainly based on a one-to-one relationship. However, in some cases supervisors hold part-time posts where their only responsibility is to observe lessons and engage in a restricted range of supervision activities. There have been recent experiments in peer coaching and group supervision, but the convention of one-to-one lesson supervision persists as the dominant practice.

In Figure 1.1 (which has been adapted from the work of Waite, 1994),<sup>2</sup> we have drawn a concept map that highlights the tasks, domains, relationships and traits that characterize supervision.

To what extent is the present situation satisfactory or unsatisfactory?

For each of these four themes, there are more detailed categories and all of these are closely interrelated. They will be referred to at appropriate points in this handbook. Here, they serve to illustrate the multifaceted character of supervision and indicate why it is that supervision, for both supervisors and student teachers, is often problematic.

What elements in Figure 1.1 do you think are particularly important, and for what reasons?

## STUDYING SUPERVISION

From a strictly theoretical standpoint, it is possible to draw on a number of disciplines to contribute to an understanding of supervision. From the perspective of *sociology*, it is possible to focus on the roles and interactions of the supervisor and the student teacher. These roles and interactions find expression in the symmetrical and asymmetrical power and authority relationships in the human interactions. In the body language and oral and written discourses, there is evidence of social decision-making. The intricate balances in the exercising of power and authority are central to an understanding of supervision.

Insofar as student teachers are supervised as part of an education and training curriculum, *psychological* perspectives are important. They generate such questions as:

- How do student teachers, as adults, learn in an experiential setting?
- To what extent does supervision promote or inhibit particular aspects of learning for student teachers?
- How can the learning outcomes of supervision be described, measured, assessed and evaluated?

What answers would you give to these questions?

There are also *anthropological* and *ecological* perspectives. For full-time student teachers, school placement is a temporary phenomenon. They are required to understand, among other

things, the culture of the school in its community setting, the culture of the classes they teach, the cultures from which their students are drawn, the culture of the teaching profession they wish to join, and the cultural characteristics of the act of supervision. For the supervisor, these understandings are equally important and it is in trying to come to terms with the variety of cultures that many supervisors find major challenges.

From an *ecological* perspective, supervision takes place in different locations, each with their own distinctive environmental characteristics. Questions about the 'Where?' of supervision deserve as much attention as those concerned with the 'How?' or 'What?'

Because supervision relates specifically to the teaching practicum, and this is but one part of a whole teacher education programme, there is a teacher education *curriculum design and analysis* perspective that includes such questions as:

- Where is the teacher practice located in time and when is the optimum time for it to occur?
- How does the teaching practicum fit into the whole programme?
- How much time is required for supervision to be effective and how should this be distributed over the period of a teaching practicum?
- Further, if supervision incorporates several roles for a supervisor, how do these roles vary over the time of a practicum?
- How far can contemporary information and communication technology contribute to the effectiveness of supervision?

In designing our study on which the advice in this handbook is based, we were aware of these perspectives and they will be returned to at appropriate points in subsequent sections of this handbook.

Why are ecological and anthropological perspectives helpful? What can they tell us?

What answers would you give to these questions?

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does our definition of supervision match your own?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages for student teachers and supervisors of having sharply defined institutional definitions of supervision?
3. In your experience, is your current supervision practice based on insights from a particular educational discipline, e.g. psychology or sociology?
4. Have you caught your supervision skills or were you taught?

## NOTES

1. Siens, C.M. and Ebmeier, H. 'Developmental Supervision and the Reflective Thinking of Teachers.' *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 11, 4 (1996), pp. 299–319.
2. Waite, D. 'Understanding Supervision: An Exploration of Aspiring Supervisors' Definitions.' *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 10, 1 (1994), pp. 60–76.

## CHAPTER 7

# Discussing Possible Failure

### ISSUE

If a student teacher is in danger of failing the teaching practice,

- how should the matter be raised by the supervisor, and
- what forms of advice can be given?

### THE PROBLEM

Both supervisors and student teachers agreed that the question of possible failure was one of the two most difficult of all to discuss. In one sense, the reason was obvious and was succinctly put by this student teacher:

It's a miserable thing to talk about ... Nobody wants to hear 'You are no good'.

(ST26)

However, it is not simply a matter of reluctance to convey such demoralizing news. There are many other factors involved which make the situation more complex. For instance, it is likely that the supervisor has played the part of a supportive colleague, and even a friend, through the initial 'formative' visits. There may, therefore, exist a close relationship between the two, but when the question of assessment arises, the supervisor now has to tell the student teacher that he or she has 'not made the grade'. In addition, there is also the fact that the decision has to be made on a limited number of visits, so the issue of 'fairness' becomes a consideration. The following supervisors' comments illustrate these dilemmas:

My interpretation is that colleagues are very reluctant to fail people. It is too serious for one visit.

(SUP8)

I have met them [the student teachers] on so many occasions, chatting to them more as a friend than as a supervisor so it's a difficult decision.

(SUP15)

There is a tendency not to like to use the word 'failure'. For supervisors, there is perhaps an element of guilt that they too have failed — they have failed the student in their hour of need. In all probability, one is saying to that person, if he or she is on a pre-service course, 'Find another career, this is not for you.' On an in-service course, supervisors are faced with an even greater difficulty. The teacher is already a part of the profession and the supervisor is in essence denying the validity of appointing this person in the first place.

Written and practical exams are often based on a <u>single</u> performance. Why shouldn't teaching ability be based on a single visit?
--

## VIEWPOINTS AND ANALYSIS

### Constructive Support

It appears that the reluctance to fail a student teacher, but the need to do so if required, leads to a very supportive attitude on the part of the supervisors. The student teachers were also very concerned that such support was necessary, but in addition made the point that the danger of failure should not be hidden and should be raised as early as possible in the course. One student teacher commented on *the need for early warning signals* and another also made the point:

If it's only hinted at by the supervisor, the student may miss the message.

(ST8)

The same point was perhaps reflected in this supervisor's comment:

When I really saw the problem and the plight, the danger of failing, then I thought 'I must get this message across to him'.

(SUP15)

The desire to provide support was clearly indicated by the following supervisors:

When we identify potential failures, we try to help. We very seldom fail them unless we feel there is nothing we can do.

(SUP1)

In my case, I would make as many visits as possible. The message is pretty clear — 'I will come and come until you make it'.

(SUP15)

How early is early?

Should possible failure be raised in formative supervision meetings?



This latter comment appears to suggest that the supervisor would help the student teacher pass, come what may. However, it was clear from an earlier comment in the interview that he *will* fail a student teacher if necessary. The expression here is perhaps more indicative of the amount of support he was prepared to provide to help a student in danger.

The student teachers too had definite ideas about the nature of the required support in possible failure situations and the need to make those situations clear. For example:

It's most important to find out where a problem lies ... To let a student teacher know the reasons why he may be failing the course so that the remedy can be made by the student teacher.  
(ST8)

Another student teacher made a similar point:

[The supervisor must] help him realize his performance is not satisfactory, this is the first step. Then probe the student teacher to point out his own weaknesses. It's better than telling him what his shortcomings are.  
(ST26)

However, it is not simply a matter of clearly identifying the problem areas. As the same student teacher made clear below, it is the supervisor's duty to give concrete suggestions too:

It's not enough ... to just tell him what to improve on. The student teacher may want to correct these mistakes but doesn't know how. The tutor should tell him for example 'Point one, you can do this ... Point two, you can try this ....' In that way the student teacher wouldn't feel overwhelmed by all the requirements ... It's like teaching pupils. How can you demand

How far does this analogy carry over to teaching practice assessment?

Does any improvement constitute a reason for passing?

What part should a teacher's POTENTIAL play?

a one-step progress to ninety marks, if his mark is only forty this time? You can expect him to achieve only fifty next time.

(ST26)

The student teacher continued in similar vein and made a final comment that is worth reflecting on:

Avoid putting too much demand on the student teacher. Do it gradually ... first tell him those areas that can be corrected easily and let him think about them ... When the student is completely at a loss, you have to direct him to see the root of the problem. Otherwise he won't know where to start. I think there's a big difference between a 'lecturer' and a 'tutor'.

(ST26)

What 'difference' do you think this student is getting at?

### The Manner of Discussion

The need to alert student teachers early has been discussed above, but once that decision is made, there is still the question of the *way* in which the matter should be raised. There appear to be some differences expressed by student teachers over this and, in some cases, contradictory views expressed by individual students. On the one hand, some students stated categorically that a direct approach should be used, as below:

I think the more direct way is better ... I know it's difficult to say it, but it's a fact so it's difficult to avoid.

(ST8)

Just tell him frankly.

(ST15)

On the other hand, an indirect approach was favoured by some student teachers whereby criticism is expressed in a positive, rather than negative, manner:

Which approach do you favour, direct or indirect? Why?

It may be discouraging for the student teachers if supervisors raise such issues directly. I think that supervisors should use words like 'limitations' and 'areas for improvement' instead of 'weaknesses' and 'shortcomings'.

(ST1)

There was also the recognition that the varying personalities of student teachers need to be taken into account when advising them of their perilous position:

[Supervisors should be direct and] the evaluation sheet seems to be the main communication channel [although] it depends on the personalities of the student teacher and the supervisor.

(ST1)

The need for a balance between frankness and sensitivity is evident in this supervisor's comments:

I said, 'Well, I'm afraid there might be a danger [of failure]. Now this is what we expect of you but you are not quite there.' [I said this] very gently, but then no matter how I raised it the effect would be the same.

(SUP15)

Do you think 'the effect would be the same'?

The same supervisor summarized the approach adopted in the following words:

I guess it has to be: apply the screw in a friendly way — very gently but becoming more direct [with time].

(SUP15)

Some supervisors perceived the value of a direct approach to be that a 'warning' may in itself be sufficient to stimulate a student to improve:

Usually, if you force them, if they know they are going to fail, then they will change.

(SUP1)

An example of such a change was recounted in the following:

I told [the student teacher] I was not happy with the way he was performing. [I told him I would make another visit and that he] would really have to think hard about it. Then, the next time I went, he was completely different which the student teacher explained as being a reaction to being told that he was near to failure.

(SUP1)

However, a different view was provided by the following student teacher who was clearly thinking in terms of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' syndrome:

Nobody wants to hear 'You are no good'. If you tell a student that, then surely he will become no good.

(ST26)

Do you agree with this student?

Another aspect about the manner of discussing failure concerns the environment in which it occurs, both in terms of place and time. The previous student teacher explained it vividly:

Also it depends on the location of discussion. If it is in a closed-door situation with privacy, then things can be discussed openly. But that is not always possible in some schools. If the discussion is conducted in a staff room with a teacher sitting next to you eating his lunch box and behind you, pupils asking for their exercise books, that would be another kind of experience ... So the environment ... is important. Also, it depends on the student teacher's condition after the

observation. If he is already in a sweat, and looks doubtful, the situation may not allow the tutor to talk to him right there. ... If the situation may get too harsh, the tutor can make an appointment with the student teacher to talk to him later.

(ST26)

Here we see again the concern with personality, with the specific individual context, and the hope that the supervisor will be sensitive to it.

Yet another aspect of the manner of discussion concerns the forms of evidence that should be used. Of course, by its nature, most of the interaction will be oral, but we have already quoted a student previously referring to the evaluation sheet as the main communication channel. This concern with *concrete* evidence is apparent in the comments of a number of student teachers:

Supervisors should write down their comments and suggestions in detail. Through the written comments, student teachers will get ideas about areas for improvement.

(ST1)

Use objective facts or incidents that are observed in the lesson so that the student teacher will acknowledge the supervisor's comments and realize the problem.

(ST8)

### **Responsibility: The Gatekeeper Metaphor**

Supervisors are well aware of the serious consequences of failure for a student teacher but, at the same time, are conscious of their social responsibility in being the validators of a teaching qualification. It is a responsibility that supervisors shirk at their peril. Indeed, in the UK, it has been suggested that if a teacher fails to reach the required standard of performance during their

first year of teaching, then the institution that certified the teacher should be held culpable. The interviews with supervisors clearly illustrate their awareness of the task and also their concern for the consequences, in terms of effects on children, if unsuitable teachers are allowed to qualify:

If a teacher deserves a failure and we say, 'Come on. Let's give him or her just a bare pass,' now this is not something we should do. Social responsibility if you like. This teacher may cause havoc for the remaining twenty to thirty years in his teaching career. [If I have to fail the student] I will do it because at the end of the day, the buck stops here.

(SUP15)

Although I want to help them [the students], I still look at myself as a kind of 'gatekeeper'.

(SUP1)

Perhaps more surprisingly, all the student teachers interviewed on this matter held precisely the same views as the supervisors and, in some cases, expressed these views even more strongly:

People may think it would be too harsh to say, 'You are not suitable to be a teacher.' ... However, I think we need to consider the well-being of the pupils. Using teachers who are without the potential to teach well may take away pupils' learning opportunities. ... [Even if] a teacher is in fact a well-experienced one ... [if he is] not worthy of a teacher certificate, why not just tell him the truth?

(ST15)

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does the material in this chapter relate to your own experience as a supervisor?
2. How do you think the material in this chapter might influence or alter your future actions with regard to the issue?
3. What specific aspects relating to the context of your own institution or subject area need to be considered with regard to this issue?

### ACTION CHECKLIST

- Do not avoid discussing failure, or possible failure, even if it is your instinct to do so.
- Discuss the situation early so that something can be done (the problem may be just in one class).
- Listen to the student's views.
- Have written evidence from lessons you have observed on a lesson evaluation sheet to back up your opinion.
- When it comes to the point of telling the student teacher, tell it gently but directly; the words used matter.
- Use a discreet and conducive environment when discussing possible failure.
- Award a failure if that is what the situation demands — it is your duty.