School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Investigation into the Adopted Supervisory Practices in the Teaching Practice of Special Education Needs Student Teachers in Saudi Arabia: Different Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores the perceptions of participants in the supervision of student teachers during their field placement as a key element in the initial teacher education of special education needs specialist teachers in Saudi Arabia. Participants in supervision are here taken to mean college supervisors, co-operating teachers and student teachers. The research was prompted by a move to implement inclusive education policies in Saudi Arabia and an associated and significant expansion of the numbers of special education needs specialist teachers being trained. Further initiatives, in particular the widespread introduction of ICT throughout the education system, reinforced the need to examine this area at this time. General acknowledgment of the importance of teaching practice in the professional life of student and novice teachers means that the role of supervision during the field placement is also an essential component of initial teacher education. Within the context of a case study approach that used questionnaires, interviews and observations as the main data collection instruments, an activity theory perspective provided a theoretical and conceptual lens through which to reach a more complete understanding of the role of supervision in teaching practice. Specific components of activity theory were particularly useful in examining an activity system of supervision within student teacher field placements and perceptions of that supervision by college supervisors, co-operating teachers and student teachers, in the setting of the schools systems where supervision was taking place (Engeström, 1999). Study participants were student teachers in the final semester of a four-year special needs specialist initial teacher education programme at King Saud University, Riyadh, together with their college supervisors and co-operating teachers.
Analysis of the findings showed that college supervisors, co-operating teachers and student teachers had different perceptions of supervision and also of the role of both supervision and the field placement. Experiences of supervision were both positive and negative, depending on the relationship between the individual student teacher and supervisor and the supervision approach adopted by supervisors. The dominant supervision approach adopted by college supervisors was directive, while co-operating teachers tended to use a far more collaborative approach. Student teachers found the co-operating teachers’ input more helpful, partly because of the frequency and ease of contact. Relationships between the university and schools involved were relatively weak, a feature that was sometimes reflected in relationships between college supervisors and co-operating teachers, and this proved to one of the factors limiting the effectiveness of student teacher supervision in Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that student teachers clearly learned a great deal about how to teach from co-operating teachers, and also college supervisors, during the practicum, participants highlighted a general lack of planning in supervision arrangements. Overall, there was a lack of systematic development, related to the lack of planning, which prevented all groups of participants from maximising the benefits of supervision. Some of the difficulties arose from conflicting demands and heavy workloads required of college supervisors and co-operating teachers. All groups of participants suggested ways in which some of the difficulties could be alleviated. These included improved planning of the practicum, starting with written guidelines regarding expectations of student teachers, a more structured and consistent approach among schools, co-operating teachers and college supervisors and more practical teaching placements throughout the university course. It is proposed that key elements of a clinical supervision approach are introduced in order to significantly improve the positive impact of supervision in the short term, supported by
consideration of options based on university research in the longer term, in order to strengthen the contribution of supervision to future improvements in initial teacher education in Saudi Arabia. It is further proposed that in education research the application of activity theory, which is a cultural theory of learning, could be strengthened by combining it with culture of learning theory, which postulates how learning is absorbed in sociocultural and professional contexts.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1  Introduction and background to the study .................................................. 10
  1.1 Introduction to the Research and Thesis ............................................................. 10
  1.2 Background and Context of the Problem .......................................................... 11
  1.3. Definitions ........................................................................................................ 15
  1.4 The current context in Saudi Arabia ..................................................................... 17
  1.5 Statement of the Research Problem .................................................................... 21
  1.6 Significance of the study and contribution to knowledge ................................. 22
  1.7 Research Aims .................................................................................................... 24
  1.8 Research Objectives .......................................................................................... 25
  1.9 Research Questions ............................................................................................ 26
  1.10 Outline of Thesis Structure .............................................................................. 28

Chapter 2 Literature Review ....................................................................................... 31
  2.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 31
  2.2 Teaching and Learning - The Culture of Learning and Learning Cultures .......... 32
    2.2.1 The Culture of Learning in Saudi Arabia .................................................... 39
  2.3 Inclusion and Special Education Needs in Saudi Arabia .................................... 41
    2.3.1 Special Educational Needs in Saudi Arabia ................................................ 47
    2.3.2 Definitions of Special Educational Needs ..................................................... 47
    2.3.3 Models of Disability and Intervention ........................................................ 49
    2.3.4 Current Position in Saudi Arabia ............................................................... 53
  2.4 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Saudi Arabia ................................................. 54
    2.4.1 Models of Initial Teacher Education ............................................................ 56
    2.4.2 Initial Teacher Education Programmes ....................................................... 64
    2.4.3 ITE for Special Needs Specialist Teachers: Current Position ..................... 68
  2.5 The Role of Supervision .................................................................................... 71
    2.5.1 Student Teacher Supervision Defined ........................................................ 72
    2.5.2 Contribution of Supervision to ITE .............................................................. 73
    2.5.3 Models of Teacher Supervision .................................................................. 75
    2.5.4 The contribution of feedback to supervision ............................................... 82
    2.5.5 Problems in giving feedback to student teachers ......................................... 84
    2.5.6 Supervision of Student Teachers in Saudi Arabia ..................................... 85
    2.5.7 Supervision Procedures .............................................................................. 89
    2.5.8 Supervision of Special Educational Needs Specialist Student Teachers in Saudi Arabia .......................................................... 94
    2.5.9 Perceptions of supervision .......................................................................... 97
    2.5.10 Barriers to effective supervision ............................................................... 100
    2.5.11 Challenges of supervising student teachers ............................................... 101
  2.6 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 102

Chapter 3 Framework for the research ...................................................................... 105
  3.1 Activity theory applied to the current study ....................................................... 112

Chapter 4 Methodology ............................................................................................. 118
  4.1 Research paradigm ............................................................................................. 118
  4.2 Research design .................................................................................................. 120
  4.3 Data collection ..................................................................................................... 126
  4.4. Participants and sample ................................................................................... 127