Professional Agency for Student Teachers

Margaret Turnbull
University of Auckland

Abstract

The practicum in teacher education affords student teachers an opportunity to demonstrate capacity to operate with professional agency. Although the site of the practicum is a school or early childhood centre, preparation for practicum occurs in a tertiary institution. This paper discusses the findings of an investigation into the effectiveness of links between 'social integration' in the tertiary institution and 'system integration' in the early childhood practicum. Findings from the study revealed that capacity for student teacher professional agency in the practicum was hindered by lack of effective links between the systems. I argue that student teacher professional agency in the practicum is reliant on the effectiveness of links between social integration in the tertiary institution and system integration in the practicum.

Introduction

Professional agency for student teachers is an important concept to be developed in initial teacher education. Given the drive for teachers to engage in active professionalism (Sachs, 2000), active agency (Smyth, 1991), and deliberative agency (Edwards, 2001), it follows that student teachers must have opportunity to develop knowledge, skills and understandings pertaining to the concept. Professional agency refers to “the capacity of the student teacher (or other educator) to effectively apply appropriate professional knowledge, skills, understandings, and dispositions in professional practice contexts” (Turnbull, 2002, p.301). In this paper, I argue that student teacher professional agency in the practicum is reliant on the effectiveness of links between social integration in the tertiary institution and system integration in the practicum. In this instance, system integration refers to the manner in which theories examined in the tertiary institution are carried out in practice by student teachers in the practicum context. Examples include implementing the strands of the national curriculum Te Whaariki (Ministry of Education, 1996), and engaging in critical reflection on practice.

This paper is drawn from a larger study (Turnbull, 2002) that investigated the possibility for student teacher professional agency in the practicum. In this paper, professional practices that promoted and/or impeded system integration in the practicum are identified. An analysis of those practices that are perceived to have impeded system integration in the practicum revealed a lack of social integration in the tertiary institution and consequent underdeveloped links between the two sites of practice. Thus,
the capacity for student teacher professional agency in the practicum was hindered. Recommendations for addressing these issues are presented in this paper.

Context

The context of this study was the final practicum of a three-year Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (BEd [Tchg]) degree at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. Within this BEd (Tchg) there is a general assumption that each course contributes to preparation for the practicum. The student teachers and their designated visiting lecturers attend a mass briefing before the practicum starts, during which learning outcomes, performance criteria, and requirements for the practicum are outlined. For associate teachers, with whom students are placed with for their practicum, a separate briefing is scheduled for the late afternoon.

In addition to the achievement of specific learning outcomes there are two requirements for students on practicum. The first of these is reflection on practice. Students are required to utilise Smyth’s (1989) model of critical reflection to reflect on their practice. The model has four stages: describing an instance of practice; informing or unpacking the description for underpinning patterns or principles; confronting or stepping back from the event and examining personal historical, social and cultural contexts; and reconstructing or considering alternative views and goals for future action. Written reflections support the student’s voice in the triadic assessment process, which is the second requirement.

The triadic assessment process, facilitated by the visiting lecturer, refers to the involvement of the student teacher, associate teacher, and visiting lecturer in the written and oral assessment of whether the student teacher has met the learning outcomes for the practicum. It is intended to be a process that allows the student teacher a voice and responsibility for self-assessment within the collective assessment of the triadic process (Turnbull, 1999). An underlying assumption is that responsibility for self-assessment helps to promote student teacher professional agency in the practicum.

Theoretical Framework

A qualitative case-study design embedded within a framework of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) was employed in the Turnbull (2002) study. Giddens’ theory of structuration was selected as a framework of educational analysis as it provided a comprehensive perspective of agency, and a means of constructing the practicum as a social system. In accord with the theory of structuration, the practicum was reconceptualised as a social system (Turnbull, 2002). Social systems have a duality of structure, which implies that the rules and resources actioned by human agents are both the medium and the outcome of the recursively organised social practices (Giddens, 1984). Such a duality infers that the practicum exists through the professional practices of the key actors.

With regard to the analyses of social systems, Giddens (1984) considered it essential to examine “the modes in which institutionalised practices connect social with system
integration” (p.xxxi). According to Giddens, social integration refers to reciprocity of practices between actors or collectives in face-to-face encounters and system integration refers to the convergence of these practices in a range of contexts, and/or in the absence of an originating actor or collective. In this study, social integration indicates the reciprocity of the teaching and learning instigated within the BEd (Tchg) early childhood teacher education (ECTE) programme. System integration refers to the resultant professional practices that are actioned by student teachers in various practicum contexts in the absence of an originating actor or collective.

**Participants and Method**

The participants were six BEd (Tchg) early childhood student teachers and their assigned associate teachers and visiting lecturers. All were female, and each chose a pseudonym to protect her identity. One of the visiting lecturers was from the primary sector of the BEd (Tchg). Semi-structured individual interviews of one hour were undertaken with each participant, before and after the final practicum of the student teachers. All 36 interviews, with participants’ permission, were audio-taped and transcribed. Triangulation was achieved through comparison of perspectives from the student teachers, associate teachers and visiting lecturers and through information from the student teachers’ written reflections on practice.

The data were divided into units by engaging in “constant comparative analysis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.102). Gradually the units were grouped into broad categories and coded using an adaptation of a coding strategy devised by Guba and Lincoln (1981). The process of unit comparison was repeated with each student teacher, visiting lecturer and associate teacher transcript, and new categories were created as the need arose. Six separate bundles of data on student teacher, visiting lecturer and associate teacher pre- and post-practicum perspectives were compiled. From the analysis of the data, factors that promoted and/or impeded student teacher professional agency in the practicum were identified.

**Findings**

**Factors that Promoted Professional Agency**

Findings of the study showed that some practices instigated in the tertiary institution promoted student teacher professional agency through system integration in the practicum. For example, there was evidence from written reflections, and associate teachers’ and visiting lecturers’ perceptions that some of the student teachers were well prepared for utilising Smyth’s (1989) model for reflection. Student teachers reported that an extra workshop on critical reflection that they had requested refreshed their understanding of the process.

The triadic assessment process was another professional practice that some associate teachers perceived to work well. Kalara, a student teacher, especially liked the oral part of the process as, “I don’t write as well as I can articulate things”. Michelle, another...
student, understood the dynamics of the triadic assessment and used the process as a political tool:

You wouldn’t say anything that would offend anyone. But it went well I think. Nobody really had any problems with anybody. I think that if you didn’t get on with your AT or VL, it would be a lot harder or awkward. Yeah, it gives you the opportunity to put yourself forward and say what you have done and how you think you have done it, and that is fine. It’s good just to stand up for yourself.

The practicum briefing was another aspect of practicum preparation that participants reported to be useful in gaining a general understanding of practicum expectations. In addition, student teachers believed that a BEd (Tchg) course on Play helped them to clarify their philosophy for the forthcoming practicum. Also Huia, a visiting lecturer, noted that the Infants and Toddlers course had prepared her student teacher for working with infants and toddlers.

**Factors that Impeded Professional Agency**

Some of the factors that promoted student teacher professional agency were also found to have impeded professional agency through lack of system integration in the practicum contexts. A significant impediment was a lack of understanding in how to utilise certain stages of Smyth’s model for critical reflection. Although all of the student teachers could apply the describing and informing aspects, both Krystal and Jessica experienced difficulty in implementing a reconstruction of practice as a result of confronting their practice. Jessica disclosed:

I always saw it [reflection] as a waste of time. But this practicum, my associate sat me down after about two weeks and said, “Why aren’t you doing your reconstruction bit?” And I said, “I dunno, that’s what you do, you write it out, this is what I do, and I should have done this, and should have done that”. And she said, “Yes but you should go back and do it”.

Elsie, who happened to be the visiting lecturer for Bella, Krystal, and Jessica, said:

There is something to be said in terms of the degree being underpinned by critical reflection. However, I would like to see more energy put into practise that. We still have student teachers who really don’t understand the difference between inform and confront and issues of the social and political environment. Sometimes they can’t think beyond what they might do with the play dough tomorrow. Bella was the exception to that. Jessica was finding her way through - and Krystal occasionally. Reflection, I think, is an issue that visiting lecturers need to work on too.

From the perceptions of the student teachers, visiting lecturers and associate teachers in the study there was appreciation of the usefulness of the Smyth model for reflection.
However, there was also evidence that some of the student teachers needed to develop greater knowledge and understanding of the total process.

Just as the process for reflection presented an issue for some student teachers, the triadic assessment and inherent communication processes proved to be a second impediment to system integration in the practicum. Bella was disappointed with her experience of the triadic assessment. Although both her visiting lecturer and associate thought her practice and documentation to be of a high standard, Bella would have liked more feedback. She said, “it would have been nice to talk about my reflections and get some feedback from what I was writing. Having that kind of communication is really valuable”. However, despite critical reflection being part of her studies in the tertiary institution, she opted not to ask for feedback. She explained, “I felt quite uncomfortable in articulating what I wanted to say about a number of things because of those feelings of not rocking the boat, I guess”.

Mary also spoke of her reluctance to challenge practices that she disagreed with, due to her feelings of being a student rather than a teacher, “there was a little line there, invisible though it was, it was there”. Elsie, a visiting lecturer, wondered if there was a “legitimate place for communication skills to be taught in the degree programme” in order to support student teachers’ ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with associate teachers and visiting lecturers who were also assessors of practicum practice.

Also, in relation to the triadic assessment, there appeared to be variations in the facilitation process. In Jessica’s case the triadic assessment spanned two visits from her visiting lecturer as the associate teacher was new to the process and needed coaching, “so my triadic was split into two and very informal”. Michelle reported that her ‘triadic’ was actually a ‘quadratic’ process, as did Krystal who revealed other inconsistencies in relation to the facilitation process:

Mine was actually a quadratic, because I had the other teacher there as well. It was awesome. We just sat down because it was on a non-contact afternoon. So my visiting lecturer came in for lunch, we had a big feed. I was very relaxed, and we didn’t do it like - this person, and then that person. Everyone was able to say what they wanted, and I really enjoyed it actually. It was really good. It was relaxing.

Jessica and Krystal appreciated the informality of the triadic assessment of their final practicum. However, based on student teacher accounts, it was evident that there were variations in how the process was facilitated.

Ella, a visiting lecturer, asserted:

I would like to see students be given more preparation to present their view. Also, visiting lecturers need to be consistent in facilitating the process. Student teachers seem to have had different experiences with the triadic.
Gaps in the understanding and practice of the triadic assessment process and a need for more effective communication skills in the student teachers were issues that hindered system integration in the practicum. As a result, the capacity for student teacher professional agency was also affected.

A third impediment to system integration in the practicum was a lack of balance between theory and practice in the BEd (Tchg) ECTE programme. Adrienne, an associate, considered that the teacher education programme lacked provision for student teachers to gain resources for stories, repertoire for music and movement, and ideas for art and for outdoor play. This perspective was reflected in the views of her student, Mary, who said:

I really feel that we have not got enough practical knowledge from being here at College. I have got lots of theories, but I found myself lacking when it comes to music or art experiences or stuff like that. I found that really difficult because I didn’t have enough to pull on.

Furthermore, a number of associates expressed concern about the theoretical approach in the BEd (Tchg) and felt there was too much emphasis on written work in relation to the practicum. Pat, a visiting lecturer, was of the opinion that there was a lack of integration in teaching about planning in the BEd (Tchg) programme, and that this resulted in gaps in student teacher knowledge about practical application:

There are huge gaps in practicalities in the expectations between Professional Inquiry and Education and Curriculum in terms of planning. They expect us [in Curriculum] to do it, and we expect them to teach the practical applications. It’s not co-ordinated. It is very disjointed.

Jessica, a student teacher, confirmed Pat’s views to some extent, “we have never actually sat down and looked at planning as a whole. It was sort of - go out and see what the centres are doing and they will teach you about planning”. Both Mary and Jessica were also concerned about how to incorporate Learning Stories (Carr, 2001) in their planning, and Adrienne, an associate teacher, was perturbed that a student on a final practicum was unclear about her philosophy of practice.

Inconsistency in the supervisory practices of visiting lecturers was the fourth impediment to system integration in the practicum. Concern about lack of consistency was expressed by student teachers and visiting lecturers:

There is really no consistency, because some lecturers push the students a lot and some don’t. People have said it before - that what they want is to get consistency between the lecturers about what they are wanting. (Krystal, student teacher)

One of the main problems we have as students, because I know it’s not just me, is inconsistency with the visiting lecturers. I know it’s a huge thing to try
and monitor. But sometimes it is just so unfair – it’s so unfair. (Jessica, student teacher)

Jessica, emphasising the need for moderation of visiting lecturer supervisory practices, quoted examples of inconsistency in relation to previous practica, including how one visiting lecturer didn’t read her practicum file, in comparison with another, who made “huge demands” about what should be recorded in the file. Michelle asserted, “well one thing with the visiting lecturers was that they all expected different things”. Ella, a visiting lecturer, who was disturbed about inconsistencies in her peers’ supervisory practices, reiterated Michelle’s view. Ella saw a need for professional development to clarify understanding and practice of both the triadic and the reflective processes:

We have inconsistencies as to what we expect – the level we expect, and the written work we expect - and the triadic process? There seems to be a range of experiences for that process. Also, with reflection, I have had some students say, “Oh last time I just explained it. Why are you saying that I have to write this?”. It puts us all in a difficult situation and leads students to playing one visiting lecturer off against another. We are not presenting consistency. We need to have more professional development for ourselves so that we are all delivering the same message.

Elsie also reported inconsistency in her peers’ supervisory practice. A student teacher that she had visited had “no planning at all because she didn’t believe in it”. Elsie considered that the student’s erroneous belief about planning was indicative of previous inadequate supervision by visiting lecturers.

A fifth impediment to system integration in the practicum was revealed by Elsie and Huia, visiting lecturers, who considered that some institutional practices detracted from a strong and united image of the ECTE sector. Both visiting lecturers were concerned that this deficit in image had the potential to hinder student teacher practice in the practicum. Elsie deplored the use of lecturing staff from the primary sector to deliver early childhood curriculum and to visit and assess early childhood student teachers during practicum. Also, she believed that early childhood student teachers often “felt marginalised in many of their lectures” due to lack of acknowledgement by primary lecturers of early childhood values and practices. Elsie was apprehensive that student teachers might think that early childhood college staff members were “victims of a hierarchy in acquiescing to lecturers from other sectors being employed to teach early childhood curriculum”. In this regard, Elsie asserted, “we need to be writing, we need to be speaking out, and we need to be putting our case forward”.

Huia expressed dismay about the prevailing culture of the learning environment in her specific centre at the tertiary institution:

We talk about early childhood being holistic. But I know that when students come to our area [in the institution] they get this horrid feeling that it is a hard place to be in. In fact, I had one student say that they had been told about the exam at the end of the year, and already she was concerned - she said, “I
believe nobody has passed this exam”, which isn’t true. But I feel bad about it, you know.

Both Huia and Elsie noted that ECTE was a very small group within the tertiary institution, and needed a strong and united image in order to promote early childhood values to student teachers. Early childhood values are best promoted by those who have passion and commitment to the essential nature of early childhood teacher education (Keesing-Styles, 2002).

Discussion

Several factors were identified to have hindered effective links between the tertiary institution and early childhood centre, and, consequently the capacity of student teachers to operate with professional agency in the practicum. These factors were:

- The implementation of certain stages of Smyth’s model for critical reflection.
- The triadic assessment process.
- Insufficient balance between theory and practice in the BEd (Tchg) programme.
- Inconsistency in visiting lecturer supervisory practice.
- An expressed need for a strong and united image of ECTE.

However, given the potential of some of these professional practices to support system integration in the practicum, to what extent did the lack of social integration in the ECTE sector at the tertiary institution impede the effectiveness of the links between the two systems?

There was evidence that insufficient preparation in utilising Smyth’s model of reflection hindered system integration in the practicum for some of the student teachers. Developing skill and ability in reflective practice takes time, but is an important aspect of professional practice (Smith, 1999). The student teachers in this study had been introduced to Smyth’s (1989) model for reflection in their first year of the BEd (Tchg) programme. Although some of the student teachers were apparently successful in utilising the model, others demonstrated an inability to connect theory to practice (Halliday, 1998). Student teachers divulged that they had requested an extra workshop on reflective practice prior to their final practicum. However, a question arises about the necessity of such practice, especially in the third year of the degree programme. Moreover, Ella, a visiting lecturer, spoke of her concerns about colleagues who had neglected the requirement for student teachers to present written reflections. If critical reflection and the use of Smyth’s model is recognised as an underpinning element of the degree programme, then ECTE staff must be consistent in their knowledge and practice of the model. Also, due emphasis must be given to the development of student teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the model throughout the three years of the degree programme. Effective implementation of the model in practice must be an expectation during students’ final practicum. Visiting lecturers’ varied perceptions on the use of the model impedes student teachers’ and associate teachers’ knowledge, understanding and practice of reflection, and also indicates a lack of social integration in the tertiary institution.
The second impediment to system integration was the variations in how the triadic assessment process was facilitated by visiting lecturers. In one case it became an informal affair over lunch. Although the triadic assessment was aimed at balancing power dynamics in assessment, an ‘informal lunch’ process was not what was envisaged. Student teachers and associate teachers must be knowledgeable about the model, and have opportunity to gain skill in participating in the process. The visiting lecturer, as facilitator, must understand the model at a deep level, and have appropriate skills to support the process (Turnbull, 1999). Visiting lecturer variations in knowledge and practice of the triadic assessment process are also indicative of a lack of social integration in the tertiary institution.

An insufficiently balanced approach to theory and practice in the BEd (Tchg) programme for ECTE was the third impediment to system integration. In some instances the student teachers appeared well prepared for practicum, but in other instances they exhibited what might be perceived as a theory to practice gap (Halliday, 1998). The students variously demonstrated a lack in ability to apply knowledge and understanding in assessment and planning; to engage in effective practice in some curriculum areas; to reconstruct practice as a result of critical reflection; to utilise effective communication and advocacy skills; and to articulate a beginning philosophy of professional practice. It follows that any deficit in knowledge and practice will detract from system integration, and hinder student teacher professional agency during the practicum. It is well documented that substantive preparation is fundamental to student teacher success during practicum (Le Cornu, 2000; Martinez, 1998). With regard to the student teachers in this study, it is accepted that all BEd (Tchg) courses contribute to preparation for the practicum, although it is not known to what extent provision is made for balance between theory and practice.

Another provision for practicum preparation was the practicum-briefing meetings. However, it is debatable whether in-depth preparation for practicum can be achieved in a one hour mass briefing. It is impossible to determine individual understanding, and any scaffolding of learning is, of necessity, directed to group response. Also, practicum-briefing meetings for students and visiting lecturers take place in an ‘on call’ time, signalling that they are perceived as an ‘extra’. This practice is unlikely to promote social integration in the BEd (Tchg) programme. Ideally, in terms of system integration, student teachers, visiting lecturers and associate teachers should be present at the same practicum-briefing meeting.

The fourth impediment to system integration in the practicum was visiting lecturer inconsistency in supervisory practice. This impediment also indicated a lack of social integration in the ECTE sector in the tertiary institution. Student teachers were concerned about visiting lecturer differences in expectations about written work and professional practice. Some considered the variations in supervisory practices to be unfair and urged for some form of moderation of visiting lecturer supervisory practice. Conversely, visiting lecturers found that student teachers played one lecturer against another in terms of criticising differences in current supervisory practice compared with those in previous practica. Visiting lecturers urged that more professional development was necessary to clarify the processes of required institutional practices. Professional
development for visiting lecturers might well include training in the skill of “learning conversations” (Timperley, 2001). The term learning conversations alludes to mentoring strategies devised by Timperley to increase the effectiveness of interaction during feedback on professional practice. If system integration in the practicum is to be achieved, then appropriate learning conversations must occur not only among visiting lecturers, but also between visiting lecturers and student teachers. Moreover, the conversation must also include associate teachers.

The fifth impediment to effective links between the two sites of teacher education was a perceived lack of strength and unity in the ECTE sector in the tertiary institution. This deficit impedes social integration in the tertiary institution and has the potential to impact negatively on system integration in the practicum. I suggest that improvement in strength and unity would be accomplished with greater emphasis on achieving social integration in the ECTE sector at the tertiary institution.

It is impossible to gauge the extent to which weakness in social integration in the ECTE sector at the tertiary institution affected system integration and student teacher professional agency in the practicum. This study was limited to the perceptions of six student teachers and their respective associate teachers and visiting lecturers. However, within this small sample there was evidence to indicate that student teacher impediments to operating with professional agency in the practicum were due to lack of social integration in the ECTE sector of the tertiary institution. Problems in social integration in one site of practice impeded the effectiveness of system integration in the other site of practice. The result was that the capacity for student teachers to operate with professional agency in the practicum was hindered.

To counteract such hindrances to student teacher professional agency in the practicum, the ECTE staff must work collaboratively to determine their values and to present a more consistent model of pedagogical and supervisory practice. Also ECTE staff and associate teachers must operate with professional agency so that student teachers have appropriate role models. In addition, student teachers must be given opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of professional agency, as well as support in effectively applying appropriate professional knowledge, skills, understandings, and dispositions in professional practice contexts.

**Conclusion**

The development of student teacher professional agency is an important issue. To increase the capacity for student teachers to operate with professional agency, social integration in the tertiary institution must be a priority. An integrated social system in the tertiary institution would improve the effectiveness of the links to system integration in the practicum.

Giddens’ theory of structuration offers a number of frameworks for investigating professional practice in educational settings. In this study, the links between social and system integration were explored. However, structuration theory also provides a concept
of agency that might be further investigated, and a frame for the reconceptualisation and analysis of educational settings as social systems.

References


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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Margaret Turnbull has been Head of Practicum, Early Childhood Teacher Education at the Auckland College of Education for twelve years. She has worked in early childhood teacher education since the kindergarten days at Arney Road, Remuera, in Auckland. Currently, she is Principal Lecturer, Postgraduate Studies at the University of Auckland Epsom Campus. Her research interests are professional development, supervision, reflective practice, and working with adults.