

Original Research

The Early Childhood Practicum as a Social System

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Abstract

In this paper, the early childhood practicum is conceptualised as a social system. Understanding the practicum as a social system will provide key players with a context that enables insight into its inherent structural properties and into the significance of the intersections of practice. If key players developed knowledge and understanding of the structural properties of the practicum and of the transformative nature of the intersections of practice, there would be greater provision for student teacher professional agency in the practicum.

Key Words: Student teacher; professional agency; practicum; social system

Introduction

Social actors in the early childhood practicum include the associate teacher, the visiting lecturer, the children and their parents, as well as other staff members (Martinez, 1998). However, central to the notion of the practicum, is the student teacher. Practicum experiences for early childhood student teachers occur in early childhood centres. The learning environment of each centre in New Zealand is influenced by the children, their families, and the staff members (McLeod, 2003) as well as legislative requirements, government policies, and the broader socio-political issues affecting the early childhood profession (Cullen, 1999; May, 1999). Each centre has its own philosophy developed by the team of staff, from which the pedagogy is determined. It is to this context that each student teacher on practicum brings her or his unique perspective, based on experience, knowledge and disposition.

This paper is drawn from a larger study (Turnbull, 2002) that investigated the possibility for student teacher professional agency in the practicum. Professional agency has been defined as “the capacity of the student teacher (or other educator) to effectively apply appropriate professional knowledge, skills, understandings, and dispositions in professional practice contexts” (Turnbull, 2005, p. 59). In the Turnbull (2002) study, in order to examine the idea of human agency, the practicum was conceptualised as a social system where human agents go about their daily social practices. Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration was used as a theoretical framework to guide this conceptualisation.

In this paper, Giddens’ (1984) theory of the structuration of social systems is explained. The context and method of research are outlined. Based on Giddens’ theory, the early childhood practicum in New Zealand is conceptualised as a social system. Data is drawn from the Turnbull (2002) study to illustrate links between actual social practices in the practicum and the various aspects of structuration theory. I contend that if key players developed knowledge and understanding of the structural properties of the practicum and of the transformative nature of the intersections of practice, there would be greater provision for student teacher professional agency in the practicum.

Giddens' Theory of the Structuration of Social Systems

The structuration of social systems (Giddens, 1984) is outlined in Figure 1. As indicated in Figure 1, social systems comprise reproduced social practices, which have structural properties or rules and resources. According to Giddens' theory, rules and resources are actioned by human agents. Giddens pointed out that rules and resources not only exist in the time and space of action but also in people's knowledge base or memory. Thus, structure is expressed in the things that people do in a regularised and institutional way (Giddens, 1984; Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Giddens made the point, "structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity" (Giddens, 1984, p. 26). This is taken to imply that appropriate knowledgeableability of the agent is a key element in structuration theory.

People inherently engage the rules of social action and interaction as resources in their everyday practices (Giddens, 1993). These practices constitute the structural properties of the institutions where the people are employed. On one hand, the structural properties or rules and resources of institutions comprise the every day recursive practices of their members. On the other hand, the existence of institutions relies on the capability of its constituent members to reproduce continually those structural properties (Giddens, 1984). Perceived as a duality, the structure of a social system comprises rules and resources that are reproduced through the recurring actions of member agents (Giddens, 1984; Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Rules

The rules of social practices frequently relate to specific instances of conduct, and have two inherent aspects; they help to constitute meaning, and they contribute to the sanctioning modes of social conduct (Giddens, 1984). The main characteristics of the rules of social practices can be described as binary opposites. Rules that are constantly invoked as opposed to those that are not always practised are known as intensive/shallow. Rules that can be articulated, versus those that are passively understood are referred to as discursive/tacit. Other binary opposites include rules that are informal/formal and rules that are weakly sanctioned/strongly sanctioned. Giddens clarified that in the articulation of a rule, an interpretation is made which, in itself, could affect the application.

Rules and Ontological Security

Giddens (1984) proposed that rules help to sustain ontological security. He defined ontological security as "confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity" (Giddens, 1984, p.302). Two phenomena of ontological security can be distinguished (Giddens, 1984). First is the comfort that is gained from practices of habit. Typically, any disruption to habit will be experienced as unsettling. The second phenomenon is the routines that are adopted when in the presence of another or co-presence (Giddens, 1984).

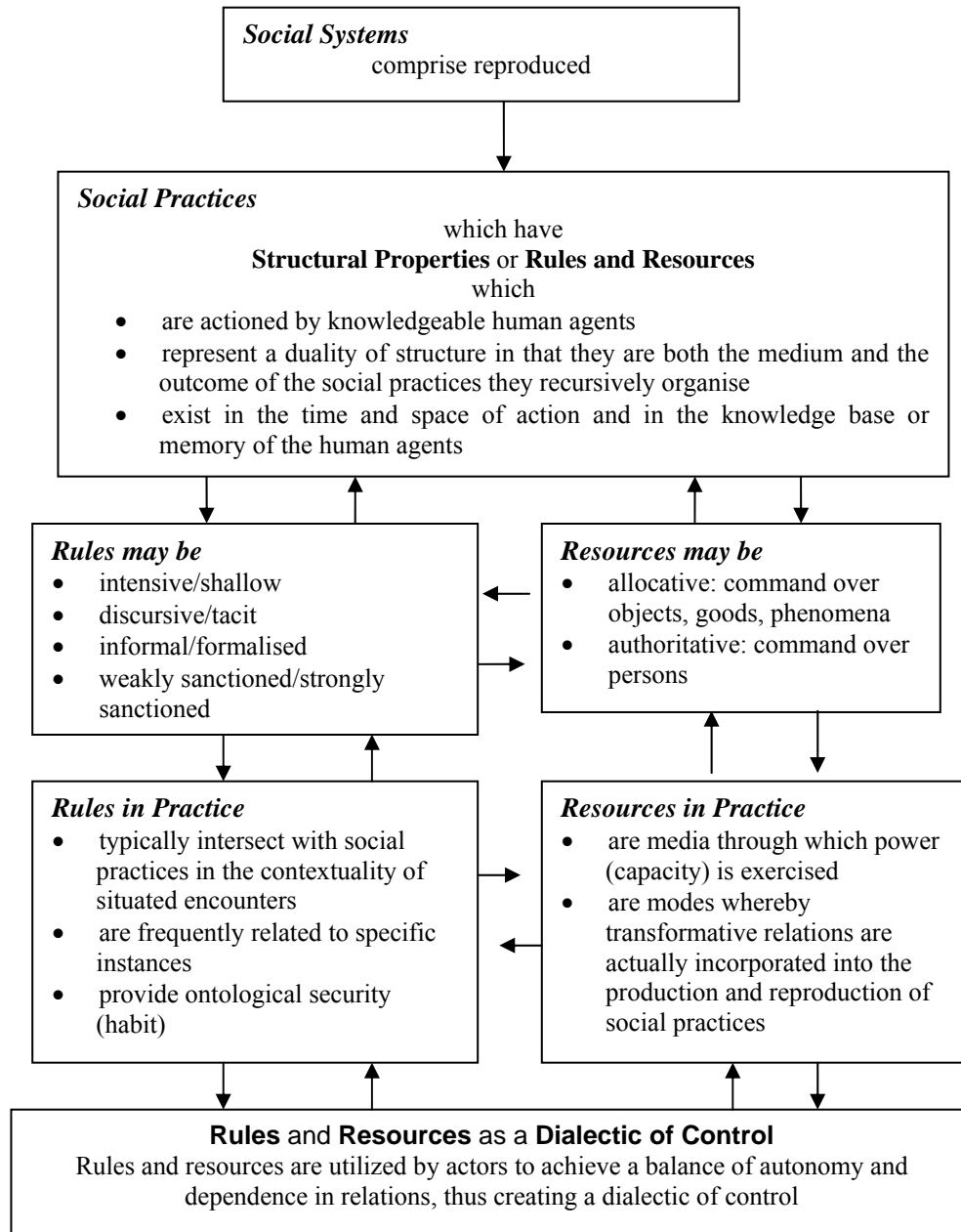


FIGURE 1. The Structuration of Social Systems (Turnbull, 2002, p. 159, based on Giddens, 1984)

Co-Presence

Pertinent to the notion of co-presence, Giddens explained that in face-to-face encounters individuals utilise tact to ensure that neither party loses face or threatens the other, “actors have a responsibility to protect other participants from blows to their self-esteem; they also have a right to expect that others will refrain from ‘assaults’ on their own self” (Giddens, 1993, p. 15). Giddens’ perspective is that if actors break social rules they place themselves at risk of social sanction. This view is intrinsic to his notion that rules enable action, but, in abiding by those rules, individuals are constrained by them (Giddens, 1993).

Aligned with the concept of co-presence is the notion of “mutual knowledge” which is the knowledge incorporated in encounters (Giddens, 1993, p. 91). Such knowledge is practical in character, and, although it may not be directly accessible to the consciousness of actors, it allows individuals to continue with the routines of their lives (Giddens, 1993).

Resources

With regard to the concept of resources, Giddens defined two distinguishable types. The first is allocative resources. These refer to the capability of generating command over objects, goods or material phenomena. The second type of resource is termed authoritative. This means having “transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 33).

Although Giddens viewed resources as media through which power is exercised, he argued that we should not see power as a resource. Rather, his perspective is that in established social systems, there are relations of ‘autonomy’ and ‘dependence’ between actors or collectives in the contexts of social interaction. These relations of autonomy and dependence are viewed by Giddens as reciprocity of practices that occur between actors or collectives.

Resources and the Dialectic of Control

Giddens alleged that all forms of dependence offer a resource whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. This notion is what he calls the dialectic of control in social systems. Giddens further defined the notion of a dialectic of control as, “the two-way character of the distributive aspect of power (power as control); how the less powerful manage resources in such a way as to exert control over the more powerful in established power relationships” (Giddens, 1984, p. 374).

Context and Method

The context of the Turnbull (2002) study from which this paper is drawn was the final practicum of a three-year Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (BEd [Tchg]) degree at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The participant sample was six volunteers from the BEd (Tchg) early childhood student teachers and their assigned associate teachers and visiting lecturers who agreed to participate. All were female and each chose a pseudonym to protect her identity. The six student teachers had placements in either a sessional or full-time early childhood centre.

A qualitative case-study design was used in which the unit of analysis (Merriam, 1998) was the final practicum experienced by the student teachers. Giddens’ (1984) theory was drawn on to reconceptualise the practicum as a social system. Semi-structured interviews with each participant (6 student teachers, 6 associate teachers and 6 visiting lecturers) before and after the student teachers went on their practicum were undertaken, providing a total of 36

interview transcripts for analysis. With participants' permission these were audiotaped and transcribed and later verified by participants.

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 (Merriam, 1998) 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. Abductive strategies, that is, the production of a technical account from a lay account (Blaikie, 2000), were utilised in combination with Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration to reconceptualise the practicum as a social system.

The Early Childhood Practicum as a Social System

Based on Giddens' perspectives on social systems, the early childhood practicum is conceptualised as a social system in Figure 2. The practicum is depicted within the individual culture and philosophy of the centre. The member actors, who recursively action the inherent social practices are identified. The crucial intersection of practice between the student teacher (ST) and the associate teacher (AT) is at the centre of the social system.

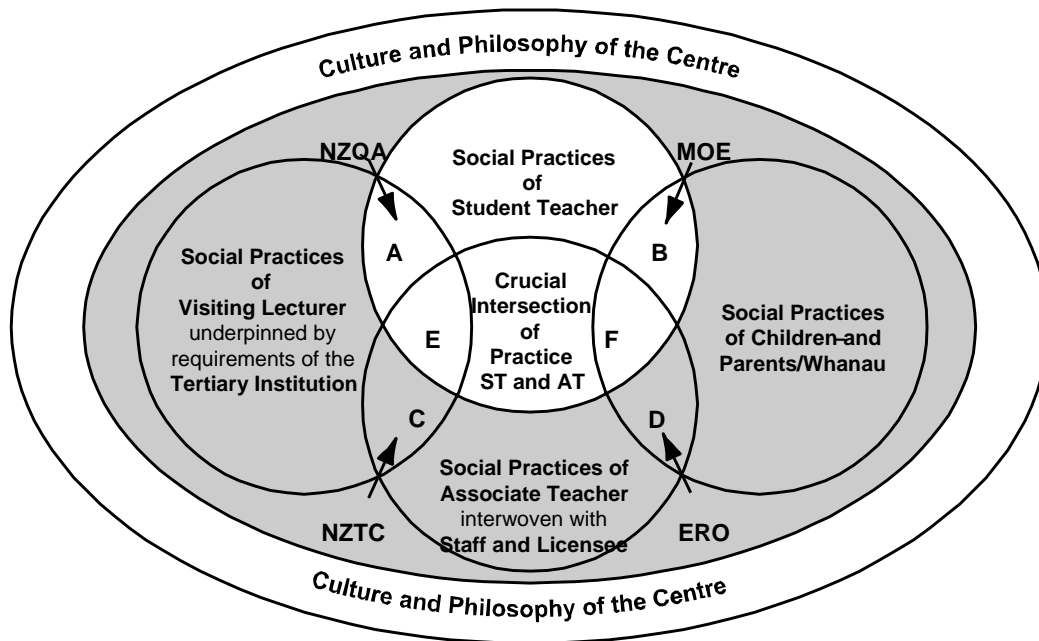


FIGURE 2. The Early Childhood Practicum as a Social System

A, B, C, D, E, and F indicate other significant intersections of practice which provide the possibility for transformation of practice:

- A. the student teacher and visiting lecturer underpinned by the requirements of the tertiary institution, influenced by legislation of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) over the degree programme;
- B. the student teacher and the children and their parents, influenced by legislation of the Ministry of Education (MOE) over the early childhood curriculum;
- C. the visiting lecturer and the associate teacher, other staff members and the licensee of the centre, underpinned by the requirements of the tertiary institution and influenced by legislation of the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) over the registration of qualified teachers;
- D. the children and parents, and associate teacher, staff members and licensee of the centre, influenced by legislation of the Education Review Office (ERO) over the quality of practice in the centre;
- E. the student teacher, associate teacher and visiting lecturer, and the triadic assessment of the student teacher's professional practice; and
- F. the student teacher, and associate teacher, other staff and licensee, children and parents.

Figure 2 also illustrates the influence of the government bodies, New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Ministry of Education, Education Review Office, and the New Zealand Teachers' Council whose legislation governs the practices of the practicum. The requirements of these government bodies are reproduced through the professional practice of the associate teacher, other staff members, the visiting lecturer, and through the developing professional practice of the student teacher. Thus, the practicum is conceptualised as a social system.

Actual Social Practices in the Practicum

In this section of the paper, data from the Turnbull (2002) study is used to make links with aspects of structuration theory and actual social practices in the practicum. The first aspect to be addressed is the notion of a social system existing in time and space.

The Practicum in Time and Space

According to Giddens' (1984) theory, the perspective of time-space is an essential component of social practices in social systems. To this effect, data analysis confirmed that the practicum exists during the time-space of actual practice, and in the knowledge base and memory of the relevant actors. The student teachers, associate teachers and visiting lecturers in this study each had views from previous practicum experiences stored in their memories. It was also evident that, influenced by the time-space of recent practice, new images of the practicum were imprinted in the memory of the participants.

For example, before going out on her final practicum, Krystal considered that it was a bonus if she had a visiting lecturer and associate teacher that she could "get along with."

I think it's definitely a bonus if you do get along with them. But I don't think there is any point in going into a practicum with a negative attitude. I think you need to be positive regardless of what happens or what lecturer or associate you've got. You need to be positive.

The other student teachers experienced a mixture of nervousness and positive anticipation. Michelle typified their thoughts and feelings when she said, "I'm looking forward to it, seven weeks, and being with the kids again - but I'm feeling a bit nervous." After their final

practicum, the student teachers recalled being accepted as a team member, being treated as a teacher, and being valued as a colleague.

The visiting lecturers perceived the forthcoming practicum as: “professional development for student teachers”; “making connections between the tertiary institution and community”; “opportunity to gain more knowledge of the student as a person”; “helping students to relate theory to practice”; and “interaction with associate teachers.” However, they were concerned about how could they give time to individual needs in supervision as well as meet other professional demands such as preparation for teaching, teaching, marking, staff meetings, writing new courses, and personal study to upgrade professional qualifications. A second issue was the early childhood values that prevailed in some centres. As Elsie said, “one of the things I like least is when I realise that students are in centres that don’t fit well with the philosophies that we support.” Reflections on their supervisory practice post-practicum included: “I should have talked with the associate in the first instance – but she wasn’t there”; “I could have been firmer around some issues”; “how does my disposition impact on the relationships that I establish? Do I form better relationships with students who have similar values to my own? How does my role as visiting lecturer impact on students from the Pacific Island’s nations?.”

From their previous experience of practicum, the associate teachers talked about reciprocity of practice - their expertise and student teachers’ currency of theory:

Adrienne: The new language and theories they bring – it stretches me as a person

Caprine: I like that they can grow and learn from what we can offer and that they have much to offer us.

Sally: Students are up to date with theory and research – I enjoy seeing their growth in practice.

Twinkle: I hate writing out the reports at the end.

Some associates mentioned their appreciation of “an extra pair of hands.” Nearly all of them expressed satisfaction in contributing to the professional growth and development of student teachers and the inherent service to the profession. Post-practicum, associate teachers talked about the professional judgement involved in supporting and guiding their student teacher. Each of them could pinpoint instances where they might have “done it differently.” Comments included: “the weekly written report - she did get them - but not on the right day”; “probably moving her on more in science”; “I tried to squash her into a box that I perceived it was expected for her to be in. Well it didn’t work.”

Using the Rules and Resources

Social systems are dependent on the capacity of member actors to recursively action the rules and resources of social practice (see Figure 1). The professional capacity of the visiting lecturers and associate teachers in this study was underpinned by qualifications and experience in the field of early childhood education, and knowledge of the BEd (Tchg) programme. All had opportunity to attend a practicum briefing to clarify understandings of the information contained in the tertiary institution’s Handbooks. The student teachers were in their final year of a three-year BEd (Tchg) programme. It was assumed that they had the capacity to participate in effective professional practice, engage in critical reflection, blend with the philosophy of the centre, and successfully achieve the learning outcomes of the practicum.

In this section of the paper, findings pertaining to participants' use of rules and resources are presented. Although there were examples of effective use of rules and resources, there was also evidence of ineffective utilisation of rules and resources by the key players.

Student teachers recognised the children and their parents as important authoritative resources: "I worked a lot with children who had English as a second language and built a relationship with their parents"; "we had so much contact with the children, their parents, the whole community, and organising experiences with them"; and "I enjoyed working with the kids." Also, all of the students acknowledged the significance of having a supportive and knowledgeable associate teacher. Mary exemplified the student teachers' view on their most important relationship in the practicum:

I think the associate is the most important relationship. The visiting lecturer is important, obviously, but I think the associate, she is the one that is there all the time. She is the one that you are dealing with day after day. I think if you haven't got a good associate it can affect your whole practicum.

Unfortunately, Mary's practicum was affected by her relationship with her associate teacher. She disclosed, "if I were an actual teacher, I wouldn't have a dilemma about acting with agency because I would be part of the staff – the tensions arose because I was a student and I didn't feel I could say anything." In similar vein, Bella, another student teacher revealed, "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."

Krystal, on the other hand, illustrated her capacity to utilise rules and resources available to her:

We went to the Sky Tower and the Museum. The kids just loved it. They're kids that wouldn't normally get opportunities like that - ever. Most of them were recent immigrants to New Zealand. The communication – I think there was about nine different languages - it was more of a body language thing. I talked to the parents as best I could. There was complete acceptance of everybody. I loved it. They were just completely different to my schooling. I was in a Christian private school in Christchurch. It was an awesome school, but very proper and everyone sort of had their hierarchical thing and people were standoffish. But this was complete acceptance. It was really good. I loved it.

In this instance of practice Krystal demonstrated capacity to establish effective relationships with children and their parents, to reflect critically, and to embrace the openhearted philosophy of the centre. Krystal's account of her practice was supported by perspectives that both her visiting lecturer and associate teacher held. Elsie, Krystal's visiting lecturer, asserted:

I think the children that spend time with Krystal will benefit enormously from the natural enthusiasm and this ability she has to lift everybody else's self-concept...She understands the theory - she refers to it in her writing. And it's in her philosophy quite clearly, when she articulates her philosophy, it's quite clear.

Sally, Krystal's associate teacher, said:

Krystal is a very unique person – and comfortable and confident in that. I think that, in this centre, we are sort of openhearted to all of it. We have to

deal with so much diversity – and the two – Krystal and us - really worked in that sense. Real learning going on there, and sort of exchange of bigger things too. And she did impact on the children – really and truly and positively. So that area was just superb.

However, there were times when Krystal lacked understanding of some tacit rules of professional practice. Sally was concerned about Krystal's lack of personal discipline, which detracted from her work:

...staying up late at night, socialising late, then coming in the next morning tired and under par - as teachers - you just can't operate at this level. Also, she hates paper work, hates writing - she was excellent with the children – but those other areas detracted from it, pulled her down as a whole student.

Sally had become aware of Krystal's disinclination to written work and her tendency to socialise in the evening to the detriment of her capacity to perform well the next morning. Nevertheless, Sally, despite the tertiary institution's implicit rules of associate teacher practice, chose not to confront Krystal about her lack of professionalism.

Michelle, another student, found herself in a situation where her associate was frequently absent. Although this was contrary to the rules stated in the tertiary institution's Handbooks, the situation did not deter Michelle's capacity to utilise the allocative and authoritative resources available to her:

Because my associate wasn't there, the staff treated me as if I was a member of the staff. They didn't hold anything back from me or stop me doing things because I was a student - apart from the fact that they didn't leave me alone with the kids because of the regulations. I got on really well with all of the kids and that sort of helped me. Reflections probably helped as well, reconstructing and finding different ways I could have done things, and doing them that way next time.

Michelle revealed her ability to interact with staff members and the children, to adhere to her knowledge and understanding of regulations, and to engage in reflective practice.

Conversely, Jessica explained how her lack of knowledge of allocative resources hindered her professional practice:

My own lack of professional knowledge held me back - especially the learning outcome about legislative policies, and stuff like that. I didn't know what it was, and it was like, what is this learning outcome all about?

Evidently, Jessica had not clarified any misunderstandings that she had about practicum learning outcomes either during the general pre-practicum briefing or during the individual pre-practicum meeting with her visiting lecturer. In addition, Jessica's lack of knowledge and understanding about professional dispositions was detrimental to her practice during practicum. Twinkle, Jessica's associate teacher, said:

The student's casual attitude, the lack of initiative, and off-hand body language, those sorts of things - just her general demeanour - and the feeling that was created around her, I was unable to tell whether it was her sense of humour or if she actually didn't really care about what she was doing.

Twinkle was also concerned about other aspects of Jessica's work and called upon the support of Jessica's visiting lecturer, Elsie, to help facilitate positive change in Jessica's practice.

Elsie, in response to Twinkle's call for help, explained how she used the rules and resources to support Jessica's practice:

...I also went to visit her at the end of the first week to read her reflections and help her look for a planning angle – Jessica had seemed to feel that planning was something quite prescriptive and that it would disturb the emergent curriculum. So I made a time to meet with her in the lunch hour so that we could be with the associate teacher as well. Jessica hadn't done any planning at that stage....that was followed up by with a couple more phone calls and another visit where I spent another hour and a half looking at reflections and the beginning of planning and discussing some of the issues that had come up for her working with children with English as a second language, or sometimes just with very little language at all. We also looked at some personal issues that were affecting her work and that I felt were affecting her self-concept in actual fact.

In this description of her professional practice, Elsie illustrated utilisation of professional judgement in achieving a balance in assessing, guiding, supporting, and challenging the student teacher, as well as inclusive interaction with the associate teacher.

However, visiting lecturers did not always follow the institutional rules of practice. In one instance, a visiting lecturer was happy for her student to verbally reflect on practice instead of requiring written reflections on practice; another visiting lecturer engaged in a shared lunch with the student and associate during a very 'laid back' triadic assessment of the student's professional practice; and another visiting lecturer failed to intervene when she discovered that "there was no planned programme as such" and that the associate teacher was often absent.

A Dialectic of Control

All forms of dependence offer a resource whereby those who are in a subordinate position can influence the activities of their superiors (Giddens, 1984). This notion is termed the dialectic of control in social systems (see Figure 1). In relation to the Turnbull (2002) study, the associate teachers considered that, in having student teachers on placement in their centres, they achieved reciprocity of practice – their expertise balanced by the student teacher's currency of theory. This give and take in practice provided a balance of autonomy and dependence and was synonymous with Giddens' notion of a dialectic of control. Echoing the sentiments of the associate teachers, further examples of interchange in practice, from the student teachers' perspective included:

Kalara: One of the staff had trained a while ago and she was upgrading her knowledge, and so she was unsure of how she might approach some things. I was able to offer a lot of my knowledge so that made me appreciate my philosophy and how confident I was in my practice, which was good. I also learnt about documenting *Learning Stories* from my associate.

Jessica: They had just started doing *Learning Stories* and they were still a bit unsure about what it was all about. And we have done *Learning Stories* at College, so I was able to bring them in, and we all worked together.

Mary: I felt that I was actually informing them of current theory, which was really good, and they sort of valued that. My associate recognised that and got me to talk to them about different things.

From the above examples it could be assumed that the student teachers had a tacit understanding of the power inherent in their professional practice. Their knowledge provided autonomy within their dependence upon the associate teacher and other staff to initiate them into the centre philosophy and practice.

With regard to their relationships with visiting lecturers Jessica declared, “the Professional Inquiry lecturers and the Education lecturers are all into documentation and getting the theorists and that sort of thing.” To help counteract a possible imbalance in power relations with visiting lecturers, the student teachers concentrated their practice and their documentation on the area that was known to be a passion of the lecturer. Michelle provided an account of how she dealt with situations of the perceived power of the other:

If I were having X or Y I would focus a lot more on my folder as they like lots of educational theory and things. If I got A she would want to see maths - I would do extra maths, I would have maths sticking out of my folder. If I got B, it would be language, books and literacy.

Thus, the potential for a dialectic of control for student teachers was evident.

Discussion

For the practicum to function as an effective social system, key players must be informed about the rules and resources and be prepared to action them appropriately in practice. The findings presented in this paper indicate that whilst some participants understood and followed the rules of practicum, others either did not understand the rules or chose not to follow them.

Michelle’s associate teacher broke the written rules of practicum by being frequently absent. However, Michelle utilised the authoritative resources available to her to engage in effective practice. Jessica, on the other hand, had not grasped how important it was to take opportunities, provided prior to the practicum, to understand the rules and requirements of practicum. Also, her lack of professional dispositions during her final practicum indicated a serious flaw in her teacher education programme. Fortunately, Jessica’s associate teacher and visiting lecturer applied their professional knowledge and skills to help transform Jessica’s understanding of the requirements of the practicum.

Although Krystal understood some of the rules for practicum in that she could engage in effective relationships with children and their parents, it seemed that she had little conception of being a consistently responsible team member. Perhaps Krystal judged that Sally, her associate teacher, was so ‘openhearted’ that she would accept Krystal’s ‘under par’ morning behaviour. In co-presence with Krystal, Sally chose to display ‘tact’ (Giddens, 1984) and not mention Krystal’s unacceptable morning behaviour or the fact that Krystal hated writing and paperwork. Was this avoidance to ensure that neither she nor Krystal would lose face? Giddens theorised that although rules enable action, individuals, in abiding by those rules are constrained by them. I suggest that Sally, in avoiding any hint of ‘threatening’ behaviour, was constrained by how she might effectively operate as an associate teacher.

Data analysis indicated that a ‘practicum grapevine’ among students provided an exchange of unofficial rules of practice based on previous experience of working with a specific associate teacher or visiting lecturer. Jessica and Michelle explained how student teachers

made use of grapevine information to decide which aspects of their work they should demonstrate to visiting lecturers. Other findings showed inconsistencies in visiting lecturers' practice. It is acknowledged that rules are subject to human interpretation (Giddens, 1984) and that no practicum experiences are identical in personnel or in environmental context. However, in order to promote student teacher professional agency, associate teachers and visiting lecturers must develop consistency in upholding the rules of practice.

As well as the tertiary institution's formal and informal rules, each early childhood centre has both implicit and explicit rules of behaviour that are individual to the specific setting. In regard to the implicit rules in their centres, both Mary and Bella gauged that it would be unwise to voice their opinions on a number of professional matters because of a perceived lack of their position power. According to Giddens (1984), it is within the intersections of practice in social systems that transformative action occurs. As is evidenced by the experiences of Jessica, Michelle, Krystal, Kalara, Mary and Bella, the position power of associate teachers and visiting lecturers in the intersections of practice can be used to support or to hinder the development of student teacher professional agency during the practicum.

Conclusion

Findings presented in this paper indicate that some participants demonstrated capacity to use the rules and resources pertaining to the practicum some of the time. However, there were also indications that student teachers, associate teachers and visiting lecturers could have engaged in more appropriate practice on a number of occasions. There was definitely room for improvement in practicum preparation and practice. As this research was a case study, no claims are made to generalisability. Nevertheless, if the development of student teacher professional agency is a goal for teacher education programmes, then new ways of understanding the practicum must be developed. I argue that, in conceptualising the practicum as a social system, key players will be provided with a context that enables new insight into how the practicum might function more effectively.

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