

**On ‘gazing about with a checklist’ as a method of classroom observation  
in the field experience supervision of pre-service teachers: A case study**

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*Abstract:* ‘Gazing about with a checklist’ as a kind of method of observation is employed by the Hong Kong Institute of Education to supervise student teachers’ classroom performance in their teaching practicum. Using this as a case, the current paper analyzes this method of observation as a form of supervision. Focusing on some of its advantages and disadvantages in practice, this paper argues that although the method works in some situations, it is not very effective in enhancing the student teachers’ professional development. To make up for its deficiencies, some other observational techniques are suggested.

## **I Introduction**

Observation as a method of classroom supervision is commonly used by educators in the field of teacher education, especially as a technique of evaluating student teachers’ classroom performances. The Four-Year Full-Time Bachelor of Education (Primary) (BEd(P)) programme at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) employs a kind of observation method, called in this paper method of ‘gazing about with a checklist’, in the supervision of student teachers’ classroom performances during their teaching practicum components of the programme. Using this case as the base of analysis, the present paper discusses the usage of this

technique of observation and argues that, despite some effectiveness in assessing student teachers' classroom performance, it is rather unhelpful as feedback to enhance the professional development of the student teachers' teaching abilities.

This paper includes five sections, with this introduction as Section I. After a brief review, in Section II, of some literature concerning classroom observational methods and supervision, Section III describes the usage of the specific method in the BEd(P) programme of the HKIEd. Section IV discusses some strengths and weaknesses of this method in enhancing student teachers' professional development, focusing on its weaknesses in practice. Section V provides a brief conclusion of the study.

## **II Literature review**

### *a. 'Observation' as a research method*

'Observation' is a term that is open to a wide range of interpretations. Its connotations may vary in intensity and complexity and range from implications of analysis, such as 'scrutinizing' or 'investigating', to the more informal 'looking' or 'glancing'. For professional researchers, observation is commonly used as a method to collect data or to record evidence. A common definition of observation by

researchers is 'watching', but this kind of watching is expected to include specific analysis and interpretation (Tikstine, 1998). Partly because of this, Sanger (1996:22) believes that observation can be made 'by looking at the collected evidence and seeking to discriminate the significant from the insignificant within that evidence'. A working definition of observation, as suggested by Tikstine (1998), is:

'The systematic, and as accurate as possible, collection of usually visual evidence, leading to informed judgements and to necessary changes to accepted practices.'  
(Tikstine, 1998:6)

Johnson (1994) qualifies the definition of observation further as a method mainly used 'to record behavior' and he says:

'In social research, observation is generally used to record behavior. It may be employed as a primary method of data collection to provide an accurate description of a situation; to gather supplementary data which may qualify or help interpret other sources of data; or it may be used in an exploratory way, to gain insights which can be tested by other techniques.' (Johnson,1994:52)

Therefore, observation as a research technique or method implies several features: (a) the collection of evidence, (b) the examination or analysis of the evidence and (c) the formation of significant judgments based on the evidence and the subsequent implications, such as changes and improvements, to accepted practices these judgments may entail.

There are varied types of observation. A wide terminologies, such as,

formal and informal, structured and unstructured, systematic and participant, are used to describe the features of observation approaches. Broadly speaking, however, observation approaches can be divided into two major kinds: non-participant and participant observations. Non-participant observation is normally an approach, which is a process whereby the observer devises a systematic set of rules for recording and classifying events, is perceived to be as objective as possible with the least intervention of the observer in the process being observed. The result of this kind of observation is usually expressed in quantitative terms. While participant observation, on the other hand, suggests a more detailed and involved relationship between the observer and the process under observation. This type of observation is an approach that often associated with ethnographic or qualitative observation techniques in which the observer attempts to arrive at an understanding of meaning of activities for the subjects being observed. (Croll, 1986:1) In addition, a variety of instruments or tools can be used for both non-participant and participant observations, such as checklists, field notes, and even audiovisual recordings (Tilstone, 1998; Montgomery, 2002).

However, any kind of method, including techniques, instruments or tools, should be in accord with the specific purposes of a research, that is, the chosen methods or techniques, should strive ‘to the aim of illuminating a particular research issue, or solving a particular research or evaluation problem’ (Sanger, 1996:40). If the

chosen research methods or techniques are suitable to the particular purpose of a piece of research, the procedure of research will have validity. Otherwise, the validity, or in related terms, the ‘responsiveness’, ‘fairness’, ‘trustworthiness’ or ‘accuracy’, of the research will be in doubt.

*b. Classroom observation and school supervision*

Classroom observation has the same general features of observations reviewed above, and has become a significant method in teacher education out at least 30 years. It is believed that professionals involved in teacher education are the ‘ultimate factor’ in determining the quality of what goes on in the classroom and it is, therefore, important to consider the place of appraisal in the development of the professional skills necessary to improve teaching and learning (e.g. Montgomery, 2002; Tilstone, 1998).

Classroom observation is widely used as a method for classroom research and, as well as, for classroom performance appraisal. Moore (1998) considers classroom observation a crucial part of the appraisal system for both student teachers and the institutions that they are involved in:

‘Classroom observation has formed an important part of the appraisal process, contributing both to professional and institutional development in the form of school improvement. The development of classroom observation within the appraisal cycle and its subsequent impact on classroom practice, remains a goal

worthy of achievement.’ (Moore, 1998:104)

Jones (1993) also points out that:

‘Classroom observation is only one way of gathering data for appraisal purposes but if appraisal of performance is about improving the quality of children’s education by improving teacher effectiveness, then looking at what is actually happening in the classroom is vital.’ (Jones, 1993:67)

Because of this, teacher educators and school administrators commonly employ classroom observation as an important method in supervision. Literature that provides us ideas and practical cases of teacher or school supervision mostly relates to the usage of classroom observation. Pajak (2000), for example, makes contribution to the field of ‘clinical’ supervision by discussing a dozen of major supervisory models, and all of which involves classroom observation. Another example is Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) who provide us valuable ideas on the usage of observation in school supervision. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002)’s analysis on formative and summative evaluations, for example, is helpful for us to understand observation as a supervision method in practice, as they state:

‘Evaluation can have a number of focuses, some which are more compatible with events, purposes, and characteristics of supervision than others. Evaluation experts, for example, make an important distinction between *formative* and *summative* evaluation. Teacher-evaluation procedures typically found in school can be classified as summative. Evaluation that emphasizes ongoing growth and development would be considered formative.’ (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002:223)

In the strictest sense, formative and summative evaluation cannot be separated, for

each contains aspects of the other, but Sergiovanni and Starratt believe that to separate formative evaluation from summative one is important in practice. The focus of some kind of supervision, such as the kind of ‘clinical’ supervision, should be on formative evaluation, because ‘the supervisor is first and foremost interested in improving teaching and increasing teachers’ personal development’. (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002: 224) On teacher’s classroom performance, Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) argue that what more important than right teaching performance is the teacher’s potential ability of good teaching:

‘Knowledge and understanding are not enough. Teachers also are expected to put their knowledge to work — to demonstrate that they *can do* the job. Still, demonstrating knowledge is a fairly low-level competency. Most teachers are competent enough and clever enough to come up with the right teaching performance when the supervisor is around. The proof of the pudding is whether they *will do* the job of their own free will and on a sustained basis.’ (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002: 214)

Those interesting arguments directly initiated my thinking on the effectiveness of the method employed by supervisors of HKIEd in classroom supervision, which will be discussed in detail in Section IV.

c. *‘Gazing about with a checklist’ as a method of classroom supervision*

The term ‘gazing about’ comes from Montgomery (2002) and refers a method or technique of classroom observation. In the book, *Helping Teachers*

*Develop through Classroom Observation* (2002), Montgomery discussed eight methods or techniques that commonly used in the field of teacher supervision before introducing a new model of ‘classroom observation sampling frame’. One of them is called ‘gazing about’. The process of ‘gazing about’ in supervision described by Montgomery (2002:36) reads as below:

‘The observer usually sits with the pupils and looks at the teacher teaching the lesson. When the pupils are settled down to a particular task the observer may get up and walk around, looking at what the pupils are doing and perhaps giving some help. After the lesson the observer and the teacher retire to a quiet area and the observer shares thoughts on what was seen, using sell and tell, for example, or any of the methods already outlined. At the end of this session the observer may write a summary report of the main views on what was seen, not always modified by the discussion which took place afterwards.’

The description does not mention whether the observer holds a checklist when he or she conducts a ‘gazing about’ observation, but Montgomery believes that the checklist as an instrument is commonly used by most types of observation and a good checklist will provide observation a helpful proposed sampling frame which ‘established on the basis of experience in classrooms and discussion’ (Montgomery, 2002:39). So it is reasonable for us to believe that ‘gazing about’ as a formal method of classroom observation might not avoid the help of checklist in practice. Therefore, following Montgomery (2002), the current paper will use the term ‘gazing about with a checklist’ to refer the method of classroom observation used by the HKIEd

programme. Taking the BEd(P) programme of the HKIEd as a study case, this paper will discuss the effectiveness of the method in supervision practice in light of the literature reviewed above in this section.

### **III The case**

Field-experience (FE) is a vital component of the BEd(P) programme at the HKIEd. FE offers student teachers the opportunity to integrate the theories and knowledge they have learned with a field-based practicum in primary schools. During the eight or ten week period of the FE component, lecturers, called supervisors in this paper, from the HKIEd visit student teachers in schools, usually one or two times per student, to supervise and evaluate their teaching practicum. The supervision focuses on classroom teaching and the main method used by the supervisors is classroom observation. Based on my observation on the supervision, the general FE classroom observation process can be briefly described below as a starting point for this particular study:

A supervisor will inform a student teacher the date and time of a school visit at least one day in advance. On the day of supervision, the supervisor arrives at the school about a half hour before the lesson begins and reviews the lesson plan,

which has been submitted earlier by the student teacher, and asks some questions of the lesson design, if any. Then, when the school-bell rings, the supervisor goes to the classroom following the student teacher. After saying hello to the class, the supervisor sits in a corner of the classroom with the pupils and starts his or her classroom observation.

The supervisor opens the student teacher's files and takes out a prepared and standard checklist, which is called the 'Teaching Practice Supervision Form' in the programme, and begins to observe as the student teacher conducts the lesson. During the 35-minute class period, the supervisor pays attention to the student teacher's performance in teaching as well as to the pupils' activities in the classroom. When the pupils are settled down to a particular task the supervisor may get up and walk around, looking at what the pupils are doing and perhaps even offering some help, but not too much, as the supervisor is not to intervene significantly in the activities occurring in the class. From time to time, the supervisor may note down something in the 'Comments and Suggestions' section of the checklist and, in the second half of the lesson, the supervisor is occupied mainly with ticking the grade boxes of the assessment sections of the checklist.

After the lesson, the supervisor and the student teacher retire to a quiet

area where the supervisor shares thoughts on what was seen with the student teacher. To my experience, the student teacher usually listens and, if given an opportunity to speak, mostly takes on a defensive stance to explain what he or she has or has not done. Some discussion may follow if necessary and the supervisor may change a grade in the checklist, but not usually – most of the evaluation is to be based on what was observed in practice in the classroom and not on later reasoning and explanation. If possible, an experienced serving teacher of the school, called a teacher-consultant by the programme, will be invited to take part in this post-lesson meeting with the supervisor and the student teacher. The consultant-teacher usually shows his or her agreement with the supervisor if he or she is strongly encouraged to comment by the supervisor. At the end of the discussion, to indicate the completion of the supervisory process, the supervisor leaves a copy of the checklist, with the grades from the assessment of the student teacher, with the student teacher.

The checklist, the ‘Teaching Practice Supervision Form’, used by supervisors includes six major categories and each category has 2-4 items for assessment. The actual checklist used can be seen below (The original is English-Chinese bilingual text):

Table 1

	Items	Please tick				Comments & Suggestions
		D	C	P	F	
The Teacher	Attitude in Teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Relationship with Pupils	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Reflective Ability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Content of Teaching	Aims and Objectives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Subject Matter (e.g.level/appropriateness/scope)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Planing & Evaluation	Lesson Planing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Teaching & Learning Strategies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Assessment Strategies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Management & Instruction	Selection & Use of Resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Structuring of Learning Activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Management of Learning Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Routine Discipline of Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Communication	Verbal Communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Non-verbal Communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Use of Media	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Individual Needs of Pupils	Catering of Learning Needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Matching Learning Styles	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Overall Performance</i>		<input type="checkbox"/> Distinction	<input type="checkbox"/> Credit	<input type="checkbox"/> Pass	<input type="checkbox"/> Fail	

(From FE Activity Guidelines, 1999-2003, HKIEd.)

Four boxes indicating the grades are attached to each assessment objective. The possible grades are D (Distinction), C (Credit), P (Pass), and F (Fail).

Attached to the checklist is also a document titled ‘Generic Grade Description for Field Experience Assessment’ (FE Activity Guidelines, 1999-2003, HKIEd), which illustrates the different grades with several references indicating the judging criteria. For example, the student teacher will be granted a Grade of Pass generally under the category of ‘The Teacher’, if he or she-

- shows some commitment, a responsible attitude, and is generally enthusiastic in teaching;
- attempts to refine practice based on reflection;
- is able to engage in professional dialogue with support;

- is willing to experiment and try innovative practices when prompted.

Or the student teacher will be granted a Grade of Fail for ‘The Teacher’, if he or she-

- does not demonstrate commitment, responsibility, or enthusiasm in teaching;
- demonstrates no evidence of attempting to refine practice based on reflection;
- does not demonstrate the ability to engage in professional dialogue.

We can recognize without any difficulty that the above process of supervision closely resembles that of Montgomery (2002)’s description on the process of ‘gazing about’ which was reviewed in the preceding section. Therefore, I roughly refer the observation process outlined above to the method of ‘gazing about with a checklist’. The possible strengths and weaknesses of this method in practice will be discussed in the following sections below.

#### **IV Discussion**

‘Gazing about with a checklist’ as a classroom supervision method has its advantages in practice. The main advantages of this method can be delineated below:

- i) ‘Gazing about’ saves time. Because usually supervisors can place a grade on a student teacher’s performance based on one 35-minute observation session of ‘gazing about’, it is not surprising that one supervisor is able to visit four or more student teachers in one day.

ii) The checklist as an instrument provides supervisors facility in ticking the boxes on a sheet of paper quickly even when classes are in session. Supervisors will not be bothered with difficulties of evidence selection or any of the other cumbersome details of data collection. All necessary categories and items are well structured in the checklist and are ready for easy use. In particular, it gives supervisors who have little experience themselves in classroom observation or who do not know what precisely should be observed an easy tool to use.

iii) Because the checklist is developed and modified based on previous practices and a number of samples, its professional is usually accepted by supervisors involved. In addition, since the checklist has been given to the student teachers before the supervision, it is understood that the contents of the checklist with all its categories and items, as well as the attached rating scales and criteria for grading, are agreed to by all student teachers. Therefore, in fact, the checklist serves as an agreement between supervisors and student teachers on what is to be evaluated. Partly because of this, many disagreements over an assessment between the student teacher and the supervisor can be resolved by referring to the criteria listed out according to the grading guidelines.

Although its strengths and advantages should not be ignored, ‘gazing

about with a checklist', as a main technique or method of classroom observation for the supervisors has some notable weaknesses. Referring to the aims of the field experience practicum and the objectives of the classroom supervision component, the discussion in the following paragraphs will identify the weaker aspects of this method toward achieving the programme's general purpose: to accurately assess student teacher ability and to help them improve. Consequently, to make up for these deficiencies, a number of possible suggestions for improvements will be made.

*1. 'Gazing about' versus participant observation*

If a supervisor is well experienced, under general circumstances, his or her judgement of a student teacher's performance may be acceptable with a good degree of confidence, but the effectiveness of such a short time frame of observation is still highly doubtful. It is clear that if the classroom observation component aims to enhance the progressive professional development of student teachers, as stated in the FE module outline, one or two lesson periods of 35-minute observation time each can do little to provide necessary to attain this aim.

One or two 35-minute observations, firstly, are too short time-wise to collect enough information on the performance of the student teachers. It is very difficult for a supervisor to understand in depth all the efforts and activities a student

teacher has demonstrated in the classroom. Secondly, if a supervisor knows little about the background of the student teacher and the class of pupils, the lack of information can easily result in mistakes in assessing the student teacher's performance, no matter how experienced the supervisor may be. For example, the quality and history of the pupils play an important role in the effectiveness of the student teacher, and without more in depth knowledge of such relevant factors, the effectiveness of the teacher is difficult to judge, especially using the 'gazing about' technique in only a short period of time. Thus, we have reason to believe that 'gazing about' as a main technique for supervision gives supervisors an easy but certainly risky way to judge student teachers' classroom performance. This may be illustrated through Miss Lo's story.

#### *The case of Miss Lo*

As a supervisor with many years' experience, I visited Miss Lo at a primary school in To Kwa Wan area on a morning in March 2003. As usual, after a 35-minute 'gazing about' observation session, I granted her a grade of Pass, just one grade higher than the grade of Fail, because I noticed that the class became rather chaotic when Miss Lo was trying to manage a role-play activity for the pupils. But later, after talking with the school principal and the Putonghua subject panel chair of the school after the class, I learned that the class was the worst in the school and that

Miss Lo had performed really well in her teaching as a student teacher under the circumstances. In light of the new information, her grade was raised to the level of Credit.

This case indicates that the method of ‘gazing about’ presents only very limited data on the student teachers’ abilities within the allotted time. As the example above demonstrates, the mistakes and consistent bad behavior and participation of the pupils during that time frame are judged as the incompetence of the teachers, which may not be warranted all the time.

The checklist format used by supervisors further raises the risk of inaccurate assessments. Most of the categories and items in the checklist are ambiguous or too abstract and difficult to understand. For example, ‘Attitude in Teaching’, ‘Relationship with Pupils’, and ‘Matching Learning Styles’ are very broad categories that may include many possibilities and interpretations. Few people, even the most experienced supervisors, can swiftly, consistently, and accurately tick the appropriate grade boxes during or after a 35-minute classroom observation period without chance of an inaccurate assessment under such broad titles. The case of Miss Lo serves as an example again. At first, I ticked a grade of Fail for the category labeled ‘Class Routine Discipline’ because Miss Lo obviously had blatant problems with her pupils during the role-play activity in the class. However, such an assessment

made on Miss Lo is not entirely fair or accurate, because ‘Class Routine Discipline’ should mean more than the management of a single role-play activity. Furthermore, judging by the other, relatively well-managed, parts of the class and the discovery that the class has had a history of being unruly, Miss Lo was awarded a grade of Credit for ‘Class Routine Discipline’. As a matter of fact, it could be said that Miss Lo actually performed better than most of the serving teachers in that school if ‘Class Routine Discipline’ is defined more holistically.

The method of ‘gazing about’ used by supervisors of the HKIEd is fundamentally designed to be a structured systematic observation. This kind of observation usually requests the observer to know already a great deal about the process under observation and that the features to be focused on could be determined in advance. The problems of structured observations include difficulties in defining what types of behavior correspond to a particular concept. Lack of confidence in the observation due to such elements as observer fatigue, lack of relevant background information, distorted perceptions, and the intervention of the supervisor’s own values, may make the resulting data open to the criticism of lacking checks on reliability, particularly when gathered by the single-handed researcher (Coleman, 2001:3). To address these issues, a more participatory method of observation could be suggested to supplement the method of ‘gazing about’.

One of the inherent advantages of participant observation, particularly in the unstructured case, is that it takes place ‘over an extended period of time; researchers can develop more intimate and informal relationships with those they are observing, generally in more natural environments’ (Cohen and Manion, 1994:110). In terms of supervision, participant observation is quite close to Sergiovanni and Starratt’s ‘informal supervision’ that ‘is comprised of the casual encounters that occur between supervisors and teachers and is characterized by frequent informal visits to teachers’ classrooms, conversations with teachers about their work, and other informal activities’. When informal supervision is in place, the supervisor ‘become common fixtures in classrooms, coming and going as part of the natural flow of the school’s daily work’ (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002:261).

Since participant observation takes place over an extended period of time, supervisors by definition have more time and opportunities to observe and collect information about the performance of the student teachers, as well as the pupils. For example, a supervisor could participate in as many as possible teaching activities with the student teacher, perhaps even engaging in a team teaching programme with the student teacher for a few weeks before making a final judgement on the student teacher’s performance. In this way, the risk of inaccurate assessment due to the structured and systematic nature of ‘gazing about with a checklist’ could be reduced

to a minimum and more valid grades could be produced to reflect and help improve the student teachers' performances.

## *2. Performance-based versus competency-based observation*

What should the supervisor focus on during the process of observation? In other words, what should the supervisor be 'gazing about' for when he or she sits in the classroom? Very often, supervisors from the HKIEd have not decided upon specific targets to look for under the general categories before walking in to conduct the classroom observation: ticking the checklist becomes an exercise in ambiguity or inconsistency. Specifically, should the supervisor focus more on performance or competence of the student teacher? Are ability and potential meant to be emphasized over the performance being carried out in front of the supervisor?

In the current practice, the existing checklist used by supervisors is mainly a performance-based one, not a competency-based one. All the categories in the checklist, listed in Section III above, relate to performance, except for the category titled 'Reflective Ability'. The existing checklist may be helpful in assessing the student teacher's skill-based or training-based performance, but will fail to achieve effectively the purpose of establishing student teachers' professional competency in teaching or to encourage their critical thinking and confidence in classroom activities.

The case of Miss Su below can illustrate the distinction between performance and competence, and the importance of emphasizing the latter.

*The case of Miss Su*

Miss Su is a fourth year student teacher in the BEd(P) programme. She has had special training in language teaching and was very eager to try out various language teaching ideas and methods, but had no classroom experience as a student teacher. I visited her in a primary school in Tai Po during her FE practicum in March 2003. In the lesson I observed, Miss Su did well at the beginning, but, in the middle of the lesson, when she tried to manage a well-designed role-play in class, encountered a class discipline problem. The head-decorations to be used in the role-play were difficult for the pupils to wear. Miss Su spent too much time helping the pupils fix their headgear for the activity, and the class took the chance to get out of control. Miss Su had to raise her voice and even shout to calm the pupils down. As the school-bell rang, Miss Su discovered that she had no time to complete her elaborately designed lesson.

How is the supervisor to evaluate such a situation? In terms of classroom performance, Miss Su was not good enough according to the criteria of the checklist. She neither managed the pupils too well nor planned her time accurately. But in terms

of competency of good teaching, I found, through my observation, that Miss Su was a student teacher of excellent competence and potential to be a creative teacher. I understood that Miss Su was smart enough and could perform well according to the checklist, if that were her aim. But she chose to take the risk of trying new teaching techniques and ideas to build a more active learning environment in the classroom, a defining feature of an outstanding teacher. Despite a bad performance, her competence, ability, and enthusiasm to teach warranted a top grade of Distinction, which would not often be warranted for only a smooth but mundane delivery of a lesson.

Should a supervisor value her performance in the classroom strictly under the Grade Descriptions attached to the checklist, Miss Su would earn nothing too far from a grade of Fail, because she ‘could not complete administrative tasks’ in the class, a strictly performance-based criterion. The grade Miss Su deserved was not based on her performance in that one class that was observed, but rather based on judgment and confidence in her competence to be a good teacher. It is just as the argument of Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002: 214) on teacher performances, which I reviewed in Section II, that, most teachers are competent enough and clever enough to come up with the right teaching performance when the supervisor is around, but the proof of the pudding is ‘whether they *will do* the job of their own free will and on a

sustained basis' (Sergiovanni and Starratt,2002: 214).

Performance and competence are often related and dependent on each other. For example, a competent dancer is expected to perform well on stage, of course. We cannot similarly conclude a violinist competent if he or she cannot deliver a good evening concert. However, performance and competence are not always consistent. Comparatively speaking, performance is more superficial and relies more on experience and practice, while competence is the more fundamental ability and potential a good student teacher needs to possess. A student teacher with good competence in teaching might not perform well in his or her first few classes due to lack of experience or unexpected incidents, but he or she will perform better in the future when he or she has earned the experience.

Since by definition student teachers have had little to no actual teaching experience, it is more important for a supervisor to find out and cultivate the competence of student teachers than simply to grade the performance of a student teacher in a single lesson. To grant grades based on student teachers' performance may be one purpose of the classroom observation, but it would not be very helpful if that were the main aspect for evaluation. Establishing the competency of the student teachers may be a more important and useful aim for the supervisory observation

component of the programme. Therefore, a competence-based observation would be more helpful than a performance-based observation, particularly for the pre-service student teachers.

### *3. Summative observation versus formative observation*

Observation as a process of evaluation may be summative or formative. Some evaluation experts and educators, e.g. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002), Montgomery (2002) and Glenwright (2002), believe that a summative observation may bear little relationship to what was observed in the lesson and how aspects of that lesson can be improved, as reviewed in Section II. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) point out:

‘Formative evaluation of teachers is intended to increase the effectiveness of ongoing educational programs and activity. Evaluation information is collected and used to understand, correct, and improve ongoing activity.’ (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002:223)

From my experience, I argue that the method of ‘gazing about’ might work to a certain extent if used for a summative purpose, but it is difficult to be used for a formative purpose, which aims to diagnose and enhance the student teachers’ teaching.

In order to help student teachers with their professional development, a formative monitoring system focusing on major problems in their teaching will be

more helpful. As Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) observed, with respect to teaching, ‘formative evaluation is concerned less with judging and rating the teacher than with providing information which helps teachers learn more about their disciplines, about how students learn, and about teaching’ (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002:223). Montgomery (2002) also suggests that there needs to be several or a series of classroom observations and feedback interviews. After each one, targets for change and improvement should be identified and, after a period of time for practice, another observation can take place. This should identify any progress that has been made and can serve as basis for new targets and strategies for further development. It is helpful, and maybe even necessary, for there to be stages of improvement. After a cycle of such appraisals, conclusions can be drawn finally about whether the student teacher is capable of development or improvement. (Montgomery, 2002:25). Such a formative monitoring system suggested by Montgomery (2002) will be very helpful for enhancing the professional development of student teachers in their teaching as well as helpful in determining the point at which the student teacher is deemed ready for the real world by him- or herself.

Taking the ‘Reflective Ability’ category from the checklist used by the BEd (P) programme of the HKIEd as an example, it will be difficult or perhaps even impossible to observe student teachers’ reflective ability in teaching through a single,

summative ‘gazing about’ session: the reflective ability of student teachers towards their own performance and their subsequent self-adjustments and self-corrections can only be ascertained through a formative process, and is very difficult to be observed using a summative approach. As an illustrative example, consider this case taken from Tinker *et al* (1998):

A supervisor, during lesson observation, noted that, although the lesson ran smoothly, the student teacher did have trouble with her questioning techniques. She did not know how to employ questions to guide pupils to further comprehension. And some questions she asked were so general and broad that the pupils did not know how to answer them and gave no response. After the lesson, the supervisor (FS) shared her thoughts with the student teacher (ST). An excerpt of their conversation went like this:

Excerpt 1

- FS: So you weren’t satisfied with the boys at the beginning of the lesson? I mean when you tried to do the review of the first three chapters with them.
- ST: No, they couldn’t produce any correct answers.
- FS: But have you considered, I mean, that the problem may involve the way you asked the questions?
- ST: No. I didn’t know that.
- FS: Well, for example, ‘Can you tell me what Chapter 1 is about?’ or ‘What did you learn from Chapter 1?’ Such questions are too general and too broad. The pupils didn’t know what to say.
- ST: But I think they have read those chapters before, so they should be able to describe them.
- FS: They are only Form 2 students and it is a bit too demanding to require them to recall the content, select the major points, put them together into a coherent whole, and then express them clearly. So they kept quiet. But it’s not your fault as you didn’t know their standard well and it’s only your first lesson with them. But next time, what can you do to help them revise what they have learned previously and have them answer well?
- ST: Break the questions into smaller, more specific ones?

FS: Sure!

In such a case, could the supervisor accurately assesses the student teacher's ability to realize her own performance and make changes if necessary in the future and most importantly, on her own, based on feedback from the pupils? Even after the supervisor has spelled out a possible improvement, it is uncertain whether the student teacher has the ability to alter her behavior in the future swiftly and in the right direction. Thus, it is highly doubtful that the supervisor has enough information to form an accurate assessment of the student teacher's 'Reflective Ability' as demonstrated in the student teacher's questioning ability through only one session of observation: there was barely opportunity to observe the presence, or lack of, reflective and subsequent corrective action at all in the student teacher from one lesson. The supervisor also cannot grant a grade for 'Reflective Ability' based on only the post-lesson discussion with the student teacher, as 'Reflective Ability' relates to teaching action in the classroom. Furthermore, knowing better is not necessarily the same as acting accordingly next time either. That is just as Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) argues, which was reviewed in Section II, that teachers 'also are expected to put their knowledge to work—to demonstrate that they *can do* the job' (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002: 214). Therefore, a continual observation or a formative observation should be undertaken before a final assessment can be appropriately made for the

‘Reflective Ability’ of the student teacher. This is an example why ‘it is helpful to adopt a more formative approach that is essentially more development and long term and out of which will emerge the cumulative assessment’ (Tinker *et al*, 1998:111). Such an assessment procedure would be both more accurate and helpful for the student teacher.

#### *4. Factual versus filtered data records*

As mentioned above, during the classroom observation, the supervisor might take notes in the section titled ‘Comments and Suggestions’ in the checklist, in addition to ticking the grading boxes. After the lesson, supervisors would take a few minutes to share with student teachers what was observed during the lessons. This sharing of thoughts is helpful to student teachers, as shown in the above excerpt from the transcription of a conversation between a supervisor and a student teacher. However, there are still a number of problems with this sharing of information. One of the main ones is that, as Montgomery (2002) observes, ‘there are no factual data afterwards to discuss’ (p.37). Anything is *ex post facto* observation or historical recall, which may in the process have been changed or manipulated or filtered through the supervisor’s perception and memory. It may make the whole procedure of observation very idiosyncratic or unreliable. None of the facts of what occurred in the class session is objectively recorded.

Evidence collection is a major problem for this method of ‘gazing about with a checklist’, which usually leaves no factual evidence to support any conclusions of the assessment at the end of the day. In fact, the checklist completed by supervisors has little meaning to student teachers without sufficient supporting data to show them exactly what they did to deserve what grade they received. This is why Montgomery (2002) points out that this method ‘is very often used by observers to conceal a lack of knowledge and inexperience about what to do and say’ (p. 37).

Along with the above-mentioned problem, since supervisors always have more power and authority over student teachers, the unequal status of supervisors with student teachers could make post-lesson discussions even less constructive. Furthermore, the traditional Chinese educational culture of more knowledgeable supervisors may protect supervisors from possible challenges from student teachers, which may not necessarily or always be a positive characteristic. A student teacher without facts from his or her teaching session usually hesitates to challenge or disagree with supervisors in an after-lesson discussion. We cannot expect consistently equal and constructive discussions under such a handicapped relationship, at least partially caused by the lack of objective data from the lesson.

*The case of Miss Kuo*

I would like to take Miss Kuo's case as an example. Miss Kuo was one of the BEd(P) students in her third year of study. I went to visit her at a school where she did FE teaching practice in March 2003. She did well in the classroom, but not perfectly. I noted down some problems, such as, 'uninteresting introduction to contents of lesson', 'insufficient attention to the bad behavior of a pupil in the back right-hand corner of the class', 'directions were not clear enough for the pupils when organizing a small group discussion activity', 'it would be better if the teacher could invite one more pair of pupils to present before the class', and 'some Mandarin tones the teacher wrote on the white-board for certain Chinese characters were incorrect'.

After the lesson, we went to a quiet place where I showed my comments to Miss Kuo as I usually do. Miss Kuo did not agree with me. She asked me to give more support for my comments. Without factual evidence, I tried my best to explain my comments to her, but she was still not convinced of my judgments of her performance and also insisted that she did not write incorrect tones on the white-board. She requested me to visit her a second time or send another supervisor to visit her lesson again. It would not have been fair to other student teachers to grant her an extra observation session and that was also forbidden by the Institute's policy. However, with the lack of factual evidence recorded during the session, discussion

between the supervisor and the student was less effective and certainly less constructive than it could have been. It would have been a lot more helpful to Miss Kuo if I had been able to show more evidence to her instead of only my comments and grades, which she certainly had a right to disagree with, and without objective data supporting her view, she also found it inconvenient to prove herself correct.

Some techniques and instruments for objective data recording should be incorporated into classroom observation. For example, more field notes, logs, and diaries could be used for evidence collection. The instrument of videotape recording is also helpful for this kind of data collection. In recent years, along with the development of text analysis research, more educators use classroom transcripts as a powerful technique to help pre- and in-service teachers understand the nature and progression of their classroom teaching and their pupils' learning. Such a concept is also a very objective technique for data collection. Although most forms of data collection cannot avoid some subjectivity, it is clear that the more actual data there are, the more helpful they would serve as reminders of significant events during a lesson, or as running commentaries over an extended period of observation.

## **V Conclusion**

To point out the weaknesses of ‘gazing about with a checklist’ as a main observational technique or method in classroom supervision does not mean to negate the FE supervision approach of the BEd (P) programme as a whole. In fact, the existing FE supervision component of this programme has been running very well for several years. A number of research projects on its effectiveness have been conducted and many of them are rich of inspiration, such as Cheng and So (2002), and Tang (2002). However, this paper agrees with Glenwright (2002) in that the existing FE supervisory approach or model as employed by the BEd (P) programme still has some room for improvement.

‘Gazing about with a checklist’ as a main technique or method of classroom observation as employed by the BEd (P) programme of the HKIEd in their classroom supervision components has its strengths in practice, but considering the aims of the FE component and the purposes of supervision, such practice is weak with regards to enhancing student teachers’ professional development of their teaching. To make up for its deficiencies, other methods, techniques, and instruments of observation such as participant and competency-based observations, formative appraisal methods, and factual data collection, will be helpful as complements.

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