The APTSE as a tool for measuring the competencies of special education student teachers

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ABSTRACT

Assessment of student teachers’ performance in teaching practice has been an area of concern for researchers for many years. At the Institute of Education (IE), Singapore, an instrument called the Assessment of Performance in Teaching (APT) is used to assess the competencies of student teachers teaching in regular schools. In July 1988, staff from the Special Needs (SN) Department in IE adapted the APT for use with student teachers teaching in the special schools. The adapted instrument known as the APTSE (Assessment of Performance in Teaching for Special Education) was trialled for a 10-week period by the SN Dept staff and the principals of the special schools.

The purpose of the paper is two-fold: first, to describe the development of an instrument to measure the competencies of student teachers teaching in special schools in Singapore, and second, to propose the use of this instrument as a viable means of assessing student performance in teaching in the special school context.

Supervision of classroom teachings may have greater potential to improve the effectiveness of schools than any other activity. This improvement can become a reality when the purpose of supervision is to work cooperatively with teachers to improve instruction. Although supervision can be broadly conceived as any set of activities designed to improve instruction, fundamentally, it is “a process that involves a cycle of systematic planning, observation, diagnosis, change and renewed planning” (Hoy and Forsyth, 1987).

The goal of the supervisor is not simply to help teachers solve immediate problems but also to engage teachers in critical inquiry on teaching and learning. Improvement of instruction is a long-term, continuous and cooperative process. Teachers not only need freedom to develop their own individual teaching styles, but they also need professional guidance, support and encouragement. Therefore, the improvement of instruction will most likely take place in a non-threatening environment where teachers are guided and encouraged, and a sense of inquiry and experimentation is fostered.

Should the criteria used for evaluating the performance of special education teachers be the same as those used to evaluate other teachers? This answer must come from reviewing the literature on effective teaching. The research data seem to confirm the applicability of effectiveness criteria to special education teacher performance, as well as, regular teachers (Englert, 1983; Englert, 1984a; Englert, 1984b; Fields, 1987). It appears that good teaching is good teaching (Good and Beckerman, 1978) and there are few teaching behaviours reported in the research that are applicable solely to effective special education teachers. The most noticeable difference may be the extent to which special education teachers go to deliver the instructional model. Special education teachers provide a more intense exaggerated demonstration of concepts to be learned; a more careful presentation utilizing sub-tasks that have been more completely delineated; and more prompted guided practice before moving to independent practice (Archer, 1986).

The purpose of this paper is two-fold — first, to describe the development of an instrument to
measure the competencies of student teachers teaching in special schools in Singapore, and second, to propose the use of this instrument as a viable means of assessing student performance in teaching.

The Development of the APTSE

Until 1988, when the staff of the Special Needs (SN) Department visited students to observe them teaching in special schools, a fairly informal system of reporting and assessment was used. This involved the supervisors writing a general description and evaluation of what was observed, discussing the lesson’s strengths and weaknesses with the student teachers and highlighting aspects which need attention. At the end of the 10-week block teaching practice period, assigning an overall grade was based on how the staff perceived the student teacher. Formative grades were not assigned to each lesson and moderation of grades took place through discussion among lecturers and visits by the Head of Department to the classrooms of distinction and failing students. Grades were not revealed to students and not much attention was given to inter-rater reliability of grades amongst lecturers.

Following the introduction of the Practicum Curriculum (Sim, 1986) for teacher training in general education programmes at the Institute of Education (IE), and more specifically, the development of the Assessment of Performance in Teaching (APT) by the Director of IE (Sim, 1986), the SN department decided to adapt the APT and make it more relevant to the needs of the special school situation. While on one hand, the APT was an excellent starting point and had in fact, proved to be a useful instrument for use in measuring the competencies of student teachers in regular schools (Institute of Education, 1988), on the other, as a teacher evaluation instrument in special schools, it needed some adaptation such as the emphasis of different skills and attitudes which are more crucial to teachers teaching in special schools. These include assessment and diagnostic skills, alternative communication skills, knowledge and use of task analysis and behaviour modification as well as, the ability to adapt programmes to individual needs and to apply precision or clinical teaching methods. As such, these competencies needed to be high-lighted in the instrument purporting to measure competencies of teachers teaching in special schools.

Although the CISE is essentially a pre-service programme, it has, up till now, been conducted on a part-time basis over three years and classified as an in-service programme. Concurrently with training, the teachers have full responsibility for a class in one of the special schools during the half of the day that they are not attending lectures at IE, as well as, carrying a full load of Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) in school on Saturday mornings. Because of the additional responsibilities they bear, it is possible, and of course desirable, to also evaluate their professionalism in discharging their duties not just as students but as practicing teachers.

In view of the foregoing, the SN Dept staff decided to review the system of supervision. They hoped to develop a system which,
(a) was congruent with that used to supervise the Certificate in Education students,
(b) was more systematic than the previous method and would promote greater inter-rater reliability among supervisors,
(c) would reduce stressfulness of teaching practice by clarifying requirements and establishing a cooperative development model,
(d) focused on competencies and characteristics specific and crucial to special education,
(e) could be completed in one lesson so that immediate, relevant, constructive feedback could be provided.

In the period from March to June 1988, SN staff modified and added to the APT form by including those teacher qualities and behaviours which research (Bickel & Bickel, 1986; Englert, 1984a; Frudden & Manatt, 1986; Morrow, Gilley, Russell & Strope, 1985) and the experience of the department staff showed were characteristic of effective special school teachers. The adapted instrument is called the Assessment of Performance in Teaching for Special Education, in short, the APTSE. At the same time a set of guidelines on teaching practice was written. This Handbook (SN Dept/IE, 1988) included specific instructions for student teachers, the supervisor from the SN Dept and the Special School Principal who acts as the co-operating teacher (CT).
Brief Description of the APTSE

The APTSE instrument provides a way of diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, as well as, monitoring progress in practical classroom teaching. It has been designed for use within the Practicum Curriculum, and specifically for use by student teachers, supervisors and co-operating teachers on Teaching Practice in special schools.

The APTSE instrument is premised on the view that practical teaching comprises a number of fairly discrete teaching processes such as planning and evaluation. These in turn draw on a range of competencies, such as knowledge of subject matter and skill in record keeping. Finally, it is maintained that the teacher draws on certain characteristics such as enthusiasm and warmth. Practical teaching, then, is conceptualised within the Practicum Curriculum as a definite set of teaching processes and competencies which can be taught to student teachers and which are modified to form particular personal teaching styles by the characteristics of the individual student teacher (SN DEPT/IE, 1988).

The ranking assigned for the processes “Very good” (VG), “Good” (G), or “Attention Needed” (AN) and “?” or “/” for competencies and characteristics are used to denote a student’s relative strengths and weaknesses at a particular point in time. Thus, for example, an excellent student is likely to have “AN” or “?” signs recorded, to show aspects of teaching that are relatively weak in terms of the student’s own general level of performance. The signs draw attention to aspects of teaching that will need a special effort to improve all-round performance. It is important that all users of the form understand this convention and do not interpret “?” or “AN” notations as indicating absolute weaknesses. (This format is used in the revised APTSE form.)

The advantages of using a standard form such as the APTSE are that it:
(a) specifies what is being noted or observed by the supervisor,
(b) is compact and yet comprehensive
(c) can be completed during one observation lesson
(d) provides immediate feedback to the student
(e) provides (when used sequentially) a progressive record

Trialling the APTSE

During the stage of development and trialling, three surveys were carried out to provide data on:
(1) the student teachers’ perceptions of teaching practice (TP) supervision prior to the use of the APTSE, and their initial impression of the proposed new format (Survey 1 was conducted at the beginning of July 1988).
(2) the opinions of all persons who used the APTSE (SN Dept staff and Special School Principals). Comments on its practicality/utility and the reactions of students to it were sought following 10 weeks of TP. (Survey 2 was carried out in October 1988).
(3) student teacher reaction to the APTSE based supervision following TP (Survey 3 was done at the beginning of October 1988).

Summary of Findings from the Three Surveys

Survey 1: Student Perceptions of Teaching Practice Supervision [30 out of 32 student teachers responded]

Feedback on TP Prior to the Use of the APTSE

Student responses indicated that prior to the availability of the APTSE and Guidelines and before the briefing on Teaching Practice, more than half of the students (67%) said they needed more information on TP requirements, specifically guidance on lesson planning. They also wished for a booklet explaining these things. The students said that although they found TP difficult, they regarded it as a chance to discuss teaching problems (67%) and to show the IE supervisor what they had learned or how they had improved (43%). What they worried about prior to TP was how their pupils might behave (57%) and what would happen if the lesson went badly (63%).

To prepare for the observation lesson, less than half the teachers (43%) planned much more thoroughly than usual and only three (10%) admitted to bribing pupils to behave well or to rehearsing the lesson in advance.

When they were asked about the value of feedback received from supervisors, a majority (57%) said the comments were useful and constructive but nearly half (47%) said comments
varied in usefulness depending on the supervisor. They implied that some supervisors were more specific in their comments and therefore, their comments were more useful and relevant, and identified some inconsistencies between supervisors in their styles of supervision.

*Feedback on TP After the Introduction of the APTSE*

After the APTSE and the new system of supervision were introduced and explained to the students, the reaction of 67% of the students was that while on the one hand they were being given clearer guidelines on what was expected by supervisors, on the other, these expectations would mean a lot more work in planning. Only a minority considered the resulting grade would be more realistic (30%) or supervision more effective than previously (23%).

A summary of the student responses indicated that the students favoured the idea of a supervision system in which there were:
- (a) clear guidelines regarding what was required in TP (67%)
- (b) consistency among supervisors on supervision style (53%)
- (c) immediate feedback on strengths and weaknesses (53%)
- (d) blocked supervision and planned visits (57%)
- (e) open communication between supervisor/supervisee so that TP was developmental and cooperative experience (77%).

*The APTSE as an Instrument for Assessment*

The APTSE and Guidelines were developed to address many of the issues which caused student concern. It was expected that by using them, supervision would be systematised and regularised as far as is possible when such a variation of special needs are catered for by the different special schools. Also, it was hoped that the stressfulness of TP would be reduced by providing both a clearer guide to expectations as well as deliberately establishing a more open, communicative relationship between supervisor, supervisee and principal.

Before the new instrument was used for supervision of trainee teachers in special schools, both the student teachers and their principals were briefed by SN Dept staff members on the format of and how to complete the APTSE. The teaching processes, competencies and characteristics which supervisors hoped to observe, and other requirements of teaching practice such as the teaching file, were also explained.

During the TP period, the APTSE was used continuously by supervisors and was discussed at frequent intervals by SN staff. The consensus appeared to be that it was achieving its objectives in terms of focusing attention on those characteristics and competencies of critical relevance to effective teaching in the special school. However, it was generally felt that it had several flaws, mostly of a design nature, such as shortage of space for writing, and cluttering caused by too many lines and boxes in close proximity to each other.

Additionally, it was found that assigning grades and plus (+) and minus (−) marks were not always constructive from a pedagogical point of view. In some cases, students could only see the grade and not the comments. Supervisors realised that if the instrument was to be used as a teaching device and not just as an assessment instrument, then, it might be more appropriate to use a less formal system of grading during the formative stages.

*Survey 2: Use of APTSE and Guidelines [Supervisors & Principals’ Responses]*

At the end of the 10-week teaching block, IE supervisors and Special School Principals who had used the APTSE were asked ten questions about its use as a viable instrument in assessing the competencies of the student teachers. Five returns (100%) were received from the SN staff and four (80%) out of five Special School Principals who used the form, responded.

The majority (78%) found the APTSE straightforward to use and indicated that they preferred to continue using it for future TP (88%). However, 56% indicated that there was insufficient space for writing and 44% said that they could not always complete it within the 30-minute lesson although the other (56%) could. While all nine users (100%) liked and wanted to maintain a structured system of observing students “because it focussed on comments more”, they did not agree over the effectiveness of the proposed system for assigning grades and noting strengths and weaknesses. Some liked it, while others did not. One SN staff member strongly opposed the use of formative grades for each lesson observed and noted that formative grades “could be
mistrust by student teachers and administrative staff of the associations.

Most (89%) did, however, agree that on the whole, student teachers regarded marks and comments positively and tried to use the feedback to improve their teaching. Furthermore, all nine respondents found the Guidelines useful and 89% agreed that it was a good idea for student teachers to be required to keep a teaching file during TP.

Survey 3: Teaching Practice using APTSE (Students’ Responses)

The 28 students who returned their responses were somewhat divided and equivocal. Although more than three quarters of the respondents (85.7%) gave favourable feedback, there were four students (14.3%) who had obviously found the whole TP experience stressful and reacted negatively to supervision. Some of their comments indicated that this might have been because of a perceived lack of consistency in style and standards of supervision among the IE supervisors. Some of their comments included the following:

“Different lecturers gave different grades”,
“not all the supervisors wrote constructive comments”.

A majority (78%) of the students agreed that the APTSE was quite straightforward to use and said they liked the way it was completed within a lesson (69%) with explanations provided afterwards by the supervisor (89%). They felt the written feedback was helpful (78%) and that the comments written on the APTSE were constructive (75%). Furthermore, a high percentage (70%) found the guidelines a useful reference and liked the way TP was blocked into a 10-week period (74%). What was quite significant was that 68% said they would like to see a modified APTSE used with future CISE students and that they thought it was a good idea to require student teachers to keep a teaching file during TP (66%). This was said in spite of many comments which indicated these two aspects of teaching practice had caused them anxiety.

Other written comments on the teaching file, in particular, showed that despite the work it created for teachers, they appreciated it for the professionalism that it brought to TP.

The areas where reservations were expressed were similar to those expressed by the IE supervisors — in the award of grades for each lesson observed. Some students expressed concern regarding inter-rater reliability of grades between supervisors. Most students felt that there would still be some inconsistency between supervisors in the way they assigned grades or the indications of strengths and weaknesses. It seemed that students did not regard the grades given, after each lesson, as formative guides but grew very concerned if their grades did not compare favourably with those of colleagues.

Many of the students were not certain about (44%) or did not like (26%) the assignment of grades to each of the teaching roles and were very varied in their opinions on whether the marking system should be such a structured one. There was also uncertainty and disagreement over the value of the “+” and “-” system of noting strengths and weaknesses and the desirability of having a structured marking system. Although the student teachers, like the supervisors, clearly did not feel that the grading system was ideal, they also did not indicate that they considered the APTSE itself lacked utility.

Concerns about the design flaws and the grading system stimulated informal discussion among supervisors and with the Principals. Consequently, a formal APTSE revision meeting was held. After much discussion and deliberations, the APTSE form was revised and no “A” to “E” grades were used in the formative stages of supervision (Table 1).

The new format, as recommended by staff, principals and students included an adjusted grading system for use during the formative stages of supervision with “VG” (Very Good), “G” (Good), “AN” (Attention Needed) indications rather than “A” to “E” (Very Good to Poor) grades and “+”, “=” or blank space for the competencies and general teaching characteristics. There is also more space for writing and fewer cluttering lines. It was agreed among supervisors that instead of the 5 grades for each teaching role, after the lesson during the post-lesson conference, the supervisor would discuss the overall quality of the lesson with the student and arrive at a consensus decision regarding the grade. In this way, it was felt that there would be more cooperative learning. Although those who work closely with student teachers know that the teaching practice period
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>COMPETENCIES</th>
<th>SPECIFIC COMMENTS: STRENGTHS AND AREAS TO IMPROVE</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Planning</td>
<td>Assesses needs before planning. Writes an appropriate overall programme. Defines specific lesson objectives.</td>
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<td>(a) of Teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Selects appropriate lesson procedures. Maintains needs based IEPs.</td>
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<td>1. Responsive/facilitative</td>
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<td>2. Enthusiastic/genuine</td>
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<td>2 Presenting</td>
<td>Aroused and sustains interest/involvement. Encourages participation/independence. Uses appropriate resources, technology. Stimulates effort, thought and imagination.</td>
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<td>3. Patient/tolerant</td>
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<td>4. Encouraging/positive</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Communicating</td>
<td>Establishes support/reciprocity/sharing. Uses oral/sign language effectively. Explains, questions, listens, responds. Varies activities to maximise learning.</td>
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<td>5. Convincing/authoritative</td>
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<td>7. Warm/sensitive</td>
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<td>8. Emotionally stable</td>
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<td>9. Flexible/adaptable</td>
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<td>10. Skilled/Resourceful</td>
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<td>11. Realistic/thorough</td>
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<td>12. Committed/responsible</td>
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<td>13. Self evaluative</td>
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<td>14. Sense of humour</td>
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<td>4 Managing</td>
<td>Creates a pleasant learning environment. Manages behaviour effectively. Adjusts lessons to changing needs.</td>
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<td>(b) of Lesson</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Groups and individuals. Uses time effectively.</td>
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<td>1. Thoroughly prepared</td>
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<td>2. Provides concrete experiences</td>
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<td>3. Achievable goal</td>
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<td>4. Well balanced</td>
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<td>5. Appropriately developmental level</td>
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<td>6. Sequential</td>
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<td>7. Well organised/systematic</td>
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<td>8. Task oriented</td>
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<td>9. Direct/clear instructions</td>
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<td>5 Evaluating</td>
<td>Provides feedback and positive reinforcement. Uses appropriate techniques to assess. Keeps diagnostic records. Uses overall data to plan follow up teaching.</td>
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<td>10. Lively/motivating</td>
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<td>11. Reinforcement activities</td>
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<td>12. Suitable pacing</td>
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<td>13. Integrated curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>14. Relevant to pupil needs</td>
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<td>6 Professionalism</td>
<td>Able to work as part of a team. Demonstrates objectivity and fairness. Accepts involvement beyond the classroom. Holistic/environmental approach to pupils. Works well with parents/professionals.</td>
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<td>15. Developing...</td>
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Additional Comments and Suggested Action:

Signed: 
Name of Supervisor:
Date:
has the potential for being highly stressful (Gold, 1985), at least with discussion and feedback, student teachers would regard the lesson observations as also learning experiences relevant to their training (Anderson, 1984; Berliner, 1979).

**Implementation of the APTSE**

In January 1989, the new system of supervision using APTSE was administered to all students in the three cohorts (1986, 1987 and 1989 Intakes) doing the Certificate in Special Education (CISE) programme in the TP period of July to September 1989. Due to space constraints in this paper, only the reactions of the CISE '86 and CISE '89 Intakes will be discussed here. The CISE '86 group of students were supervised using the old informal method of supervision for TP1 and TP2 and had participated in the trialling of the APTSE the year before during TP3. The CISE '89 group had not been supervised before and would be supervised with the APTSE in TP1.

**Reactions of CISE '86 and CISE '89 students to the use of the APTSE in TP**

How then did the new system of TP supervision stand up in 1989? In the post programme evaluations for the CISE (1986 Intake) conducted in November 1989, some questions were asked about teaching practice. Not surprisingly, the CISE '86 graduates (these students had graduated in May 1989) who had experienced the old system of supervision and the trialling period, did not respond as positively as the CISE '89 group who had only experienced supervision using the APTSE form and a more communicative approach. With APTSE in the implementation phase, students were surveyed on their overall perceptions of the programme including teaching practice. To a question on which aspects of the CISE programme they had found useful and relevant, a majority (54%) rated teaching practice, in general, negatively.

More specific questions on TP using the APTSE, however, elicited more positive responses. The most positive aspect was ‘discussions with the supervisor’, rated as useful by 85% of the participants. Other aspects of teaching practice rated positively by 65% or more were:

- Carrying out recommendations of the supervisor 77%
- Maintaining a Teaching File and Pupil Records 69%
- Setting objectives for pupils and the programme 77%
- Getting informal feedback from the supervisor 77%
- Planned visits by the supervisor 77%

Very negatively rated aspects of teaching practice were:

- Having to write detailed lesson plans 85%
- Getting grades for lessons 69%
- Unannounced visits by the supervisor 77%

Their negative feelings can at least be partially explained. During the three years of the CISE '86 programme, the nature of TP supervision for the students and the requirements of a student teacher were revised.

In the first year of the CISE '86 programme, TP was conducted in a fairly, informal, unstructured way. Supervisors’ visits were usually planned in advance. The written report given by them was a free comment without specified focus on desired teacher qualities, characteristics and behaviour. Lesson plans and a teaching file were not required by all supervisors and there was little discussion of the student teachers’ strengths and weaknesses and grades were not awarded. However during the course of the programme, major revisions to TP requirements were made and implemented. The APTSE and Guidelines for Supervision were drafted, written and trialled, so that for their final TP of 10 weeks, student teachers were faced with a more rigorous and structured supervision style. More was demanded of them and more detailed and analytic feedback was provided to them, as well as, grades.

The CISE '86 group of students found this somewhat threatening and very demanding because they feared there might be differences in standards and expectations of supervisors which might disadvantage them. In reality, one of the important reasons for the new system was to avoid this problem by standardising supervision procedures as far as possible. The students worried that they would be caught unprepared and therefore given a poor grade.

Given that it was their final TP, one can understand that they could see only the judgemental, assessment role of the supervisors and did not accept that the role of the supervisor was developmental and that supervision was intended to be a formative process.
Despite their relatively negative response to TP, the student teachers did acknowledge they had benefited from the overall CISE programme.

By way of comparison, an evaluation of Teaching Practice using APTSE was also carried out with the CISE '89 student teachers in November 1989, at the end of their first year in the programme. For this group, TP had been preceded by a course "Techniques of Teaching" in which the APTSE and the Guidelines on Teaching Practice were introduced and the expectations of supervisors explained in detail. Also, immediately before the 10-week TP block began, a further general briefing and meetings of students with their own supervisors were held. In the post TP survey, carried out one month after the completion of TP, 92% of the CISE '89 students rated TP as a relevant and useful component of their programme. They also responded very positively to most of the questions on specific aspects of TP in which they were assessed using the APTSE. Among the aspects rated very positively were the following:

- Discussions with the supervisor 89%
- The written report using APTSE 85%
- Attempting to carry out recommendations of supervisors in their classrooms 89%
- Maintaining a teaching file and systematic pupils' records 85%
- Being expected to set objectives for individual pupils and the programme as a whole 96%
- Getting informal feedback on teaching 88%
- Planned visits by supervisors 89%

The student teachers, however, viewed two aspects of TP negatively. Slightly more than half of them (52%) disliked having to write detailed lesson plans, and 56% disliked unannounced visits by supervisors. Only 66% found getting grades for their lessons was useful.

In summary, there were quite marked differences between the perceptions of the CISE '86 who had graduated and the CISE '89 students who had only completed a third of their programme.

In terms of their general perception of TP, the difference was 46% — only 46% of the '86 cohort rated TP positively while 92% (double the amount) of CISE '89 were satisfied that TP was useful and relevant in terms of the specific questions on TP.

Although over 85% of both groups found discussions with their supervisors very worthwhile, a majority of both groups disliked having to write detailed lesson plans and unannounced visits by their supervisors. Otherwise in all aspects of TP, more CISE '89 students rated their experiences positively than did the CISE '86 students. Hopefully, this is a result of the improvements made to the supervision of TP through introducing the APTSE and the Guidelines.

The greatest differences between the groups were in attitudes to grades given and the written APTSE report on their performance, both of which had been concerns of the CISE '86 group throughout the programme. While only 31% of the CISE '86 students were in favour of getting grades for their lessons, 66% of their counterparts in the CISE '89 liked to receive grades from their supervisors. Similarly, a higher percentage of the CISE '89 students (83%) preferred to get the written APTSE report as compared with the CISE '86 students (61%).

Implications and Conclusions

Will these findings result in further revisions to the APTSE and the system of supervision? Or are the areas which students do not like, an essential part of the process? May be it is an attitude change on the part of the teachers that needs to be achieved. Perhaps they need to be convinced that part of being a professional and having a professional approach to their job involves being prepared at all times with full lesson plans for any visitor to the classroom be that person a supervisor, principal, parents or another professional.

Furthermore, they need to accept that entry to any profession requiring qualifications depends on a certain level of achievement in both academic and practical work and that this must be assessed and graded to ensure that standards of performance are acceptable. May be in future, we will have to address this issue of professionalism and the acceptance that a special educator (as indeed, all educators) must be accountable for this preparedness and performance at all times. Perhaps student teachers should see this acceptance as the step they have to make if they wish to make the transition from being a student to being a professional.
REFERENCES


