'Where to next?' Examining feedback received by teacher education students

Neville John Ellis and Tony Loughland
University of New South Wales

Professional experience is a critical aspect of teacher education. Therefore, the feedback given to teacher education students during this time is critical for their professional learning. However, the strong support in research and practice for formative assessment in the classroom has not always translated to feedback given on professional experience to teacher education students. The particular formative assessment strategy that was the focus of this study is Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feed up ('Where am I going?'), feed back ('How am I going?') and feed forward ('Where to next?'). This study explored the feedback teacher education students reported that they received from their various supervisors during professional experience in relation to these three questions. Their perceptions were gathered through interviews and focus groups in a developmental, iterative research design. The results of the study are that feedback from supervising teachers focused more on the 'How am I going?' question than the other two feedback foci. The implications of these findings for both tertiary supervisors and supervisors in schools are that the outcomes of professional experience need to be more explicit ('Where am I going?') and supervisors need to be trained in giving constructive 'Where to next?' comments so that teacher education students can reach these outcomes.

Introduction

Across the globe, the role and function of schools is changing, hence teachers need to constantly upskill in order to remain effective (OECD, 2009). Indeed, high-performing education systems are characterised by an ongoing investment in the professional development of teachers (Jensen, 2010). In Australia the necessity of professional development is "widely recognised" (Santiago, Donaldson, Herman & Shewbridge, 2011, p. 88). However, the Education Policy Advisor to the OECD believes a significant "problem" is that teachers in Australia "don't get the feedback they need to improve their teaching" (McNeilage, 2013, para. 18). This feedback is even more critical when teachers are on a steep learning curve in their first pre-service professional experience.

While different models have been proposed for the supervision of teacher education students (Akcan & Tatar, 2010, p.153), providing feedback remains an essential part of a supervisor's role. For many teacher education students, feedback is the "most useful component" of professional experience (Copland, 2010, p.466). Feedback plays a critical role in learning and provides an invaluable tool for improving practice (Ferguson, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Schartel, 2012; Thurlings, Vermeulen, Bastiaens & Stijnen, 2013; Wiggins, 1998). Feedback may be conceptualised as "information provided by an agent … regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.81). It thereby involves an "evaluative response" (Ferguson, 2013, p.443) and a sense of "appraisal, analysis, or rating" (McPherson, 1998, p.47). Feedback exists on a continuum (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and can range from formal written statements to a

passing comment (Ferguson, 2013). Feedback may be presented in the form of questions, suggestions and statements and "might focus on the weaknesses or limitations and/or the strengths of an aspect of a learner's performance or production" (McPherson, 1998, p.47). Feedback should help learners improve in a specific activity (Jones, 2005) by providing "actionable information" (Schartel, 2012, p.79) and be related to a set of standards, criteria, objectives or goals (Ferguson, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Holland, 2005; van de Ridder, Stokking, McGaghie & ten Cate, 2008; Sadler, 1989). Integral to the feedback process, 'feed forward' is where learners are told how to improve in order to reach their desired goals (Conaghan & Lockey, 2009) and is perceived as critical to learning (Brown, 2007).

Although feedback can be "powerful" (Hattie, 1999), it can also play either a positive or negative role (Ferguson, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), depending on the "nature of the feedback and the context in which it is given" (Brookhart, 2009, p.1). In an extensive review of the literature, Thurlings, Vermeulen, Bastiaens and Stijnen (2013) established that to be effective feedback should be "goal- or task-directed, specific, and neutral" (p.1). Furthermore, other researchers have determined that the sender and receiver of feedback must work as "allies" (Schartel, 2012), as information may be "filtered" by the learner (Brookhart, 2008), especially if the learner believes that the feedback giver is "ill-equipped" (McPherson, 1998). Additionally, 'dialogue' is important if the student is to engage actively in the feedback process (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010). Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified three important components of effective feedback which they called *feed up, feedback,* and *feed forward.* Feed up involves establishing a clear purpose or goal ('Where am I going?'), feedback concerns information about a student's progress toward that goal and suggests actions that might be taken ('How am I going?'), while feed forward is about future planning and focuses on what further improvements need to be made to advance progress ('Where to next?').

Few studies have focused on what constitutes effective feedback to teachers (Thurlings et al, 2013). This study, whilst focusing on one specific case of teacher education students, will extend knowledge in the field by suggesting important ways for improving the feedback loop in professional experience.

A supervising teacher needs to be able to provide timely and constructive feedback to their teacher education students on professional experience. To do this, supervisors need to be able to critique both their own teaching practices as well as those of teacher education student they are supervising (Hudson & Hudson, 2010; Teacher Education Taskforce, n.d.). The way supervisors present this feedback and the amount of time they allocate to meeting with their pre-service teacher is also seen as important (CESE, 2015; Pridham, Deed & Cox, 2013). Across Australia it is a requirement that all teacher education students undertaking professional experience are formally assessed against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the Graduate level (AITSL, 2015).

The aim of this study was to explore the type of feedback teacher education students received during professional experience. Specifically, this study investigates teacher education students' perceptions of the feedback provided by various supervisors on their

professional experience. The data was analysed using the three questions that Hattie and Timperley (2007) argued that all learners need answered: 'Where am I going?'; 'How am I going?'; and, 'Where to next?'. The following research question framed the study:

> To what extent does feedback from supervisors on professional experience accord with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) three feedback questions: 'Where am I going?', 'How am I going?' and 'Where to next?'

Methods

This research study, focusing on the nature of feedback that teacher education students receive on professional experience, was drawn from a larger project that also examined the context and performance outcomes of feedback (Loughland & Ellis, 2016). The data for this study were sourced from interviews and focus groups and then analysed using the three categories of feedback represented by the three questions, 'Where am I going?', 'How am I going?' and 'Where to next?' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Data for this study was collected from three sources, namely, a series of semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and an anonymous questionnaire. Ethics permission was sought before proceeding with data collection. The University's Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel for the Arts, Humanities & Law was satisfied that the project was of minimal ethical impact and met the requirements as set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. A participant information sheet was provided which outlined details about the nature, purpose and benefits of the research, the time that would be involved, and issues concerning confidentiality and consent. Written consent was obtained from each participant, except for the questionnaire. Here, consent was implied through respondents returning the completed forms. The researchers ensured that the confidentiality, privacy and anonymity of all participants were maintained at all stages of the research project.

The sample population consisted of all the education students enrolled in the third year of a dual degree program and all the postgraduate students enrolled in the first year of a Graduate Diploma or Master of Education program who were undertaking *Professional Experience 1* in the first semester of 2014. This involved a four week attachment to a secondary school. A broadcast email was sent to all the students enrolled in Professional Experience 1 to invite them to take part in the research study and a briefing session was conducted for those who indicated interest. No person was subject to any coercion, inducement, or undue influence to volunteer for the study.

Although 10-12 participants were targeted to be recruited, a total of nine students gave written consent to participate in the series of semi-structured interviews and focus group following the briefing. These participants were required to provide responses to a number of open questions posed via an online platform on a weekly basis over the four week time frame. Themes that emerged from the literature review and in the analysis of the pre-existing data were used to develop a number of broad questions for the initial interview schedule. Probing questions were then used to explore areas of interest in more depth and

detail as the dialogue progressed. The research process was conducted in an iterative fashion, with the researcher continuously moving back and forth between reviewing the literature, collecting, analysing and interpreting the data.

A focus group was conducted after Professional Experience 1 in July 2014. One participant who was unable to attend that session took part in an additional interview. Proceedings of the focus group and the interview were digitally recorded and verbatim transcripts made. In addition, all students who had recently completed Professional Experience 1 were asked to respond to a questionnaire which asked closed and open questions about the value of feedback students received from supervisors during Professional Experience. 109 undergraduate and 120 postgraduate students responded from a total of approximately 350 students. Examples of the questions included in the interview schedule and questionnaire are given in the Appendix.

As the research design involved voluntary participation, one limitation of the study is the possibility of bias. Participants eager to take part in the study could possibly present a biased view, particularly if they had an exceptionally good or bad experience or relationship with their supervisor/s during professional experience, or felt compelled out of duty or obligation in any way to take part in the study.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report themes and patterns that occurred within the data while allowing for rich, detailed and complex description (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The different themes that emerged in the analysis of the data were grouped under three meta-categories, namely 'The interactional context', 'The nature of the feedback message', and 'Working towards the standards to improve practice', as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Meta-categories and categories emerging in the analysis of data

Meta-categories	Categories
The interactional context	Taking responsibility for learning
	The contribution and capacity of supervisors
	Working in a collegial and collaborative context
	The site where feedback was given
	The provision of formal versus informal feedback
The nature of the feedback message	The provision of clear and specific direction
	The detail and quality of feedback
	The frequency of feedback
	The provision of focused feedback and feed forward
	The consistency of feedback and inter-rater reliability of supervising teachers
Working towards the standards to improve practice	Feedback for improvement or assessment
	Understanding and working towards the standards
	The TES as novice and as expert
	Improving the feedback process and professional experience

This study focused on the meta-category of "The nature of the feedback message" that included the data relating to the nature of the feedback teacher education students received and consists of five different dimensions, namely; 'The provision of clear and specific direction', 'The detail and quality of feedback', 'The frequency of feedback', 'The provision of focused feedback and feed forward', and 'The consistency of feedback and inter-rater reliability of supervising teachers'. These dimensions were then further scrutinised using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) three questions as thematic categories.

Results

The results of this study are reported here using the three thematic categories used to analyse these data. There are instances in the findings that represent both positive and negative student perceptions of the advice they received from their supervisors on professional experience.

'Where am I going?'

In this study there was little evidence that supervisors referred to the overall goals for the professional experience in their assessment of their pre-service teacher's progress. In the absence of any specific direction being explicitly articulated by the supervisor or the school, commonly both the supervisor and the pre-service teacher (TES) implicitly assumed that the primary aim of professional experience was for the supervisor to offer feedback that would develop and improve their TES's teaching practice. This was expressed succinctly by one of the teacher education students: "Where you should be going? is not a defined goal. The aim is that I receive experience and feedback from which to improve my performance. Improvement is the 'direction' I have been given".

The lack of defined program goals was also apparent to another TES in their first week: "I wasn't provided much feedback on where I should be going in my first week. It was mainly on getting to know my students, and what I should be thinking about when planning my lessons". Feedback pertaining on 'Where am I going?' was rare according to the teacher education students in this study. While all TESs were made aware by the University that they would be formally assessed against the Standards, they were not always provided with a clear purpose, goal or objective by their supervising teacher relevant to the particular context in which they were placed for professional experience.

'How am I going?'

Feedback in relation to the question, 'How am I going?' was reported to be more prevalent than feedback pertaining to 'Where am I going?' by the teacher education students in this study. The supervisors were reported to be mainly assiduous in their provision of feedback to the TESs with some fortunate enough to have received it from multiple supervisors. A minority of students claimed that they received little, if any, feedback from their supervisors.

A majority of TESs described how they received detailed and extensive feedback from their supervisors, describing such feedback variously as "extensive", "very detailed and relevant", in "abundance", "really constructive", "in-depth on a daily basis", "extremely comprehensive and useful", "excellent" and "thorough" and the supervisor/s as "brilliant", "amazing", and showing "a keen interest in my development". Thoroughness and diligence are apt descriptors for the feedback reported by these TESs, "Feedback was given after every lesson taught" whilst another TES claimed that "Feedback was provided on all of my lesson plans and lessons taught as well as my participation in other school activities".

Some of the TESs reported that they receive feedback from multiple sources. These sources included their supervising teacher, university liaison and other teachers as expressed in the following excerpts, "I received a lot of positive feedback from both my uni liaison and supervising teachers" and "All teaching staff who watched my lesson provided written feedback, which has been extremely helpful".

At the other end of the continuum were some TESs who reported that they received very little feedback from their supervisors. This ranged from "not much" to "very rarely and when feedback was provided it was only for a 5 minute period and was just verbal not written feedback to keep". Another TES also did not receive written feedback, "mainly verbal feedback, mainly in first two weeks". Yet another TES claimed that their feedback was "general / limited and only upon request" whilst another said they had "very little feedback given too late".

In summary, the TESs in this study were able to report that in the main they did receive feedback from their supervisors. The next section examines whether this feedback included directions for where they might improve.

'Where to next?'

The first two thematic categories revealed a definite bias towards different ends of the continuum. The final thematic category that focuses on the feedback question of 'Where to next?' sits in the middle of the continuum.

A good number of TES were provided with excellent feedback of the 'Where to next?' kind. 'Where to next?' was represented by a range of synonyms in the data. For one TES, the synonym was improvement; "Every lesson my supervising teacher gave me written and verbal feedback on areas I did well or could improve". For another it was 'bad points' as in "After every lesson they discussed good and bad points as well as a typed up summary for further thought". For another the synonym was honesty as in "Feedback was always given positively but honestly".

The TESs in this study were also able to offer their criteria for what they regarded as effective feedback that provided guidance for their next steps. One TES highlighted specificity as a key criterion:

> I think, that what my supervising teacher did that was fantastic ... he would verbally tell me a comment that I would then write down, about one thing in that lesson that I could improve on. There was only one thing, and he would say, 'Right. For the next lesson I want you to work on this'.

Another TES identified immediacy as a key criterion for 'Where to next?' feedback:

> There are also instances where she will offer suggestions throughout the lesson, these can be distracting, but the immediate feedback is the most effective because it forces me to use the feedback (rather than just think about it, and possibly forget it before the next lesson).

In summary, specific, constructive and timely 'Where to next?' feedback from supervisors was valued by the TESs in this study. In contrast, there was a clear theme evident in the TESs responses that their supervisors were reluctant to provide critical, constructive and specific next steps. One TES clearly articulated why they needed critical 'Where to next?' feedback at this stage of their professional journey:

> At this very early stage of a career, I have a particular energy and enthusiasm I bring to learning to be a great teacher. I would like to utilise this energy in the best way possible. Without criticism, I have no idea which areas I need to focus most on to improve.

In the same vein another TES claimed that their supervisor "was too 'nice'" and not critical enough: "Always told me I was doing good, but I really wanted to know how to improve". This uncritical 'Where to next?' feedback was also associated with praise, as in "Little constructive feedback. Lots of praise and not enough room for improvement or advice."

TESs also expressed dissatisfaction and frustration when the 'Where to next?' feedback provided was vague, general or lacked specificity with respect to the next steps the TES might take:

> [Written comments] were all pretty much of the ilk of, "Tim has done pretty well". I'd still say it hasn't really given me much guidance to go forward. But I'm not feeling that too badly, because I know where I have to improve. But that is because of my own self-assessment … but if I was just going off this, yeah, not a lot to go on.

TESs were also frustrated if the 'Where to next?' feedback provided did not focus on the area of practice that they wanted: "Lots [of feedback was given] in terms of behaviour management, not much in terms of lesson content". This suggests that there was little dialogue between the supervisor and the mentee on what their goals for each lesson might be.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the supervisors in professional experience gave more 'How am I going?' feedback to the teacher education students than 'Where am

I going?' or 'Where to next?' feedback. These findings have three implications for mentoring conversations in professional experience. First, they suggest that the supervisors do not regularly use the three questions feedback model in their mentoring of TESs. Second, the lack of reference to overall goals suggests a lack of knowledge of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers or that the supervisors don't read the professional experience handbook that the University helpfully and optimistically sends out to each of them. Third, the mentoring conversations in this study that seem to predominately favour feedback of the 'How am I going?' category being delivered to the TESs indicate that these conversations are monologues rather than a dialogue.

It is evident from the findings of this study that, from the perspective of these teacher education students, these supervisors did not employ Hattie and Timperley's (2007) three question model of feedback in their mentoring conversations. The scope of this study did not permit a wider investigation of the incidence of this model in their overall teaching practice, so it is not possible to identify this as a capacity or transference issue. Both issues are surprising as Hattie's model has had wide circulation in professional networks in Australia both in its original version and through popular translations such as 'medal and mission' feedback (Petty, 2009) and 'be kind/ be specific/ be helpful' (Berger, 2003). The absence of such protocols has implications for the types of mentoring conversations that are possible.

A bias towards feedback suggests that the mentoring conversations in this study resembled monologues from the supervisor that described or evaluated the mentee's practice rather than a dialogic exchange. Timperley (2001, p.112) argued that supervisors can create a dialogue but "it requires that the data and reasoning on which the evaluation is based to be carefully articulated so that either may be contested". Timperley's (2001) argument seems to provide a solid foundation on which to develop a conversation for the possible next steps ('Where to next?') for the practice of the TES. It also provides an opportunity for the supervisor to calibrate the TES's goals towards the required goals ('Where am I going?') for the professional experience. This is problematic when the required goals are not well understood by the supervisors.

The goals for professional experience in Australia have been standardised since 2011 (AITSL, 2011). Professional experience is at the graduate level of a four tier accreditation system that has been progressively introduced to the state of NSW in which this study was conducted. This means that the more experienced teachers who are more likely to be supervisors have had the least experience with using the standards. The implications of this are that assessment in professional experience, as evidenced by the mentoring conversations in this study suffers from a lack of critical alignment (Biggs, 1996) in that the summative goals ('Where am I going?') are not clearly linked to the formative assessment ('How am I going?' and 'Where to next?') given to the TESs throughout their experience. This finding has two important implications for the future of mentoring conversations within a national standardised assessment system for professional experience in Australia.

The first implication is that the graduate standards need to be refined for use as assessment criteria for professional experience. At present the same graduate standards are both program goals for the entire teacher education programs prescribed through accreditation, as well as being criteria for professional experience units which are but one part of the program. Providers of initial teacher education programs do provide evidence guides to assist supervising teachers make assessment judgements but arguably they could do with more guidance in this area.

The second implication for professional experience assessment emerges from the first. The findings of this case study suggest that supervising teachers could do with more training in using the graduate standards as assessment criteria. This is not a new finding as it has already been argued elsewhere (Loughland & Ellis, 2016; Ure, 2009) but it needs to be made again if inter-rater reliability in the use of the standards as assessment criteria is to be obtained in the important area of professional experience.

Conclusion

This study explored the nature of the feedback provided to teacher education students on their first professional experience. The findings were that feedback was far more prevalent than both feed up and feed forward. The implications of these findings for both teacher-educators and supervisors in schools are that the teaching standards as outcomes of professional experience need to be more explicit to teacher education students, and supervisors need to be trained in giving constructive feedback comments so that teacher education students can reach these outcomes.

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Appendix A: Examples of the questions included in the interview schedule and questionnaire

I am interested in learning about the type of feedback pre-service teachers receive from their Supervising Teacher, other mentors, colleagues, and fellow students while on Professional Experience and how this might help you to develop and grow as a teacher and work towards achievement of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

- Could you please describe the feedback process you experienced during Professional Experience in terms of type and quality?

Probing questions:
- Where and when was this feedback given?
- Who provided this feedback?
- How was this feedback provided?
- What was the feedback provided in response to?

Further probing questions:
- What do you believe constitutes effective feedback?
- Was the feedback given more focused on your development as a teacher or more on the assessment of your teaching performance, i.e., was the feedback synonymous with promoting or measuring success?
  - Why do you say this?
  - Can you give examples or evidence to illustrate what you say?
- To what extent did the feedback assist in your growth and development as a teacher?
- To what extent did the feedback help you to work towards achievement of the Standards?
  - To what extent were you given guidance on collecting evidence to demonstrate you have achieved a Standard?
  - What Standards do you feel you exceeded in beyond graduate teacher?
  - What evidence do you have to support this?
  - What Standards do you feel you need to work on?
  - What evidence do you have to support this?
  - How much knowledge did your supervising teacher and other mentors have about the Standards?
    o Why do you believe this to be so?
- Was the feedback process a monologue or dialogic process?
  - To what extent did you feel a power imbalance might have existed?
- To what extent were you involved in professional conversations with other staff members in your school?
  - Who initiated such conversations? Where and when did these occur?
  - Did you receive feedback from any other sources?
- How much do you value the feedback given?
- How much do you value the role your Supervising teacher and other mentors played?
- What is your intended future use of the feedback you received?

- Can you suggest a more effective and efficient method of feedback provision to help you work towards achievement of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers while on professional experience?
- Do you have any questions you would like to ask me or is there anything further you might like to add before we finish?

Dr Neville John Ellis is a lecturer in the School of Education at University of New South Wales where he has previously functioned as the Professional Experience Convenor. Neville's teaching and research interests centre around teacher development, professional learning, and practitioner research.
Email: neville.ellis@unsw.edu.au
Web: https://education.arts.unsw.edu.au/about-us/people/neville-ellis/

Dr Tony Loughland (corresponding author) is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at University of New South Wales. He was formerly Director of Professional Experience at the University of Sydney. Tony is currently working on the validation of a teacher observation instrument based upon the construct of teacher adaptive practices.
Email: tony.loughland@unsw.edu.au
Web: https://education.arts.unsw.edu.au/about-us/people/tony-loughland/