Teacher educators' experiences in supporting and assessing student teacher practica in early childhood centres

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Introduction

Practice experience in early childhood settings is recognised as a central component of all early childhood initial teacher education[ITE] programmes. While tertiary based teacher educators play a key role in facilitating connections between theory and practice experiences in programmes, there is a relatively small body of research literature relating to their role as visiting lecturers on practicum. This report focuses on a small-scale study carried out by a group of teacher educators (lecturers) from one ITE provider. The group explored their experiences of supporting and assessing early childhood student teachers on practicum in early childhood education settings.

Background

The broad topic for the study arose following an annual visit to the Open Polytechnic by the monitor appointed by the NZ Qualifications Authority as part of its quality assurance processes. The NZ Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand require evidence that graduates from initial teacher education degree programmes meet defined 'graduating teacher standards' (Education Council, 2015). The monitor asked for evaluative evidence about the practicum component of the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) teaching degree. It was a 'curious question'; she had not detected any issues. She felt it would be valuable to round out the evidence she had gathered about other components of the qualification programme.

The research project was proposed during a 2014 meeting attended by all the lecturers in the ITE programme when research strategy was being discussed. Group projects were planned in order to build research capacity and capability. Eight lecturers wanted be involved in a project relating to student teachers practicum and this study, with a focus on lecturers' experiences in relation to practica, was designed.

The ITE programme had recently completed an online survey to collect data from associate teachers in early childhood education[ECE] services who support the student teachers during their practicum. The project would supplement survey findings with qualitative research data from the lecturers' perspective. A later phase was mooted in order to research the student teachers' experience. Most of the lecturers who volunteered were not already actively engaged in any research project. As the project evolved, they clustered into two overlapping groups: the research coordination group and a group who agreed to be participants during data gathering. Some changed roles during the life of the project.

The purpose of the research was to deepen understanding of how lecturers support and assess student teachers' practicum, including their bicultural practices. Participation in the research gave lecturers what Brennan, Everiss and Mara (2011) described as "an opportunity to reflect on personal practice as teacher-researchers, and in … collective reflection and analysis of the teaching and learning encounters, resulting in shared understandings … and also validation of the participants'

practices," (p. 5). This quote is pertinent because the lecturers involved in the research project are teachers too—teachers of adults who are student teachers.

Research questions

The research followed an appreciative inquiry methodology that sought to uncover the current best practices of the participant lecturers. The main research question was, "what makes practicum work well from teacher educators' perspectives?".

The objectives of the research were:
- To study the positive experiences of academic staff teaching in an ITE programme in supporting and assessing early childhood education students' practicum;
- To explore and appreciate any differences in teacher educators' experiences of supporting and assessing practica of student teachers who live/work in small towns, and those who live/ work in main urban locations;
- To study ways to strengthen teacher educators' confidence in assessing bicultural competencies.

As the project developed the research group considered the three broad categories of the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015) - professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional values and relationships - and used them to reflect on their own practice.

Summary of findings

Key insights that emerged from this research are summarised here.

- The categories of knowledge, practice and relationships used in the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015) provided a useful framework for understanding the work of visiting lecturers.
- The regional lecturer network of the Open Polytechnic Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) is central to effective support and assessment of practicum in this blended ITE programme model. Lecturers are currently the key link between the programme and practice settings. Continuity of relationships with regional students and early childhood centers underpins decision making, open dialogue, advocacy and student agency. Relationships are built on multiple points of contact, both distance and face-to-face.
- Visiting lecturers play a key role in supporting students to understand and contextualize practicum competencies and to draw on theory to interpret practice experience. To do this lecturers need good knowledge of ITE programme courses and the professional frameworks for self-evaluation and reflection used by teachers.
- Lecturers are committed to supporting students' deep engagement with kaupapa Māori knowledge and pedagogies but recognise that this is complex and that their competence

varies. Strengthening resources within practicum courses has given lecturers more confidence.

- When assessing students, lecturers aim to reveal and to enhance students' own sense-making, the connections between their philosophy and practice and their professional identities as teachers. More opportunities for mentoring dialogue could strengthen this process.

- The intentions and practices of lecturers based more in rural or in urban locations appear the same. However, there are contextual differences that account for different challenges and experiences in their work. Urban experiences were characterized by 'diversity' reflecting the cultures and backgrounds of student groups, and centre philosophies. Rural themes emphasised 'consistency' with less choice and a closer web of relationships.

- Visiting lecturers' work is complex and utilises specialised knowledge and skills. Creating more opportunities for professional discussion and reflective learning cycles amongst lecturers could focus and strengthen lecturers' intentions and strategies, resulting in enhanced practice experiences for students.

Report structure

This report begins with an overview of the Open Polytechnic Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) programme. This is followed by a scan of literature relating to the research focus. The next section outlines the appreciative inquiry methodology and data gathering approach, including ethical considerations. This is followed by a discussion of the data, which identifies key themes that emerged from focus group discussions. Future directions and a concluding statement summarise the findings and their significance.

The programme

The Open Polytechnic Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) is one of a handful of early childhood ITE programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand using a mixed-mode blended approach with on-line and face-to-face teaching and learning. The programme has a national reach with regional lecturers across the country who teach nationally (in specialist content areas) and locally (mentor and support regional student cohorts).

Programme documentation outlines that professional practice (practicum) experiences provide student teachers with opportunities to develop the professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and values required to work in a range of early childhood settings. Expectations are that the student teachers will strengthen their practicum competencies year by year, and become increasingly critically reflective. Practicum competencies broadly cover professional knowledge and skills; planning effective learning experiences; supporting children's learning and development; developing children's social competencies; understanding bicultural practice and engaging with re reo me ngā tikanga Māori.

 Student teachers complete four five-week blocks of practicum over three full time equivalent years of enrolment. Many students enrolled in the ITE programme are already employed in licensed early childhood settings, including home based services. A further cohort of student teachers are either in full time study or in part time employment in other fields. All student teachers regardless of employment status are required to complete 20 weeks (100 days) of practicum in a range of early childhood centres. Students may seek approval to complete the first level 7 practicum in the centre where they are employed.

The practicum is a collaborative partnership between the student teacher, their lecturer, licensed centres and associate teachers in local communities. Students have a 'voice' and influence in the choice of centre in which they complete their placement. This is negotiated with their regional lecturers who maintains responsibility for ensuring practicum policies are complied with and that the student teacher learning will be enhanced through the experience. Students are placed with associate teachers in approved settings that have a memorandum of agreement with the ITE programme. Practicum centres must have satisfactory Education Review Office reports and a good reputation in the community.

Workshops offer student teachers the opportunity to share ideas and develop collegial learning relationships and build communities of learners. They enable student teachers to cover complex content in a group learning situation, kanohi ki te kanohi through discussion, reflection and the extension of ideas and attitudes. These inform practice and are guided by specific learning outcomes. All student teachers attend a two day practicum workshop prior to their practicum placement for three out of their four practicum courses. These workshops give students the opportunity to clarify goals, expectations and processes that form the practicum.

Regional lecturers for the ITE programme visit each student and associate teacher twice, for the first and final practicum. The first visit may sometimes be replaced with a phone-call during the middle two practica. A triadic discussion underpins the practicum assessment process. It involves the regional lecturer, the student teacher and associate teacher together in a triadic (three-way) discussion about the student teacher's progress against the competencies specified for that practicum. Together, the triad discusses and evaluates the student teacher's practicum. Thus, it is intended that the student is actively involved and has a 'voice' in the formative and summative assessment.

The teacher educators on the programme are regional lecturers. In addition to teaching on courses, they follow a cohort of students through the programme, providing pastoral care and playing a key role in the support and assessment of their practicum. Phone calls and email contact are important ways that ensure personal-professional contact is maintained. The lecturers have also built up stable relationships with ECE settings over many years, as well as a sense of shared duty of care for student teachers, because visiting lecturers are known and trusted in the ECE community.

The mixed mode of study enables students enrolled with this ITE programme to live and work in rural and small town locations as well as larger population centres. One lecturer will complete the majority of practicum visits for student teachers in the same geographic location, so each student has consistent support and regular communication from 'their' lecturer for the three years of their study. Contracted adjunct faculty do support lecturers as visiting lecturers in special circumstances. Typically, these adjunct teacher contractors are involved in the programme in other ways and they have been thoroughly inducted by permanent staff.

Literature review

Professional practice in initial teacher education

The quality of teaching and initial teacher education for teaching in schools and in early childhood education (ECE) services has been the focus of public scrutiny and government policies internationally examining issues around quality, accountability and learning outcomes (Cameron & Baker, 2004; Darling–Hammond, 2006; Grudnoff 2011; Kane, 2005;). Several researchers have raised questions about what is good practice and how effectively teachers are prepared to practise as teachers (Darling Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Dayan, 2008; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006; Ord, 2010; Warren, 2014).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Education Council of New Zealand requires ITE providers to prepare student graduates to teach the appropriate curriculum, ensuring that they meet the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015). Each initial teacher education provider interprets the requirements for professional practice (practicum) which are then enacted through the practices of the associate teachers, other staff members in the setting, the visiting lecturers and through developing the professional practice of the student teacher (Simpson & Grudnoff, 2013). The *Graduating Teacher Standards* (EDUCANZ) provide insights into what is regarded as becoming and being a quality teacher within Aotearoa New Zealand. According to Simpson and Grudnoff (2013) the documents make implicit education's obligation under te Tiriti o Waitangi by defining a quality teacher as being "one who has the cultural and pedagogical knowledge understanding skills and commitment to teach students in ways that are responsive to their diverse needs and backgrounds" (p.75). The standards are reinforced in *Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners* (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Becoming an early childhood teacher "involves mastery of particular knowledge and a set of skills that are the basis for quality practice" (Ryan & Grieshaber, as cited in Recchia & Shin 2010, p. 136). However many argue the need to re-conceptualise what being a professional means (Betts, 2014; Simpson & Grudnoff, 2013) and the need for professional inquiry learning and critically reflective student teachers, (Dalli, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Duhn, 2010; Korthagen 2004; Osgood, 2010; Urban, 2010). There is an increasing emphasis on teaching as a way of empowering learners rather than as a means of providing knowledge (Trevethan, 2014). Such an approach is connected to a holistic view of learning and learners which should be modelled in ITE programmes (Korthagen, 2004).

Rural education and blended approaches to learning

Government restructuring of tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand since the1990's has opened up opportunities not only for a diversity of learners to embrace teacher education (Maraskind, 2010) but also for different delivery models of early childhood teacher education. The significant demands on ITE providers to develop appropriate programmes, methods of delivery and methods of support for students in isolated parts of the country (Kane 2005) has led to a much greater range of modes of delivery,

including distance options. Distance education has always had "a natural affiliation with rural education as both have traditionally provided services to geographically isolated people" (Stevens, 1992, p. 170).

Stewart (2009) in describing options for rural education argued for blended learning, which is a combination of multiple approaches to learning because it "enhances traditional face to face learning and teaching with the use of educational technologies combining on line and on campus approaches," (p. 239). The multiple methods of contact make students feel part of a learning community and create a sense of belonging (Simpson, 2008). Ussher and Carss (2014) highlight practicum as an important blended learning component of distance programmes that contribute to student teachers' sense of belonging to a community of practice. Simpson, Hastings and Hill (2007) noted in their study the benefit of having pre-service students on practicum experience provided a major link to current theory and practice for teachers working in rural and isolated communities. For teachers in these locations "the presence of pre-service student teachers expands the learning community even if only relatively briefly", (2007, p.494). Ussher and Carss (2014) also noted that associate teachers in their distance learning study valued the knowledge student teachers brought to their practicum experience.

Consistent with the international literature, Sampson, Goodrich and McManus, (2011) noted that relationships in rural places are embedded in dense networking of close ties. Rural people have connections with each other and the place they reside in which in turn has relevance to the lives of students and their communities. However, in a summary of their research into rural communities Treeby and Burtenshaw (2003) concluded that there are not great differences between rural and urban New Zealanders. They are remarkably similar in educational achievement as well as income and lifestyle indicators such as the use of internet. In their Teaching Learning and Research Initiative research on the impact of assessment feedback to distance learners in a teacher education programme, Murphy, Edlin, Everiss, McClew, Margrain and Meade, (2006) covered focus groups from provincial, rural and Māori student cohorts and concluded that "there did not appear to be any significant differences between the urban and provincial focus groups" (p. 27). The researchers found that the value that students place on relationships indicate that "personal support and mentorship is a critical component for student success particularly in distance education" (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 27).

Practice experience

ITE programmes have long valued the teacher practice experience (known as practicum). It is an embedded component of all ITE programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aspden, 2014; Davitt 2006; Haigh & Ward, 2004; Kane, 2005; Lind 2004; McDonald, 2014; Trevethan, 2014; Turnbull, 2002). The practicum experience is seen as "an essential and integral component of initial teacher education where student teachers have the opportunity to actually teach" (Yates, 2011, p. 25). Novice teachers often consider practicum as the most important part of their preparation to become a teacher (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

The practicum experiences for early childhood student teachers occur in a range of early childhood centres. Each is a site where student teachers practise teaching and prove their readiness to be teachers (Haigh & Ward 2004; Lind, 2004). Turnbull (2007) reminds us that the learning environment of each early childhood centre in Aotearoa New Zealand is in turn influenced by the children, their families and the staff members as well as legislative requirements, government policies and the broader socio-cultural issues affecting the early childhood profession.

Broadly speaking, the benefits of practicum include opportunities for student teachers to integrate theoretical knowledge and professional practice in a variety of contexts under the guidance of experienced teacher practitioners (Le Cornu, 2010; Trevethan, 2014). Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) argued that, "the supervised student teaching is the most persuasive pedagogy in teacher education having a profound impact on student teachers." (p. 411). It is also a time for students to develop their own ideas and reflect on their developing practice (Haigh & Ward 2004), and an opportunity to develop professional agency (Turnbull 2002). Davitt (2006) and Lind (2004) suggested there is a general consensus that the practicum can provide an opportunity for learning about teaching and being a teacher, which is situated and authentic. In their review of initial teacher education literature, Cameron and Baker (2004) claimed practicum is more than practical application of theory and course work, as Kane (2005) noted, it is an opportunity "to be able to theorise practice and practise theory" (p.56).

Practicum however cannot be assumed to be effective simply because it happens (Sanders et al., 2012). Fayne (2007) argued that there is evidence that the practicum experience is not an effective learning experience for all student teachers, citing Zeichner's view that "growth will only occur if supervisors force discussions about the values implicit in actions and the impact of social context of learning and teaching" (p. 54). Although there has been considerable change to the way teacher education programmes are conceived and delivered, Grudnoff and Williams (2010) contended there has been little change to the practicum process. The literature neither challenges the norms for practicum, nor provides evidence about the best ways to provide student teachers with consistently high quality practicum experiences (Le Cornu, 2010). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Sanders et al. (2012) identified three key contributors to effective practicum experiences for student teachers. These contributors included developing meaningful relationships, open conversations at a deep level, and opportunities to challenge and be challenged.

Several early childhood education scholars have explored initial teacher education within the early childhood context analysing various aspects of the practicum experience. These include: the development of student teacher agency (Turnbull 2004); field based practicum experiences (Howie & Hagan, 2009; McConnell, 2011; Murphy & Butcher, 2011) early childhood teachers' preparedness for teaching (Ord, 2010); and tensions related to the two roles of ITE providers' representative—supervision and assessment (Aspden, 2011, 2014; Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012; Ortlipp, 2003, 2009). Whether international or local authors, compulsory or early childhood education sector, almost all writers of literature related to initial teacher education agree the practicum is a key part of teacher preparation—

the part that provides the strongest and most enduring link between course work and teaching. Practicum is viewed as a context within which the formative process of development as a professional can occur and students develop their sense of professional identity (Howie & Hagan, as cited in Sanders et al., 2012).

Communities of practice in practicum settings

Much of the recent research and literature about practicum is shaped by an understanding of the practicum experience as a community of practice or as a place where student teachers negotiate entry to a school community of practice or a teaching community as a whole (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2003; Haigh & Ell, 2014; Korthagen 2004; Lind, 2004; Trevethan, 2014). According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) learning about teaching develops through participation in a community of learners where content is encountered in the contexts in which it can be applied. In his thesis, Lind (2004) argued for a realistic approach to teacher education that includes integration of theory with practice in actual situations encountered by the student teacher whilst on practicum. "Practicum should create opportunities for collaborative learning situations" (p.27).

A community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998) is the dynamic two-way relationships between people and the social learning system in which they participate. Communities of practice are conducive settings for learning to teach (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Practicum as a community of practice model features a shared perspective and a common language and culture in which teachers and student teachers share understandings about the nature of good teaching and work together to enact them. There should be "the removal of power differentials as members are negotiating and learning together to contribute to the common goal of supporting student [teachers]" (Haigh & Ell, 2014, p. 18). As noted by Turnbull (2007) each centre has its own unique community and as a result the professional culture in the centre context does make a difference. Immersion in a community of practice enables broad and authentic engagement with qualified teachers, children and families which expand opportunities to reflect on and consider a range of perspectives (Ussher, 2010). In their literature review of investigating high quality practica in initial teacher education, Whatman and MacDonald (2017) concluded that practica are strongest when the whole learning community takes responsibility, and theory and practice are integrated into every aspect of the ITE programme.

There is a growing research literature (for example, Simpson, 2008) on the importance of communities of learning and practice which are recognised as socially situated, and collaborative. Communities of learning can extend beyond tertiary classrooms with information communication technology, but the use of ICT is minimal in relation to practicum.

The role of the teacher educator

In the literature, the participant in the practicum process who has been least studied is the teacher educator or visiting lecturer. According to Koerner, O'Connell Rust and Baumgartner (2002) the visiting lecturer "plays a critical role; serves as translator of the values and beliefs of the teacher education

programme; is the go between for the institution and the setting; and helps student teachers to make sense of their work in ways that will translate into future practice" (p. 38).

McDonald (2014) has also shown that it is the visiting lecturer who plays a key role in cementing the relationships between the three parties: the student teacher, the associate teacher in the early childhood education service and the visiting lecturer. As a representative of the teacher education programme with insights into the bigger picture of teaching, the visiting lecturer is a link to build bridges between the two learning environments so that the different perspectives can be identified and utilised as a basis for student teacher learning (Grudnoff, 2011; McDonald, 2014; Williams 2014). Often teacher educators need to be dually qualified, that is certificated teachers with professional acceptance by the teaching community, and academics' teaching in tertiary institutions (Gunn, Berg, Haigh & Hill, as cited in Whatman & MacDonald, 2017). Koerner and colleagues (2002) argue that the priority of the visiting lecturer should be the education of the student teacher. As a liaison between the institution and the setting the visiting lecturer "acts as an advocate for the student teacher with regards to the teacher education programme," (p. 49). Ortlipp (2003) found that this responsibility often influenced teacher educators' judgements and silenced their voice in the triadic discussions.

The role of the visiting lecturer is complex, multifaceted and challenging. The literature on visiting lecturers considers the diverse roles of guide, mentor, and assessor reporting issues of power dynamics (Davitt, 2006; Haigh & Ward, 2004) and the effects of power in the supervisory /assessment relationships (Ortlipp, 2003; Murphy & Butcher, 2011). Davitt's study (2006) also reported issues of power dynamics in relation to the diverse roles of guide, mentor, and assessor. Murphy and Butcher, (2011) explored the effects of power in the supervisory relationships. Power can also come into play in the support/ mentoring role (MacDonald, 2014). Koerner et al., (2002) claimed that the role confusion for the visiting lecturer may be the barrier to successful practice experiences for some student teachers. Some literature identifies tensions for the visiting lecturer between assessment and support in their relationships with students (Dayan, 2008; Haigh, 2013; Haigh & Ward, 2004; Murphy & Butcher, 2011; Ortlipp, 2006, 2009). Cohen et al. (as cited in Whatman & MacDonald, 2017) identified that unequal status between visiting teacher educators and the mentor teachers in the practicum setting, and differing perceptions between these two parts of the practicum triad were key sources of tension that restricted co-operation and open sharing of ideas.

The visiting lecturer's supervisory role in the triadic process for the evaluation and assessment of the student teacher's competence is the focus in recent literature (Aspden, 2011, 2015; Dayan, 2008; Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012, Ortlipp, 2009;) with some evidence directly examining the experiences of teacher educators or visiting lecturers assessing student teachers in early childhood settings (Aspden, 2011, 2014; Dayan, 2008, MacDonald, 2014; Murphy & Butcher, 2011; Ortlipp, 2006). Hawe (as cited in Aspden, 2011) identified practicum not only as a site of learning and practice but as the context for assessment within a teacher education environment that mandates accountability because it is the gate keeper to the teaching profession. Koerner et.al. (2002), in considering roles in practicum, asserted that the mentoring role belongs primarily to the visiting lecturer. Their data suggest that visiting lecturers are

seen by both student teachers and associate teachers as liaison supervisors who could "influence the development the new teachers and the practice of experienced teachers in powerful ways, although they (the visiting lecturers) rarely interpret their role this way and consequently often missed key mentoring opportunities" (Koerner et al., 2002, p. 55). Dayan (2008) also found that visiting lecturers tend to conceptualise their role in visiting students primarily as an assessment exercise rather than a time for guidance and promoting professional growth. However, Aspden's (2014) study in early childhood contexts found that guiding and mentoring was deemed their primary task by teacher educators.

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) found that guidance and mentorship during the practicum experience appears to be critical in enabling student teachers to make sense of their experience and learn from it. In the practicum context "coaching and feedback can come from associate teachers, teacher educators or peers" (p.411). McDonald (2014) noted that both associate teachers and visiting lecturers gave clear constructive feedback through encouragement, support and reflection including in written reports despite their summative nature. In her study, Graves (2010) identified that student teachers valued supervisors who mentored them in a proactive manner as advocates and acted as liaison for students with the practicum centres. Support and mentoring are integral to the practicum experience. Tillema, Smith and Lesham's (2011) study considered whether mentors in their support role can be assessors of performance related to external standards, concluding "that all stakeholders of the practicum seem to have most confidence in a mentor guided judgement orientated approach to assessment that will provide student teachers with further opportunities for improvement of performance and reflection" (p.139).

Although rich mentoring and collaborative practice may be the desired context for learning, Martinez (as cited in Koerner et al., 2002) claimed that the end point of assessment may well limit the potential this offers. In Cameron's literature review of *Learning to Teach* (2007, citing Moskowitz & Stephens, 1997) she notes that traditionally researchers have considered that formative (usually within the role of the mentor) and summative assessment should be kept separate because of the belief that it is difficult for the mentoring relationship when the mentor is also the assessor. However, in a review of the mentor role, Yusko and Feiman-Nemser (2008) claimed that it is possible for mentors "to combine both formative and summative assessment while retaining the trust of learners and promoting their development" (p. 33). Ussher and Carss (2014) concluded that the dual role of assessor and mentor is enhanced by having a consistent visiting lecturer over the different practicum which allowed for the development of relationships, greater shared knowledge and more meaningful feedback and support.

Bicultural practice

Warren (2014) reminds us that part of the role of teacher educators is the requirement to engage in bicultural teaching practice. Bicultural practice in early childhood education services is mandated through the regulations, curriculum and professional standards promulgated by the Education Council. In order to meet the requirements of the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015) and

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 1996, 2017*)*, student teachers on practicum in early childhood settings must know and show their knowledge of te reo me ona tikanga Māori. Practicum settings are the sites for student teachers to engage with bicultural learning in practice (Warren, 2014).

The literature highlights the key role ITE programmes have to play in educating graduates who are able to implement strong bicultural practices appropriately. However in their review of initial teacher education, Cameron and Baker (2004) reported at that time that there was little evidence within the research on initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand which shows that pre-service programmes are preparing beginning teachers to address the needs of Māori students in the classroom. In recent years, a number of studies in early childhood education have investigated ways in which early childhood teachers and academics implement a pedagogy that is bicultural (Jenkin, 2012; Ritchie & Rau, 2006, 2008; Taniwha, 2010; Williams & Broadley 2012). Jenkin (2012) claimed that "teachers and student teachers *still* struggle to implement bicultural aspects of the curriculum within their early childhood education practices" (p. 49) and their attitudes and skills vary in relation to including bicultural practice. While teacher educators are committed to meeting their obligations and responsibilities they fall along a continuum of knowledge and understanding to be able to either assess or support student teachers' bicultural learning (Jenkin, 2012; Ritchie & Rau, 2006; Williams, Broadley & Lawson –Te Aho, 2012).

Heta Lensen and Dunham *(*2013) claim that the challenge becomes that of knowing and more importantly the depth of knowing required for student teachers to meaningfully engage with kaupapa Māori. Greenwood and Te Aka (as cited in Meade, Kirikiri, Paratene & Allan 2011) discussed themes of effective bicultural teacher education practice within the early childhood field. Meade et al. (2011) identified the importance of support and mentoring from knowledgeable Māori colleagues for teacher educators in their journey of bicultural learning.

Summary

The aims of initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand are influenced by the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2017). This includes preparing teachers to honour te Tiriti o Waitangi and work effectively in bicultural and multicultural contexts. To empower all learners, teachers need to develop skills in critical reflection and inquiry.

Distance teacher education enables students from rural communities to participate in teacher education. Blended learning modes with multiple points of both online and face-to-face contact are particularly effective and enhance communities of learners. Online technologies potentially open up new opportunities to strengthen this approach.

Practice experience is an essential and ideally, embedded component of ITE that has a strong impact on the practice of developing teachers. In addition to practical skills and confidence, practice experience provides opportunity to theorise practice and practise theory, to develop reflective practice, a teaching identity and professional teaching philosophy. However, practicum experiences

do not always achieve this. Mentor teachers and visiting lecturers play key roles in the effectiveness of the practicum. Students need opportunities to develop meaningful relationships, engage in open dialogue and to experience support and challenge. Learning can be enhanced by participating in communities of practice that engage in collaborative learning, all members of the community are involved giving students access to authentic learning situations and a range of perspectives.

The role of the visiting lecturer is one of the least studied in the practicum triad. They play a key role in mediating between ITE programme and the practice setting and facilitating relationships within the triad. Often they need to be need to be dually qualified with the ability to walk in both tertiary and the school or early childhood sector environments. Visiting lecturers negotiate power relationships that exist between practicum participants and settings. They are have a dual role of mentor and assessor. This complexity can limit and even silence their effectiveness. Consistent relationships and a focus development enables the roles to co-exist effectively in the activities of the visiting lecturer.

Research has questioned the effectiveness of ITE programmes to prepare teachers to develop bicultural teaching practices and support the success of Māori learners. Teacher educators are committed to their role in support students but they vary in their own knowledge. Knowing culture is complex and involves access to support and knowledge from people and contexts.

Methodology

From the very first discussion, the project coordination team agreed that it would be a qualitative, appreciative inquiry focusing on practicum support and assessment. Appreciative inquiry involves searching for the best in people, in organisational practices and in the context around them.

> "..it attempts to draw out, describe and heighten those positive aspects of a system … [T]he appreciative inquiry process seeks out people's experiences and achievements, their strengths and potentials, their stories and wisdom … providing incentive for individual and collective growth," (Gibbs, 2006, p. 250).

"[It] offers an affirmative approach for … envisioning future initiatives based on best practice" (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins & Hetherington, 2009, p. 2). Appreciative inquiry shares features of action research in that it analyses current practices with a view to making some decisions to improve them. However, it differs from many action research projects, as it does not measure, nor is it deficit-based. Camm (2010) says that this is one reason why there is compatibility between appreciative inquiry and kaupapa Māori research. Hammond (2013) says that appreciative inquiry "amplifies what is working"; as it "approaches change by assuming whatever you want more of already exists in the organisation," (p. 1).

A second key decision was to adopt a participant-researcher approach. Some of the lecturers who were the subjects in the appreciative inquiry data-collection-sessions also coordinated the research project. Other lecturers simply joined the appreciative inquiry discussions. All signed consent forms to participate.

Methods

The methodology involved a variety of methods:

- examination of text pertaining to practicum in ITE programme documents;
- facilitated appreciative inquiry discussions between the research coordinators and additional project participants, followed by thematic analysis of the qualitative data (Mutch, 2013).

A literature review was undertaken as the research proposal was developed and added to during the data collection period. A search of more recent literature was undertaken during the period when the analysis of the data and writing up of the findings were done.

The ITE programme material approved by external government agencies, and material about practicum prepared for use by student teachers, lecturers and associate teachers was examined and used in the background and discussion sections of this report. No assignments written by student teachers, or assessments written by associate teachers were accessed.

Data were collected at two day-long focus group discussions that were facilitated by an external researcher with extensive experience in undertaking educational research, including appreciative inquiries. The discussions were recorded on audio-tape, backed up by pen and paper notes of the group's dialogue. Answers to some questions were captured by participants writing on short questionnaires. The first focus group discussion questions included: How do lecturers support students before and during practicum? How are students supported to implement bicultural practices within practicum? How do lecturers assess bicultural competencies within practicum? And, Why do you do what you do? (This involved each participant looking back into their past career to move forward in their current role as a teacher educator). For some parts of the discussion the focus group divided into two and considered questions according to their experiences in rural and urban locations.

The second data-collection focus group discussion was held some months after the first one, and the questions and probes were influenced by appreciative themes that had emerged from the first data-collection session. The questions asked what they were doing in supporting student practicum that works, the conditions that allowed them to do their best teaching, and how they had improved their professional guidance for student teachers in relation to practicum experiences in recent years. They were asked for proposals about how lecturers could become more confident about assessing bicultural practice.

The final question in the focus group discussions invited lecturers to 'dream about a third space', a different way that they and associate teachers in practicum centres could support student teachers to become effective early childhood teachers in early childhood settings. In summary, participants explored the "multiple ways in which practice is mediated" as students move from knowing how and what, to also knowing why (Brennan, Everiss & Mara, 2011, p. 5).

Real names of participant-lecturers were not recorded. Real names of student teachers and centres where students were placed for their practicum were not used. The aim was to illuminate the values, processes and theories that the lecturers drew on and enacted in supporting and assessing students in their practica.

Results and discussion

In keeping with the appreciative inquiry methodology, the analysis of lecturer's focus group discussions focused on identifying the 'best of what is' in their work of supporting and assessing student teachers' practicum. These results are descriptive, providing an 'inside view' of what lecturers agreed was effective in what they do, or try to do. They identify the key strengths and drivers that currently exist within the lecturers' practicum programme and key areas of focus for student practicum into the future. These descriptions are considered within the broader literature relating to teaching practicum and the role of the teacher educator as visiting lecturer.

During the data analysis the categories of knowledge, practice and relationships used in the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015) proved useful to analyse different aspects of the lecturers' work. The categories were very familiar to all participants and provided them a shared point of reference. The categories served to tease out different aspects of lecturers' best work, their knowledge, their relationships and how these aspects supported what they did. Knowledge, relationships, and established practices were highly integrated in lecturers' work and during analysis a working model (Figure 1) was developed that captured the integrated nature of these aspects. The following discussion explains and elaborates on this model.
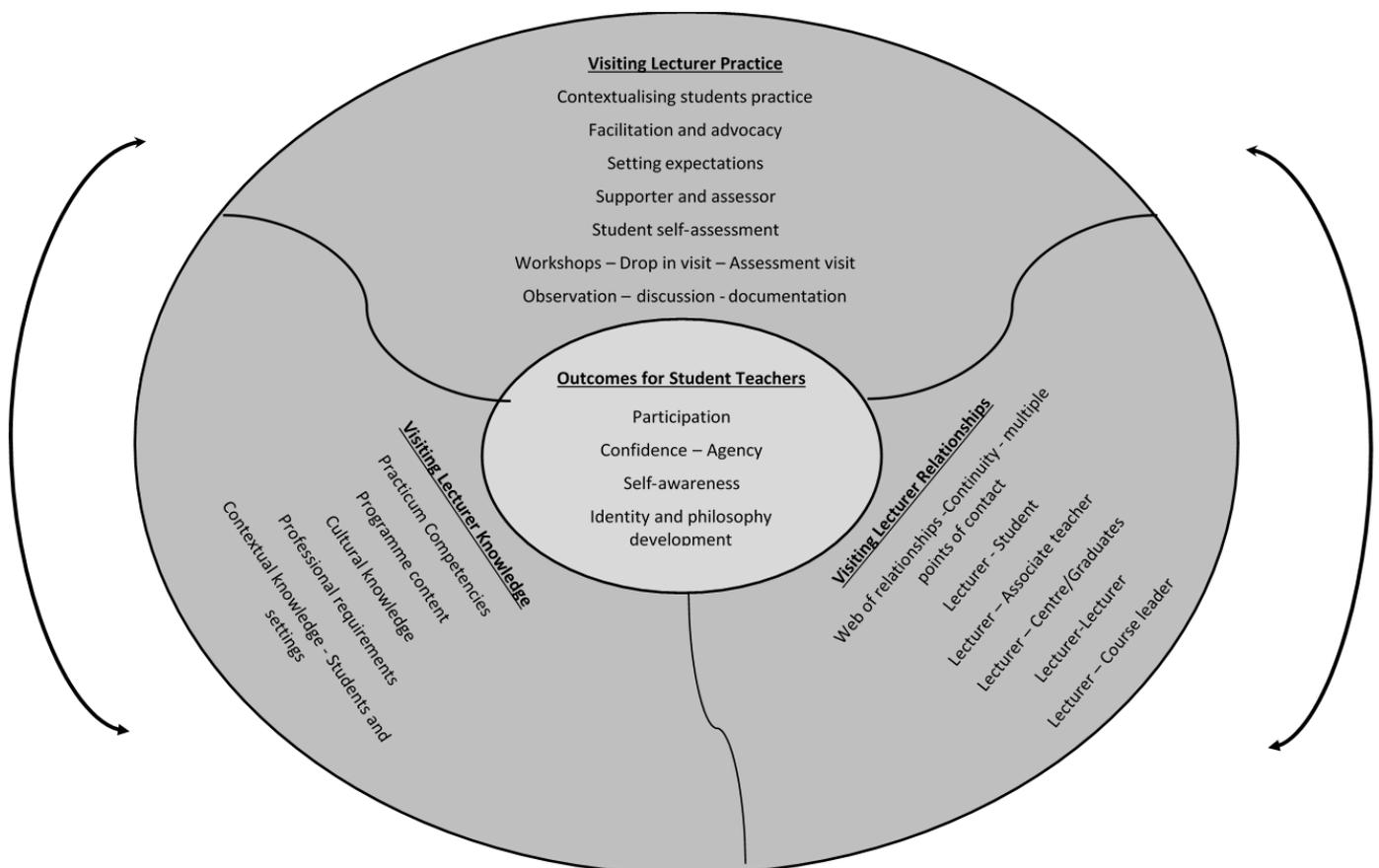

Figure 1. Knowledge, relationships and practice in lecturers' work

Knowledge

The integration of theory and practice, or praxis, is central to teacher education. Early childhood teachers are expected to develop specialised theoretical and practice knowledge about what they should teach, how learners learn, and the contexts in which they teach (Education Council, 2015). Kane and Broadley (2005) highlight the critical importance of teachers being able to make explicit the thinking behind their practice. Practicum is an opportunity to integrate and situate knowledge through experience (Le Cornu, 2010;Trevethan, 2014). Authentic conversations with experienced teachers allow student teachers to develop ways of theorising their own practice.

Research has emphasised that teacher educators play an important role in bridging the divide between the theoretical knowledge of an ITE programme and students' experiences on practicum (Koerner et. al., 2002). This role of a 'translator' between contexts was a central theme in the participant researcher's descriptions of their work in this study. This section provides insights into knowledge lecturers' value, and how they use this knowledge in their discussions with students on practicum.

During practicum visits, lecturers referred students back to the practicum assessment competencies. For example one lecturer would say to students, "check in on your module on that one and see how the competency is framed up there". Lecturers used their knowledge of courses in the ITE programme to prompt connections between the student's experience and other courses they knew the student had already completed. For example, one lecturer described referring to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and how that might apply to a student's practice in a particular context she had observed. Lecturers wanted students to make their own connections, and identify how course content influenced their emerging philosophy of teaching. Lecturers encouraged students to look for the theories that underpinned "I believe" statements students made. Reflecting back on the most important aspects of their work, there was consensus among participants that knowing more about the programme strengthened their support for students on practicum. One lecturer put it this way:

> "So knowing more about the courses and knowing more about … trusting that we can say, 'You can relate what's happening there. You've come across some of these ideas in theory.' … we can be more powerful in the questions we ask … because we can make the connections, help them to make the connections and see them".

In order to support students' coherent understandings of theory and practice, lecturers themselves needed deep and cohesive knowledge of the ITE programme content. In addition, lecturers needed knowledge of government policy and publications that guide and regulate the work of teachers. Knowledge of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), *The Graduating Teacher Standards*

(Education Council, 2015) and *Tātaiako* (Ministry of Education, 2011) enabled lecturers to support students it the use these resources to guide and reflect on their professional practice.

*Tātaiako (*Ministry of Education, 2011) refers to cultural locatedness at different stages of a teaching career. For people entering initial teacher education, and for graduating teachers, the focus is mārama: developing an understanding of one's own identity, language and culture; developing an understanding of the relevance of culture in New Zealand education; and developing an understanding of, and openness to, Māori knowledge and expertise. Knowledge of culture is deep and complex and goes beyond surface actions. The Open Polytechnic Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) closely integrates knowledge of culture and Tangata Whenua with knowledge of learning and development. It emphasises the importance of teachers being able to work with both Western and Māori pedagogies.

Lecturers aimed to support students to look beyond surface practices to the principles and concepts that underpinned their actions.   However, lecturers varied in their confidence and experiences of te ao Māori (the Māori world). Some identified kaupapa Māori knowledge as a passion or a lived experience. They highlighted that their recognised expertise could actually be daunting for some students and that they actively sought to set students at ease and show that they were there to support the student's personal journey. Other participants felt that they did not have the deep understanding needed and for them a key strategy was to refer students back to concepts introduced through the programme material and their noho marae experiences. As one participant explained:

> I don't think I have the competence to.. extend their learning. All I can do is just remind them of some of the learning they have achieved so far themselves.. and most of them have done the noho when they go out [on practicum] ..and remind them of some of the resources they will have been introduced to…and to make them aware of their own centre, the centre they're in, so they can try and imagine how they can build on their learning whilst they're there.

These lecturers valued professional resources that outlined bicultural obligations and approaches like *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and *Tātaiako* (Ministry of Education, 2011) and they prompted students to use these resources when reflecting on their practice. It was identified that strengthening theoretical frameworks and professional resources in practicum course materials had improved lecturers' confidence in supporting students. The implementation of online language learning tools, and the introduction of explicit references to theoretical frameworks such as *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (Durie,1998) gave lecturers shared frameworks to work with. Participants felt that referring students to these resources and frameworks set clearer expectations and helped them to engage more deeply with cultural ideas and practices. One lecturer explained that as her own understanding had increased she had become more confident to engage with students when they were questioning bicultural approaches.

Professional experience of having been a teacher was recognised as an advantage by lecturers. For example, being a certificated teacher and knowing about certification requirements helped support students to evaluate themselves against the *Graduating Teacher Standards*. One lecturer emphasized experience as an important factor in supporting diverse students by stating " I think also that we've all been teachers and we're used to working in diversity so for me it's very familiar". This participant also emphasised how her own research, networking and commitment to the sector strengthened her ability to support students. Lecturers' own knowledge of early childhood teaching and their own professional experience appeared to be reflected in descriptions of 'the main things' they wanted students to understand. For example, one participant explained that she wanted to "support students to understand holistic learning and child initiated play". Another emphasized "that the key to it is knowing people, building relationships with children, teachers, families and others in an ECE setting".

Summary

Lecturers aimed to support students to understand their practice competencies and to draw on a professional body of knowledge to make sense of practice. Knowledge of courses enabled lecturers to focus their support, and by referring to concepts that students had already engaged with, facilitate greater coherence in students' experience. Strengthening the course content in the important and complex area of bicultural theory and practice gave lecturers more confidence in their support of students. Lecturers also recognised that being up to date with the key publications relating to professional responsibilities enabled them to provide better support for students' self-reflection.

Relationships

Lecturers mediate the distance between students, practicum centres and the teacher education programme. Lecturers in this study facilitated a shared understanding of programme requirements through the relationships they developed with students and centres, straddling the dual roles of assessor and mentor (Ussher & Carss, 2013). They highlighted the relational and contextual nature of their interactions with students and centres during practicum. Knowing students, knowing centres and the continuity of those relationships, underpinned support and assessment that was holistic and responsive to individuals and situations. Lecturers viewed facilitating the relationship between a student and centre as a fundamental aspect of their work. This focus was reflected throughout the entire practicum process, from the initial decisions made about teaching placements, right through to the roles played in the assessment discussion. The quality and continuity of relationships also enhanced lecturers' roles as advocates and mentors for students. The importance of these roles echoes Sanders et al.'s (2012) recognition that quality practicum experiences for students develop through establishing meaningful relationships, where they have opportunities for deep conversations which challenge them to be their best 'teacher' selves.

A web of relationships

Although regional lecturers worked in different locations they referred to a shared web of relationships which supported their best work, with students, regional centres, and the School of Education Studies team. The ITE programme structure facilitated the continuity of relationships. As part of the blended approach of the programme, lecturers lived and worked in regional locations where they were responsible for the 'pastoral' care of a regional cohort of students. Regional lecturers supported their regional students throughout the programme as well as visiting them on practicum. Regional lecturers also developed ongoing relationships with centres in their region.

Consistent regional relationships enabled lecturers to facilitate a learning community for students. Regional lecturers placed importance on their ongoing relationships with early childhood centres in their regions. Knowing students and centres well helped regional lecturers to make effective decisions about practica settings. One regional lecturer, for example, thought that "Knowledge of students allows me to obtain a suitable centre for placement for the student – matching the student to a centre ….Also very important is my knowledge of centres, managers and staff – built up from being in the area for a long time".

The relationships with students that supported the practicum developed through multiple engagements which included phone contact, email, tutorials and workshops. These relationships created ongoing and timely discussions with students which had continuity, and which enabled responses to be made to questions as they arose. The consistency of student/regional lecturer relationships provided lecturers with a deeper understanding of their students as learners. One participant commented that "Relationship with a student means knowledge of them/their circumstances, whanau etc, their study progress, willingness to share concerns, highlights etc". Through these interactions, regional lecturers provided support and mentorship for students, which have both been identified as critical to the success of students in other New Zealand research (Murphy et al., 2006).

All lecturers identified tutorials as an opportunity to encourage links between the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015), students' practice on practicum and other course content. Lecturers were also aware of encouraging relationships between students. As one lecturer explained, "They're searching for support outside of us, especially more amongst themselves, setting up little networks in their area. And not face to face, but all online". Relationships between lecturers were also identified as an additional form of support. Particular roles such as strand leaders and bicultural leaders in the programme provided opportunities for discussion with a critical friend. Therefore, in addition to their regional focus, regional lecturers also felt part of a collegial team structure that supported them in their work.

Knowing students well

The continuous relationships that lecturers formed as regional lecturers for student cohorts underpinned their role as visiting lecturers on practicum. The nature of this relationship meant that lecturers were well positioned to offer support when it was needed. Another lecturer explained "I get to know about what is happening for students and I can provide assistance re contact with other lecturers, pastoral support…. if things go amiss in students' lives".

Lecturers felt responsible for students' support and well-being while on practicum. They emphasised the importance of being available to students describing themselves as a "first point of call" and the importance of being responsive to questions as they arose via email and on visits. Being available was particularly emphasised in relation to diverse students. Mobile phones were an important tool because lecturers were often travelling for practicum visits, and ensured that "basically anywhere we can be in touch with people".

Consistent with the arguments of Ussher and Carss (2014) "Knowing students well" was seen as contributing a raft of advantages. Knowledge of students over time supported a realistic assessment of student's performance and progression in different contexts. Lecturers felt they had a 'head start' in reflective discussions with students. Lecturers were able to recognise and discuss links with previous practicum experiences, able to ask more probing questions and challenge expectations. Lecturers felt part of students' process of identity building by supporting a growing awareness of their abilities and progression. Knowing students well also enriched the knowledge lecturers could draw on for assessment. One lecturer commented "Assessment is something that is tied up closely to mentoring and supporting the student. It is not a 'test' as such but rather an opportunity to discuss, critique, encourage, challenge and reflect on the student's praxis".

Lecturers were able to be more responsive, suggesting areas to focus on and areas where students needed support. When a student struggled in a practicum situation lecturers were able to make judgements and take appropriate action. Sometimes this involved taking action if on-going concerns were detected, or "going in to bat" for a student if strengths had been seen in the past. Lecturers discussed their role in advocating for diverse students. One explained "I felt like I was kind of helping them to build resilience by going, "I'm on your side. It's okay, I see the problems you're having, you know… This is the ECE sector, this is how it works". Another reflected that she was "helping people to find their place, because recently I visited a student, very quiet, but saying to her, That's who you are and work within that".

Lecturers considered a key benefit of knowing students well was a more relaxed lecturer visit for both students and regional lecturers. Students were more prepared for what was going to happen with the assessment and felt less anxiety. Students were able to act with more agency in planning their own professional journey, asking questions and working to their strengths. One lecturer commented that students often enjoyed welcoming their lecturer into the practicum centre. These descriptions suggest that established relationships help to alleviate tensions with power relationships that are inherent in

the practicum triad. However other issues could arise, as a lecturer reflected, because she was invested in the relationship with students, having another professional to view the relationship was very important at times.

Summary

Relationships are a fundamental part of positive practicum experiences for students, lecturers and centres. Therefore, the ability to build supportive relationships is a key component of a lecturer's repertoire, as they 'translate' the theoretical knowledge of the ITE programme for students in their practice experiences on practicum. Having opportunities to get to know students well and the contexts in which they learn provides a deeper understanding of students' performance and progression. Being able to build a continuity of relationships with students and centres is vital to lecturers, as it enables them to be responsive to students' needs, to identify areas for extra guidance/support and to nurture students' understandings of being a teacher.

Practice

This section reports on key practices identified by lecturers with a particular focus on the assessment process. Reflecting the findings of Aspden (2014), the practices of lecturers were shaped by institutional structures and processes, but were also contextualized in response to individual students and contexts.

The assessment model of the ITE programme reflects the dual purposes of practicum assessment identified by Haigh and Ell (2014) of professional learning as well as professional accountability. The four practica courses have learning outcomes derived from the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015). The learning outcomes are defined as practice competencies that form the summative assessment. The summative assessment document is a shared point of reference for the lecturer, the associate teacher and the student. The ITE programme objectives include that; "students will experience teaching as an individual and collective endeavor; they will engage in praxis and critique and they will develop their personal and professional identity" (Open Polytechnic, 2016). A triadic discussion that includes the perspectives of the associate teacher, the visiting lecturer and the student is a key focus of assessment model that reflects these objectives.

Working within this model, lecturers emphasised supporting, facilitating and mentoring students to self-assess, reflect, relate theory to practice and develop a confident teaching identity. Consistent with the findings of Brown (as cited in Aspden, 2010) achievement of the competencies only became a clear focus for the lecturers when there were areas of concern around students' practice. One lecturer explained it like this: " ..I actually want them to tell me how they are changing, and what they are doing, rather than me tell them what I don't think they are addressing, and I really only fall in to a pure assessment role if there are areas of concern or there's a student at risk. Then I get more clear-cut and say, "well you know this is what you should be doing and this is what I am wanting, but after that whole supportive process".

Lecturers also sought to facilitate shared understanding between students and associate teachers about the assessment, adjusting their support and clarifying expectations for different associate/student relationships.

The assessment context

Learning to teach has been described as a process of learning through participation in communities of practice (Korthagen, 2004). Immersion in a community gives authenticity to experience and deeper access to a range of perspectives (Ussher, 2010). Collaborative work with teachers in particular, expands opportunities for student learning. Lecturers encouraged students to get involved in centre life and to interpret their assessment competencies within that context.

A first visit early in the practicum was important for discussing how the student will meet the practicum competencies in a particular centre. One lecturer described encouraging students to "talk to, /work with their AT's and other setting teachers, to learn how this happens in that setting". Another described unpacking the centre philosophy to help students understand teaching approaches that might be relevant at that centre. When supporting students to "step up' for their final practicum placement, one lecturer explained that she encouraged students to "think of yourself as part of the teaching team, imagine that you worked here, you know, do engage in conversations with the other teachers, work with their planning, work with what they're doing and be much more part of the centre and take responsibility for things".

Practicum settings present different models of practice for students to participate in and differing levels of support. Therefore, practicum settings influence the assessment of student performance. Lecturers discussed strategies that enabled students to get the most out of their practicum context. This process began with choices about the practicum centre. As has been discussed earlier, best decisions came from a continuity of relationships with students, centres and associate teachers. One lecturer captured the time required and the nuanced nature of these decisions.

> "Hopefully I have built a sense of trust between the student and me – this takes time to develop in the first year. Knowledge of the student helps me to obtain a suitable centre…[the] choice of centre for the student could be because I see areas in the student's knowledge/practice that would benefit from being in that centre. The student may be shy/hesitant and need a supportive AT and centre to allow development… my knowledge of centres, managers and staff is built up from being in the area a long time".

Identifying appropriate bicultural experiences for students was another issue identified by lecturers. This is reflected in wider practicum research literature as seen in Taniwha (2010) who found that experiences within practicum centres varied "depending on how centres carried out their own bicultural practice" (p.85). Jenkin (2012) also commented that many centres struggled to incorporate biculturalism into their practices. Lecturers in the current study needed to negotiate the landscape of

biculturalism in early childhood education. While they agreed that it was important to create high expectations for student's use of te reo Māori and engagement with te ao Māori, they were mindful of the interaction between students' level of knowledge and centre practices. When centres are 'not doing much' students needed to be encouraged to take the initiative and show leadership. Lecturers needed to help students to see opportunities in the environment. In many cases, centres were happy to learn from the student, which was affirming, but did require confidence on the part of the student.

Lecturers also discussed students coming through the programme who had been immersed in te ao Māori. Centre contexts needed to enable them to develop their bicultural teaching practice at a deeper level. One lecturer explained "I'm always making sure that I'm placing them with associate teachers who are very supportive of te reo Māori, so that they are not going from a full immersion environment into an environment that has nothing. It's about supporting them".

Setting expectations

While the contextual nature of the practicum was very important, preparation for assessments also involved setting clear expectations. The weekend workshops prior to practicums were a key time for lecturers to go over requirements. One lecturer explained, "We go over the folder or show them the tasks and talk about them". Workshops fostered a community of learners approach to understanding expectations by sometimes combining different year groups. Workshops also began the process of contextualising and building relationships, tasks were discussed in relation to particular settings, and students who needed a little more support were sometimes identified.

One lecturer described how important the workshop was prior to the final practicum. "I think the workshop is the key then for that, for setting them up for that final practicum because, you're right, that's where they focus "Where am I up to? What's my self-assessment on how well I'm doing with the graduating teaching standards? And what are the areas that I really need to be focusing on in this practicum?".

Setting expectations is seen as particularly important in developing students practice in te reo and tikanga Māori. If there was not an opportunity to participate in good practice models students tended to see this aspect of practice as optional. Lecturers valued having a clear set of expectations, although this was described a 'balancing act' as lecturers also wanted students to understand why they were doing it. Lecturers also felt the need to 'walk the talk" themselves and model waiata, karakia, te reo Māori and tikanga during workshops and in their interactions with students. This is consistent with the perspective of Warren (2014) that teacher educators have a responsibility to promote and demonstrate bicultural teaching practice.

The drop in visit was an important time to check that students and associate teachers understood assessment requirements. Participants noted that the beliefs of associate teachers about assessment did not always align with the holistic and contextual approach of the lecturers. One lecturer explained, "I say that it is a socio-cultural assessment process. It's about holistic development. So let's start with

a strengths base". Lecturers felt they needed to adjust their support and advice to students based on the role they believed the associate teacher would play.

The Assessment visit

Key elements of the programme assessment model, the use of observation, discussion and written work, featured strongly in lecturers' descriptions of the assessment visit. All three aspects were often referred to in the same sentence suggesting that all parts of the assessment were important and interconnected. In Aspden's (2014) study, observation was the most highly rated assessment method by teacher educators. Observation also featured strongly in this study, but discussion was most frequently referred to in descriptions of practice. Discussion occurred after the observation in a collaborative way that was both an assessment and a learning opportunity. Lecturers were "looking for that fit between what a student says and does". Strengthening students' awareness of their evolving philosophy was seen as ongoing and present in all discussions. One lecturer commented, "I do try to encourage all students to be aware of what works for them/ what beliefs and values they have". Engaging students in dialogue is considered an important component of making sense of and learning from practice experience (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2006; Sanders et.al., 2012).

One lecturer identified the importance of listening during discussions. When thinking about diverse students she explained, "I always try to listen to student's explanations and I always actually actively ask for them. In the time we have … tempting to talk and tell them to look at the task and tell them; and I actively try to not do that and listen to what they're saying". Another lecturer noted "every practicum I revisit the students' strengths" (1:1:8). An emphasis on encouragement, mentoring and dialogue in the assessment process is consistent with the perspectives of lecturers in Aspden's (2014) study. The current study supports the view that teacher educators can successfully combine the formative and summative aspects of practicum assessment (Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2007) particularly when the aim of assessment is to facilitate student insights and growth. A consistent visiting lecturer over the course of a student's practicum is likely to facilitate the potential of a dual assessor and mentor role (Ussher & Carrs, 2013).

Triadic discussion

A central part of the assessment visit is the three way 'triadic' discussion between the lecturer, the student and the associate teacher. The ITE programme documentation (Open Polytechnic, 2016) states that the triadic discussion allows for a transparent process where the student teacher is actively involved and has a "voice" in both the formative and summative process of assessment. Consistent with literature (Aspden, 2014), triadic discussions were described as complex with each one being a unique interplay of situation, context, relationships and understandings. Lecturers responded to both students and associate teachers to ensure a triadic discussion was successful.

A successful triadic discussion has a flowing three-way discussion, students feel empowered, are able to reflect and to make connections between theory and practice. Lecturers sought to support

students' active participation in the triadic discussion. One lecturer explained that the professional discussion builds a student's professional identity "because we actually want someone to be able to do the practice but also to articulate the why and the what and the how; and to be challenged on it". Lecturers acknowledged that this process is challenging for students and it "doesn't always work". Research suggests that differing perspectives, power relationships and practical constraints all contribute to a lack of authenticity in the triadic discussion.

Again, it was the continuity of relationships with students that underpinned lecturers' approach. Lecturers gave more support to students on their first and second practica with an increasing expectation that students would take more initiative and lead the triadic discussion. Lecturers reminded students to be prepared for the discussion, because "…if a student prepares well, then it goes well". Another lecturer discussed having a pre-conversation so that students could begin to think about what was going to be talked about. During the discussion, lecturers invited students to speak first, and adjusted their prompting and support to the level of the student.

Lecturers recognised that associate teachers also needed support. Discussions worked better when associate teachers were prepared and had time to devote to the discussion. Constraints on associate teacher time and a lack of private space within centres limited discussions. To counter this, lecturers would make a point of talking to associate teachers about the needs of the triadic discussion and, depending on the associate teacher, they also spent time explaining the assessment process and what was being assessed.

Associate teachers were often quite uncertain about their role and needed affirmation and support, especially when students were not meeting the competencies. One lecturer explained it this way:

> "I don't know whether this is a good thing or not a good thing in terms of actual assessment, but it's pretty important that the associate teacher feels comfortable in the triadic discussion for it to work as well but sometimes if they don't feel at ease, and you're not affirming what they're doing, the whole thing kind of shuts down a little bit, you kind of, you need to make, show the centre in a positive light as well as the student in a positive light for the discussion to flow. And perhaps around bicultural issues, like the amount of times an associate teacher will begin that conversation by going 'we don't do very well, we could do better".

Lecturers also valued the exchange of ideas in the triadic discussion. As lecturer noted "when it works well, when a triadic discussion works well, I learn a lot. You know you can actually learn a lot from their perspectives."

Summary

Assessment practices revealed a strong focus on facilitating conditions for student growth and self-assessment. The workshop and drop in visit were important to clarify and contextualise shared

understandings of the assessment process and competencies prior to the assessment. The assessment competencies were viewed as contextualised in students' participation in the early childhood setting. Therefore matching students and contexts and helping students to see opportunities and participate actively during practicum were key activities that supported performance. The process of assessment aimed to reveal and to enhance students' own sense making, the connections between their philosophy and practice, and their professional identities as teachers. This contributed to building the confidence and preparedness of both students and associate teachers for this process.

Rural and urban

This ITE programme is a national programme and lecturers are located in regions throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. The objective of this section of the inquiry was to appreciate and explore any differences in lecturers' experiences of supporting and assessing practica of student teachers who live/work in small towns, and those who live/work in main urban locations. Consistent with other studies (Murphy et.al., 2006; Treeby & Burtenshaw, 2003) there appeared to be few differences between the intentions and practices of lecturers based in rural or in urban locations. However, there were contextual differences that accounted for different challenges and experiences in their work.

In urban areas, lecturers emphasized diversity which resulted from the "variety of centres and the kaupapa available" .They described the cultural diversity amongst the student cohort and community and felt that workshop discussions and practicum experiences were enriched as a result. Lecturers suggested that, while travel times were not necessarily shorter in urban locations, there was more potential for students to get together face-to-face and in larger groups, to support each other and share practical advice and experiences. Lecturers could also provide additional support visits on practicum if required and seek support from colleagues in the same region. Students would get to know and might be visited by more than one lecturer having the potential to benefit from their different skills and perspectives. There were generally more opportunities for students and lecturers to interact with the wider early childhood sector. There were pressures too, as lecturers perceived a competitive environment with a range of ITE programmes working in the same space. They were aware of the need to uphold their own and the ITE programme's reputation and to work to build sustained relationships with centres.

In contrast, lecturers working in rural locations emphasised the consistency of relationships. Students were often already part of communities and known to centres, which were also their main prospects for employment. Lecturers explained that the limited options for practicum settings meant they 'were all in it together" and needed to invest in maintaining trusting working relationships with the centres that were available. They talked openly with students about this. One participant put it this way "we know that if they get the pip with you .. that we run out of options , so you have to get on with them". One lecturer who had experience in both environments reflected that in rural locations she has "built up relationships with staff and they are very welcoming. This is quite different from urban". Ongoing

relationships meant that often all staff were known to the lecturer and as one participant explained, " you are not just there to assess the student – you have a range of different conversations with different people while you are there". This observation supports Simpson, Hastings and Hill's (2007) notion that the presence of student teachers and visiting lecturers can expand the learning community in rural locations.

Lecturers in rural areas particularly valued meeting students for tutorials when they were in the area for practicum visits. Their perspectives echoed the benefits of blended learning in rural areas that have been identified in other research (Simpson, 2008; Stewart, 2009) that face-to-face opportunities helped to make students feel less isolated and fostered a community of learners. Working in isolation, the support networks built into the structure of the ITE programme were important to rural lecturers. They had access to practicum course leaders, strand leaders and managers to clarify and discuss issues.

All participants agreed that while there are contextual differences within regions, practicum processes and outcomes were quite consistent throughout the country.

Future directions

Near the end of focus group discussions participants had the opportunity to reflect on the insights that had emerged and 'dream' of ways they could work differently or better. Four themes emerged from this discussion. These included, more opportunities for mentoring dialogue, stronger connections between theory and practice elements of the ITE programme, further development of resources and professional development to support bicultural competence, and more opportunity as lecturers to collectively reflect on and develop their practice.

Mentoring

Whatman and MacDonald (2017) identified that for an effective practicum student teachers need to be prepared for, willing and able to take agency. Descriptions of lecturers' assessment practices in the current study focused on facilitating conditions and opportunities for students' confidence and growth in their practicum context. Consistent with the views of Dayan (2008) lecturers sought to cultivate the students' sense of responsibility for their own self-assessments and insights. Opportunities for dialogue give students the experience of framing questions and engaging in inquiry into questions of teaching and learning, as proposed by Darling Hammond and Bransford (2006). Consistent relationships with regional lecturers created conditions conducive to trust and open dialogue.

In line with other research, the lecturers' emphases on empowering students' self-assessment combined roles and processes of both mentoring and assessing. During discussion, the possibility of more focus on a mentoring role was raised. One lecturer explained

> "I would like it to be my role more than it is; perhaps more mentoring rather than just being there for a short visit. Yeah I think that would be really effective teaching for the student, because you're very dependent on the quality of the AT".

Opportunities to strengthen lecturers' abilities to engage in mentoring dialogue were considered. Suggestions included more frequent visits, longer visits and the potential to make more use of the initial visit:

> "I think the best place, what you were talking about with the first year visit, I think that the drop-in visit is just … you know, there's no guidelines around the drop-in visit, we just do it and it feels quite good and it feels like the right thing to be doing".

Workshops prior to the practicum were acknowledged as instrumental in the process. As one participant noted "I think workshops make a big difference. Yeah, a really strong part of what you do". One practicum level does not have a workshop and it was suggested that this should be added.

Literature suggests that mentoring is also strengthened when the mentor teachers in practicum settings are well supported and take responsibility. Genuine partnership between the tertiary providers and school settings is a challenging but important aspect of a robust practicum programme (Whatman & MacDonald, 2017). Lecturers in this ITE programme are well-positioned to play an active role in facilitating and strengthening this partnership.

Theory and practice

In their review of ITE practicum programmes, Whatman and MacDonald (2017) conclude that an essential ingredient of quality is the integration of theory and practice into every aspect of the programme. This integration has been identified a strength of the current ITE programme structure where lecturers teach on programme courses as well as focusing on their regional cohorts. However, the participants also discussed a desire for even closer integration between theory and practice in the programme. As one participant explained,

> "I think it's really important point; because we've been saying all day, and yesterday, how integrated the courses are and how the practicum reflects each of the courses, and so if we're assessing that then we need to be knowledgeable about (all of) them…We've never really sat down - to talk about what we do in each other's strands fully".

Lecturers also considered more integration of practice experience into the ITE programme although they were more tentative about how this might occur. One suggestion was that more centre-based experience would be an advantage and another was to include a theory and a practice component in every course. There was recognition that these suggestions could potentially conflict with the accessibility of the open and distance nature of the programme delivery model.

Cultural competence

Discussion about supporting and assessing bicultural practices particularly highlighted the responsive and relational nature of the visiting lecturer's role. Within each practicum situation, the confidence levels of the lecturer, the student and the associate teacher could be different. This meant that lecturers needed to be respectful, encouraging, ready to suggest and clarify, and ready to learn. Lecturers recognised tensions between setting specific objectives for prescribed visible practices and supporting a deeper respect and conceptual understanding. However, having resources for students and lecturers to engage with helped create a shared point of reference for dialogue. Recent developments had facilitated this and further strengthening would continue to support both students and lecturers.

Lecturer development

Finally, it was recognised that the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue throughout the appreciative inquiry had provided new insights for all participant researchers. They understood their role of visiting lecturer as specialized, requiring wide knowledge and relational skills. Systematic reflection on this role was not currently a regular activity for most participants. More opportunities were needed to evaluate and reflect on their practice as a community of learners, to support a cycle of ongoing improvement. As one participant explained,

> "It would be the same thing we ask of students really. It's like … we come out of a visit and we get back home or we get to our hotel and we just sit down and say, 'Well, how did that go today? What would I do differently?

In a distance programme such opportunities to reflect deeply on practice as a group, were rare. More opportunities to meet at a regional or national level were suggested.

> "I think our whole practicum assessment and everything would be greatly enhanced if we actually had more time as a team to share ideas on what we're doing and how we're doing it and our beliefs"

> "perhaps even if we can't have them as a full group then we probably have to make a quite specific time where at least in regions we do actually spend a bit of time together and focused on practicum"

> "I think it's more about peer mentoring really. I think we need to probably try to look at some way of initiating … you know when I'm going out on a practicum visit, somehow someone else comes with me".

A follow-up idea suggested during the data analysis stage of the research was to continue the process initiated by this project by creating specific learning communities within the lecturer team or engaging in regional reflective learning cycles. This would involve identifying meaningful areas of interest and development for a group to review and providing feedback to and input from the wider group of lecturers.

Conclusion

This appreciative inquiry has provided the participant researchers with an opportunity to engage in professional dialogue about their role as visiting lecturers and teacher educators. With a focus on positive experiences, participants identified their current strengths in supporting and assessing early childhood students on practicum. They considered their rural and urban experiences as lecturers on a national ITE programme and they considered their confidence in supporting and assessing bicultural competence. What emerged from these discussions was greater clarity about the knowledge, relationships, practices and structures that underpin their effectiveness.

Much discussion related to what was happening in the face-to-face elements of the Open Polytechnic Bachelor of Teaching. This research suggests that the face-to-face components of the blended delivery are central to integrating the theory and practice components of the programme, and to the development of students' confidence and professional identities as teachers. As the Open Polytechnic institutional strategy moves further into an online learning environment, this study has highlighted the contribution of face-to-face relationships in teacher education. Online interactions can enhance but perhaps not replicate these opportunities for students.

The consistency in the practices and experiences across the participant researchers emphasised the extent to which their practices are embedded in and supported by the current programme structure and resources. Central to this structure is the role of regional lecturers who develop consistent relationships with a cohort of students throughout their study and with early childhood settings in their region. Their connectedness to the programme, to their local student cohort and to early childhood setting communities are key conditions that equip them with the knowledge and relationships they need to carry out their roles as visiting lecturers. Ongoing relationships developed over multiple points of contact underpin responsive and contextualized support and assessment.

This research has highlighted the specialised knowledge and activities of the role of the visiting regional lecturer. They need knowledge of theory and concepts of practicum courses and the wider ITE programme. They need knowledge of early childhood teachers' professional requirements and responsibilities, and they needed to have the knowledge and confidence to promote student competence in cultural practices. Visiting lecturers need knowledge of individual students and contexts. Relationships are at the heart of effective and responsive support and assessment.

While the practicum assessment criteria in the programme are competency based and designed to meet the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (Education Council, 2015), the process of assessment favoured by lecturers focuses on promoting self-assessment with connections between what students know, say and do. This is consistent with the intentions of the programme aims that students will "engage in vigorous interaction with content, relate new ideas to previous knowledge, relate concepts to everyday practice, relate experience to conclusions, and examine the logic of the argument or practice approach" (Open Polytechnic, 2016, p. 28). These assessment aims and practices are also

consistent with research suggesting that a dual focus on support and assessment is successful when there is a consistent relationship between lecturers and students (Ussher & Carrs, 2014) and that this approach is more powerful in promoting students' development (Tillema, Smith & Lesham, 2011; Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2017).

It is important to note that the research participants did not include all regional lecturers on the Open Polytechnic Bachelor of Teaching programme. Therefore, the relevance and validity of the research is limited to the extent that it resonates with other lecturers' experience. Further inquiry focusing on student and associate teacher perspectives would also give a fuller picture of what is happening during practicum and how it can be improved for all participants.

Koerner O'Connell-Rust and Baumgartner (2002) argue that the reshaping of teaching practices requires an "explicit commitment on the part of teacher educators to raise the level of discourse within their programmes through shared professional development" (p.56). It is hoped that this inquiry provides the foundation for shared understandings and focused dialogue that support "deeper connections between the programme and practice settings and more opportunity for students' growth on practicum" (p.55).

Appreciative inquiry is a cycle that involves four stages of discussing, dreaming, designing and delivering. The designing phase includes provocative statements about what participants want to achieve (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins & Hetherington, 2009). Based on insights from this research, the research participants put forward the following propositions as a focus for future projects.

- A mentoring project – how can mentoring be enhanced to better support students' confidence, awareness and critical insight on practicum?
- A theory and practice elements project – how can better connections between theory and practice elements of the programme further enhance students' teaching practice and professional insight?
- A resources and practices project - how can programme resources and practices better support competence, confidence and open dialogue in a bicultural context?
- A professional development project – how can professional development and dialogue better support visiting lecturers' knowledge, relationships and practices?

As an exploratory piece of research, there are many areas touched on that would benefit from further inquiry, and contribute to the current research base relating to practicum. Some of these include:

- An exploration of students' perspectives of the Open Polytechnic practicum
- An exploration of associate teachers' perspectives of the Open Polytechnic practicum
- Exploration of associate teachers' perspectives of practicum within New Zealand
- Exploration of students' perspectives of practicum within New Zealand

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