

Northern Regional Hub-funded project

Project Report



Teaching practice
experiences of year one
early childhood student
teachers in a field-based
teacher education
programme

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Research undertaken by
Te Rito Maioha Early
Childhood New Zealand

Published by Ako Aotearoa

PO Box 756

Wellington 6140



An Ako Aotearoa publication. This project output has been funded by Ako Aotearoa through the Regional Project Fund.



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Project description

The aim of this study was to generate teaching practice narratives from stage one early childhood student teachers based on their experiences in a field-based teacher education programme. This research documents the experiences of first year students. It is important to acknowledge their limited and perhaps idealized view of their experiences to date.

Caterina Murphy led the research as Project Leader and Jenny Butcher acted as Project Participant.

Teaching practice is an embedded and essential, component of any teacher education programme. There are two modes for the delivery of teacher education: pre-service, that involves full time academic study in a tertiary institution and the field-based model, where those in an early childhood workplace context participate in academic study on a weekly basis. Student teachers in field-based programmes have the opportunity to use their teaching practice experiences to regularly apply pedagogical theory and course learning to assist them to develop as a skilful, knowledgeable and reflective teacher (Bell, 2004). They are supported through this process by a Mentoring Teacher, Associate Teacher and their Visiting Lecturer.

The dearth of literature on field-based teacher education became apparent in the planning stages of the research. Various aspects of teaching practicum for early childhood and primary student teachers in New Zealand (e.g. Ferrier-Kerr, 2003; Haigh & Tuck, 1999; Kane, 2005; Lind, 2005; McDonald, 2004) and internationally (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2005; Kennedy, 2001; Ortlipp, 2003) were documented. Research studies from an early childhood student teacher perspective (Ortlipp, 2003; Turnbull, 1999, 2005; Walkington, 2005) were evident; however, published research that documents the voices of first year early childhood students teaching practice experiences in an early childhood field-based initial teacher education programme were not found prior to the commencement of the study. It is these gaps in the research literature this study addresses.

Methodology

The research questions required students to reflect on the relationship they developed with their Associate or Mentoring Teacher during their teaching practice and reflect on the experience of having their teaching practice assessed by their Visiting Lecturer and Associate Teacher. Students were required to consider the value of setting regular goals and of applying theory to practice in order to strengthen their teaching practice.

The research questions were:

1. **Relationships:** How effective are mentoring teachers (including Associate Teachers) in enabling students to strengthen their teaching practice?
2. **Assessment:** How do teaching practice assessments conducted by the Visiting Lecturer contribute to students' learning and to the strengthening of their teaching practice?
3. **Goal setting:** How does the regular setting of teaching goals contribute to students' reflections on teaching?
4. **Field – based teacher education:** How effective is the field-based teacher education model in the application of theory in practice?

In the past two decades focus group interviews have been a widely used tool in qualitative research (Basch, 1987; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). For this research study the researchers conducted two focus group interviews in 2008 during term three. The students at the time of participation were

situated at one campus. They were either in the first year of the initial teacher education programme or had just completed it and were entering their second year. The only selection criteria was that the research participants had to be first year students. Students were asked to participate through a letter of invitation that informed them of the research themes. Sixteen students were approached; eleven chose to participate. Early in term three the Project Leader provided an occasion to talk about the proposed study on campus with anticipated participants and answer any questions. At this face-to-face meeting the consent letter was distributed. Students willing to participate were able to choose the dates and times they wanted to be involved in a group interview. This was for their comfort, convenience and safety. Early childhood teaching staff at the campus, the participating stage one students and the Project Mentor were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Data were generated through a semi-structured interview method that captured the shared narratives of the students and provided opportunity to observe the interactions among participants during group sessions. The research writers hoped they would be able to “observe the naturally unfolding worlds” (Berg, 2001, p.117) of stage one students. The interviews happened on campus to enable data generation to take place in a familiar setting as “personal meaning is tied to context” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1996, p.45). Context is important in order to uncover and understand the participants’ experiences and perspectives within this context.

It was the facilitator’s (Caterina Murphy) role to establish rapport with the group and ensure that each interview began with a clear direction and an indication of the themes to be explored (Berg, 2001). Ground rules were established for the focus groups to ensure students knew what to expect. The groups were reminded of confidentiality relating to any information shared during the interviews as well as the study in general and of their right to decline to answer any question asked of them. The interviews took one and a half hours per group. The facilitator undertook the interviews. She asked each student group one initial open-ended question and then let the stories unfold, utilising prompts and probes relating to the four themes.

Jenny Butcher acted as scribe, manually documenting key elements of the shared stories, in particular direct quotations and field notes about the dynamics of the group. Each focus group was audiotaped and scribed; the audiotaped data was transcribed verbatim.

Both researchers individually examined transcripts A and B. They listened to the recorded interviews to gain the essence of the stories. Information was then coded to highlight the storytelling in the themes of the four research questions. The researchers met to compare their coding’s and to agree on common findings. Jenny Butcher applied quantitative analysis to common threads. Caterina Murphy used qualitative analysis to identify common threads, summarize the essence of the stories and simultaneously identify any implications for teacher education providers.

Findings

Discussion of the findings are categorised under the four research question themes:

1) Relationships

Seven out of the eleven participants (64%) reported a positive practicum experience and eight out of the eleven (72%) reported numerous positive aspects associated with their relationship with the Associate Teacher (AT). Students commented on the instances where ATs had been very supportive and committed to the development of a good relationship e.g. supplying useful Te Reo phrases / waiata; having regular meetings and regularly checking up with questions; offering advice and information; being well informed and well prepared; being available most of the time and working ‘on the floor’ with the student.

Students had clear expectations of their AT; some were disappointed these expectations were not met. Their expectations included: how the role of the AT would be filled (performance) and what the relationship was going to be like (communication and availability). In relation to performance expectations, teacher education providers can provide assistance to ATs to identify and/or further define their teaching philosophy statement which would underpin the professional relationship. Students expected the AT to be an inspirational and positive role model; only three out of the 11 students (27%) described their AT as inspirational during the interviews. Six out of the 11 students (55%) expressed some difficulties with the relationship due to such things as the AT's lack of availability, restricted access to the AT; a perceived distance in the relationship. Associate Teachers need to ensure they have ample opportunity to act as mentors and role models in their daily work with the student and to observe the student's teaching practice. One possible strategy for professional accountability would be to provide the student with verification of the time given and document it at the end of practicum.

The research findings show that students require support through practicum regardless of their age and experience, especially students with English as a second language. Students perceived practicum as an important and challenging opportunity to trial learning in a new context. Any negative practicum experiences regarding the relationship with the AT, had a profound effect on the students, such as: loss of confidence; putting them off an age group. At times, students called on their own dispositions, particularly resiliency and initiating, to get them through a challenging practicum experience where communication difficulties existed with the AT. For example, one student sought support from her usual centre mentoring teacher several times when the Associate Teacher was unavailable due to sickness.

There is a need for cultural considerations to be made when there are difficulties. Maori and Pasifika students particularly, may not want to articulate their dissatisfaction with an aspect of assessment or when there are difficulties in the relationship with the AT.

Students who have had confidence set-backs and other difficulties during practicum may be guarded in group debriefing situations in the classroom. When students return to the classroom after practicum, individual conferences between the student and the lecturer can occur to allow stories to emerge safely about their experiences.

In summary, the students' stories reveal that ATs met their expectations in some regard such as meeting regularly or being lovely people. However, some viewed the level of support and the relationship with them as disappointing overall. The skill of building effective relationships is vital to provide support for anyone in an Associate Teacher role, including those in the position of back-up AT. These findings had some common threads with some recently reported New Zealand early childhood student teacher voices of practicum experiences (Broadley & Roberts, 2008). Stover (2008), reporting on a keynote by Peter Lind at the same symposium, also emphasised the importance of relationships as a key aspect of practice.

Mentoring teachers play a key role in the teacher education programme (Davitt, 2006). Students have a mentoring teacher at their usual centre and this relationship (in addition to the AT) was explored. The common themes that emerged across both focus groups were the clear expectations students had of them, such as knowledge of and familiarity with the programme, being a positive role model and being available to help with course work. Triadic discussions that occur during assessment processes can become an opportunity to identify good teaching practices that have been modelled to the student by the mentoring teacher and others. This would reinforce the value of working alongside students to support socio-cultural theorisation.

Wide variations of support and time allocation provided by mentoring teachers were reported. Five out of 11 students (46%) expressed positive experiences and 37% were non-affirming for reasons such as; lack of access, unavailability, confusion over assessments, lack of currency with changes in early childhood education and/or unsupportive of the students' programme. A common thread from

Focus Group B was that mentoring teachers were not perceived as contributing to students' learning. They merely sign off documentation rather than actively engaging in mentoring. In addition, the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship appears to relate directly to a friendship being built and sustained.

2) Assessment

At the time of the study, students had experiences of at least four teaching practice assessments, either in their usual centre or their practicum centre. Five out of 11 (46%) student teachers voiced positive experiences with their Visiting Lecturers (VL) during assessment. Twenty eight per cent of the responses were neutral in regard to assessment questions. Interestingly, this percentage was derived from one focus group. Students relayed clear expectations of the Visiting Lecturer(s) during the assessments of their teaching practice that included such things as being supportive, able to competently offer direction and extension and matching expectations during the summative process that reflected the level of their academic study. Nerve wracking experiences were storied within the focus group, even with a well-established relationship with the Visiting Lecturer. This could be attributed to assessment being summative and the added pressures involved. The lack of students' association of mentoring teachers to assessment (during the interviews) can possibly be attributed to them viewing the mentoring teacher role as one of giving feedback during formative assessment.

Several students in each focus group were disappointed when their expectations were not met. At times, students viewed the Visiting Lecturer's interpretations of assessment criteria as too rigid, particularly the expectations of speaking Te Reo Maori when context did not support meaningful language application. This alerts to a need to ensure that Visiting Lecturers benefit from teaching practice assessment critique.

3) Goal setting

There was a mixed reaction to the setting of goals in order to strengthen teaching practice. Students identified a number of different approaches to goal setting with three out of the eleven students (27%) describing it as a positive experience. Others in the cohort took either a neutral or not so positive view towards the relevance of it. In their teaching programme students are required to set teaching goals at the beginning of each paper and link these goals to teaching criteria developed during the programme. Students articulated many positive benefits such as: developing strategies to vary their practice, pushing themselves beyond the boundaries; focusing on an aspect of their practice which required strengthening; progressing own practice through the regular setting of new goals.

The value of receiving feedback about current practice strengths from the Visiting Lecturer in order to focus on new goals was emphasised. Goal setting in the students' usual centres was seen as particularly relevant due to the familiarity of the environment. Students appeared more open to possibilities with goal setting when there was familiarity with the programme. Despite this, students were challenged by the process and some were unclear of the relevance or purpose of goal setting. Interestingly, these students found it quite hard to set teaching goals with a practicum experience pending. They were fearful of choosing a goal that might not be easily applicable to the new setting. Others found it hard to be specific and to get started.

Most first year students recognized the importance of goal setting. It may be helpful for students to engage in dialogue with their lecturer about goal setting immediately prior to going on practicum, particularly with the context of practicum in mind. It is possible that lecturers would benefit from specific professional development to guide students to set effective and achievable goals that contribute to the development of students' teaching practice. Such times as student orientation/induction may provide additional windows of opportunity for newly enrolled students to gain initial understanding of its purpose prior to classes beginning. The creation and use of exemplars during goal setting activities combined with one-to-one conferencing with teaching staff

would be beneficial. In addition, it may be preferable to facilitate final reflections in relation to goal setting in the classroom environment, where there is in-depth one to one lecturer support available to ensure a deeper level of student understandings of its value and purpose.

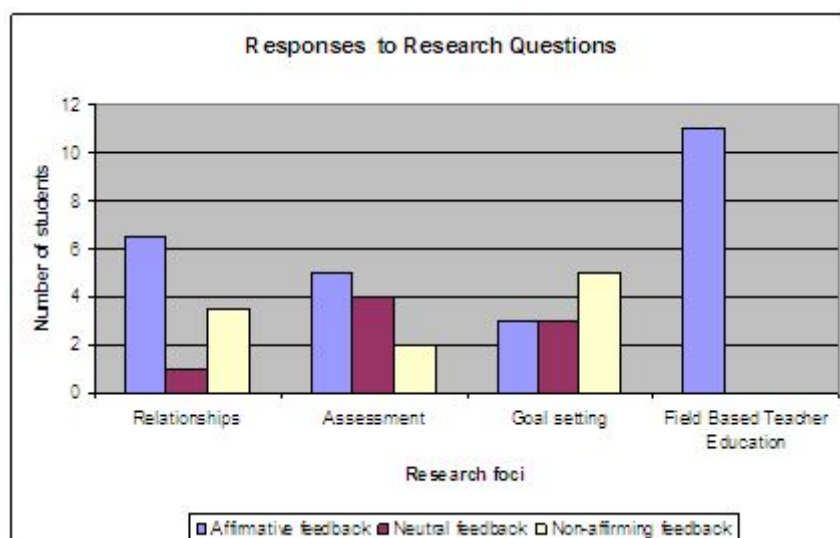
4) Field- based Teacher Education

There is a desperate need for more data from field-based practice. The research findings in regards to the effectiveness of field-based teacher education emphasise students’ perceptions of the benefits of such delivery. All of the students across both focus groups reported that studying in a field-based programme was a positive experience (100%). Students believed that field-based teacher education provides real opportunities to build relationships with the early childhood community and makes links between learning and practice. Five out of the eleven participants (46%) indicated that the delivery mode specifically helped them gain confidence and that they would not want to be in a class five days a week. There is no doubt from the interviews, that students staying working and earning was a huge advantage to them and their families. This affirms the model as a sound apprenticeship model.

Sharing weekly learning from classes with colleagues at work, reflecting on their practice and forming ideas and the regular support and sharing with class mates of each others’ experiences were highlighted. Interestingly, students were already becoming acutely aware of teachers’ poor practice; some were determined to stop modelling their own practice on negative role models. The researchers note that even in the early stages of teacher education, these students are already establishing an ethical and reflective stance due primarily to the experiences available in a field-based programme.

Practicum settings encompass the nurturing of cultural diversity. The sharing of experiences in the field-based programme is highly valued. The practicum is a two-way learning experience and students do have something to contribute (Stover, 2008). Students have access to two mentoring teachers; the Associate Teachers when on practicum and their mentoring teacher at their usual centre. Students commented on the usefulness of exposure to current thinking and practices. Teaching within a centre environment for a required minimum of contact hours per week enabled students to engage in teaching experiences in a ‘safe’ place where they are supported by professional knowledge through reflective practice. Making mistakes becomes part of learning and students are not being assessed constantly during this time, so feel more able to take risks, and have opportunities to step back and reflect and evaluate their teaching practice. This type of approach can be directly linked with goal setting.

Summary of findings:



The graph highlights the overwhelmingly positive response (100%) to the field-based teacher education mode of delivery. It is important to note that responses concerning assessment and goal setting experiences gravitated to the professional role of the Visiting Lecturer rather than Associate Teachers and other mentors.

Evaluation of the success of the project against the goals

The researchers achieved their goal, of generating valuable data with stage one early childhood student teachers about their teaching practice experiences in a field-based initial teacher education programme. The project begins to address the effectiveness of mentoring in relation to teaching practice and the contribution that teaching practice assessments make to students' learning. The researchers make recommendations based on the implications of the findings for teacher education providers. However, these recommendations are mindful that the participants were first year students who had limited experience at the time of the research and had only had one practicum experience.

The researchers have addressed specific gaps in the literature in this study, namely the significance of the field-based teacher education delivery model and students voices in the earliest stages of a teacher education programme. Goal setting and the value of field-based teacher education have been initially explored. To realise the significance of this data it will be important to interview these students again further on in their teacher education programme and/or in their first year of provisional teacher registration.

Key recommendations for good practice

Relationships

It is recommended that:

- Associate Teachers access an annual induction programme offered by the teacher education providers that includes:
 - Roles and expectations
 - Being a mentor and a role model
 - Developing a teaching philosophy
 - Guidelines on student observation and shared reflection
 - Building collaborative and cultural relationships
 - Engaging in effective professional discussions
- Teacher education providers consider how verification of the time given to mentoring to students is documented, to ensure consistency and equality among students and the monitoring of the responsibilities of the Associate Teacher.
- Teacher education providers consider the support students require during practicum regardless of age and/or experience, especially ESOL and Maori/ Pasifika students and affirm communication pathways available to express concerns as they arise.

Assessment

It is recommended that:

- A credit-based approach is applied to the assessment of student teachers, celebrating their strengths while working towards meeting the Graduating Teacher Standards (NZTC) and identifying how practice can be further strengthened with particular strategies in mind;

- consideration is given to the teaching report to ensure strengths and achievements are identified and student teachers are involved in self-assessment during professional discussions
- Visiting Lecturers receive teaching practice assessment critique from a colleague/ manager as part of their appraisal process, to contribute to their ongoing professional development.

Goal setting

It is recommended that:

- Lecturers are consciously aware of taking time to extend and challenge student teachers to meet Graduating Teacher Standards (NZTC) and/or achieve higher goals, such as across different contexts and to guide and facilitate them in setting worthwhile teaching goals in the classroom environment.
- lecturers access specific professional development relating to guiding students in setting effective and achievable goals
- exemplars are used to develop a deeper level of understanding of the value and purpose of goal setting

Field Based teacher education (FBTE)

It is recommended that:

- The effectiveness of the FBTE model is acknowledged, not only as a delivery model, but also as a significant pathway for applying learning to practice, strengthening reflection in practice, developing students' confidence in their teaching and strengthening community networks.

Unexpected findings or learning

1. The overwhelming affirmative response to the value of the field-based teacher education model of delivery in relation to application of theory in practice.
2. Students desire to be challenged and extended primarily by the Visiting Lecturer when they are meeting the assessment requirements early in the programme. This affirms a notion of setting new teaching goals regularly throughout each academic term.
3. Only 27% of the participants found their Associate Teacher inspirational. The clear expectations that students had of Associate Teachers were centred on performance, communication and availability.
4. The ability of students to draw on dispositions of self in times of difficulty and to develop alternative strategies for coping with the unexpected or non-affirmative experiences and still meet assessment criteria.
5. Students perceive mentoring teachers in two ways; the personal individual who offers support and friendship and the professional individual, who supervises, assesses and evaluates their practice.
6. Each focus group has its own synergy and directions despite being facilitated in the same way and upon analysis it was challenging to collate the data. The Project Leader has reflected on how in future studies, one can effectively mitigate the discrepancies between a number of focus groups.

Ways in which the project findings have been, or could be, used in other contexts

When the Project Leader first applied to Ako Aotearoa for funding, she considered that the study could be extended in the near future to other campuses or programmes. The research writers consider that this research should become a longitudinal study to address the dearth of literature about ongoing teaching practice experience of field-based early childhood students (Cameron & Baker, 2004). The research writers could follow the two groups at a later stage of the initial teacher education programme (2010) and into their first year of Provisional Teacher Registration (2011). Continuing with these students would provide ongoing valuable data and should illustrate the growth of more reflective practice as the students grow professionally. In addition, other possibilities lie with hearing the voices of mentoring teachers and exploring further the specific benefits of field-based teacher education, with the inclusion of a collaborative approach involving students and mentoring teachers together.

Additional Comments

The importance of relationship building is relevant to all teacher education providers regardless of the delivery model used. There has to be consistency in the way that Associate Teachers perceive their role and conduct their responsibilities. There is a need for a collaborative approach by teacher education providers to offer programmes with specific content to support ATs and other mentoring teachers. Interestingly, feedback from Associate Teachers following a recent presentation of this research, included the difficulties of supporting several providers in the AT role and the challenges of keeping current with each programme's requirements.

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Acknowledgements

- Student participants
- Ako Aotearoa - funder of the study
- The Institution concerned, Ethics Committee and staff
- Our employer for encouraging research capability
- Dr. Ann Balcombe – Project Mentor