



Peer-reviewed paper

Equitable teaching practicum: A key to success for immigrant Asian early childhood student teachers and their associates?

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In this article, I consider the issue of success in practicum within early childhood initial teacher education (ITE). I discuss findings from a doctoral research project that enquires into what counts as success for student teachers and their associates on practicum, illustrating the discussion with data from three associate teacher/student teacher dyads. Themes of success, culture, language, practice, and time are linked to concerns about equity within the structure and assessment of practicum within ITE. I suggest that many New Zealand ITE providers do not provide programmes that offer practicum flexibility to suit individual student needs in order to encourage success. Rather, all students are expected to achieve within the same set standard length of time. I further suggest that the assessment of practicum does not take into account the student and associate individual senses of success within practicum. Instead, assessment relies solely upon externally-imposed summative assessment criteria. A variety of alternatives are briefly explored.

Introduction

This article looks at some initial findings of a doctoral research project which investigated practicum success for Asian-born early childhood teaching students and their associate teachers. When I began the research, I had a personal perception of success as meeting or exceeding the required competency level as set by the ITE institution. But over the course of discussing success with both student and associate teacher participants, I discovered that this was not their primary success criteria at all. Success was an individualised complex web of concepts, perceptions and meanings. Although the research did not specifically set out to explore issues of equity within practicum, reflection upon emerging themes has led me to consider how equitable current practicum structures and assessment are for a diversity of students.

Cultural tension within practicum

The student population of ITE providers is becoming increasingly diverse. Currently, the fastest growing ethnic group emigrating to New Zealand are those from Asian countries (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). A large number of Asian immigrants arrive as international students. In 2013 alone, 14% of all tertiary students were of international origin, with nearly 8% accounting for all enrolments in teacher education courses (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Although practicum remains a key aspect of early childhood teacher education programmes, not all students find it a successful learning experience. Those



students who have been born in Asian countries and who have come to New Zealand to study at the tertiary level can face multiple challenges in terms of adapting to a new culture, language and understanding of the teaching role (Ortlipp, 2006; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). For some, the practicum is their first opportunity to experience the local early childhood education system, and it can be a shock. Practicum can become the site where cultural expectations are encountered and challenged. It is from within the education system that the significant cultural differences in child-rearing practices, understanding of the nature of teaching, the view held of the mentor/student relationship, and expectations of children become apparent (Cruickshank, 2004; Fan & Le, 2009; Hadley, De Gioia, & Highfield, 2011; Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012). Much of this body of research has focussed upon students' negative experiences. Yet little has focussed on what is required to make this experience a positive one for both the key parties involved.

Structure and assessment of practicum

The structure and assessment of practicum varies across educational training institutions. Across the usual three years of the teaching qualification, a minimum of twenty weeks must be of a practical nature (Education Council, n.d.). Individual practicum can be anything from two to seven weeks in New Zealand, depending upon the training provider and the emphasis given to the benefit of hands-on learning. These are timetabled to occur between other theoretical learning components of the course. If a student does not pass the practicum experience, they are required to repeat it. This usually occurs at the end of the year, once all other written assessments and the rest of the year's programme have been completed.

Practicum is also an assessed component of the training course. The associate teacher is not only responsible for the mentoring of the student, but often also for the assessment of their practice against criteria set by the training institution. These assessment measures are often in alignment with the Graduating Teacher Standards as set by the Education Council (Education Council, 2015). The associate teacher shares responsibility for assessment of the student with a representative from the ITE institution who visits the early childhood setting at least once during the period the student is present.

All students are assessed using standardised, institutionally-defined assessment criteria to provide a minimum acceptable performance level. Because of the relative homogenous ethnic, gender and class makeup of academic staff at teaching institutions, these criteria tend to reflect the perspectives of white, middle-class women (Ortlipp, 2006). However, these criteria do not capture individualised perceptions of the success of the participants experiencing practicum themselves.

While on practicum, all ITE students, no matter their ethnic or cultural origin, are expected to meet the pass criteria determined by their teacher education provider in the same set length of time. This provides the necessary minimum benchmark of acceptable teaching practice across all students. But some immigrant students may be required to put their own educational beliefs to one side before taking on board a completely new way of understanding and practice that is appropriate in *Aotearoa* New Zealand. Because there is a uniform period where practice is being assessed across all students, any challenges to expectations must be explored,



reflected upon, and resolved successfully while students simultaneously develop new pedagogical skills. There is an underlying assumption that this complex process can occur within the same length of time afforded to all students.

It was for this reason that I began this research project: to understand the experiences of a small number of Asian-born student teachers and their associate teachers, and to try to find ways that could support their successful adaptation to the educational system in which they were training.

Method

The larger doctoral study that this article is based upon took a symbolic interactionist approach in a multiple case study design (Blumer, 1969; Chadderton & Torrance, 2011). I chose this approach as the concept of success is abstract, and its meaning can be considered to be individually constructed during practicum. I anticipated that each student and associate pairing would develop an understanding of what success would look like between themselves, in their particular centre, and at that particular time.

Three pairings of student and associate teacher took part in the study. Student teachers who had been born and educated in an Asian country were approached. This was to ensure they had no significant prior educational experience in New Zealand before beginning their study here. Once they had consented to be involved, their associate teacher was then approached and invited to participate.

Each participant was interviewed individually prior, during and following one of their final practicum experiences. The interview prior to practicum looked at personal perceptions of what made for a successful practicum experience, preferred supervision and feedback styles, mentoring relationships, personal teaching philosophies and observed cultural differences. The interview during the practicum was based upon video evidence of the student's practice and asked participants to reflect upon what they considered to be successful elements within it. The final interview covered similar topics as to the first interview, but looked at changes in their perspectives as a result of the recently completed practicum.

Participants

This article looks at some of the findings that emerged from the three dyads. The first pairing was comprised of Lien¹ and Alison. Lien was a Taiwanese student in her late thirties who had lived in New Zealand on and off for the past decade. She had a background in commerce and was in her final year of a three-year degree qualification. She had passed all of her other practicum experiences in her previous two years. Alison, her associate teacher, was an experienced head teacher of an early childhood centre which operated in a highly multicultural community.

The second dyad was Jiao and Lucy. Jiao was in her late 20s and had lived in New Zealand for ten years, coming here for her tertiary education immediately following secondary school in China. She already had a commerce degree from a New Zealand university, and was completing a one-year Graduate Diploma in

¹ All participant names have been replaced by pseudonyms.



Early Childhood Education. Lucy, her associate teacher, had been involved in the early childhood sector since leaving school. She was particularly interested in infant and toddler care, and her career had reflected this.

The third and final pairing was Arjun and Shelley. Arjun had lived in New Zealand for two years. He was born and raised in India and had a career there as a mathematics teacher of primary school children. Although he was able to become a registered teacher in New Zealand with his existing teaching qualification, he had difficulty finding employment. He decided to gain a New Zealand qualification that would assist him in understanding the system here from its foundation. He was about to begin his third and final practicum of a one-year Graduate Diploma qualification. His associate teacher, Shelley, had worked in the early childhood sector since leaving school and specialised in infant and toddler care. Like the other two associate teachers, she was of New Zealand European descent.

The practicum for each student lasted for five weeks and was assessed using set competency criteria from the initial teacher education provider. To pass the practicum, the training institution had set the success criterion that students needed to pass over 90% of the set competencies.

Findings

Success is experienced

A predominant theme that occurred right across all three dyads was the lack of account taken of the ITE provider's success criteria when considering personal success. For all six participants, success instead was a personally experienced, positive phenomenon. For example, Lien did not pass this practicum experience according to the competencies outlined by her ITE institution, but both she and Alison considered it to be a highly successful experience. Before it began, Lien reflected upon her previous practicum experiences and concluded that success for herself was two-pronged: feeling positive in herself, as well as learning something new.

I learnt something in this placement. And I build very positive relationships with children and staff. I am included as a team member. I feel very comfortable staying here . . . I feel like if you get more encouragement, you will become more confident. (Lien)

Jiao also did not factor external criteria into considering her personal success during practicum. Although she did indeed formally pass, she instead focussed upon being acknowledged for her contribution and gaining the mutual respect of her associate teacher, rather than simply meeting the required competency levels.

The most important thing is the respect. I have respectful associate teachers and they say the foundation to build the relationship with each other is mutual respect. So if the associate teacher and the student teacher are not from the same cultural background, they also respect [... each other. They] acknowledge the cultural differences and understand their own culture; accept different answers and different options from other cultures, not make them change. So



inclusive, both parties together, I think respect is the foundation.
(Jiao)

Arjun had similar views. He considered his practicum to be successful if he developed self-confidence and acceptance as a teacher by other staff, children and parents.

When we feel confidence, and if we are able to [convey] that confidence [to the] associate teacher, and more important, children and parents, then we are successful. If children and parents trust upon you within five weeks, if you're able to make good relationships, and perceive yourself as a teacher, then they accept you as a teacher. It does not matter if we pass from this course, it is more important for parents and children, they accept us as a teacher, then we are successful. (Arjun)

These findings replicate previous research on the practicum expectations of immigrant Asian student teachers. They tend to enter practicum, expecting to be treated as professional colleagues (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Haigh, 2001; Haigh & Ward, 2004) with mutual respect considered essential (Loizou, 2011; Martinez, McNally, York, Rigano, & Jose, 2001; Nguyen, 2008).

Positive personal affect was also highly valued by the associate teachers. They all prioritised the development of student's positive personal perception over the course of the practicum. Alison and Lucy particularly focused on confidence.

I want a student to come, to leave here feeling "I've actually learned, I've grown a bit," whether it's confidence-wise or just, you know, in whatever area it is, and to go away feeling better prepared for the job. If a student has learnt and can go away feeling a bit better about themselves, you know, a bit more positive, then great. (Alison)

I believe that if a student comes into a centre for five weeks, by the end of it they should be part of the team – confident, and that when they go, it's like we lose something. (Lucy)

So it can be seen that none of the participants considered the external formal assessment as being immediately relevant to the success of their own experience. This makes apparent the tension of using externally-imposed criteria to try to measure an interpersonal experience. If participants did not *feel* successful, they did not consider the practicum to *be* successful. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this directly reflects the concept that the meaning of a successful practicum, in this instance, is individually developed and experienced (Blumer, 1969; Burbank & Martins, 2009). The meaning of success could not be imposed from an external source. Instead, it needed to be developed through the social interactions of the people concerned.

Culture, language and practice

It was impossible to ignore the effect of cultural and linguistic differences upon teaching practicum. Possibly as a result of the deeply engrained beliefs Lien had learnt growing up in Taiwan, her teaching practices sometimes focussed on interactions with children as direct-teaching moments using closed questions as



a teaching strategy, rather than allowing the child to lead their own learning. For example, compare these two excerpts from Lien, then Alison, when discussing an interaction Lien had with a young boy using blocks to make what he described as a 'worm farm'.

I feel like maybe I can try to talk about [it], because he was interested in the worms, so maybe I can discuss something more about worms. Not only talk about what he made, but maybe I can extend his thoughts, his interest more. Something like, 'Do you know what the worms like to eat?', or 'Where do they live?', 'Where can you see worms?' (Lien)

She asked some questions at the end of it. There possibly was an opportunity a little earlier on to clarify some of the things he was saying, to get a better idea perhaps, without actually detracting from his conversation. Her questions weren't terribly relevant; perhaps relevant talking about worms but it was not relating to what he was doing. It was kinda just random comments about worms really rather than questions. (Alison)

This type of teaching strategy may directly reflect Lien's own experience as a young child in Taiwan. When entering the teaching profession herself, she may have expected her new educational system to mirror her own life experience: being teacher-led and with disciplined, compliant students (Myles, Cheng, & Wang, 2006).

Cultural difference extended further than simply the choice of teaching strategies used with children. Indeed, Jiao perceived that the very way she looked and sounded as an adult in her centre affected her ability to teach successfully. In previous practicums, she did not consider that she had developed deep relationships with children because her physical appearance and English communication abilities played a role in affecting their development.

I think probably I look different from other teachers and the English I try to express, explain, is different – the words. So [I am] kind of being excluded by the children. It's not [that] they didn't respect me; it's kind of they see you as a visitor, not a teacher in their centre. So they don't have to listen to what you are saying, or do everything you told them. (Jiao)

From an associate teacher's perspective, Shelley, too, explained how uncomfortable she felt in communicating effectively with her student Arjun. This impacted on the depth of feedback or support she could give him during the day.

Because when he started on a really big conversation his accent would get quite thick and it would get quite hard to understand him, and people were worried they were offending him. Sometimes I did feel bad saying 'pardon' over and over again. If I tried to explain something that he wasn't doing quite right, he wouldn't understand. And I'd say it three or four times and he still wouldn't quite understand what it was. (Shelley)



This communication barrier meant that she was unable to have in-depth conversations with him to support the development of his practice. She would try several times to communicate her message, but would give up if unsuccessful. Similarly, if asked a question, she would give an answer to what she hoped she had understood him to say.

Thus, cultural and linguistic difference was apparent in two significant areas: the students' views of appropriate teaching practices with children, and their effectiveness in being able to communicate. The culturally based expectations of students and the implied role of teachers have been deeply engrained from birth. To be challenged in them, to understand their origins, and to change behaviour to meet local expectations is not something that occurs naturally or quickly. All such culturally-based perceptions are very deeply held, and difficult to change (Guo, 2006; Hawkey, 1998). Recognising that these assumptions exist is important for both associate and student to acknowledge and articulate (Greenfield, 1994). It is important to recognise how they can influence practice on a daily basis. They are reflected in our behaviours every day, often without thought. Indeed, even experienced New Zealand-born teachers could struggle to recognise and acknowledge these influences on their practice. So, to expect that a migrant teacher-in-training could undertake this process successfully within, say, a five-week practicum period could be overly challenging.

The same concerns around language comprehension have arisen across similarly focussed research. Students and associate teachers have both indicated that the degree of confidence in English affects the nature of the relationship, and subsequent success of the practicum (Hyland & Lo, 2006; Nguyen, 2008, 2012; Remington Smith, 2007). Consequently, the depth of reflective conversation around the meaning of cultural differences could be significantly compromised.

Time

A final reoccurring theme that emerged with participants was the time taken, both to develop relationships and to provide support and feedback. Rather than the commonly held weekly meetings between student and associate, Alison held daily meetings with Lien to get her feedback on the day and provide emotional and professional support. Alison acknowledged this at the end of the practicum:

You have to be willing to put in a bit of extra time and make the effort like we do with our families, to actually build a relationship. You take the time to build a relationship, to make the person feel welcome, to make them smile and look relaxed. (Alison)

Lien also acknowledged that it took her a long time to develop trust in her associate:

I think the relationship between me and my associate, this time, it developed gradually. Gradually, I feel it's ... trusting the relationship - starting to trust each other. Even though she didn't share a lot of things about [herself] personally, but gradually, gradually she asked me my background, my culture, my family, my teaching philosophy. So I feel she truly wants to [get to] know me. And she trusts me [that] I would do my best. (Lien)



Until she felt that Alison truly wanted to support her as an individual, Lien did not open herself up to reflect or act upon her feedback. As a result of this delay, Alison thought that the five-week-long placement was simply not long enough for Lien to be able to make the fundamental changes to her practice that were required to meet the pass criteria of her initial teacher education institution:

I think a bit more time would have been good - but not just a week. She probably would have needed a few more weeks really... I think both options; either to have a short break, a bit of time to consolidate new information and then to come back, or to have carried on. I think either would have been quite good. I don't think another week would have been really here nor there. (Alison)

As a result, Alison invited Lien to return to the centre once a week on a volunteer basis. Lien was therefore able to continue to develop relationships, her self-confidence and practice. Alison even lobbied the ITE institution to ask if Lien could repeat her placement at their centre. After some negotiation, this was arranged late in the year and Lien eventually passed the practicum. Without these opportunities, Lien would have needed to begin the process of developing relationships and trust in a completely new setting all over again. Whether she would have passed or not is unknown.

At the end of the practicum experience, Shelley also recognised that successfully mentoring Arjun had taken additional time in comparison to her experiences with New Zealand-born students. She acknowledged the importance of reflective discussions and more individual support, and therefore the time, to be able to be successful.

As far as difference, it would really just be the time to talk to them. I do think the conversations that we had about culture are important too, so that I can understand his culture and he can understand mine. I think it definitely helps... being able to understand the little things, like the mother in the relationship with the babies, that's something I wouldn't have thought of. I think it all really comes down to allowing them the time, and giving them the time, to talk about, well, just to talk in general. (Shelley)

The very low numbers of children in the nursery during this practicum meant that Shelley was able to converse with Arjun often and regularly, and was able to answer his frequent questions. This would not always be the case in a busier centre.

Additional time and support is not always recognised as being important to the successful practicum experience of immigrant students. Many associate teachers fail to realise that mentoring a student from a cultural minority may be significantly different compared with a student from the dominant, white majority (Martinez, et al., 2001). Assumptions are made that all students, no matter what their cultural orientation, have the same access to information on the education system and on subtleties in how to behave (Campbell, O'Gorman, Tangen, Spooner-Lane, & Alford, 2008; Erben & Wyer, 1997; Hastings, 2010). As a result, associate teachers may support immigrant students in the same way that they would support any other student: a practice that is neither fair nor equitable.



Implications for teacher education

These findings only reflect the experiences of three pairs of participants. Nevertheless, their experience has prompted my reflection on how practicum is structured for new arrival teaching students in our country. I question whether equity in two features of practicum, its structure and assessment, is currently offered and even if this ideal is possible to achieve.

Equity of practicum structure

An obvious feature of practicum where equity is not evident lies in its set length of time, and its positioning within the existing teaching programme. Although the length has minimum requirements (Education Council, n.d.), their placement in the middle of other theoretical course requirements limits the possibility of significantly extending them if individual students require additional time. It was clearly evident with Lien and Alison, for example, that additional time was needed yet the course structure did not allow this to occur until the end of the year. Inherent within this practice is the assumption that all students are offered the same amount of time in which to achieve to the same level of competency. However, this reflects an underlying system that promotes equality, rather than one that is equitable or fair to all students.

I suggest that one way that a more flexible practicum structure may be offered is through an e-learning or block course structure. Instead of being required to complete practicum within a set timeframe, students could spend as much time as necessary (within a generous limit) to develop relationships and practice to an acceptable level before beginning the next theoretical component in their programme.

But where does this leave those students learning in an on-campus mode? Practicum is only one of several course components that must be passed each year. One way is to position practicum at the end of each semester block of teaching, to allow more time to be added if individual students require it. This would mean that students would not feel as pressured to succeed in a short period of time, knowing that, together with the support and guidance of their associate teacher and training institution, they could choose to extend practicum to meet their own needs.

Equitable practice would also recognise that some students require additional support in order to achieve to the same level as their peers. Yet few, New Zealand initial teacher education institutions offer a structured, formalised support programme geared towards either immigrant students or their associate teachers.

Several options have been trialled in Australia to support Asian-born immigrant students during their practicum experience. Cruickshank (2004) discussed offering a flexible mode of delivery for immigrant teachers, with classes being held in the weekends and options as to whether their practicum was undertaken in one block of time or over several days each week. They were also given the opportunity to observe educational settings before their practicum began. This gave them the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon their experiences with other students in a safe environment prior to practicum. Similarly, Spooner-Lane et al. (2009) recommended a short-term cultural immersion programme prior to formal teacher education beginning, in order to support immigrant students'



understanding of the education system they were about to enter. This, together with a gradual immersion of paired students into schools, eased students more gently into the practicum environment.

But in the tight fiscal environment across the board in tertiary education in New Zealand (Tertiary Education Commission, 2015), it may not be economically feasible to run additional support courses for a small percent of the student population. However, the question of academic integrity arises when initial teacher education institutions accept enrolment fees from such students, without having sufficient support mechanisms in place should they be needed. This goes beyond individual pastoral care; it is about an ethic of institutionalised care.

Equity of practicum assessment practices

The second major equity issue within practicum is its associated assessment practices. As mentioned above, none of the participants entered into practicum using the institution's competency criteria as their own success measures. Yet it was only this yardstick which determined the institution's view of success.

I argue that there actually seems to be two assessment processes going on within practicums. The first is the final outcome which is based upon the individual ITE institution's criteria. As discussed, these vary across institution and in the manner in which they are used. The second process, however, is *not* formally measured. It is the personal sense of success felt by the student and associate teacher. All participants suggested that it is the development of trust, respect and self-confidence which lies at the heart of this. Yet these characteristics are unable to be measured externally as they are personally experienced. Therefore, their existence is ignored in the assessment process. But from a personal perspective, they are very real and were able to be discussed in retrospect by both the student and associate teacher. From an equity standpoint, the student should have a voice as part of the assessment process, rather than having the assessment format imposed upon them from an external third party.

Assessment needs to measure the success as perceived by all participants in the process: the ITE institution, the associate teacher and the student. Recognising that these individuals bring value and differing perspectives to the process is one step towards an equitable assessment process. This could mean that only part of the success criteria are determined by the training institution. The remaining portion could be developed between the student and associate teacher. Practically or financially, this would not be difficult to achieve. It would simply require a change in perspective from the institution from a hierarchical position to recognising practicum as a co-constructed experience. Recent local research supports this perception of practicum in New Zealand (Starkey & Rawlins, 2011). It is now time for initial teacher education providers to back this approach from a practical standpoint.

Conclusion

Despite not setting out to investigate issues of equity, it became apparent during the course of this research study that it is an important concern for Asian-born student teacher's success while on practicum. *Te Whāriki* is an inclusive document, providing a framework to encourage respectful teaching practices



across all ethnicities and backgrounds. With an increasingly diverse workforce reflecting our increasingly diverse population, we need to ensure that culturally-diverse student teachers are supported and encouraged to succeed. This reflects our profession in the light that we already see ourselves: as authentic and with an ethic of care for everyone.

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