

The theory to practice connection: What our Graduate Diploma students are telling us.

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The phrase ‘readiness to teach’ has become synonymous with the work of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers and their role in ensuring student teachers have the skills, knowledge and dispositions to support quality outcomes for ngā tamariki from their first days as beginning teachers. In a 2024 report compiled by the Education Review Office it was found that many beginning teachers did not feel that their academic programs adequately prepared them for the teaching profession, aligning with Flewitt and Ang’s (2020) proposition that theory and practice should be inseparable. Within ITE at New Zealand Tertiary College, student teachers engage in practice-based learning through weekly centre attendance and scheduled professional experience placements. The purpose of these practical experiences is to not only support student teachers’ development of teaching practices but also to support adaptive expertise, the ability to apply knowledge effectively in a range of different situations and contexts (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019). The following article details the findings of a small survey to explore student teachers’ perception of their application of theoretical knowledge to teaching practice through weekly centre attendance and professional experience placements.

Introduction

When *Te Whāriki He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early childhood curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE]), 1996) was updated in 2017, a key standout was the focus on intentional outcomes for tamariki and the kaiako role (MoE, 2017). For teachers in training, this learning begins in initial teacher education (ITE). The application of theory to practice prepares teachers in training to be able to “facilitate children’s learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy” (MoE, 2017, p. 59). Wanting to unpack how this looks within the authors’ organisation, a small-scale quantitative research project was undertaken. This article aims to review the literature on the application of theory to practice, incorporate the findings from the author’s research, and propose directions for future studies.

Literature Review

The benefits of blended learning

New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) is a blended learning ITE provider for Early Childhood Education (ECE). This model of delivery offers significant benefits by linking theoretical concepts covered in online courses with practical application, thereby enhancing students' readiness to teach. Regular opportunities for students to engage in centres through weekly Centre Attendance and Professional Experience Placements ensures continuous integration of theory and practice. Tate (2016) proposes that having regular practice experience strengthens the relationship between theory and practice. Darlin-Hammond (2006, as cited in, Tate, 2016) states regular practice during teacher education leads to students being empowered to make sense of what is covered in their academic work and provides different perspectives on theory and practice. Ussher (2016) agrees by highlighting the importance of being in the school (centre) context for students learning to teach, so there are opportunities to "theorise practice, develop identity, exercise agency, and take responsibility for their own learning and teaching" (p. 4). Students can only begin to understand theory once they apply the knowledge to practice (Neethling & Nel, 2021). Therefore, looking deeper at the links between theory and practice is useful as it helps to consolidate the different areas of students' learning.

The importance of connecting theory to practice

The first consideration when examining connecting theory to practice is considering the notion of praxis. Praxis posits theory and practice are inseparable, with each informing the other (Flewitt & Ang, 2020). Harmeý et al. (2022) agree by emphasizing the importance of linking theory to practice in education, emphasising that it is essential to see that theory and practice can be given equal status, and that each one only becomes meaningful alongside the other. Acknowledging that students learn best when they can integrate knowledge from different places further supports this approach (O'Neil, 2015; Phillips & Condy, 2023).

There are advantages to this connecting and reconnecting of theory and practice. Acting and reflecting on action can lead to a cycle supporting new understandings and extensions on learning. Knowledge learnt through courses can be applied and tested against what happens in the practice context (Neethling & Nel, 2021; O'Neil, 2023). Perry and Probine (2021) support this by asserting that strong connections are needed to be able to contextualise teaching. For ITE students in New Zealand, part of the contextualisation is the expectations set forth by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, which oversees teachers' registration. Whatman and MacDonald's (2017) study emphasises developing strong links between theory and practice so students can "understand and explore the interconnectedness of educational theories and classroom practices" (p. 1). This interconnection of different areas of knowledge leads to a synthesis of knowledge that can support a readiness to teach.

The importance of being ready to teach

Whatman and MacDonald (2017) claim that ITE graduates should have the capability to teach in today's environment as well as adapt to what is needed for teaching in the future. They claim teachers need to be confident in their adaptive expertise, ability to problem solve and in integrating knowing, being and learning from different contexts. This supports students to show initiative and make contributions to their centres. Being knowledgeable is seen as an important aspect of being ready to teach (Polley, 2023; Tate, 2016) and this can be linked to adaptive expertise, as having a balanced of knowledge of both theory and practice opens more possibilities to the student (Tate, 2016).

The above aspects lead to the building of professional agency for students, which is a key component as they are learning to teach. They need the ability to seek out opportunities to partner with others, use their strengths and knowledge, and to show they know how to learn and what they need to do (Dennis & Sommerville, 2023; Polley, 2023; Ussher, 2016). Therefore, it is important that lecturers consider encouraging students to think for themselves and engage in reflection as they discover new perspectives in the journey of being ready to teach (Neethling & Nel, 2021).

Research

The application of theoretical knowledge to practice greatly enhances teaching. The Education Review Office (ERO, 2017) acknowledges that robust theory to practice in ITE is essential for newly graduated teachers to feel confident and prepared to complete meaningful assessments of children's learning. As part of ITE studies at NZTC, students complete weekly centre attendance (field experience) and 20-day blocks of practice (field practice). Within this small-scale research project, the authors sought to understand student perspectives in terms of the learning they undertake within online courses and their practical teaching experiences. NZTC students enrolled in the Graduate Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) in January 2024 were invited to participate in the research, 37 students responded. The Graduate Diploma in Teaching programme caters to students who have previously completed an undergraduate qualification and enrol to pursue early childhood teaching qualification that leads to Teacher Certification, at an advanced undergraduate level (Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2023). Students completing this qualification generally do not have a background in early childhood education and this was important for the researchers to understand their perception of theory to practice in supporting their readiness to teach.

Two questions were posed to students and their responses were ranked by a Likert Scale of very little, a little, quite a bit, and very much. These were:

- Do your online courses inform your practice within Field Experience?
- Do your online courses inform your practice within Field Practice Placements?

The responses showed that all students felt that their learning through the online courses informed both their Field Experience and Field Practice with 51% and 56% sharing that it very much informed their Field Experience and Field Practice respectively. The data spread between a little and very much was inverse with 22% of students sharing that courses informed their Field Experience a little, compared with 24% of students for their Field Practice. Similarly, 27% of students felt that their courses informed their Field Experience quite a bit, with only 21% of students ranking that for Field Practice. These findings were similar to data collected by ERO (2017) that shared that newly graduated teachers who felt confident and prepared cited practicum as a critical part of their study for connecting theory to practice, as well as those who completed work in an ECE service outside of placement as part of their qualification to support their understanding and implementation of the curriculum. The connection between ITE study and practice experience is further discussed in Tate's (2016) research. Tate (2016) aimed to define theory and practice within ITE study, highlighting the necessity for theoretical knowledge to inform up-to-date teaching practices, and for practical experience to test and apply newly gained theoretical knowledge. Further, Tate (2016) articulated that this balance of theory to practice enhances teacher identity and willingness to contribute within the classroom. This conveys the importance and value of a mix of theoretical learning with practical opportunities to contextualise and refine knowledge, skills, and actions to apply educational theory into educational practice alongside ngā tamariki, whānau, and kaiako.

Discussion

The challenge of ensuring that ITE programs adequately prepare student teachers for the realities of the teaching profession are well documented within recent research (ERO, 2017; Tate, 2016; Whatman & McDonald, 2017). As lecturers within an ITE provider specialising in ECE teaching qualifications, the authors are immersed within the systems and processes of supporting student teachers during field experience and field practice placements. Leading up to the implementation of the research, much discussion between the authors centred around the theory to practice connection. The focus of these discussions was how our own lecturer practice could be adapted to meet individual learning needs that enhance student teacher progression and intentional teaching practices.

The broad nature of the two research questions asked form a base line from which it is intended that further research is implemented. Initial findings suggest that the majority of students felt confident in their ability to inform their practice with the learning gained through formal academic courses. However, the findings also suggest that some students struggled to identify the connection between their academic learning and their teaching actions within field experience and field practice placements. One possible cause for the contrast in the research findings could be that the data gathered did not indicate the progression of

students through the program. As students progress through their program of study the expectation to identify how theory is informing practice and how practice is informing understanding of theory becomes more critical to meeting placement expectations. It can be inferred that those student teachers at the beginning of the Graduate Diploma in Teaching program may have felt less able or confident to make connections between teaching actions and academic courses, theoretical concepts and ECE discourse. This highlights a limitation in the research, however, also provides insights that could inform future research which may focus on interventions to support beginning Graduate Diploma student teachers understanding of the theory to practice connection.

A second limitation of the study is the general nature of the questions and use of the Likert Scale as measurement of students' perception of how well the online courses inform student teacher practice in both field experience and field practice placements. While the Likert Scale offers simplicity in quantifying student perceptions, many questions arise in terms of the 'why' of the rating students have chosen and the 'how' their knowledge and experience could be enhanced. While the two questions asked provided some good preliminary information it is clear that further qualitative research that provides more opportunities for barriers to understanding to be identified could be implemented.

Finally, although the authors have found that there are limitations within the research, the findings have prompted further reflection and questions to be answered. This small-scale survey is a starting point for possible future research in relation to how the connection between theory and practice can be highlighted to support readiness to teach. One possible action going forward to build upon these initial findings would be to conduct a second survey of beginning Graduate Diploma Teaching students. Potential findings from a second survey could inform review of field experience and field practice placement materials and lecturer practice to support the development of reflective and intentional practice informed by theory, research and ECE discourse.

Conclusion

There is a clear link of the need for connection between theory and practice and the benefits of this to students' readiness to teach. The study conducted by the authors confirmed that Graduate Diploma students viewed that their course work was important to their participation in Field Experience and Field Practice. Though conversely a significant amount of study participants struggled with the course to practice link. These findings provide a base line from which further investigation and reflection can be carried out and more specific information could be sort. The findings both from this study and ongoing research has the potential to inform ECE thinking, discourse and practice.

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