

*Original Research Paper*

## **Dynamic Ways of Knowing. Not Just in Our Heads: A Study of a Continuous Practicum in Field Based Teacher Education**

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### **Abstract**

*Field Based Teacher Education (FBTE) is one approach to initial teacher education (ITE) in New Zealand. The research project reported here analysed the extent to which a continuous practicum contributed to early childhood student teachers' professional development in one FBTE Diploma Programme. A qualitative methodology within an interpretive paradigm was used. Data was generated using individual interviews with four graduate teachers, reflective journals from five teacher educators and questionnaires from 26 peer support teachers. The results suggest a continuous practicum provides highly contextualised learning in specific social and cultural early childhood contexts. These contexts, along with campus classes, provide student teachers with weekly opportunities to interweave theory and practice. It is the continuous practicum that creates a 'dynamic knowing' as students 'see' and learn through practice. This research provides a basis for further investigation into how teachers' learning can be embedded in the socio-cultural practices of teaching communities.*

### **Introduction**

The study analysed the extent to which a continuous practicum contributed to early childhood student teachers' professional development in one Field Based Teacher Education (FBTE) Diploma programme. It focused on the weekly practicum experience of the student teachers' in their 'home setting', the perceptions of teachers working alongside the student teachers and the teacher educators. This article reports on the nature of students' learning in a continuous practicum setting.

Student teachers need to draw on specific teaching experience in order to make sense of their learning. Therefore, initial teacher education (ITE) must provide students with opportunities to develop contextually relevant understandings with all the inherent tensions and frustrations that inevitably arise (Darling Hammond, 2006; Goodfellow & Sumison, 2000; Korthagen & Lunenburg, 2004). Specifically, reform in teacher education suggests alignment with self-study which requires a "focus from generalisation to a focus on unique

situations in their contexts” (Korthagen & Lunenberg, 2004, p. 438). Self-study recognises teaching as a form of scholarship – a way for teachers to investigate their own teaching and learning (Korthagen & Lunenberg, 2004; Loughran, 2006). For example a study by Barksdale-Ladd, Draper, King, Oropallo and Radencich (2001 as cited in Korthagen & Lunenberg, 2004, p. 439) demonstrated how specific case studies based on student teachers own unique contexts and experience enabled the exploration of dilemmas encountered by student teachers. They discovered the problematic nature of teaching was exposed and found that solutions were not always possible. However, problems were not so clearly identified by teacher educators who “paid less attention” to the specific contexts where the students worked (p. 439). As Darling-Hammond (2006) also suggest, teachers need frequent opportunities to confront the complexities of teaching, with all its messiness. Confronting these complexities requires a closer relationship and engagement with the teaching settings, by the teacher education programme.

Reconceptualising teacher education requires a complete shift to transcend the traditional hierarchy of theory over practice (Keesing-Styles, 2001; Korthagen, 2004; Loughran, 2006). Korthagen (2004) frames this as realistic teacher education, where learning is situated and facilitates the continuous interplay of theory to practice and practice to theory. In this view, theory is not privileged over practice but considered “implicit in practice and the relationship is a continuously interactive one” (Keesing-Styles, 2001, p. 148). Loughran (2001 as cited in 2006, p. 172) calls for a shift in ITE to an approach that embeds learning in experience, and places the focus on the learner rather than the curriculum. Consequently, teacher education requires frequent practicum opportunities where student teachers may “...transform content and theoretical knowledge into pedagogical understandings” (Eastern Institute of Technology, December 2008, p. 5).

For instance, a secondary teaching initiative in New South Wales, Australia, called ‘Classmates’ provided for the alignment of continuous teaching practicum with academic studies (Ferfolja, 2008). The programme provided opportunities for student teachers to develop “contextually relevant teacher capital” (p. 82). Student teachers had authentic opportunities to develop meaningful relationships by working with parents and the community. As Ferfolja suggests these relationships enhanced student teachers’ reflexivity and increased their confidence.

A similar outcome was reported by one small scale study in New Zealand conducted by Murphy and Butcher (2009). They investigated the first year experiences of student teachers in one FBTE early childhood programme. Across both year one focus groups they reported 100 percent support for the effectiveness of FBTE. The student teachers believed it gave them “real opportunities to build relationships with the early childhood community and make links between learning and practice” (p. 2). The relative lack of experience of the students and their perhaps “idealised view” were acknowledged by the researchers as limitations in this study (p. 1).

The contextualised nature of a continuous teaching practicum closely aligns with socio-cultural understandings of learning (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) and Bereiter’s (2002) notion of knowledge creation. This view recognises that learning is embedded in social and cultural practices (Anning, Cullen, & Flear, 2004; Wenger, 1998) and that knowledge is continually constructed and re-constructed. In this way, learning moves beyond the individual and institute and is integrated by student teachers’ participation within communities. Learning in this context involves both the social relations and political dimensions of a particular community (Wenger, 1998). Wenger claims that a ‘dynamic

knowing' emerges from participating in practice with "people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating and using knowledge" (p. 1).

However, it is not sufficient for student teachers to be embedded in a teaching community only. They must be supported in critical inquiry. Notions of self-study and teacher as researcher embedded in teacher education programmes develop these skills (Gibbs, 2006; Kincheloe, 2003). Gibbs argues that such "inquiry is central to professional practice and when this is conducted by teachers on their own teaching it becomes more purposeful, relevant and meaningful" (p. 247). Without such inquiry, teachers may remain technicians, subject to the influence of bad teaching (Kinchloe, 2003). Consequently, student teachers need frequent opportunities to problematise practice (Brookfield, 1995; Smyth, 1991), to enable them to develop reflective and critical capability.

Furthermore, not all students' learning in communities is admirable and, if unsupervised, such learning may actually reinforce undesirable practices (Fenwick, 2000). Fenwick claims that this undesirable practice may be socially reinforced and therefore difficult to change. Moreover, he suggests that communities tend to "conserve, protect, and recycle their knowledge," rather than critically examine and develop it (p. 94). Fenwick also comments that differences in power and existing hierarchies may exclude some learners from participation. For example Haigh and Ward (2004) found that secondary student teachers' professional agency was restricted because of the power relationship between student teachers and associate teachers. They reported that assessment influences the relationship, in that a desire for a pass mark overrides the student teachers' willingness to experiment. Another qualitative study by Overton (2009), investigated the intersection of teachers' identities - their personal and professional selves - and educational change in early childhood. Overton demonstrated ways in which teachers can be undermined and disempowered when they are devalued and not appreciated, or lack direct or indirect support, including feedback. This suggests student teachers' learning may be constrained when conditions are not ideal. Also, dimensions of race, class, gender and culture are always present, along with personal complexities (Fenwick, 2000).

FBTE is one approach to ITE. Research and debate is required to "identify and explain insights about specific programmes where teachers have a positive impact on student learning, regardless of the programme, approach or route into teaching" (Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 6). At the time of this study, there was limited published research on the impact of a continuous teaching practicum on student teachers' professional development within a FBTE approach in early childhood education in New Zealand. The exceptions are Bell, who in 2004 described the historical trends, theoretical underpinnings and some policy implications for FBTE delivered at multiple sites and the recent publication by Murphy and Butcher (2009).

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

In this small case study, the case is defined as one FBTE programme, rather than the individual participants. A case study is most useful when there are uncontrollable variables, and the focus of the research is to examine the phenomenon in its real world context (Stake, 2005). A qualitative methodology within an interpretive paradigm was used as the researcher sought to understand and gain insights (Chaboyer, 2004; Janesick, 1994) into the lived experience of a continuous teaching practicum.

There were three participant groups: the graduate teachers, the teacher educators and the peer support teachers. Three different methods of data collection were used: namely semi-structured interviews, journals and a questionnaire. Three participant groups were used and multiple methods of data collection in order to add breadth and depth to the investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Triangulation was used as a method to cross check and provide validation of the data (Holliday, 2007).

The research procedures, ethical guidelines and protocols of Deakin University, Melbourne and the Eastern Institute of Technology, New Zealand were adhered to.

### ***Research question***

The research analysed in what ways a continuous teaching practicum contributed to student teachers' professional development. Within this aim, the research question reported here was: how does a continuous teaching practicum shape student teachers' learning to be a teacher?

### ***The teacher education programme***

Field Based Teacher Education (FBTE) is one approach within initial teacher education (ITE) in New Zealand. In the chosen research programme, FBTE requires the early childhood education (ECE) student teachers to spend a minimum of 12 hours practicum per week, in a voluntary or paid capacity, within a 'home' early childhood setting. The weekly practicum is for the duration of the academic year while students also attend 11 hours of face to face classes a week. The 12 hours practicum per week is defined in this study as a continuous practicum. In addition, student teachers undertake a range of teaching practices in other early childhood settings for three consecutive weeks in each year of study, as set down in the 2006/2007 curriculum requirements (Eastern Institute of Technology, August, 2007). This differs from pre-service approaches, where practicum is usually conducted in a linear model with theory taught first, followed by a block teaching practicum (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

### ***Graduate teachers and interview approach***

All graduate teachers from the FBTE programme in 2006 and 2007 were invited to participate in the research project, with the intention of selecting four to six participants. Four to six was chosen as a reasonable number to manage in a small study, and allowed for the possibility of participants withdrawing from the research. The 2006 and 2007 graduate teachers were chosen because they had a minimum of one year's graduate teaching experience, and would be able to reflect on both their teacher preparation and their role as teacher professionals.

The choice of graduates was constrained. Two years of graduate teachers were chosen to increase the potential pool of possible participants, giving a total of 37 graduates. It was anticipated that some would not volunteer and some would have left the region or left teaching; the address data base was current as of 2006/2007. All would be female, as no males were enrolled in the programme at that time. Given this, together with predominance among graduates of Pākehā/European teachers, the researcher could not gain a gender or culturally diverse sample (Manning, 2008).

The intention was to blind select an equal number of voluntary and paid teacher graduates. This approach was selected as a criterion because the researcher's experience indicated that student teachers experienced the continuous teaching practicum differently, depending on

their status as voluntary or paid. However, no blind selection was necessary, as the minimum number of four graduate teachers responded to the invitation to participate in the research. Three completed their FBTE continuous practicum in childcare, and one in kindergarten. Two were in paid employment for the three years, and two did a combination of paid and voluntary hours. Two were from the same centre, although they were in different years of the programme. Consequently, the results may reflect a bias towards the experience of those student teachers in paid employment. The graduate teachers' ages, in the research cohort, ranged from 18-43 at the commencement of their programme. This age range is typical of the cohort groups entering this FBTE programme.

Although the graduate teachers were employed in early childhood settings, at the time of interview they were asked to reflect on their time as student teachers. They are therefore referred to as student teachers in the results and discussion sections.

The graduate teachers were interviewed using semi-structured questions that were developed from the overarching research questions. They were:

- What advantages to your learning were there being in a centre 12 hours per week?
- What disadvantages to your learning were there in being at a centre 12 hours per week?
- How were you a member of that community of practice?
- What did you learn about relationships and how did this impact on your learning?
- Tell me about the practice/theory relationship from your perspective.

The research questions were piloted with one teacher educator and a voluntary graduate teacher from a different cohort who was not involved with the case study. This enabled the researcher to practice interview skills and evaluate the questions. (No changes were made). Questions were sent to the graduates prior to the interview and interviews were then conducted face to face and lasted for between 40 minutes and one hour. The interviews were conducted at a location and time convenient to the participants.

#### ***Teacher educators and journal documentation***

The teacher educators' perspectives were obtained by reflective journal documentation (Brookfield 1995). The teacher educators were invited to maintain a journal, recording up to five critical incidents either in class or during lecturers' visits to a centre that caused them to reflect on FBTE. The critical incidents were recorded as narratives (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), along with the teacher educators' reflections on these incidents. Subsequently, twenty reflections were received from five full time teacher educators and this included five from the researcher.

#### ***Peer support teachers and questionnaire approach***

The peer support teachers' perspectives were gained using a small quantitative questionnaire. The questions were designed to gather information on the peer support teacher's qualification, experience and early childhood setting: 13 questions using a Leichart scale; and four short open questions to gain their perspectives on the FBTE programme. The questions were partially based on a questionnaire designed by Aitken and Gould (personnel communication, 25 August 2006). Subsequently, this study could be aligned for a comparative cross institutional study in the future. As well, the questions were aligned with the graduate teachers' semi-structured interview. Peer support teachers enter a voluntary

agreement with the Institute to offer collegial support to the student teacher during the 12 hours continuous teaching practicum in the field based setting. They meet in a triadic discussion with the visiting lecturer and student teacher three times a year.

### *Data coding and analysis*

The graduate teacher tapes were transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts were sent to the graduate teachers to confirm the accuracy of the recording, as recommended by Stake (2005). Participants confirmed the accuracy of recordings and made no changes. Prior to data coding, a number of readings and re-readings occurred within each participant group, the tapes were listened to again, and key words were recorded. All the data was recorded in NVivo, using the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) Standards (April, 2007) as the code. NVivo was used as a data management system rather than an analysis tool, as the researcher was not experienced enough with its capacity. The NZTC standards were used because they reflect the policy directions of the profession, and to mediate the danger of forcing pre-conceptions on the data (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to the graduating teachers' standards, four other codes emerged: quality, transition, peer support teacher, and the role of the student teacher (paid or voluntary). The peer support teachers 13 questions using the Liechart scale were all graphed.

A constructivist grounded research methodological approach was used to analyse the data. A grounded approach acknowledged that the researcher's interpretation was an integral influence on the research, and shaped what meaning and significance was derived from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Similarities and differences were compared within participant groups within each code, and then across participant groups within each code. Comparisons were then made across codes within each participant group, and finally across participant groups across codes. Thus, categories were constructed through "the comparative methods of analysing data" and identifying patterns that were common across at least two participant groups (Charmaz, 2006, p. 100). Once categories began to emerge, the data was recoded using the two main categories and sub-categories identified to address the initial proposal of the study (Yin, 1994). Standards of rigour based on triangulation, reliability and transparency were used to judge the validity of this research.

### **Results and Discussion**

Two main categories were identified: the first category was the nature of learning in a FBTE programme with sub-categories of learning through practice, weaving theory and practice, and multiple perspectives. The second was the nature of centre based relationships with sub-categories of being part of a team, belonging and respect, and relationships with children, families, ngā whānau and community. Pseudonyms are given to teacher educators and graduate teachers to protect their identity. The peer support teachers are identified using the letters A to Z. This article presents the findings of the first category and responds to the first research question: how does a continuous practicum shape student teachers learning to be a teacher?

#### *The nature of learning: weaving theory and practice*

Learning as seeing and recognising

It was learning about things in the classroom [at the institute] and then...recognising how it works with the children... yeah just putting it together and that built my confidence (Millie, student teacher).

Not only did we learn all the theory we got to put it into practice so not only were we having it in our head, we were able to see it working... in a centre. (Amber, student teacher).

Just from seeing them pouring... in the sandpit and actually having the knowledge behind it to go oh yeah, and talk about the science concepts... observing it and then maybe providing them [children] with resources that extend on it or encourage that learning, therefore you can talk about it with them and they're [children] learning...(Amber, student teacher).

The module that we did in our first year that I really loved was Play and Pedagogy. ... [it] gave me an understanding of what we were doing at work, like, I was in the centre, and I had little... knowledge of practices really..., um... I followed everybody else's practices but being at tech and doing the Play and Pedagogy made me understand why play was so important... yeah, if I had just... learned that in a classroom and not been able to put it straight into practice, I think it would have been different (Katie, student teacher).

I wrote lots of learning stories [assessment in early childhood], and we [children and she] did lots of exciting things, anything new...would go straight back into the centre and be used...I did a lot of research within the centre, made a lot of changes... (Jane, student teacher).

Students are capable and competent teachers and learners because they are grounded in the reality of teaching practice. Theory becomes totally relevant in their practice; practice is enhanced by study, by being challenged in reflective practice, also in the collegiality experienced in class situations (peer support teacher, R).

#### Contextualised learning

To be a learner in this way..., you grow two ways, you grow within yourself as a person... with going to work and you grow within... your head knowledge...(Jane, student teacher).

...you do courses on leadership and team work module, we do get taught that, but a lot of that work we do out there [at the Institute] is a lot of discussion about how it actually works... we're already in a team and we're having to... We're open to understanding how to work that, for you guys [lecturers] to guide us, we're already doing it... and hearing how it works in other centres, and how it doesn't and how you might be lucky or not be (Katie, student teacher).

...implement what they learn in class within the centre. Thus being involved in real experiences and learning what 'works' or what doesn't within context of own centre (peer support teacher, D).

The student has the great opportunity to learn alongside other professionals who have a wealth of knowledge to share. Critique practice can only improve students' practice. Making the most of centres, resources, experiences, and practices can only benefit the student (peer support teacher, H).

This is evident in class and online discussion where students question, challenge and support one another to make sense of and to make changes in their teaching as they face the challenges in day-to-day teaching (Trixie, teacher educator).

#### Tension between theoretical and practical knowledge

... you learn to sort of mould it [theoretical perspectives], mould it and come to a compromise between what happens in your practices and what happens in your theory (Amber, student teacher).

I did find that frustrating because I wanted to bring these um...this new learning into the setting and ...I couldn't really...I was being told a different perspective (Millie, student teacher).

I learned to be very tactful in my discussion about the practice I was seeing (Jane, student teacher).

Reframing Wenger's (1998) concept, the researcher suggests a 'dynamic knowing' occurs when student teachers' learning about teaching is continuously embedded in the practicum experience. This is because it affords continuous weekly opportunities to weave theory and practice. The weaving of thought and action offers transformative potential to student teachers' learning as they have immediate opportunities to apply new content and pedagogical knowledge. Through their practice new learning is transformed into pedagogical understandings and, or, they seek to make sense of their practice knowledge (Kincheloe, 2003). Learning was described by the students and peer support teachers as 'putting it into practice straightaway'. Jane reflected on the excitement of trying out this new learning in the centre, of her research and making changes. Weekly practice was the way knowledge was learned and understood. In a FBTE approach, learning is continuously embedded in experience (Loughran, 2006).

#### *Learning as seeing and recognising*

The student teachers described their learning as 'seeing' and 'recognising' in their field based practicum and concepts introduced to them through their weekly course work. For example, Amber articulated her new understanding during the course on Maths, Science and Technology. She shifted from a belief that maths and science did not happen in early childhood settings to one where she noticed and recognised maths and science concepts. She responded immediately to support children's mathematical and scientific learning. Amber believed that this immediate recognition and action supported not just her theoretical understanding but also her memory. Otherwise, she believed she would "just forget" (Amber, as cited in McConnell, 2010, p. 38). It was this immediacy of practice that shaped the student teachers' learning.

Through weekly practice, the students were able to make meaningful connections with theory and research when the continuous practicum is closely interwoven with course work and assessment. Katie described how, rather than just following other teachers' practices, she came to her own understanding about play through the combination of thinking (exposure to theoretical and research perspectives) and practising each week. In this way, students are supported to 'see' the inter-relatedness of theory and practice as they construct and reconstruct their professional knowledge and "come to know what they understand from practice" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 18). Indeed, the process for them was an interactive one (Kessing Styles, 2001). Millie described this as "putting it together", a way of making sense of discussions, readings, study and practice. Student teachers' learning is shaped in a way



that is holistic when the programme design aligns practice and theory and the student teachers are continuously engaged with practice.

### ***Contextualised learning***

A 'dynamic knowing' about teaching and learning occurs when learning is highly contextualised through the continuous teaching practicum. The student teachers bring the lived experience of their continuous teaching practicum to the classroom, and can provide their own examples of practice and problems which can be explored in a process of critical enquiry (Gibbs, 2006; Kincheloe, 2003). There is a high degree of relevance and authenticity to their learning. For example when students study leadership, they bring two years of experience in early childhood teams to the discussions. As Katie explained, "we know what it is like to work in an early childhood team and you [institute lecturers] guide us". Applying theoretical frameworks and engaging in conversations supports student teachers to understand their experience in different ways (Tate, 2002).

The student teachers' contexts also reveal the diversity and complexity of early childhood settings. Each student teacher is involved in a unique early childhood setting and early childhood team. This process shifts the focus from academic generalisations to a focus on unique situations, as recommended by Korthagen and Lunenberg (2004). Jane referred to taking the knowledge and experience of others and trying it out. If it did not work in her context, then she could reflect and bring the discussion back to class the following week. Trixie (teacher educator) observed that in both online and classroom discussions student teachers question, challenge and support each other to make sense of practice. In this way, FBTE provides regular opportunities for student teachers to develop contextually relevant understandings (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Goodfellow & Sumison, 2000; Kincheloe, 2003). The multiple realities of the continuous teaching experience intersect and enrich the campus learning experience.

Student teachers in a FBTE programme have the advantage of continuously engaging with an early childhood community. As peer support teachers confirmed, the student teachers have access to teachers' professional knowledge, centre resources and the opportunity to engage with real experiences on a regular basis. Students get to 'see' the whole enterprise of teaching over time as opposed to becoming a 'guest' for some weeks on a block practicum. Therefore, learning moves beyond the individual and the institute and is integrated with student teachers' participation within early childhood settings. As Amber stated: "not only were we having it in our head, we were able to see it working... in a centre". While Jane described it as growing in two ways "you grow within yourself as a person...with going to work and you grow within...your head knowledge." In FBTE, student teachers' learning is embedded in both the social relations and the political dimensions of their field-based practicum when they work co-operatively with a teaching team and share responsibility for children's learning.

### ***Tension between theoretical and practical knowledge***

The continuous practicum is not without the tensions found in any community. One was the clash sometimes encountered between theoretical understandings and practical application. Amber expressed this as 'moulding'; taking time with nappy change to maximise the relationship with the child (theory) but needing to achieve the nappy change in a timely manner (practice). Millie expressed frustration in her first year when the team was unwilling to consider new ideas and her developing philosophy became at odds with the centre practices. She resolved this by shifting centres in her second year. This aligned with

Fenwick's (2000) claim that communities may be reluctant to examine and develop preferring to "conserve, protect and recycle knowledge" (p. 94). Jane described a need to be diplomatic at times when she considered practice as not ideal and felt unable to question practice because of her status as a student. As Fenwick (2003) reminds us, differences in power exist and may influence participation. The tensions revealed that some settings can be less than ideal for student teachers' learning and consequently, two students moved centres in their second year of study. This demonstrated that the student teachers were efficacious.

Despite these challenges, the graduate teachers believed the benefits of learning 'not just in their heads' but simultaneously through practice contributed significantly to their professional development. They graduated as confident and capable teachers. In a continuous practicum, student teachers participate in the social and cultural practices of the real world, one that adds value and supports their learning to be a teacher. This was similar to studies conducted by Beck and Kosnick (2002), Ferjolia (2008), and Murphy and Butcher (2009).

### **Future Research**

Early childhood centre teams invest significant time and energy in supporting student teachers in their continuous teaching practicum. Therefore, it makes sense that research seeks to understand the complex relationship that supports both parties. It is important moreover, to consider how team interactions and hierarchies create or restrain ways that empower student teachers' professional development. FBTE is under researched in New Zealand and this research indicated potential directions for further research. This included research into how students negotiate academic work and practice in FBTE, both in the institutional setting and in the early childhood setting. The relationship between peer support teachers and student teachers could be investigated further to understand what constrains or enhances student teachers learning.

### **Conclusion**

The results suggest a continuous practicum provides highly contextualised learning in specific social and cultural early childhood contexts. These contexts, along with campus classes at the institute, provide student teachers with weekly opportunities to interweave theory and practice. While the research revealed some tensions, it is the continuous nature of the practicum that creates a 'dynamic knowing' as students 'see' and 'recognise' through practice. This must be supported by the development of critical inquiry skills both in the early childhood setting and the institute. The continuous practicum must also be closely interwoven with course work. FBTE shifts the focus from generalisations to specific contexts that enrich the institutional learning experience providing relevance, authenticity and meaning to student teachers learning. This research has shown that a continuous practicum enhances the professional development of student teachers provided certain conditions are met (see McConnell, 2010). In FBTE, student teachers' learning is embedded in the practice experience and this facilitates the continuous interplay of theory to practice and practice to theory.

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