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## **The Complexity of Practicum Assessment in Teacher Education: An Examination of Four New Zealand Case Studies.**

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*Abstract: Practicum is a key element of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, designed to support the professional growth of student teachers. Practicum is also a key point of assessment, leading to a determination of the student's professional growth and their readiness to teach and enter the teaching profession. This study sought to understand the way in which the assessment of practicum was enacted and experienced within New Zealand early childhood ITE programmes. Case study methodology was used to explore the experiences of practicum triads from four participating institutions. Data included recordings of triadic assessment meetings, post-assessment interviews with the student teachers, associate teachers and teacher educators, and examination of associated assessment documentation. In presenting key features of the four case studies it is argued that practicum assessment is complex and multi-faceted, enacted with institutional parameters, but highly individualised in practice.*

### **Introduction**

Initial teacher education (ITE) encompasses formal programmes of study designed to prepare student teachers to enter the teaching profession and to provide prospective teachers with the professional knowledge, skills and dispositions to support effective teaching and learning (Grudnoff & Williams, 2010). ITE programmes are a key mechanism for the training of new and beginning teachers and typically include some form of accreditation at state or national level. The assessment of practicum plays a critical role in determining the student's readiness to teach and achievement of expected graduate standards, (for example, as set by the Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand, or the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership). As a result, the assessment of practicum must weave together elements of supportive guidance for the student, alongside judgements as to the achievement of expected competencies and ultimately, gatekeeping into the profession of teaching. This study explored the way in which the assessment of practicum was enacted at four ITE providers in New Zealand, and illuminated the experiences of the key practicum triad members: student teacher, associate teacher and teacher educator. This paper reports key findings to emerge from the case study phase of a larger doctoral study, to highlight the complexity of the assessment act, the influencing variables that shaped the assessment experience, and the way in which such experiences were both institutionalised and individualised.

## Practicum

The term ‘practicum’ represents the component of initial teacher education programmes in which a student teacher spends time in an educational setting for the purpose of developing their skills as a teacher, applying the knowledge gained in their course work to the everyday context of teaching and learning (Haigh & Ell, 2014; McGee, Ferrier-Kerr & Miller, 2001), as well as being apprenticed and socialised into the teaching profession (Roberts & Graham, 2008). Practicum varies across programmes and institutions, in terms of length, structure and place in the overall programme and may be aligned with course work in different ways (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman & Stevens, 2009). It is the context in which student teachers are given the opportunity to grow and develop as future members of the profession, to practise their skills and reflect on what it means to them to be a teacher. Practicum is the forum in which student teachers are able to gain understanding of the daily reality of teaching practice and to see a range of educational philosophies manifest in practice (Haigh & Ell, 2014). No matter how it is structured or placed within the programme, however, there is ready agreement from key stakeholders that practicum is one of the most critical components of effective teacher education programmes (Brown & Danaher, 2008; Doxey, 1996; Goodnough et al., 2009; Rivers, 2006).

## The Assessment of Practicum

The research literature related to practicum typically focuses on the role of practicum in supporting the student teacher’s development and growth through mentoring, induction and skill development. Yet, assessment is also a core act of the practicum and is utilised to determine the progress of the student teacher, the need for support and guidance, and readiness to enter the teaching profession upon graduation.

Assessment, as it is typically enacted in ITE, serves a dual role with both formative and summative purposes (Tillema, Smith & Lesham, 2011). Joughin (2009) refers to these as learning and judgement functions, and identifies the challenge of balancing these different purposes. Formative and summative assessment practices may be similar; however they are differentiated by the core intent and purpose of the assessment. Formative assessment has been defined as assessment *for* learning, typically enacted during the learning situation, while summative assessment is defined as assessment *of* learning, typically at the end of an experience (McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013; Watson & Robbins, 2008), although such categorisations may be somewhat simplistic. Summative assessment is typically aligned with the grading processes of the institution, and has implications for the students’ progress through or completion of a course of study (Ciuffetelli-Parker & Volante, 2009; Maclellan, 2004). Formative assessment attends to the current demonstrated practice of the student, for the purposes of giving feedback that will support reflection, and professional learning, growth and transformation. Boud (2009) suggests that in higher education domains, such as initial teacher education, formative purposes of assessment are gaining in emphasis, but are still often subordinated to the summative purposes required of qualification standards.

As conducted within a teacher education programme, assessment is a high stakes exercise (Maclellan, 2004). The outcomes of assessment have significant implications for the student teacher’s subsequent career, and extensive time, commitment and

finances are typically invested in their success, both by the student teacher and the accrediting institution. There is a need for transparency and understanding in relation to the purpose and practice of practicum assessment (Haigh & Ell, 2014). For institutions, a political climate of increased accountability and greater demand for outcomes-based evidence of programme efficacy means that continued public funding may depend on assessment outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2006). Authors such as Haigh (2001), Ortlipp, (2003; 2006), and Hawe (2002), have argued that assessment is problematic and not always fair and appropriate for the student teacher, with issues related to bias, reliability and consistency. “Such issues need to be addressed and resolved if the integrity of the assessment system and the qualification awarded are to be protected, and if the public is to have confidence in teacher educators as the gatekeepers to an initial teaching position” (Hawe, 2001, p. 19).

The present study reports on one phase of a larger, multi-phase study designed to investigate the complexities of practicum and its assessment, through examining the multiple perspectives of key stakeholders, including student teachers, associate teachers and teacher educators, as well as the ITE institution. The study was guided by the following research question: *‘how is the assessment of practicum enacted and experienced by key stakeholders in early childhood initial teacher education?’* The study was designed to be exploratory and illuminatory, providing rich descriptions of the experiences of the key participants in practicum assessment, within the context of initial teacher education in New Zealand.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The organising theoretical framework for this study was guided by the work of Barbara Rogoff, who proposed that deep understanding of a given context is best captured through multiple lenses, or planes of analysis. She described these planes (or lenses) of analysis as the cultural/institutional plane, the personal/individual plane and interpersonal/relational plane. While the planes are seen to be inseparable and mutually influential (Rogoff, 2003), analysis is conducted through a process of foregrounding, allowing for specific elements to be brought into sharp and critical focus, while the other planes remain present, but in the background. Rogoff’s work supported investigation of the institutional context within which practicum is conducted, the assessment experiences of individual participants, and the way in which assessment was enacted within the context of the relationships between practicum participants. Consideration of the assessment of practicum through multiple lenses allowed for the complexity of influences at work in a given practicum experience to be identified and examined.

## **Research Design**

The research reported in this paper focuses on the final phase of a multi-phase research study. The study employed a mixed method QUAL-quan sequential exploratory design (Punch, 2009) to examine the assessment of practicum. Phase One involved personal interviews with ‘key informants’ in four New Zealand teacher education institutions (i.e., cultural/institutional plane). Phase Two utilised an online survey of all student teachers, associate teachers and teacher educators in each of the four ITE institutions, to garner self-reports about beliefs, practices and experiences

related to the assessment of practicum (personal/individual plane). Phase Three involved case studies of practicum triads to provide data in relation to the interpersonal/relational plane. The purpose of these case studies was to understand the interaction between the participants of the practicum and to consider the way in which the relationships between the student teacher, associate teacher and teacher educator manifest in practicum assessment. Details of the larger study are available in Aspden (2015). The findings reported here are drawn from the final phase of the study; the detailed case studies of four practicum triads (one nominated triad from each ITE institution) as they enacted the final assessment visit.

## Participants

A purposive sample of four ITE providers was selected for the larger study. Each ITE provider offered a three-year Bachelor level qualification (early childhood education speciality) leading to teacher accreditation in New Zealand. The sample group for the case study phase reported here was one nominated practicum triad from each institution, comprising a student teacher, associate teacher and teacher educator, with the practicum setting being a licensed early childhood service in New Zealand. The only parameter provided for selection was that the student teacher needed to be in the final year of their study, and considered likely to succeed in the practicum; instituted to protect potentially vulnerable students<sup>1</sup>. Of the four students, three were female (aged between 20-35 years) and one was male (aged 40-50 years). The associate teachers, onsite mentors who were based in the early childhood setting, were all female, and were experienced early childhood teachers who had mentored at least four students on practicum. The teacher educators who represented the ITE institution were all experienced, with at least five years experience in their role; two were male, two were female.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for the case studies involved three components including direct observation of the assessment visit, interviews with each of the triad members shortly after the assessment meeting was complete, and analysis of assessment documentation. The observation was used to gain understanding of the assessment processes and practices utilised, the way in which the triad members interacted with each other within the assessment process, and the factors that determined the final assessment outcome. The semi-structured interview provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on their experience of assessment during the practicum, indicating strengths and challenges. The assessment documentation included assessment forms, observation reports, and student reflections, and served to provide further understanding of the institutional requirements, the nature of feedback, and the way in which assessment outcomes were reached and communicated to the participants. The data generated in this phase was analysed through an iterative process of content and thematic analysis to

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<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Southern B, Application 10/51).

identify key characteristics unique to each case, as well as themes that recurred over the different cases.

## Results and Discussion

The aim of this study was ‘*to critically analyse how a representative sample of New Zealand initial teacher education institutions assess the early childhood practicum*’, in order to illuminate and make current practicum assessment policy and practice more transparent. The results identified many similarities in approach to practicum assessment across the four institutions. Each institution developed the parameters for practicum within the regulatory framework provided by the New Zealand Teachers Council (now Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand) for the accreditation of ITE programmes, including the *Graduating Teacher Standards*, which as Kane (2005) noted, is likely to explain many of the similarities evident. These regulations determined the parameters for length, location and number of practica required, specified that students be supported by a qualified and registered associate teacher within the early childhood setting, and visited by a suitable representative of the teacher education institution (NZTC, 2010). Within this regulatory framework, each institution adopted what Rodgers and Keil (2007) refer to as the traditional student supervision triad of student teacher, associate teacher and teacher educator, who each contribute to the assessment in different ways. The similarity in findings across the four institutions affirms the notion that practicum is a site of practice that is characterised by distinctive participation structures, with many shared values, practices and expectations (Rogoff, 2014).

As in the practicum model typical of most New Zealand ITE programmes (Rivers, 2006), it was the responsibility of the teacher educator, as the representative of the accrediting institution, to assess the student teacher for both formative and summative purposes. In three of the four cases the teacher educator only visited the student once, with the visit between two- three hours in duration, although early introductory phone calls and emails also took place. In the fourth case the student was also visited once early in the practicum, to establish relationships and make sure all was proceeding well, rather than for assessment purposes. At the time of the assessment visit, in which the data collection occurred, the students had completed at least 75% of the total practicum time (typically four - five weeks) and were soon to complete. The nature of the assessment visit was also generally the same across the cases, comprising of time spent observing the student engaging with children, discussion between the teacher educator and associate teacher and a three-way conversation (triadic meeting) between the teacher educator, associate teacher and the student. Within this triadic meeting, there was a joint focus on both formative assessment; identifying the strengths of the student, as well as areas for development, as well as attending to summative purposes; the level to which the student teacher had met the institutional criteria and was eligible to pass the practicum. Grading for each practicum followed a somewhat different assessment matrix from pass/fail, through to Competent/ Very competent/ Highly competent.

The cases affirm practicum assessment as a social and relational act (Haigh & Ell, 2014) that is influenced by the interpersonal relationships of the key participants. In each of the four cases, the participants reported overall positive professional and personal relationships between the triad members. There was no reported break-down of relationships or conflict between the participants; to the degree that comments made by

participants in two of the cases indicated that the relationship between the associate teacher and student teacher would continue past the end of the practicum, an outcome of the friendship and mentoring relationship that had developed. In reporting the data for each of the four cases, the following discussion will highlight one key theme that played a significant part in shaping the way in which the assessment of the practicum occurred in each context. In different ways these issues reflect the way in which the social and relational nature of practicum assessment added to the complexity of the assessment process and decision-making.

#### **Case Study Tahi: Assessment as a Relational Act**

Of the four cases, Case Tahi most overtly demonstrated the strongest relationship between the triad members. The student and associate teacher had not met prior to the practicum, but stated that they had built a strong rapport very quickly. The student teacher commented that this had been the “closest relationship I’ve had with an AT” and both expressed that it was highly valued and rewarding, and had enhanced the practicum experience. The assessment meeting for this case was the most collegial and relational in tone, with the greatest inclusion of personal conversation, and shared discussion related to teaching and learning. Analysis of the dialogue of the assessment meeting, and comments made in the interviews, reflected that the associate teacher and student teacher had established a relationship that spanned both professional (i.e. mentoring) and personal (i.e. friendship) dimensions. Comments made highlighted personal characteristics such as warmth, caring, kindness, as well as professional characteristics related to the sharing of knowledge, giving and receiving of feedback, and shared engagement in teaching and learning moments. For example, the associate teacher comments to the student “in terms of your professional qualities, you’re lovely, easy going, very friendly, you let the child be, you’re there for them”. When the teacher educator entered into this relationship at the time of the assessment visit she received a warm welcome, and joined with the existing dyad in a positive and friendly way, sharing personal anecdotes, and complimenting the practicum setting. The relationships in this triad were supported through an emphasis on affirmation, which was not only directed towards the student teacher – each of the members of the triad openly affirmed each other during the course of the triadic meeting, with comments related to their role.

Given the emphasis on affirmation and relationship, the (most-likely unintended) outcome was that this triadic had the least emphasis on providing specific assessment feedback to the student teacher. Very little of the dialogue in the triadic meeting related directly to the formal assessment of the student teacher, with no discussion related to the achievement of established institutional criteria or the student’s observed practice. This resulted in very minimal guidance as to future professional growth and development. Related to the notion of relationships and feedback, Snyder, Hemmeter, and Fox (2016) describe the importance of collaborative partnerships rather than collaborative relationships in their practice-based coaching model. These researchers have emphasised that working and professional partnerships are essential to create the context for effective feedback but a focus on personal relationships and friendships might impede the delivery of constructive feedback.

The student in Case Tahi commented that the positive relationship that she experienced was of the utmost importance to her, as her first practicum experience had been ‘*traumatic*’ due to poor relationships and limited support and had caused great anxiety on further practicum placements. This case highlights the notion of practicum assessment as a relational act but also calls into question how the primacy of practicum

relationships might affect the context for and effectiveness of assessment. Nonetheless, students were most likely to report positive assessment experiences when relationships were functioning well, and felt most vulnerable in the assessment process when relationships were problematic. The following case reveals the tension that arises when navigating the personal and professional dimensions of the triadic relationships and further highlights how the importance of maintaining relationships in the assessment process can lead to compliance and inauthentic practice.

#### Case Study Rua: Assessment and the Need to Perform and Please

Harwell and Moore (2010) propose that student teachers are primarily focused on performance during practicum. The idea of performance for assessment was most explicitly evidenced in Case Study Rua, where the student referred to the notion of being a ‘performing seal’ and identified that he had made deliberate choices to please the assessor: “*Well, I’m not really out there to impress, but I want to keep the TE [teacher educator] happy. So I do the mat times anyway*”. Across the cases the student teachers stated that they saw their role in the assessment process as limited, but were focused on the need to show themselves as competent in meeting assessment expectations – to provide the evidence that they believed the teacher educator and associate teacher were looking for: “*My role is just showing him that I’m competent, like I’ve got to show him in all my aspects, like my written and my practice*”. The student teachers described the need to act in specific ways in order to garner the approval of those who assess them and were strategic in their decisions around performance during the teacher educator’s observation time.

The student in Case Study Rua knew the teacher educator who came to visit, had attended face-to-face classes with him, as well as personally through shared attendance at a social group outside of the ITE context. In the post assessment interviews, the student teacher revealed that he entered the assessment visit with pre-conceived ideas of what the teacher educator would be looking for, and planned for the ‘performance’ expected, although was somewhat anxious these pre-conceived ideas may not be accurate.

*He [is] definitely a harder marker... I wonder if he is looking for something slightly different, and I’ve kind of keyed with the other lecturers, what they’re after, but with [TE] .... I’m still trying to work out what he actually wants... With the others I can know that they’re, just what their looking for. [TE] does things slightly differently, and so I don’t really know what he’s after.*

Student teachers were aware that there were practices that were emphasised by each assessor and/or institution as being important and admitted to being intentional and strategic in demonstrating these particularly valued practices. This was highlighted in the dilemma of whether to plan a specific activity for the teacher educator to observe. The student chose to set up an art activity as they felt this was expected but reflected in the post assessment interview that: “*I don’t like to have a set plan, because it’s so, I don’t know, it’s too fake for me. I didn’t, to be honest, I didn’t want to do even that art activity*”. These comments affirm that student teachers feel the need to portray themselves in a particular way according to the context and expectations of the assessor, which may prohibit an authentic picture of the student as a future teacher (Goodnough et al., 2009; Harwell & Moore, 2010).



In contrast, the teacher educators indicated that they wanted to see the student's authentic practices as they engaged in the typical life of the early childhood centre and generally did not have an expectation that the student would prepare a specific activity or teaching moment for the observation period. Yet the students felt that this was necessary or expected, and so undertook specific activities with the children including pre-planned art experiences and structured group times, even when this might not have been the choice they would have made if not being observed. The student teachers appear to be making their own interpretations of what the assessors expect to see, which are not necessarily in alignment with the assessor's own beliefs, suggesting the need for greater transparency and open communication to prevent uncertainty and confusion (Haigh & Ell, 2014).

In navigating successful relationships and participation in the setting, it is evident that student teachers may shape their practices in accordance to that which they observe. The 'need to please', as identified by Goodnough et al., (2009) was manifest in these data. The students saw both associate teachers and teacher educators as being in positions of power due to their role in assessment, and actively shaped their practices in an effort to be seen positively and achieve a good assessment outcome. These findings suggest that while student teachers may experience a measure of agency in practicum experiences (Roberts & Graham, 2008) assessment requirements can in fact serve to perpetuate compliance and conformity, as further shown in the following case.

#### **Case Study Toru: Assessment and the Silencing of Voices**

The research of Ortlipp (2003) and Nuttall and Ortlipp (2012) establishes the potential for 'silence' within the practicum assessment, in which participants feel that they cannot, or should not, share all that they would wish to in the assessment process. To explore this issue, each participant was directly asked if they felt that they were openly able to share their point of view within the assessment meetings. While the participants reported that they were not silenced, there was evidence that the student teachers chose not to challenge assessment feedback that they disagreed with and believed that they needed to defer to the teacher educator.

This was illustrated in Case Toru when the teacher educator and associate teacher agreed that the student had achieved the institutional criteria to a very high standard, and that the student had met all specified requirements. Yet, despite this agreement the teacher educator made the final decision that the summative grading would be recorded as 'not yet achieved', and required the student teacher to submit supplementary written work post-practicum that was deemed by the teacher educator to support additional professional learning. Both the student and associate teacher had significant concerns about this outcome, but did not raise this with the teacher educator. After telling the student the grade outcome, and indicating the work that he was seeking, the teacher educator asks, "*How do you feel about that?*" to which the student replies, "*Yeah, good*". She gives no indication that this outcome is a shock to her, or that she disagrees with the position he has taken, even though she then expresses this openly in the subsequent interview. The student explained that it was inappropriate for her to challenge the decision of the teacher educator. The associate teacher was also upset and concerned at this assessment outcome, but as with the student, justified her position by noting that the final decision making rested with the teacher educator and that she did not wish to engage in conflict: "*... that's not my kind of background to... someone who is higher qualified, or someone who's, you now, been around the block so to speak, has*

*more knowledge and understanding*". This scenario supports Robert and Graham's (2008) assertion that student teachers employ tactical compliance in their relationships with assessors, and defer to those seen to have the power in assessment decision-making.

The case study data suggests that student teachers and associate teachers were more likely to be silenced than the teacher educator, reflecting the hierarchical roles evident in the summative assessment process. Beliefs regarding the appropriateness of challenging those in positions of authority are culturally determined (Rogoff, 2003) and must be understood within the cultural contexts of the individual participants, the practicum setting and the ITE institutions, which may or may not align.

Of concern was that student teachers believed there was little recourse available to them to address concerns related to the process or outcome of assessment. While empowering the student to have a sense of agency within the practicum is seen as a desired outcome (Roberts & Graham, 2008), the findings of this study highlight that in relation to assessment, students feel that they have very little real power. Student teachers indicated that there was little point in contesting an assessment outcome, that their point of view would not be heard, or that they would make themselves vulnerable. This perspective was not shared by the teacher educators, who typically reported that they valued working collaboratively and welcomed open communication where concerns could be discussed. These findings suggest a need to address the discrepancy between the perspective of student teachers and their assessors and to consider ways in which the power relationships in practicum assessment are established and contested.

#### **Case Study Wha: Assessment and the Hierarchy of Power**

*I think the power's with me.... because I have the ultimate call on the grade. I do tend to let what the associate teacher says and writes influence how I give the grade for teaching. And then, I think, there's very little power with the student... So if you ask me to rank the power, then it's me, the associate teacher, and student last.*

As noted by Bloomfield (1997), the nature of practicum, and in particular the assessment function, has the potential to create hierarchical relationships and raise issues of power and control as established by role delineation. In three of the four cases, there was a clear sense that the teacher educator was perceived to have the ultimate responsibility for leading the assessment visit and determining the assessment outcome, similar to the reported findings of Rivers (2006). This hierarchical structure was not identified by participants as being of concern, or seen to diminish the relationships between the triad members. There was a sense that this model is typical, expected and accepted.

The student in Case Wha encapsulated the student perspective in stating that, "*I think, in my mind, the lecturer [TE] holds my life in her hands! (laughs)*" despite the fact that the teacher educator in this case actively sought to minimise the hierarchical structure of the triadic by seeking relationship with the student, and offering her opportunities to lead and guide the assessment process, which she declined. The teacher educator in the case explained that developing a relationship with the student, even within the short time frame of the assessment visit, was very important to her as an outward expression of her professional philosophy about respectful collaboration and power-sharing. This relationship building was facilitated by the use of a meeting time with the student prior to the observation period, a strategy not used in the other cases.

During this time, the teacher educator shared some information about herself, and asked the student questions about herself and the practicum in order to develop an understanding of the student and the context. This approach illustrated the commitment expressed by teacher educators for assessment to be individualised to the needs of the student, and to attend to the context of the assessment.

Despite teacher educator's efforts, the summative assessment of practicum was seen by student teachers and associate teachers to be predominantly the responsibility of the teacher educator, although their role in affirming and supporting students was also viewed as essential. Conversely the teacher educators themselves reported that they placed less emphasis on the summative purposes and saw their primary role as mentoring, supporting relationships, resolving conflict, affirming practice and providing feedback to facilitate growth; *"it doesn't matter who the student is, the job is to support them and find out where they are, and what's happening for them, and give them opportunities I guess to make sense of what it is they're doing and why they're doing it"*. The findings indicate that teacher educators define their role in multiple and complex ways (Haigh, 2001) and in ways that may not align with the pre-conceptions and expectations that other participants have of them.

### **A Cross Case Revelation: The Essential Assessment Question**

The intent of the case studies was to foreground the interpersonal plane (Rogoff, 2003) of practicum assessment, in order to illuminate the way in which the relationships between the student teacher, associate teacher and teacher educator influenced the assessment of practicum. While institutional criteria played a role in the assessment process of each case, the individual expectations of the assessors were equally, if not more, significant than criteria in determining assessment decision-making; however much less transparent and visible to the student teacher. When asked to describe the factors considered in assessment decision-making, it became apparent that each assessor carried an internal measure of what they considered to be a 'good teacher', and their own checklist of qualities that they looked for in the student teacher. Such qualities were not necessarily explicitly articulated to student teachers – they represented the personally-held system of beliefs, values and principles that formed the assessor's implicit understanding of teaching (Graves, 2010). The teacher educator from Case Toru expressed this internal measure in the following ways:

*As a lecturer I can bring all the academic stuff, look for and assess the academic stuff, but my ultimate evaluation is usually guided by intuition, the intuition that they know how to use that, all that academia stuff, intuition that they are an authentic practitioner and they have the passion and commitment and the rights for the children at the forefront, and intuition that they are a good person, and they do deserve to be with our children. That's probably an interesting statement, deserving to be with our children... because it carries my own intuition, that we don't automatically have rights as an adult to work with children, but we must prove it. So to some extent that might subconsciously be there in my evaluation process – have you earned the right and the privilege?*

Associate teachers and teacher educators were able to articulate a range of qualities that they wished to see evident in the student teacher, yet, the sentinel essential question that underpinned the assessment decision became apparent – 'Would I want

this person teaching children?’ Some of the participants personalised this further, to their own children or grandchildren:

*So, I guess I have an internal measurement, judgement, whatever it is you want to call it... Yeah, about would I leave my children with this teacher?... Would I leave my grandchildren with this teacher? And I think those are things that are really, really, important, because they’re the things that come from the belly. They’re our basic instincts about whether we trust this person... so, and sometimes we might have lots of questions about a person, and we have to make a final judgement – that’s part of our role as an assessor.*

Associate teachers also framed this question in terms of whether they would be happy to teach alongside, or employ the student teacher: “*Yeah, just kind of get a feeling, yeah really if you want them working with you and the team*”. Criteria and indicators were seen as helpful in explaining the rationale for their choice, especially if there are concerns about the student’s competence, but the question ‘would I want this person teaching children?’ remained central.

The case studies made visible that assessors had their own reference points for making assessment judgements that may or may not reflect the assessment criteria presented by the institution, and that student teachers at times found it difficult to understand the judgements made. Assessment practices, as both described and observed, relied extensively on the professional judgements of both associate teacher and teacher educator, albeit enacted within the context of supportive, professional growth-oriented relationships (Ortlipp, 2009). This position was justified by participants as an expressed desire to serve as gatekeeper to the profession and to protect vulnerable children. However, as Grudnoff (2011) points out, a reliance on professional judgement has persistent issues related to the shared understanding of assessment guidelines and transparency around the grounds that assessors use in their judgements.

There is a need for greater transparency in the assessment of practicum, in order to attenuate the challenges that result both from individual assessor influences and institutional constraints (Maclellan, 2004). It may be that the institutional guidelines serve to create an image of assessment that is more objective than it is in practice. Caires, Almeida and Vieira (2012) argue that research must acknowledge the affective and relational elements that underpin the practicum and shape the way in which assessment is enacted in the context of the triadic relationships. Discussion that acknowledges how subjective the assessment process is, and supports greater understanding of and attention to both interpersonal and intrapersonal influences on assessment would appear to be of value.

## **Conclusion**

Joughin (2009) suggests that there are three functions of assessment that predominate in higher education: “supporting the process of learning; judging students’ achievement in relation to course requirements; and maintaining the standards of the profession” (p. 1). All three of these functions are critical in the assessment of practicum as teacher education providers and other stakeholders seek to answer the question: “what type of evidence is needed to safely say that an aspiring teacher has not only grasped the essential notions and concepts from the teacher education course, but is also able to implement them in real world classroom situations?” (Bannink, 2009, p. 244). Despite the established nature of practicum within teacher education, and the acceptance of

practicum as a site of assessment of student teacher competence, there are few studies that provide explicit detail of the assessment methods and practices adopted. The case studies of the present study reveal both the complexity and the individuality of each practicum in the way in which assessment is enacted and experienced.

While there are finite assessment outcomes - the student teacher will ultimately either pass or fail the practicum - the process leading to this final outcome is unique in every single case. Even when assessment is conducted within regulatory and institutional guidelines, associate teachers and teacher educators enact assessment in ways that intuitively feels right for each given situation. The assessment of practicum thereby relies heavily on the professional judgments of assessors. Such assessments have been shown to be subjective, shaped by the beliefs, knowledge, experience and expectations of the individual assessor, and the interplay of relationships within the practicum triad. At the case study data reveals, students are then actively seeking to interpret the expectations of assessors and to shape their practice in ways that attempt to meet what they feel is expected. Discussion that acknowledges how subjective the assessment process is, and supports greater understanding of and attention to both interpersonal and intrapersonal influences on assessment would appear to be of critical importance. The findings of this study suggest that there is a lack of transparency in relation to assessor expectations and criteria, and little shared agreement or understanding on which to establish the foundation of practicum assessment and the judgement of competence of student teachers. Future practices will need to address meaningful ways to support alignment and increased understanding between the participants in order to attenuate the challenges that result both from individual assessor influences and institutional constraints (Maclellan, 2004).

Of note, while this research is situated in initial teacher education, and enhances knowledge of practicum assessment it also contributes to the broader literature that addresses the examination and judgment of competency of professionals in training across multiple fields. The same issues that are inherent in the way in which assessors must draw together and weigh the contribution of multiple personal attributes and professional skills in order to determine competence and readiness for entry to a professional crosses different professional sectors. Whether student teachers on practicum in an education setting, or veterinary, social work or medical students evaluated on their clinical placements; there is a need to consider how future professional are assessed as competent and what characteristics and competencies they need to develop to successfully navigate these critical training experiences. Cross sector examination of assessment of professional competence and assessor judgements offers scope for valuable insight into potential innovations and responses.

Findings revealed that the assessment of practicum is both highly institutionalised and highly individualised. Each institution had a clear framework and guidance in place to support the way in which the assessment of practicum was enacted, as informed by national standards such as the New Zealand Graduating Teacher Standards (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2004). These institutional requirements were established in the accreditation of the programme, and communicated to participants in briefings, practicum documentation and assessment forms. It would be anticipated that such measures would support transparency and shared understanding between practicum participants. However, in contrast, the reports of participants and the evidence of the case studies reflect a highly individualised response to practicum assessment. Each participant in the triad enters the assessment with their own beliefs, expectations and understandings of the process. Many of the challenges of practicum assessment thereby emerge when there is misalignment between the individuals as they engage in the assessment process. Future practices will need to address meaningful ways to support

alignment and increased understanding between the participants, and enhance the way in which accreditation standards, at institution, state or national level, are communicated, understood, applied and assessed.

The cases reported affirm the notion that practicum assessment is a social and relational act (Haigh & Ell, 2014) that is influenced by the interpersonal relationships of the key participants. The relationships in the practicum operate on two levels: professional and personal. The personal dimension encompasses the way in which the participants connect socially – whether there is warmth, care, friendship, kindness, collegiality and support. The professional dimension relates to the way in which the student teacher is supported and guided in their professional growth within the context of these relationships. The challenge to teacher education arises when the personal dimension of the relationships takes precedence over the professional, inhibiting the feedback given in order to preserve and maintain relationships. Due to the high stakes nature of summative assessment requirements participants may therefore become strategic in what they say (and don't say) in order to support positive and functioning relationships, further perpetuating hierarchical power relationships even when assessors seek to work more collaboratively. This raises concern as to the validity of the assessment process, and the determination of readiness to enter a profession.

There are no easy or simplistic answers to the challenge of practicum assessment. Approaches that better select, prepare and support the participants, and openly attend to the subjectivity of practicum assessment are necessary. Greater collaboration and increased transparency are required to support the trustworthiness of assessment. However, meaningful and sustained change will require a significant investment of time, resources and finances, the very areas so often identified as the biggest constraints. Interrogation of the way in which the roles of the triad members are perceived is also necessary in order to minimise the negative effects of hierarchal positioning; a difficult challenge when summative outcomes loom so large for student teachers. In shifting the traditional hierarchal view, the intent must not be to devalue the expertise and experience of teacher educators and associate teachers but to assure student teachers of the value of their active contribution to assessment, and to confront their perception that they cannot or should not challenge their assessment.

The assessment of practicum is complex, problematic and at times flawed. While many rich and meaningful assessment experiences are reported, there are equally many indications of the struggles that participants face in the assessment process. Although generally accepted that assessment is intended to be informative, supportive and transparent (Boud, 2009; Norsworthy, 2010), it is clear that such outcomes only emerge when contributing influences align positively, which appears to happen more by chance than explicit design. There is need for skilful assessors who can attend to multiple variables and the complexities of assessment, while student teachers could also be supported in skills related to receiving feedback, and engaging in professional dialogues with assessors to support professional growth. There are practices and challenges in practicum assessment that are taken for granted in nature (Haigh & Ward, 2004) that will require innovation, courage and imagination to change in meaningful and sustainable ways, as they attend to the institutional and regulatory context, the participants' core beliefs and identity, and the interpersonal relationships that define each triad.

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