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## Scrutinising the Final Judging Role in Assessment of Practicum in Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education in New Zealand

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# Scrutinising the Final Judging Role in Assessment of Practicum in Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education in New Zealand

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*Abstract: Practicum is the cornerstone of teacher education. Triadic assessment of practicum is an established model in early childhood initial teacher education in New Zealand. Based on a phenomenographic study on assessment of practicum, this paper presents a new perspective on triadic assessment. Interview data are collected from 35 participants (20 associate teachers, 5 visiting lecturers, 10 student teachers) to obtain a specimen of collective conceptions of key stakeholders about triadic assessment. The analysis reveals three sets of logically related categories of conceptions (outcome spaces) that denote the tensions around the final judging role in assessment of practicum, in particular, visiting lecturers' scheduled observation. Based on the findings from this study, we contemplate some significant modifications to the triadic assessment model which calls in question visiting lecturers' final judging role in assessment of practicum.*

### **Introduction**

Initial teacher education (ITE) plays a gate-keeping and quality assurance role for the teaching profession, and practicum is a pivotal component of any ITE programme. It has become internationally embraced philosophy that teacher preparation should be underpinned by strong partnership between the programme provider and the schools or early childhood education (ECE) settings. However, implementation of the partnership approach to practicum is far from satisfactory, rather, the collaborative process has always been fraught with tensions largely due to 'a lack of clarity in defining roles and responsibilities of supervising teachers and university supervisors' (Allen, 2011, p. 743). The degree of tensions exacerbates when it comes to assessment of practicum. Speaking of the ultimate responsibility for

assessment of practicum in school settings, Smith (2007) raised the question: ‘Does it lie with the school-based teacher educators, who are likely to have contact frequently with the student teacher during the practicum? Or does it lie with the university-based teacher educator, who visits a few times during this important period and keeps a distance?’ (p. 283). Due to some of the attributes of early childhood teaching, the ‘ultimate responsibility’ issue gains augmented prominence in early childhood ITE. The currently prevailing approach to assessment of practicum in early childhood ITE in New Zealand (NZ) is triadic assessment. Despite all of its merits, the unresolved tensions in triadic assessment undermine the effectiveness of assessment of practicum. It is important to pinpoint these tensions and explore ways of addressing them.

### **The NZ Early Childhood Teacher Education Context**

In NZ, ECE refers to education for children aged from birth to school entry (five years old) which is provided by a range of services such as state kindergarten, private kindergarten, full day care and education centres, *Kohanga Reo* (total immersion *Māori* language services), playcentre, Montessori and Steiner preschools, and community crèches. The national ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) requires early childhood teachers to ‘plan activities, resources, and events which build upon and extend children’s interests’ (p.83), and a play-based, child-initiated curriculum is a common choice in NZ ECE settings. More important is the sociocultural orientation of *Te Whāriki*, as it is articulated in the curriculum document, ‘the importance of the social context within which children are cared for and learning takes place is one of the foundation stones of the curriculum’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.7). The sociocultural approach requires early childhood educators to ‘keep the complexity of learning in mind and are particularly mindful of the context’ (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 3).

ITE in NZ is regulated by New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) which has recently been replaced by a new agency, the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. NZTC has a set of standards for graduating teachers and requires that all graduates of early childhood ITE complete practicum experiences across a range of early childhood services. NZTC regulates that the practicum ‘will operate as a partnership between the teacher education provider and a fully registered associate teacher’ (New Zealand Teachers Council [NZTC], 2014, p.13) and that the practicum should have specific learning outcomes that ‘are supervised and assessed by the visiting lecturer, recognising the advice and feedback provided by the associate teacher’ (NZTC, 2014, p.14). The teachers council also regulates that student teachers must be visited by a visiting lecturer from the course provider and that each visit ‘should be of significant time to enable meaningful engagement between the student teacher, the visiting lecturer and the associate teacher/s’ (NZTC, 2014, p.16).

## **Triadic Assessment**

Triadic assessment of practicum has been adopted in school and ECE settings in NZ and other parts of the world (Haigh & Ell, 2014; Haigh & Ward, 2004; Mitchell, Clarke, & Nuttall, 2007; Ortlipp, 2003a; Smith, 2007; Turnbull, 2005). Turnbull (1999) comprehensively described the assessment model as practiced in a leading NZ university. According to Turnbull, three key players of practicum are the student teacher, the visiting lecturer and the associate teacher. The student teacher is an adult learner who is enrolled on the ITE programme and completing the practicum in an ECE setting. The associate teacher is a registered teacher of the ECE setting who supervises the student teacher. The visiting lecturer is an academic staff of the ITE programme who supervises and assesses student teachers' work during the practicum, in particular, conducts a formal observation visit. After the observation the student teacher, associate teacher and visiting lecturer engage in an oral reflective process known as triadic meeting when the visiting lecturer facilitates discussion to achieve consensus. In NZ teacher education, according to Grudnoff and Williams (2010), the triad model has long been used where the student is observed and assessed by a staff member of the ITE institution.

According to Aspden's (2014) recent study, triadic assessment as currently practiced in NZ typically comprises a scheduled observation and a formalised triadic meeting, observation plays 'a key role as an assessment tool' (p.124), and triadic meeting is 'an assessment forum' (p.124). Aspden found that while the role of student self-assessment was acknowledged, the contribution of the student was not given a high-priority in the assessment practices and that the final assessment outcome of the practicum was the responsibility of the institution.

Given its popularity, triadic assessment certainly has its strengths, for example, it 'enhanced the shared understandings of the standards expected of the initial teacher education student and encouraged a greater collegiality within the relationships' (Haigh & Ward, 2004, pp. 137-138). However, it also implicates a number of issues which remain unresolved. Ortlipp (2003a) reported that 'triadic assessment has proved to be problematic within the early childhood practicum... the triadic approach relied on the tertiary supervisor, field supervisor and student reaching a consensual agreement but the documents from some institutions revealed situations where consensus could not be reached' (p. 226). Lind (2004) noted that the associate teacher and the visiting lecturer in the practicum had different views about the role of the practicum and there was little congruence in the supervisory roles adopted by the associate teachers and the visiting lecturers' (p.137).

## **Visiting Lecturers' Final Judging Role and the Aim of the Study**

Triadic assessment relies on achievement of consensus between stakeholders. However, significant dissensus among people in grading is often inevitable (Haigh & Ell, 2014). Moss and Schutz (2001) proposed that there is a need for 'shifting the emphasis from consensus to understanding and learning from differences' (p.55). Haigh and Ell (2014) endorsed this stance and maintained that 'agreement is only one possible outcome of an

interaction when people engage in discussion with the aim of understanding others' perspectives' (p.19).

The question arises: How does an early childhood ITE programme deal with 'the situations where consensus could not be reached' (Ortlipp, 2003a, p. 226)? Smith's (2007) question as quoted above applies to a similar dilemma in early childhood contexts: Does the final judging role lie with the associate teacher who is likely to have contact frequently with the student teachers during the practicum? Or does it lie with the visiting lecturer who visits a few times during this important period and keeps a distance?

In NZ, the currently dominant practice in triadic assessment is that visiting lecturers (or other staff from the tertiary institution) have the final say, for example, it is prescribed that the practicum should be 'assessed by the visiting lecturer, recognising the advice and feedback provided by the associate teacher' (NZTC, 2014, p. 14). Aligning with this, the programme handbook of a leading NZ university enunciates,

(The student's practicum) is jointly assessed by the student, the Associate Teacher and the University Supervisor/Visiting Lecturer. Wherever possible a meeting of all three parties will be held for assessment purposes. This meeting, facilitated by the University Supervisor/Visiting Lecturer, will seek consensus in making assessment decisions. Where consensus is not achievable, the University Supervisor/Visiting Lecturer, in consultation with the relevant Practicum Convenor, has ultimate responsibility for the decision. (University of Auckland, 2015, p. 24)

Such an arrangement answers Smith's (2007) question – the final judging role lies with the visiting lecturers, but fails to offer any justification. Further, this arrangement contradicts arrangements made by others, for example, a leading Australian university maintains,

If there is a dispute between the field supervisor and the tertiary supervisor regarding the grade to be awarded, the field supervisor's views should prevail.....in recognition of the fact that the field supervisor has more in-depth knowledge and consistent experience of the student's performance during the practicum. (Ortlipp, 2009, p. 163)

As reflective practitioners who want to make informed decisions, we should not turn a blind eye on the contradictory arrangements. Instead, we need to make informed and justifiable choice in how practicum is assessed. There are no studies that directly address the question of who has the 'final judging role' in triadic assessment of practicum. It appears imperative that the tensions in triadic assessment of practicum be thoroughly inspected, in particular, visiting lecturers' final judging role as currently enacted in NZ early childhood ITE programmes be scrutinised. Recognising the many tensions in triadic assessment, this study aims to address the tensions by contemplating a new perspective on triadic assessment. The research question is: What are key stakeholders' (student teachers, associate teachers, and visiting lecturers) perceptions of the approach to assessment of practicum in NZ early childhood ITE?

## Methodology

The methodology of this study is phenomenography which aims to uncover the different ways that people experience, perceive, and understand a phenomenon (Marton, 1994). Marton emphasized the range of variations in experiences (categories of description) and the collective experience (Marton, 1994). Interview is the preferred data collection method for a phenomenographic study (Marton, 1994). Marton provided a detailed guideline on conducting such an interview. For example, Marton pointed out that, through the interview, ‘the experiences and understandings are jointly constituted by interviewer and interviewee’ (Marton, 1994, p. 4427). Also, according to Marton, the interview questions for a phenomenographic interview evolve from the interview, that is, they largely depend on what the participants have to say. Marton (1994) described this process as ‘to establish the phenomenon as experienced and to explore its different aspects jointly’ (p. 4427).

A phenomenographic method suits the purpose of this study. First, due to the complexities of triadic assessment of practicum experienced by three key stakeholders, it is important to uncover the different ways that they experience, perceive, and understand the phenomenon. Second, the focus of the data collection of the study is the ‘collective experience’ of each stakeholder, and a phenomenographic method prioritises such collective experience. Third, interview, the preferred data collection method of phenomenography, suits this study best, in particular, the ‘evolving’ nature of the interview questions in a phenomenographic interview allowed us to obtain in-depth, nuanced descriptions of experiences for answering our research question which is of a controversial and dilemmatic nature. Individual semi-structured interviews were used to capture stakeholders’ collective conceptions of the phenomenon.

Participants were 35 people that were involved in early childhood ITE programmes delivered in a North Island city in NZ. During the period March – May of 2015, the first author interviewed 20 associate teachers from 10 ECE settings, and 5 visiting lecturers and 10 student teachers from an early childhood ITE programme. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ workplace or learning institution. Each interview lasted for 20 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio taped, and transcribed by an experienced, paid transcriber.

Upon ethics approval that was granted by the research committee of the authors’ employing institution, the first author made email/telephone contacts with all the local ECE settings to select suitable settings and seek permission to participate. The selection criteria for a suitable setting were: At least two registered teachers (one being the team leader, .i.e., manager, head teacher, or supervisor) have experience in supervising student teachers and are able to attend an interview. As a result, 20 associate teachers from 10 settings (seven education and care centres, one state kindergarten, one private kindergarten, and one community crèche) attended the interview. The student teachers were sampled from the third-year Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) programme of a government owned institute of technology. All the Year 3 students were invited to participate, and 10 students gave their consent and attended the interview. Five of the eight academic staff of the same ITE programme attended the interview.

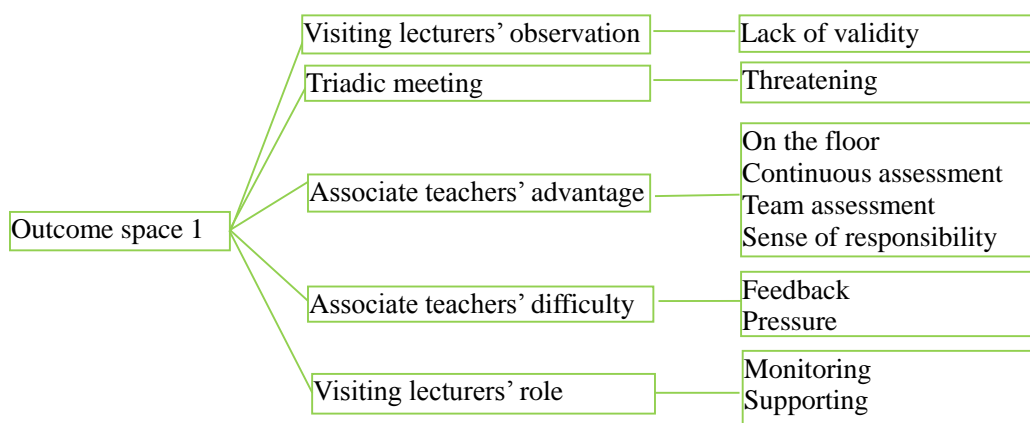
The guiding question for the interviews was: Could you describe your experience with or perception of the assessment of practicum? Probing questions were used to guide the conversation in order to enhance the ‘joint constitution’ of the experience and understanding. The associate teachers described their experiences with a range of ITE providers while visiting lecturers and student teachers focused on one ITE programme.

### Data Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed adopting Marton’s seven-step approach (familiarizing, condensing, comparing, grouping, articulating, labeling, and contrasting) which is a classical approach for data analysis in phenomenographic studies (Aflague & Ferszt, 2010; Marton, 1986). The interview transcript was read carefully before the most relevant statements were selected for further analysis. Upon comparison, similar responses were grouped together, and the essence of the similarity articulated. Each group of responses was then labeled and thereby formed a category. The categories were further checked against each other to ensure that each category represented a qualitative variation. Marton (1994) referred to the logical relations between categories of description as ‘outcome space’, and stated that ‘the categories of description and the outcome space are the main results of a phenomenographic study’ (p.4428). The participants of this study represented three heterogeneous populations – associate teachers, visiting lecturers, and student teachers, and therefore, the analysis resulted in three naturally separate outcome spaces. Each outcome space contains a number of categories of description of experience and represents the collective experience of one of the stakeholders in triadic assessment. The categories were illustrated by selected quotes from relevant participants. Each participant was identified with a code: AT01-AT20 for associate teachers, VL01-VL05 for visiting lecturers, and ST01-ST10 for student teachers.

#### *Outcome Space 1: The Associate Teachers’ Experiences and Understandings*

Figure 1 illustrates the outcome space generated from the data of interviews with the associate teachers.



**Figure 1 Associate Teachers’ Conceptions of Triadic Assessment**



Five categories were captured with each category containing one or more sub-categories: visiting lecturers' observation, triadic meeting, associate teachers' advantage, associate teacher's difficulty, and visiting lecturers' role.

The category *visiting lecturers' observation* is characterised by some associate teachers negating the validity of visiting lecturers' scheduled observation, as the below quotes illustrated,

You can't actually base your entire assessment on a cluster of moments, you know it's the teacher who is always with the students five days a week, sometimes for six weeks, that's a big chunk of time. (AT18)

They are just here for an hour or two, they just see the glimpse of that person being on the best behavior and trying very hard, because they know they are being watched, but that's hard to keep up for three or four weeks or a six-week period. (AT03)

The category *triadic meeting* highlights some associate teachers' describing that the triadic meeting was too threatening to address issues, as the below quote illustrated,

From my experience when I was doing my triadic, you just sort of smiled and that wasn't a time to bring things up. [The student] was too scared to speak up, ...it can be quite hard because you got three people...as a professional you should be able to do that, definitely, but if I had concerns with the student, I would probably feel a little bit uncomfortable talking about those concerns in front of the student. (AT05)

The category *associate teachers' advantage* encapsulates several advantages of the associate teacher being the primary assessor, as mentioned by the associate teachers, including: able to assess student teachers on the floor, able to assess continuously, able to assess as a team, and sense of responsibility. Each sub-category is illustrated with one quote as below.

*On the floor:* We see them on the floor, all we see is what is in front of us and how they are working on the floor with the children, and how they fit amongst the team, and how they find a place within the centre, that's what we can base our assessments on. (AT12)

*Continuous assessment:* We see them day in and day out, what the visiting lecturer sees maybe not a true reflection of every other day. (AT19)

*Team assessment:* I talk to other teachers to see what they think of this student, just to get confirmation, perhaps I did something wrong, maybe I just like this student, if I can gain somebody's perspective on the floor, they are always with the student. (AT11)

*Sense of responsibility:* If we say that a student teacher has done really well you know we put ourselves on the line... you say yes they've done really well then they go out, and they are not making it at all, it is disservice to the student as well as early childhood in general, so it's a big responsibility. (AT02)

The category *associate teachers' difficulty* denotes two challenges faced with by some associate teachers as an assessor, including limited ability to provide feedback to student teachers, and feeling of pressure to pass the student teachers, as illustrated below.

*Feedback:* The associate teacher is nervous to give constructive feedback to the student...sometimes I don't think the associate teachers are actually upfront with students, so I think people need to be taught how to give constructive feedback to students. (AT01)

*Pressure:* As a teacher you know that person, you could end up working as a colleague...I think you have other pressures, it has to be a pass, I had many fights in our team in letting students pass or not pass, there is a student out there I wouldn't have passed but everybody got pressures from all directions. (AT17)

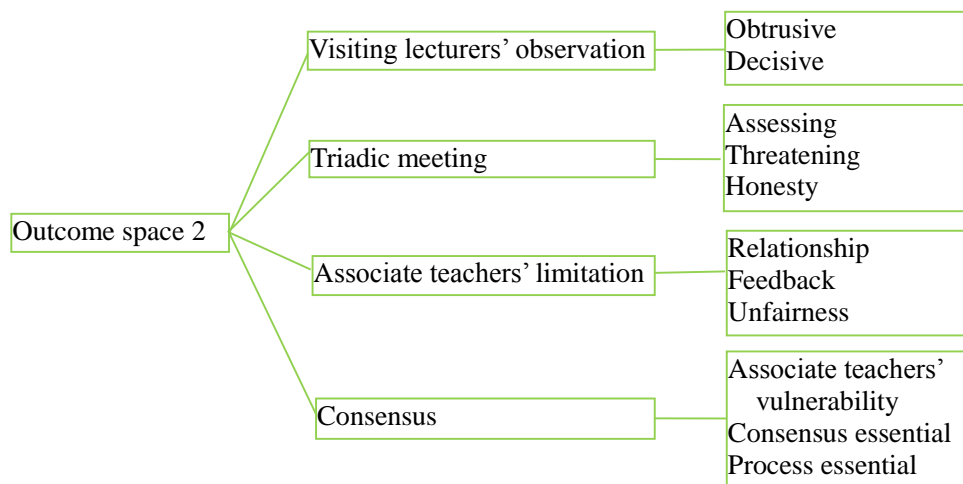
The category *visiting lecturers' role* incorporates the associate teachers' suggestion that the main role of visiting lecturers should be monitoring student teachers' performance and providing personal and/or academic support for student teachers, as illustrated below.

*Monitoring:* They come to observe the student, I think it makes that student accountable to someone else, sometimes students can get a bit lazy, but at least we are having a lecturer coming in, as an associate you can try to keep them on path, but it's their work, they are the ones who've got to prove to their lecturer that they are capable of doing what they say they are doing. (AT13)

*Supporting:* You need to come and make sure your student is happy, and we think they are happy but they need to be able to talk to you about their feeling because they can't talk to us...[You] would come in perhaps in the beginning, and help to make the connections with the environment that they are going to be doing the practicum with, and touching base through that practicum, and talking to them about their assignments and whether they are doing well in the centre. (AT10)

**Outcome Space 2: The Visiting Lecturers' Experiences and Understandings**

Figure 2 illustrates the outcome space generated from the data of interviews with the visiting lecturers.



**Figure 2 Visiting Lecturers' Conceptions Of Triadic Assessment**

Four categories were captured with each category containing two or three sub-categories: visiting lecturers' observation, triadic meeting, associate teachers' limitation, and consensus.

The category *visiting lecturers' observation* denotes visiting lecturers being aware of some effects of their scheduled observation, including the observation being obtrusive, and the observation forming the basis of their decision-making, as the below quotes illustrate:

*Obtrusive:* I explain to them also I am going to sit quite close to you, which I know to start with might make it more difficult for you, but I must be able to hear what you and the children are saying, how you are interacting...I watch and I listen, and very occasionally I prompt or I ask questions of the students, not by interrupting and talking to the child of course, I might just ask questions if I want sort of to encourage them to try something a bit more. (VL1)

*Decisive:* I think because we do the observation first with the student, I feel that I am more empowered to make a decision because I can see them working. (VL1)

The category *triadic meeting* features the visiting lecturers' confirmation that one purpose of the triadic meeting was to assess the student teachers, that the meeting was threatening to some student teachers, and that it was unknown whether everyone was honest in the meeting, as the below quotes illustrate:

*Assessing:* I want to hear and want the student to hear what the associate teacher has had to say, and it's very important for me to try to gather information about whether the student has had the benefit of the associate teacher's input, observations, good professional collegial discussion...all

of these things add to the decision I will make about whether I think the student has met the competencies. (VL1)

*Threatening:* What I notice of the triadic for the year ones is that they don't have the experience for that type of talk, they're still in what you probably call the 'going to the principal's office' mode from school days, they are quite scared about what's going to be said, and they are quite apprehensive, and then maybe they don't have that skill to stick up for themselves as much as they would like to or to bring up issues that they would like to bring up. (VL5)

*Honesty:* I do wonder if people are honest in those meetings about what is happening, and how they're feeling about things, including the students, I don't know if the student is in the position to discuss maybe problem they're having when they're sitting there with the teacher who is watching them and the visiting lecturer who they may or may not know. (VL4)

The category *associate teachers' limitation* represents limitations to some associate teachers' assessing students, as mentioned by visiting lecturers, including when the student teacher/associate teacher relationship is negative, improper feedback, and unfair judgment, as illustrated below.

*Relationship:* I have once been to see a student, it was a very difficult situation...she felt very unsupported by her associate teacher, she felt her associate teacher had been completely negative, disapproving of everything she was trying to do...she was so upset when she came to talk to me about it, and after I had observed her she cried. (VL1)

*Feedback:* Students have been told by the associate teacher you're doing a fantastic job, but typically in this situation, I'm describing the associate teachers, they almost got nothing to say to the students...[It also happens that students received] very negative feedback and [they] couldn't understand what the feedback was. (VL1)

*Unfairness:* I have seen several experiences for whatever reason unfairness has happened to the students, I don't think the associate teacher necessarily meant to be unfair, but that was what was happening. (VL2)

The category *consensus* reflects some visiting lecturers' noting that associate teachers are vulnerable when confronting disagreement by visiting lecturers, that consensus must be reached to avoid associate teachers' decision being overruled by visiting lecturers, and that a clear process must be in place to ensure that consensus is reached, as illustrated below.

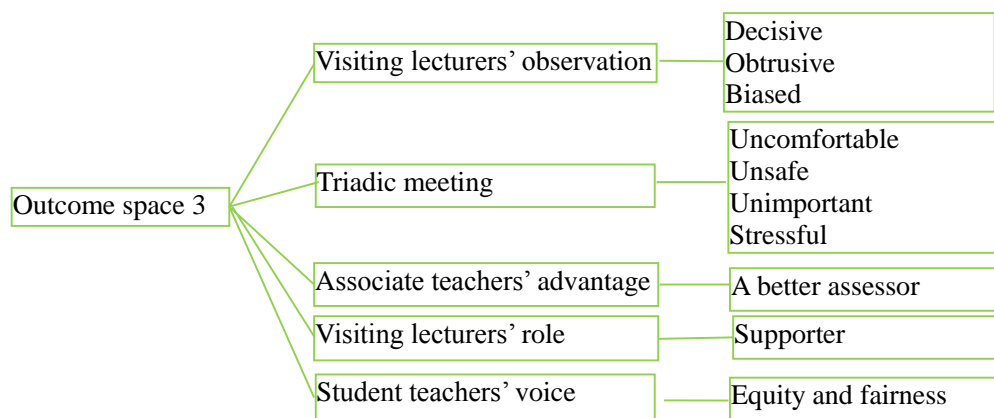
*Associate teachers' vulnerability:* I think in that case the associate teacher was very vulnerable because she thought I was criticizing her when I should've been able to make it much clearer. I tried to but I couldn't, because she thought I was criticizing her, she couldn't see that I was just trying to make sure that we would be fair to the student. (VL2)

*Consensus essential:* I would never want to overrule an associate teacher's decision, I like to be able to come to consensus and agreement at the end... I don't think the idea to say 'no sorry, you are wrong, I'm right' is the right idea at all. (VL2)

*Process essential:* I think (there should be) a much more upfront talk at the beginning, so this is disagreement here, can we have a process to make sure that we can come to consensus. I would go in and start by discussing with the associate teacher, okay, there is some dissensus here, and this is the process I would like to use. (VL2)

### ***Outcome Space 3: The Student Teachers' Experiences and Understandings***

Figure 3 illustrates the outcome space generated from the data of interviews with the student teachers.



**Figure 3 Student teachers' conceptions of triadic assessment**

Five categories were captured with each category containing one or more sub-categories: visiting lecturers' observation, triadic meeting, associate teachers' advantage, visiting lecturers' role, and student teachers' voice.

The category *visiting lecturers' observation* includes concerns raised by some student teachers about the visiting lecturers' observations of their practice. These included concerns that the observations could be decisive, obstructive, and biased, as the below quotes illustrated.

*Decisive:* There are so much stress put on that day, I know someone that is freaking out for weeks, absolutely for weeks...I don't know, this student she tries but she finds it's hard, she lacks all the confidence to get prepared for that day, she was just completely consolable, and then when the visiting lecturer came in and watched her, everything went wrong, she was trying to interact with children, but the children just didn't want to be near her in anyway... (ST01)

*Obtrusive:* Sometime I found I had to get up and stop what I'm doing so I can greet the visiting as well, so I was just being disrupted by the visiting lecturer,...because you know maybe the associate said da da da here, and it's like you are engaging with children, then you have to stop, then you come back...and try to get yourself back into the play again, and you can't really because the children in that few minutes would've gone off somewhere else. (ST06)

*Biased:* The tutor can have a bias definitely, if they know what you are like in class, and if you kind of slack off, or if you are really studious in other end, they are going to pay more attention to your good side than your bad side or vice versa. I find I had the most success when I had a visiting lecturer that I don't particularly know very well, or they haven't had me for class, simply because I feel like I can completely be myself, and haven't got previous bias about what I may be like. (ST03)

The category *triadic meeting* stands for some student teachers' describing the triadic meeting as uncomfortable, unsafe, unimportant, and stressful, as the below quotes illustrated.

*Uncomfortable:* I'm more encouraged by reading the written feedback, I can go back and read it, if I don't agree with something, I got time to sit and think, ...whereas if you talk kind of face to face, I mean depending on the person, you might get all up and start arguing or showing disrespect, or after the meeting's done you might feel you might close down and you have to finish the rest of the practicum kind of like in a shell. (ST05)

*Unsafe:* If there is anything you want to discuss, if you have a hard time as a student, or you're not being treated fairly...then you can't discuss that in front of the associate teacher. (ST08)

*Unimportant:* For me I don't need to hear the associate's point of view, I'm with her all the time, she talks to me all the time, she is teaching me all the time, if the visiting lecturer needs to have information from the associate, then they can go and have a meeting. (ST10)

*Stressful:* That's scary because you don't know what is going to be said about you to your face...sometimes it can be emotional, I'm sure some students have probably cried or gone to the bathroom and cried and felt very low about themselves. (ST09)

The category *associate teachers' advantage* indicates the student teachers affirmation that associate teachers are in a better position than visiting lecturers to assess the practicum, as the below quote illustrated.

*A better assessor:* The associate teachers are the ones who actually working in the daycare, they are watching us, they get to see the real us, they get to see us in our conversations, they get to see us be funny, be dirty with the kids in the sandpit, and whereas they see us playing, they see us doing all the things that we are supposed to be doing, and all the things we enjoy, they see us cuddling and see us being really good, effective, caring teachers. I think they should have the main say in how we go about things, not really the visiting lecturers, because they only come once or twice, and it's always the associate teachers that know how we perform. (ST04)

The category *visiting lecturers' role* labels the student teachers suggestion that support, rather than assessment, should be the main role of visiting lecturers, as the below quote illustrated.

*Supporter:* It is touching base, it will be more of a support person, kind of like they are [visiting lecturers] of course they are visiting, you know, they come and support you, if you have any questions or worries or I'm stuck on something, how could I improve..., I'd rather to be supported, especially for the eight week practicum, they maybe come more than once, just to give that support, eight weeks is a long time. (ST07)

The category *student teachers' voice* embodies some student teachers' belief that they should have a voice in the triadic assessment to ensure that they are treated equally and fairly, as the below quote illustrated.

*Equity and fairness:* We are not treated equal in the whole assessment thing, we are not equal, we don't have a voice, we can't express our voice, that's not equity, and that's not inclusion. (ST02)

## **Contemplating a New Perspective on Triadic Assessment**

The above findings reflect the collective conceptions of triadic assessment by key stakeholders. In spite of discrepancies between stakeholders, there is a high degree of consistency about visiting lecturers' scheduled observation, triadic meeting, and visiting lecturers' role. First, all stakeholders including visiting lecturers themselves perceived the scheduled observation to be problematic in one or more ways such as 'invalid', 'obtrusive', 'decisive', and 'biased'. Second, all stakeholders acknowledged that the currently practiced triadic meeting was not achieving its purpose because of its being 'threatening', 'assessing', 'dishonest', 'uncomfortable', or 'stressful'. Third, both associate teachers and student teachers believed that visiting lecturers' role should be supporting rather than assessing.

Therefore, it is important that these three areas are closely examined, hence the following three threads of discussion.

### **Problematising Visiting Lecturers' Scheduled Observation as an Assessment Tool**

This study has highlighted that both associate teachers and student teachers have concerns about the validity of the visiting lecturers' scheduled observation being used to assess students' competence, although this was not a concern expressed by the visiting lecturers. The finding resonates with previous studies. Roth and Tobin's (2001) study revealed that 'many [student teachers] are uncomfortable with the idea that an outsider can validly assess the effectiveness of their teaching in a classroom that is normally shared only by a teacher and the students' (p.9). Lind and Wansbrough (2009) identified several problems related to visiting lecturers' observation, for example, a visiting lecturer is 'not always fully informed about the expectations of the student teacher on the practicum and may not actually teach in the courses to which students are expected to be making links to their practice' (pp. 18-19).

If the validity of visiting lecturers' scheduled observation is questioned by both associate teachers and student teachers, one should ask: What is the justification of allowing the observation to be decisive and obtrusive? Sullivan, Mousley and Gervasoni (2000) suggested that 'where observation and critique of classroom teaching are used, summative judgments be avoided, and that a major goal of observations be to stimulate debate about different teaching styles and individual and cooperative reflection' (p. 247). Further, an obtrusive observation impedes, rather than enhances, the learning of the children as well as the teaching of the student teachers. Therefore, if visiting lecturers' scheduled observation has to happen, it should be carried out in an unobtrusive and non-judgmental way.

As a privileged method in positivist discourse, formal observation of episodes of teaching may not achieve its evidentiary purpose in a sociocultural curriculum (Ortlipp, 2009). The visiting lecturer does not know anything that happens before and after the observation, how can s/he make a safe judgment on a student teacher's performance based on an observation of a short period? Also, the scheduled observation is against the ethos of child-initiated curriculum that dominates NZ ECE. A typical NZ ECE setting is characterised by a number of geographically separate spaces that are freely accessible to all children and provide a variety of learning experiences simultaneously, both indoor and outdoor. Except for very limited time such as mat time and meal time, children are allowed to choose any of the spaces on their own. Therefore, the visiting lecturer may end up constantly 'chasing' the student teacher who is following the unpredictably roving children, which is blatantly obtrusive, disruptive, and therefore harmful. Further, the unstructured, unpredictable nature of children's learning experiences renders specimen-oriented, formal observation ineffectual – the visiting lecturer essentially can't expect the student teacher to do or not to do something for the sake of 'demonstrating competences'.



### **Redefining the Triadic Meeting**

As revealed in this study, in spite of the triadic meeting's supposed benefit of allowing three way communication, its purpose of 'making judgment' is not tenable. As student teachers said, due to their powerless position, they were not in a position to defend themselves in the meeting. Also, in front of a third person, both associate teachers and visiting lecturers might not be straightforward enough to address issues and express dissensus. Therefore, the consensus in the triadic meeting might be unreal.

Previous studies support this speculation. What Ortlipp (2003b) described as 'culture of niceness' (p. 32) not only applies to visiting lecturers, as she detailed in her study, but also applies to associate teachers. Ortlipp provided a thoughtful comment on the triadic meeting:

The triadic assessment approach is based on the notion that there can be an equal sharing of voices and that consensus can be reached as a result of this process...consensus in many cases is an illusion because it is gained through someone's silence...we must pay more attention to the human element of practicum assessment, to creating safe spaces for critical dialogue to occur. (Ortlipp, 2003b, p.33)

There are other issues inherent to using the triadic meeting for the purpose of assessment, for example, the power imbalance that may silence the student voice. Some student teachers in this study expressed disappointment with their lack of voice. Ortlipp (2003a) commented that 'achieving an equitable sharing of assessment between student, tertiary supervisor and field supervisor through the process of triadic assessment is questionable due to the operation of local relations of power that inform the interactions between these three participants' (p. 226). One possible way to curb the power imbalance is for every one of the triad to reflect on his/her own performance in the triadic meeting. Another way is to consider allowing all parties of the triad to evaluate each other's performance at the end of the practicum, for example, student teachers 'will also be invited to evaluate supervisors' (Grand Canyon University, 2013, pp.31-32) and visiting lecturers (Kent University, 2013).

In view of the tensions inherent to the triadic meeting, it is unrealistic to expect a true consensus to be reached and a fair judgment made in that meeting. Nevertheless, if the purpose of triadic meeting is modified to be less assessing, it could become a valuable forum for triadic reflections. In the triadic meeting with a less assessing purpose, every member of the triad reflects on his/her own performance or supervision during the practicum rather than focus on the strengths and/or weaknesses of the student teachers only.

### **Repositioning Visiting Lecturers**

Both associate teachers and student teachers in this study signaled that visiting lecturers should not have the final say in assessment of the practical element of the practicum,

as is the case with NZ currently, on the ground that visiting lecturers do not have the evidence to make a valid judgment. Visiting lecturers' main sources of evidence are their scheduled observation and the triadic meeting both of which are problematic as above discussed.

Previous studies have reported a general reluctance of visiting lecturers to waive their final judging right in triadic assessment. Smith (2007) found that the 'university faculty is reluctant to give up the full responsibility for assessing students' learning and to fully trust school-based teacher educators' practical knowledge' (p. 290). However, according to Smith (2007), the role of the practicum sites is 'rightfully receiving increased attention recently' (p. 290). Smith (2007) observed, 'If information collected by school-based educators does not create the foundation for assessment, the validity of assessment is at stake, as school-based teacher educators are the ones who know the context of teaching and should be able to assess the appropriateness of actions in that specific setting' (p. 283).

The visiting lecturers in this study expressed several concerns about associate teachers having the final say in assessment (e.g. unfairness, improper feedback). While these concerns are justified, they do not justify visiting lecturers' having the final say. Associate teachers may find ways to overcome their limitations as an assessor (e.g. team assessment), but by no means can visiting lecturers' lack of validity in the scheduled observation be overcome in their capacity. In NZ, qualified teachers are expected to have 'knowledge of a range of relevant theories and research about pedagogy, human development and learning' (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007). Furthermore, associate teachers are equipped with theory in action or 'enacted knowledge' (Aitken, Sinnema, & Meyer, 2013, p. 25).

Visiting lecturers' final say in assessment of the practical component of practicum may not only disrupt the ECE setting's natural teaching and learning processes, but also create unnecessary tensions which may undermine the partnership between the ITE programme provider and the ECE setting. The 'unnecessary' tensions are exemplified by a sub-category of this study (*associate teachers' vulnerability*) and resonant with Hastings' (2004) observation that an associate teacher felt 'rocked on the occasion when his ability to assess a student was questioned' (p. 139).

Both associate teachers and student teachers in this study believed that the best role for visiting lecturers is a supporter rather than an assessor. As a support person, the visiting lecturers support the student teachers on practicum both personally and academically, and 'help student teachers bridge the university-based content of their teacher preparation programs and the practical knowledge of teaching' (Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman, & Nichols, 2011, p. 1068).

Based on the above findings and discussion, we are able to present a new perspective on triadic assessment of practicum: (1) Visiting lecturers' scheduled observation should not be fundamental or essential to summative assessment of the practical component of the practicum due to its inherent problems as an assessment tool; (2) The triadic meeting should encourage shared understanding between stakeholders, and consensus should not be its sole aim; and (3) Visiting lecturers' role in assessment of practicum should be supportive or coordinative rather than judging and assessing.

## **Implications of the Study**

The study touches the heart of the assessment of practicum and several implications of the study can be envisaged for NZ early childhood ITE. The findings alert both the early childhood ITE providers and the early childhood practitioners to the fact that the current triadic arrangement is not impeccable, in particular, the legitimacy of visiting lecturers' final judging role is dubious. Given the many problems with visiting lecturers' scheduled observation and its summative assessment status (Aspden 2014; Mitchell, et al., 2007), early childhood ITE providers may need to find an alternative tool of summative assessment which builds on the formative assessments that are conducted by associate teachers on daily basis (Turnbull, 1999; Ure, 2009). Also, if the triadic meeting is not solely consensus-driven as above discussed, then visiting lecturers might need to adopt a more open and inclusive approach to the triadic meeting. Ortlipp (2009) reported on a visiting lecturer remaining silent in the triadic meeting about the student teacher's competency because 'she perceived that what she knew about the student...was not as valid as what the field supervisor knew' (p.162), which is excellent illustration of such openness and inclusiveness. Further, if visiting lecturers' role is more of a support person instead of a judge, as contemplated in this study, then early childhood ITE providers may consider expanding visiting lecturers' role to include supporting not only student teachers but also associate teachers to address concerns of the practicum sites over their lack of support from ITE providers (Allen, 2011).

It is important to point out that the problems with triadic assessment as identified in this study are not necessarily inherent to the model itself, rather, it is largely due to the way it is implemented. Due to the complex, controversial, and dilemmatic nature of implementation of triadic assessment, it is advisable that professional development aiming for unpacking and addressing the unresolved issues be provided for both visiting lecturers and associate teachers.

## **Limitations and Future Direction**

As we have indicated in this article, the aim of this study is 'to scrutinise' and 'to contemplate' rather than 'to recommend' or 'to propose', which can be seen as a limitation in terms of conclusiveness of the study. A number of practical issues entwined with our proposed new perspective on triadic assessment are yet to be untangled, for example, the mechanism of associate teachers' team assessment, the training of both associate teachers and visiting lecturers, the linkage between summative and formative assessments, and if necessary, the re-selection of practicum sites. All of these practical and technical issues must be addressed before we can confidently advocate for a new approach to triadic assessment. These issues can be best resolved through properly designed action research projects, which leads to one of our future research directions. Another limitation relates to the potentially homogenous nature of the samples of visiting lecturers and student teachers in this study that were selected from one ITE provider

based on convenience sampling. To address this limitation, in future research, we may consider collaborating with other early childhood ITE providers and expanding the samples of visiting lecturers and student teachers.

## Concluding Notes

Taking the lenses of all key stakeholders, this study explores and examines the tensions in assessment of the on-the-floor component of practicum in early childhood ITE in NZ. The study found visiting lecturers' scheduled observation and the triadic meeting to be two major sources of tensions. Based on the findings from this study as well as previous studies, we have contemplated three facets of triadic assessment that can potentially be modified to improve the effectiveness of the traditional assessment model, and the potential modifications includes: making the visiting lecturers' scheduled observation non-decisive and unobtrusive, making the triadic meeting non-judgmental and equitable, and entrusting associate teachers with the final judging role in assessment of the practical element of the practicum.

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