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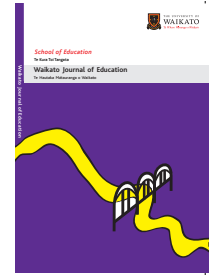
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## A complex act—Teacher educators share their perspectives of practicum assessment

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### Abstract

*Practicum visiting and the assessment of students' practicum form a significant component of the teacher educator role. Teacher educators are tasked with making judgements regarding the quality of students' teaching practice, as well as their attributes, dispositions, skills and knowledge, and ultimately their readiness to enter the teaching profession. This paper reports the findings of a doctoral study that examined the assessment of practicum in early childhood initial teacher education and, in particular, the way in which practicum assessment was enacted and experienced by early childhood student teachers, associate teachers, and teacher educators within institutional contexts. The study provides insights into how teacher educators define their role, what they look for and hope for in the assessment process, as well as the challenges faced in making authentic, appropriate and informed assessment decisions. The critical importance of professional judgment within the context of a relational pedagogy is highlighted in response to the complex variables involved in practicum assessment. Implications for future directions in policy and practice related to practicum assessment are proposed.*

### Keywords

Practicum; assessment; early childhood; initial teacher education

### Introduction

Practicum is generally accepted to be one of the most critical components of effective teacher education programmes (Brown & Danaher, 2008; Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbons, Glassman, & Stevens, 2009; Rivers, 2006) and is an integral component of all teacher education programmes offered in New Zealand, as mandated by the Education Council Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Council New Zealand, 2017a). Student teachers consistently report that their experiences whilst on



practicum are some of the most significant and influential moments in shaping their development as a teacher (Cameron & Baker, 2004). The marrying together of practice and theory that is central to practicum is valued for helping student teachers to understand the realities of teaching whilst becoming informed by research as to best teaching practice (Clift & Brady, 2005). In this context student teachers are given the opportunity to develop as future members of the profession, to practice their skills and reflect on what it means to them to be a teacher (Cattley, 2007), while also gaining understanding of a range of educational philosophies manifest in practice (Haigh & Ell, 2014). However, practicum is not only a site of learning and induction; it is the context for assessment within a teacher education environment with increasing requirements for accountability as a gatekeeper to the teaching profession (Rorrison, 2010). Assessment is therefore a critical component of the practicum process.

The practicum triad is typically comprised of a student teacher, an associate (or mentor) teacher, and the teacher educator, who is the representative of the institution in which the student teacher is completing their programme of study. The teacher educator role is designed to both support and assess the practice of student teachers while on practicum (Haigh, Pinder, & McDonald, 2008). They may be referred to variously as supervisors, visiting tutors or lecturers, or appraisers. The teacher educator serves as the intermediary between the student, early childhood centre, and institution, and typically holds responsibility for summative assessment (Cameron & Baker, 2004; Kane, 2005). Drawing from a larger doctoral study, this paper explores the perspectives of teacher educators in relation to their role in the assessment of practicum in early childhood initial teacher education.

### The teacher educator role in the assessment of practicum

Joughin (2009) identifies three functions of assessment that predominate in higher education settings, including “supporting the process of learning; judging students’ achievement in relation to course requirements; and maintaining the standards of the profession” (p. 1). Each of these functions are critical in the assessment of practicum as initial teacher education (ITE) providers and other stakeholders face the critical 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). The teacher educator, as the representative of the ITE institution, typically holds responsibility across each of these three assessment functions.

There is little research evidence that describes the way in which the key stakeholders conceptualise the teacher educator role, or the specific practices that are adopted by teacher educators in making assessment decisions about students on practicum. Haigh and Ell (2014) note that while there are governing standards for practicum, there are no specified guidelines for how assessment should be enacted in practice. Observation appears to be a key assessment tool (Power & Perry, 2002), but in many studies the role of observation appears to be a taken for granted practice, with little description or quantification of the observation process. The value of multiple sources of evidence is typically highlighted as important in the assessment process, including the perspectives of the associate teacher and the student, as well as the students’ own documentation and artefacts related to their practice (Brown & Danaher, 2008). However, little attention has been given to the experiences of teacher educators and the ways in which they define and enact their role as assessors of practicum in early childhood ITE.

For the teacher educator, assessment of practicum is an exercise in professional judgement (Joughin, 2009). Although both external standards and institutional criteria may be in place, the assessment process relies heavily on the decision making of the teacher educator to determine whether required outcomes have been met, and to what measure of quality (Smith, 2007). Teacher educators are tasked with the complex act of drawing together multiple perspectives, in order to make a determination as to the standard of a student’s practice and, ultimately, their readiness to enter the profession (Haigh, Ell, & Mackisack, 2013). However, such dependence on professional judgement within a standards and

criterion-oriented approach raises questions regarding subjectivity and potential fallibility, especially given that practicum is a high-stakes and complex situation (Hawe, 2001). Within an assessment culture that relies heavily on the professional autonomy of the teacher educator, “factors such as intuition, personal feelings, experience, knowledge of the subject and cumulative knowledge of the particular student were acknowledged as key elements of professional judgement” (Hawe, 2002, p. 98). Haigh and Ell (2014) argue that such instinctive judgments may lead to confusion for the student teacher when they are not aware of the reasons for the assessor’s decisions, highlighting the need for greater transparency.

As teacher education typically positions itself within social-constructivist paradigms of learning and teaching, which suggest intersubjectivity between teacher and learner (Cameron & Baker, 2004), notions of power and hierarchy in the roles of the triad members have come under scrutiny. Power resides with the institution to determine and shape the nature of the practicum experience (Hawe, 2002) and there is a clear hierarchy of triad members (Turnbull, 1999) in their role and responsibility in relation to assessment (Veal & Rikard, 1998). Cattley (2007) asserts that such power dynamics can become a focus of practicum relationships and can be detrimental to the professional growth of the student teacher. While there is often theoretical agreement as to the importance of equal and reciprocal relationships in the practicum, achieving this outcome in practice can be very difficult. Lomas (1999) goes so far as to suggest that it is almost impossible due to the ‘evaluation bind’ “created by assessment requirements on the supervisor and supervisee which acts against the establishment of a climate of openness and trust so necessary for an effective professional development focus” (p. 24). Understanding of the way in which teacher educators position themselves within the triadic relationship and the practices that they use during assessment is therefore critical.

Given the high stakes nature of practicum assessment, the way in which teacher educators facilitate the assessment process has significant implications for all stakeholders. Studies such as those by Haigh et al. (2013), Ortlipp (2003, 2009) and Hawe (2002) serve as a reminder that practicum assessment is problematic and not always fair and appropriate. “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).

This research study was therefore founded upon the contention that “we need a greater understanding of what goes on at the level of subjectivity of those who participate in practicum assessment” (Ortlipp, 2003, p. 33). Arguably some aspects of the practicum assessment process are open to scrutiny, readily discussed, and debated. There are explicit policies and practices that guide the practicum and assessment process, outlined in handbooks and course regulations. However, there are other dimensions to practicum assessment that are implicit, taken for granted, or unacknowledged. Some areas may be hidden or rarely discussed in the wider initial teacher education forum, as they deal with sensitive issues of bias, relationships, competence, subjectivity, and consistency. For this reason, the study reported here was designed to be illuminatory and exploratory (Punch, 2009), with the intention of answering the over-arching research question, “how is the assessment of practicum enacted and experienced by key stakeholders in early childhood initial teacher education?” Drawing from the wider study, this paper reports specifically on the findings of the teacher educator participants.

## Methodology

The theoretical framework for this study was provided by the writings of Barbara Rogoff, who proposed the importance of viewing a given context through multiple lenses, or planes of analysis, including the cultural/institutional plane, the personal plane and interpersonal 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 was a meaningful fit for this study in considering the institutional context within which practicum is conducted, the practicum

assessment experiences of individual participants, and the way in which assessment was enacted within the context of the triadic relationships.

In order to address the research objectives, a multi-site, multi-phase and mixed method QUAL-quan design (Punch, 2009) was developed in alignment with Rogoff's (2003) planes of analysis. Four representative New Zealand institutions accredited to deliver early childhood initial teacher education participated in the study including university, community, and private providers, offering a mix of face-to-face, distance, and field-based programmes. The initial phase of the study accessed the institutional policy and practices of practicum assessment through interviews with key informants at each institution. Phase two foregrounded the intrapersonal plane, through an online survey that invited student teachers, associate teachers, and teacher educators to share their beliefs and experiences in relation to the assessment process. The final phase focused on the interpersonal plane, through the use of a single case study at each institution to gather data on the way triad members came together to enact the assessment visit.

The data reported in this paper is drawn from the teacher educator responses to the questionnaire, as well as the case study interviews. Twenty teacher educators responded to the questionnaire, four of whom were male. In reporting survey data, it is noted that not all teacher educators chose to answer every question; percentage figures therefore represent the percentage of responses received, with (n=) denoting the number of responses when less than the full 20 participants. The majority (47 percent) of teacher educators were between 40–50 years of age; a further 42 percent were over 50 years, while only 11 percent of teacher educators were less than 30 years of age. The teacher educators indicated a high level of experience in assessing student teachers on practicum, with all respondents rating themselves as a four or five on a rating scale, where five was denoted as extensive experience. A similarly high rating was noted when teacher educators were asked to rate their confidence in assessing student teachers, with 94 percent of participants rating themselves either 'confident' or 'very confident'. This signifies that the sample consider themselves experienced and confident teacher educators. In addition, a further four teacher educators were participants in the case study phase, comprising one self-nominated participant from each representative institution. Of these, two were male, all were aged over 40 years of age, and all considered themselves very experienced in the role. The following section outlines the key themes to emerge from teacher educators' responses to the survey, as well as drawing from the interview data of the case studies in describing the way in which teacher educators conceptualise their role, enact assessment requirements within a relational pedagogy and address the challenges experienced.

## Findings and implications

### Conceptualising the teacher educator role

The teacher educators in this study played a very significant role in the assessment of practicum as the intermediary between the institution, the education setting, and the student. They were positioned by the institution, and thus by associate teachers and student teachers, as having the primary responsibility for determining the assessment outcome of the practicum. Teacher educators identified that they were responsible for observing the student, providing feedback, gaining the perspectives of others in the practicum, understanding context, synthesising multiple points of view, resolving conflict, representing the institution, supporting the associate teacher and student teacher, and developing and sustaining professional relationships. At times these multiple roles were challenging, and potentially in conflict. For example, the need to balance pastoral care with the need to enforce assessment criteria, in particular when a student is not meeting expected outcomes. The way in which the teacher educators described their role in practicum assessment was complex and multi-dimensional. Of note, the way in which teacher educators perceived their role did not always align with the perception of others; in particular regarding to formative and summative assessment purposes. While students tended to focus on the teacher educator as having the power to determine the

assessment outcome, teacher educators themselves indicated that the opportunity to provide formative feedback, support and guidance to the student was the key focus of their assessment practices. This finding is of particular interest in suggesting a potential misalignment in expectations between institutional requirements, role definitions, and emphasis in practice.

The teacher educators identified successful experiences of assessment as being when the triadic relationships were functioning well, when assessment identified and acknowledged the strengths of the student teacher, and provided support and guidance for future professional development. Open, honest communication, evidence of concerns, and alignment between the perspectives of participants was hoped for. Teacher educators demonstrated concern for students and a desire for practicum experiences to facilitate the professional growth of the prospective teacher in the context of rich, positive relationships (Smith, 2007). The teacher educators across the survey and case studies revealed genuine care for student teachers and distress over practicum cases where the experience was less than positive. Teacher educators were invested in the professional growth of student teachers and actively sought to contribute to this through the course of the assessment visit.

Teacher educators in this study adopted a responsive approach to practicum assessment in order to address the unique context of each practicum situation. When the student teacher and associate teacher relationship was seen to be strong, teacher educators reported taking more of a monitoring and supportive role, whereas if there were concerns and the dyad was not operating successfully, teacher educators took a more direct role in guiding the assessment process. As one teacher educator (TE) commented:

When a student is working well in their practicum setting, I see my role as being primarily to give them feedback. When there are major problems, I have to do both: i.e., provide feedback, support and guidance BUT also benchmark strongly against the required standards. (TE: Case)

Thus, teacher educators believed that their role was to respond to each case individually, even within typical protocols, in order to support the best outcome for the student teacher, as well as maintain relationships with the early childhood setting. Such a responsive and flexible approach relies on skilful assessors who can attend to multiple variables and navigate the complexities of each case.

Survey participants were asked to identify how they conceptualised their primary role in the assessment of practicum. The question purposefully forced a decision between a formative and summative focus of assessment, to determine which focus had precedence. Seventy-two percent of the teacher educators (n=18) identified their primary role as ‘assessing the student teacher to provide feedback, support and guidance for professional growth’. Only 28 percent selected ‘assessing the student against required standards in order to determine suitability to graduate as a teacher’ as their primary role. The findings suggest that teacher educators are committed to supporting the professional development of student teachers and that summative purposes are seen as necessary, but secondary in importance. The way in which teacher educators and key informants describe assessment practices suggests that formative assessment may be given greater weighting in the first stages of a programme of study, with summative assessment purposes considered more significant for students in the final stage of their study, where the reality of entry to the profession became more tangible and the role of gatekeeper became more immediate. As one respondent commented, “You know, if you want your degree to be well respected and robust there has to be some measure of gatekeeping. We can’t let people that obviously don’t make the grade pass” (TE: Survey). Greater lenience would thereby be shown in the earlier stages of their study in the hope that with time and opportunity the student will demonstrate the desired growth in practice. However, comments revealed that such practices may cause ethical tension, as professional growth of the student is not assured, resulting in student teachers who proceed a significant way into the programme only to fail.

## Relational pedagogy

... a relational approach to working with students is helpful. When time is taken to get to know a student as a whole person and character is considered as well as teaching technique it is much harder for the student to put on an act, or conversely, they are less likely to be nervous. Building strong relationships between the teacher education institution and the early childhood centres is also essential as this enables honest professional conversations to occur which help all parties to be on the same page in regard to expectations. (TE: Case)

As the quote highlights, positive, open, supportive relationships were seen by teacher educators to be of critical importance for several key reasons, including to support authentic assessment through connection and deeper knowledge of the student teacher; the belief that relationships influence assessment outcomes—both positively and negatively; to develop and maintain ongoing relationships—with the student and the setting; and to promote shared understanding and reduce misinterpretation during the assessment process.

Relationships were viewed by teacher educators as both a strength of the assessment process but also the cause of many challenges as participants negotiate complex interpersonal dynamics. Ninety percent of survey respondents indicated that they had experienced a practicum triad in which a difficult relationship between the associate teacher and the student had influenced the assessment act, while 20 percent had experienced a difficult relationship between themselves and the student. A breakdown in relationship between participants was seen to be an impediment to the learning and development of the student teacher, and to the ability of those involved to assess the practicum in an effective way.

Ortlipp (2003) found that teacher educators made purposeful choices as to whether to use voice or silence in the assessment meeting in order to maintain relationships. When exploring this notion in the present study, 50 percent of teacher educators in the survey indicated that they have held back in the assessment meeting in order to manage the different (and sometimes competing) needs of the student teacher, early childhood centre and training institution, and to ensure that ongoing relationships between the parties remained effective and collegial. This finding suggests that when positioned within a relational pedagogy, teacher educators do feel that they have to temper and adjust their responses in order to achieve what they deem to be a positive outcome for the practicum.

Although teacher educators in the study reported that they actively sought out positive, collaborative interactions that empowered other members of the triad, both survey and case study findings affirmed that associate teachers and students still often position the teacher educator as the ‘expert’. The nature of this hierarchical positioning was reflected in the humorous comment from one student who exclaimed, “I think, in my mind, the lecturer [TE] holds my life in her hands! (laughs) ...” (ST: Case). However, this hierarchal structure was not generally 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.

## Assessment as an act of professional and personal judgement

Across the four institutions there existed a high trust model of assessment; while assessment is conducted within the guidelines and parameters of the institution, the assessment is, in reality, a subjective act that relies heavily on the expectations and judgement of the teacher educator. Seventy-eight percent of teacher educators in the survey rated their own observation of student teachers as the most important assessment practice. The findings suggest that in practice, institutional guidelines and assessment criteria play a secondary role to the professional/personal judgements made by individual assessors. This result strongly mirrors those of Hawe (2002), who found that assessment was

frequently expressed as a personal/professional judgement, more often related to the student as a person, than to the expressed outcomes or performance standards. As reflected in the following quote, findings suggest that teacher educators enter the practicum situation with a pre-existing set of expectations that sit alongside those expressed by the institution; thus, teacher educators have an internal image of a ‘good student teacher’ and the actions of the student are both consciously and unconsciously measured against this image.

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. (TE: Case)

Findings suggest that there is an implicit assessment question that underpins more formal assessment processes. This core question was framed by participants in reference to ‘would I want this student to teach my child/grandchild?’ Participants justified this position as a responsibility to serve as gatekeeper to the profession and to protect vulnerable children. The following quote from the case study data typifies this position:

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? ... 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. (TE: Case)

Smith (2007) proposes the notion of ‘professional autonomy’ as the space in which teacher educators make assessment decisions, shaped by their values, beliefs and professional knowledge, requiring courage and imagination. The assessment practices described by the teacher educators in the survey, and evidenced in the case studies, reflect a high level of professional autonomy. The assessment process was not simply a matter of checking a pre-defined list of criteria—rather the criteria were used by teacher educators (to varying degrees) as just one measure in assessment decision-making. The teacher educators drew on their prior experience, personal expectations and professional knowledge to synthesise multiple points of evidence in order to both provide feedback to the student and determine the assessment outcome. “I then rely on my years of experience as an EC teacher and now EC lecturer to help guide me to a fair and robust assessment” (TE: Survey). The findings present an understanding of such decision making as individual, culturally mediated, complex and nuanced.

### Challenges of practicum assessment

Given the complexity of practicum assessment, survey respondents were asked to identify the challenges they had experienced in assessing practicum. Unsurprisingly, given the emphasis on a relational pedagogy, the most common challenges identified by teacher educators were relational in nature. Ninety percent of survey respondents indicated that they had experienced a difficult relationship between the associate teacher and student that had influenced the assessment process, while a further 40 percent reported difficulties in the AT/TE dyad. Twenty five percent reported feeling pressure to award an assessment outcome that they did not agree with, while 40 percent reported feeling unsure about whether a student is meeting the expectations for the stage of study. Other key issues identified related to the validity of the assessment feedback, workload, quality of practicum experience and lack of shared expectations, as explored in the following sections.



### Inaccurate, unexpected or unfair feedback

Teacher educators valued the role of the associate teacher and viewed them as having a very significant influence in the practicum and subsequent assessment. However one of the greatest concerns of teacher educators was when assessment feedback provided by the associate teacher was deemed to be uninformed, unexpected, unsubstantiated or unfair. Assessment was seen by teacher educators to be uninformed when the associate teacher was not present for much of the time during the practicum, but appeared to offer assessment feedback based on seemingly little knowledge of the student's actual practice. As one teacher educator commented:

One of the most common situations that I have seen on several occasions is when the associate teacher has not spent a great deal of time with the student teacher and therefore has not been in a position to give accurate feedback to and about the student.  
(TE: Survey)

When asked to identify challenges in practicum assessment, 65 percent of survey respondents indicated that they had experienced an associate teacher providing inaccurate or inappropriate assessment feedback. Teacher educators were concerned about occasions where associate teachers either provided negative assessment feedback when previous contact had indicated no concerns, or alternatively when concerns raised informally were not then carried through into the AT's formal assessment reports. Teacher educators also found it difficult when the feedback from the associate teacher did not reconcile with their own observations and judgments of the student, raising questions of whose feedback should be given primacy in the decision making (Ortlipp, 2009). As one survey respondent commented:

Another common situation is when the associate teacher does not provide honest and accurate feedback and only highlights the positive aspects of practice, rating them more highly than is deserved and therefore giving the student a false perception of how well they are doing. They are then unprepared when given honest feedback by the visiting tutor and this can result in the conflict as the student may find it more difficult to accept the feedback. (TE: Survey)

### Workload concerns

At an institutional level, the cost of practicum was an often-cited concern, which in turn had repercussions for the parameters that framed the teacher educator role. Lack of funding and budgetary constraints were seen to limit the possibilities in the way practicum is offered and assessed. Participants acknowledged that there were alternative approaches and strategies that institutions could adopt, for example, greater frequency and duration of visits, and closer partnerships with practicum sites, if there was sufficient funding to both initiate and sustain such changes in the long term. Teacher educators also identified challenges in managing competing elements of their role: teaching, research, practicum, and service, as well as needing to visit a number of students within allocated timeframes. Ortlipp (2009) similarly cited institutional funding as a significant constraint in minimising the amount of dialogue that can take place between the triad participants. With more funding, teacher educators believed they could visit more frequently, and have more sustained relationships with the education settings over time, that would in turn facilitate a greater level of shared understanding, and foster enhanced collaboration between the two key sites of ITE programmes.

Workload also had implications for processes of moderation and professional development. In the survey, only 50 percent of teacher educators (n=18) indicated that they had been involved in formal moderation of practicum assessment. One respondent commented, "We're supposed to, but alas due to ongoing heavy workloads it continues to be a challenge to factor in." Sixty-one percent of teacher educators (n=18) reported that they had been observed and given feedback on their assessment

practice; however, descriptions indicated that this process had typically happened at the time of their own induction, or when responsible for inducting a new staff member, rather than in a regular, ongoing and purposeful way. Sixty-seven percent of the teacher educators ( $n = 18$ ) responded that they had received induction to assessment, and 59 percent had participated in some professional development related to assessment of practicum. Sixty-five percent of teacher educators indicated that they would like further professional development in this area, including more time for professional conversations, support for mentoring and access to research.

### Quality of practicum experience

Not all educational settings are models of exemplary teaching practice. Teacher educators across the study reported concerns related to assessment in the context of less than desirable practicum situations, either in relation to the setting itself, or the actions of the associate teacher as a mentor. Finding settings that provided students with rich exemplars of quality early childhood practice with the support of experienced mentors was considered problematic, especially when there was demand from placements across multiple ITE providers. There were inherent tensions that in commenting on an area of a student teacher's practice that is of concern, it may be perceived as passing critical judgement on the setting or the associate teacher, if they are modelling and enacting this poor practice themselves. In such situations teacher educators reported choosing silence over voice if they felt that they might cause offense, in awareness of their role as 'guest' in the early childhood setting, as well as an institutional representative who may have ongoing connections with the setting.

Regular visits to early childhood centres, alongside more rigorous selection processes for associate teachers, was seen to be an effective solution, however, with the acknowledgement that it would increase programme costs and would likely result in a reduced pool of associate teachers. The perceived lack of opportunity to shift the status quo led to some rationalisation of existing practices. For example, the suggestion that a problematic practicum could be seen to actually support the growth of the student teacher's philosophy as it alerts students to the reality of less than desirable practices, and affirms the practices that they would value instead. As one institutional key informant (KI) stated:

You don't have the luxury to say, well it's not a quality centre I can't, won't place the student there, or will only place them in these places, because one, you would never have enough placements and two, they do need those challenging environments to shape their philosophy as well. (KI: Interview)

However, this process cannot be assumed to occur automatically, as it requires a high level of reflection, meta-cognitive processing and professionalism to bring about growth in professional practice (Haigh, 2005). It is likely that students need skilled support in order to reflect on such experiences in a meaningful and positive way. Results revealed little evidence to suggest such extensive support is in place.

### Shared expectations

One of the challenges frequently noted in survey responses, and evident in the case studies, is when members of the triad do not share the same expectations or interpretation of established standards, supporting Haigh and Tuck's (1999) assertion that there are significant doubts about whether stakeholders have a genuine shared understanding of the practicum criteria and the standards to be attained.

The findings of the study indicate that there was limited attention to determining shared expectations within the assessment act, resulting in assessment outcomes that were informed more strongly by the professional and personal judgements of the assessors than the institutional criteria. Given that the institutionally determined criteria serves as a culturally mediated assessment tool, it is problematic that the key participants may not have a mutually shared understanding of and commitment to the

expectations of success for practicum. There were limited examples in the case studies where the teacher educator outlined what they were looking for in relation to criteria, and little reference to criteria in the triadic assessment meetings. These findings support the position of Haigh, et al. (2013) who claim that criteria are often not clearly communicated or explained to the triad participants, leading to concerns about the comparability, and thereby reliability of practicum assessments across education settings. Of note was that some teacher educators in both the survey and case study reported that criteria played a more prominent role in assessment when there were concerns about the student, as they enabled the assessors to pinpoint specific practices that needed attention.

The data suggests that when assessment criteria are not understood or accepted, then assessors may place even greater reliance on their own expectations and professional judgement, which may or may not align with institutional criteria. Pajares (1992) argues that teachers' beliefs are complex and messy, shaped extensively by their own educational and cultural experiences. While assessing student teachers it appears that assessors may revert back to these fundamental beliefs in guiding their 'intuition' and 'gut feeling' about a student, giving such beliefs primacy in decision-making.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study support many of the principles for assessment of practicum previously identified in practicum assessment research. Practicum assessment is seen by teacher educators to be fair and consistent when the following conditions are met: it takes place in the context of positive relationships (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009), is guided by the exercise of professional judgment (Joughin, 2009; Ortlipp, 2009), measured against the criteria established by the institution and other stakeholders (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000), considers multiple perspectives (Haigh et al., 2013), and is subjected to both informal and formal moderation (Adie, Lloyd, & Beutal, 2013).

The findings of this early childhood study illuminate that while assessment is conducted within regulatory and institutional guidelines, teacher educators enact assessment in ways that intuitively feels right for each given situation. The assessment of practicum therefore relies heavily on the professional judgments of the assessors that have been shown to be subjective, shaped by the beliefs, knowledge, experience and expectations of the individual. Each practicum is shaped by multiple variables, many of which cannot be controlled by even the most well-considered and well-intentioned approaches to assessment. In this context, the teacher educator role is pivotal, but also complex, demanding and multi-faceted. Effective responses to the issues identified by teacher educators are challenging, as they must attend to the institutional and regulatory context, the participants' core beliefs and identity, and the interpersonal relationships that are unique to each triad.

The results of this study challenge initial teacher education providers to continue dialogue that addresses issues of reliability and validity in practicum assessment. The issues identified in this study will be of even greater importance if the proposed move by Education Council (2017b) to postgraduate initial teacher education is supported by the Ministry of Education and Tertiary Education Commission, potentially placing greater importance on robust assessment of practicum. Likewise, upcoming changes to the initial teacher accreditation processes based on the new *Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession* (Education Council, 2017c) will emphasise the critical role of the teacher educator in making judgements and assessing the capability and suitability of student teachers to enter the profession. While participants acknowledged the importance of moderation, it appears to be limited in practice and reliant on informal collegial support. Greater articulation and examination of the role of professional judgement and the way in which teacher educators are inducted into and supported in their assessment role must be considered. Increased transparency and specific articulation of assessment expectations is needed in order to moderate the challenges that result both from individual assessor influences and institutional constraints, affirming the critical need for induction, training, and ongoing support.

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