

International ECE student teachers on practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand: Fostering ethnorelative understandings

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In Aotearoa New Zealand, an increasing number of international students are choosing to study through initial teacher education programmes and staying to teach after they have graduated. However, to date, little research has focused on the practicum experiences of international early childhood education student teachers and how to effectively support their professional growth in ways that foster ethnorelative understandings. In this article, Yanan Li shares insights and recommendations drawing on her experience of having been an international ECE student teacher from China and her current role as a Visiting Lecturer. The aim of this article is to foster ethnorelative understandings between international student teachers and those who work with them, to enhance communication, relationships, and mentoring in the early childhood education practicum space.

Between Jan–Aug 2024, 73,535 international students arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand (ICEF Monitor, 2024); a 6% increase compared to the 2023 total, with a 14% rise in international students studying at universities. In 2023, students from China made up the largest group (35%), followed by India (11%), Japan (10%), and Korea (5%) (ICEF Monitor, 2024). Increasing numbers of these students enrol in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and stay to teach after graduation (Burke, 2024a; Rana, 2021), becoming part of the early childhood education (ECE) sector and New Zealand society. Within this context, developing ethnorelative understandings during practicum is vital for international student teachers and those who mentor them. However, little research has explored international student teachers' ECE practicum experiences or effective mentoring strategies to support professional growth and foster ethnorelative understandings.

In this article, we draw on Yanan Li's experience as a former ECE student teacher from China, and her current experience as a Visiting Lecturer mentoring a high percentage of

international students in postgraduate ITE programmes at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). We begin by defining ethnorelativism and explaining its relevance for ECE and ITE. Yanan then shares her story, leading to a discussion of challenges international students often navigate in ITE. Recommendations for international student teachers and their Associate Teachers (ATs) and Visiting Lecturers (VLs) are provided, while acknowledging that each student and their context will be unique.

Ethnorelativism and the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity

The term ethnorelativism was coined by Bennett (1986) as part of his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS outlines six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural difference, moving from denial, defence, and minimisation (behaviours associated with ethnocentrism) to acceptance, adaptation, and integration (behaviours associated with ethnorelativism). Ethnocentrism involves using one's own culture as the reference point for judging others, accompanied by feelings of superiority, negative views, and stereotyping. In contrast, ethnorelativism embraces the understanding that a person's beliefs, values, and behaviour are best understood within the context of their culture/s and that all cultures are valid and complex.

Ethnorelativism promotes intercultural appreciation and communication, understanding of difference, empathy, and respect: essential building blocks for relationships and collaboration. People's perceptions of cultural difference vary and, rather than being fixed, our perceptions of cultural difference can evolve; ideally moving towards increased intercultural understanding and cultural responsiveness.

The relevance of ethnorelativism in ECE and ITE

Ethnorelativism aligns with the emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogies in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). For example, under the Family and Community/ Whānau Tangata principle, the MoE promotes the understanding that "all cultural groups have beliefs, traditions, and child-rearing practices" (p. 20). Children's learning and development are enhanced when "culturally appropriate ways of communicating are used and when parents, whānau and community are encouraged to participate in and contribute to the curriculum" (p. 20). Likewise, international student teachers have a lot to offer, including the prior knowledge, skills, experiences, and diverse perspectives they bring.

The triadic relationship between the student teacher, AT, and VL can be mutually beneficial, grounded in ako and reciprocal teaching and learning. Questions raised by student teachers may help ATs and VLs reflect on their own knowledge systems and cultural practices, while also providing opportunities to learn about students' perspectives. Writing from an Aotearoa ECE context, Grey (2013) draws on Bennett's (1986) work on ethnorelativism, emphasising that intercultural competence involves forming an interpersonal and intercultural space where connections and learning can occur. This view of a shared space disrupts the notion that learning on practicum is one-directional, with the student teacher being the only person adapting and learning. Rather, practicum provides opportunities for ATs, other members of the teaching team, and VLs to grow professionally.

Yanan's story

In 2016, I arrived in Aotearoa on a visitor's visa, keen to experience a different culture and lifestyle. By chance, I had the opportunity to visit an ECE centre where I observed fun and nurturing interactions between teachers and children. This experience opened my eyes to a teaching approach that was markedly different from my own educational background in China. I felt inspired to become an ECE reliever and went on to gain an ITE qualification.

As a student and beginning teacher, I experienced emotional ups and downs in relation to understanding social norms and cultural differences in a new language and country. Sometimes I felt homesick. Although I had studied English since primary school, it was challenging being in fast-paced English speaking contexts. Immersing myself in the local language and social events was helpful for developing my English language skills and deepening my understanding of New Zealand culture. I found my experiences of being an immigrant help me connect deeply with children and families who are also new to Aotearoa.

A significant shift for me involved understanding how *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) emphasises each child's uniqueness and competency and promotes child-centred learning. I learnt to appreciate how encouraging children to think for themselves through active exploration, inquiry, and problem-solving fosters their learning dispositions and working theories. This contrasts with the previous views I had of learning being a teacher-led process with the aim of learners attaining specific answers within a set curriculum.

As my teaching experience grew, I enriched my knowledge and practice through master's study and I became a VL. The ideas discussed in this article reflect my evolving perspectives from student teacher to qualified teacher and VL. I am mindful that at any given time, a significant number of international student teachers will be navigating their place in ECE within the unique bicultural and increasingly multicultural context of Aotearoa. International student teachers are on a journey that involves not only learning, but also unlearning and reconstructing knowledge in culturally responsive and contextually appropriate ways. They experience moments of joy and satisfaction alongside challenges. By sharing my story, I hope to contribute to ethnorelative understandings and enhance the practicum experience for international student teachers, and their ATs and VLs.

Challenges and wellbeing

It takes courage for international students to study in a new country, and they come with hopes and aspirations of what they will experience and achieve (Doyle et al., 2020). However, as part of their ITE journey, international student teachers face challenges. For example, understanding educational philosophy and the links between theory and practice can be challenging for all student teachers. When a student's cultural and linguistic background and prior educational experiences differ significantly from the context of their ITE programme, this adds another layer of complexity. In particular, the shift from teacher-led to child-centred learning and play-based pedagogy in Aotearoa ECE is often a challenge that requires deep shifts in awareness and new paradigms for teaching and learning.

It is important for ATs and VLs to be aware that, in addition to facing new educational paradigms, international student teachers may experience emotional and practical challenges associated with living in a new country. These challenges can include feelings of homesickness and loneliness, difficulty understanding the local culture and language, and practical tasks, such as finding accommodation and navigating the public transport system.

Doyle et al. (2020) draw attention to the connection between international students' academic and intercultural experiences, explaining that these are integral to their overall wellbeing and feelings about their host country. Tending to international student teachers' holistic wellbeing and viewing them through a credit-based lens can support them to be happy and successful in their studies. This, in turn, is likely to influence

whether an international student teacher decides to stay in Aotearoa to teach after they have graduated.

An ethnorelativist approach to practicum

While international student teachers face a steep learning curve as they adapt to their new context, Arndt (2015) advocates that host countries should recognise and appreciate immigrant teachers for who they are, rather than expecting them to change who they are to “fit in.” This approach aligns with shifting from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspectives and reflects the core values (whakamana, manaakitanga, pono, whanaungatanga) underpinning the teaching profession in Aotearoa (Education Council, 2017).

The following reflective questions based on the core values are designed to encourage ATs, teaching teams, VLs, and ITE providers to be mindful of how we welcome international student teachers as newcomers to the sector and build collaborative relationships that strengthen feelings of togetherness, support, and mutual appreciation.

- **Whakamana:** How do we empower international student teachers to reach their highest potential by providing high-quality teaching and leadership?
- **Manaakitanga:** How do we create a welcoming and caring learning environment in which international student teachers are treated with respect and dignity?
- **Pono:** How do we demonstrate integrity by working with international student teachers in ways that are fair, honest, ethical, and just?
- **Whanaungatanga:** How do we engage in positive and collaborative relationships with international student teachers?

High quality mentoring—based on collaborative relationships, reciprocal communication, and alignment with the values for the teaching profession—creates safe spaces to draw from and build on student teachers’ prior experience and funds of knowledge. These conditions have the potential to support not just student teachers, but also those who work with them, to examine and understand their own cultural experiences and professional journeys, and to unpack implicit cultural assumptions and their image of the child (Burke, 2024b). Note, the term *funds of knowledge* created by Moll et al. (1992), refers to a person’s cultural, community, and family/household knowledge and practices, including knowledge and practice related to child rearing and education.

Key themes, challenges, and recommendations

The increasing number of international student teachers and immigrant teachers in Aotearoa presents possibilities for both challenges and enrichment in ECE. In this section, we focus on three key themes in the practicum space:

- **Professional relationships:** Communication and building student teacher-mentor relationships.
- **Te Tiriti o Waitangi Partnership:** Understanding and implementing Tiriti-based practice.
- **Design for Learning and Learning-Focused Culture:** Understanding teaching and fostering learning within the Aotearoa ECE context.

Practical recommendations are then provided through the lens of the student teacher and their AT and VL.

Professional relationships: Communication and building student teacher–mentor relationships

Communication and relationship building on practicum are essential, yet challenges may arise from differing cultural perspectives on respect and power, as well as language hurdles. In their study of social norms in Japan, China, Vietnam, and Singapore, Monkhouse et al. (2013) highlight hierarchy as a form of social order in South East Asian society. Within this context, individuals regulate their behaviour according to their societal position. On practicum, cultural norms related to hierarchy-based power dynamics can influence how international student teachers perceive and engage with their ATs and VLs. International students may feel hesitant in their communication and be polite and respectful but distant. What is intended to be respectful communication on the student teacher's part can be misinterpreted by ATs and VLs as a lack of interest, understanding, or engagement. Students may hesitate to raise questions, admit they do not fully understand, or offer differing perspectives for fear of causing offence.

International students with limited prior exposure to English language often find English challenging at the beginning of their studies. On an academic level, they are exposed to a conflux of new theories, terminology, and jargon. Although international students studying in Aotearoa are screened for English-language competency as part of being accepted into an ITE programme and may be experienced in using English for academic purposes, they can lack confidence in their abilities to speak English in everyday

contexts. One contributing factor is that they may be more familiar with American or British accents due to popular culture and how they were taught English. International students may require encouragement to shift their approach from primarily using English for assignments and examination success to becoming more comfortable using it as a practical and professional communication tool (God & Zhang, 2018).

International students may also struggle with contextual understanding, such as everyday language and colloquial expressions used in Aotearoa. For example, the phrase “How are you?” is commonly used in Aotearoa as a casual greeting without the expectation of eliciting a detailed response, but international students may feel unsure about how to respond appropriately. For instance, greetings in Chinese culture tend to be more direct, such as “Hello” or “Hi,” with more personal inquiries like “Have you been busy?” or “How did ... go?” being reserved for close acquaintances. Cultural differences like these can contribute to hesitation or nervousness when interacting with others.

God and Zhang (2018) draw attention to how contextual and cultural factors, such as social norms, manners, pronunciation, idioms, speed, and intonation, also influence English speakers from different countries. For instance, Americans might have difficulty understanding the New Zealand accent or idioms and vice versa. Thus, even international students who have lived in countries where English is commonly used can still find it challenging to adapt to a new English-language environment.

We advocate that it is helpful to frame challenges in relation to understanding and speaking English as hurdles that can be worked through, rather than immovable barriers. Given that communication is a two-way process, we also encourage those working with international students to develop awareness of intercultural factors and contextual nuances involved in learning and using a language in a new country. ATs and VLs are encouraged to create safe spaces for international students to become more confident speaking English and to risk engaging in open communication.

Recommendations for ATs and VLs

- Create safe, welcoming environments. Help student teachers feel part of the team and ECE community.
- Be mindful that student teachers’ learning trajectories are influenced by their personality, learning dispositions, and funds of knowledge. Some students may take longer to feel comfortable in a new environment. Give students time to gradually open up about what they are thinking and feeling.

- ☉ Cultivate a culture of listening and, when needed, slow down your speech. You may need to repeat information to ensure the student fully understands. Another strategy is to ask the student to repeat back what has been said to check their understanding.
- ☉ Be curious about student teachers' prior experiences and funds of knowledge. What expertise and interests do they bring? What might you learn from them?
- ☉ Encourage students to develop their confidence and contribute to the ECE service by sharing their expertise and interests.
- ☉ Model being a learner. Invite student teachers to share ideas and questions. Create a safe space for discussions where differing perspectives can be expressed.
- ☉ Emphasise the processes of engagement and learning over "getting things right" to take the pressure off students worrying about making mistakes.
- ☉ Be aware that international students may come from backgrounds in which the use of initiative is not encouraged. Provide explanations and examples to illustrate what you mean when encouraging student teachers to use their initiative.

Recommendations for international student teachers

- ☉ Be mindful that ECE teachers in Aotearoa work collaboratively. Student teachers on practicum are encouraged to be active participants rather than observers waiting to be told what to do. If you are unsure what to do, ask the teachers how you can help.
- ☉ Be open to feedback. Ask questions to clarify your AT's and VL's expectations. For example, if they say to use your initiative, ask them for examples of what that could look like.
- ☉ If you do not understand something, ask for clarification and check your understanding. This is preferable to pretending to understand.
- ☉ It is natural to feel out of your comfort zone, but the only way to improve your spoken English is by using it regularly. Reading books and singing songs with children are useful ways to build your confidence.
- ☉ Your AT and VL want to get to know you and work collaboratively with you to support professional growth. Engaging in professional discussions is a useful way to get to know you better.
- ☉ In Aotearoa ECE, there is often no "one right answer". Trial and error are valuable parts of the learning process. Focus on engaging with children and adults, reflecting on your learning, and looking for ways to build your understanding and practice rather than worrying about getting things "right."

Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership: Understanding and implementing Tiriti-based practice

Teachers in Aotearoa have a responsibility to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi and foster learning that reflects Te Tiriti partnership (Education Council, 2017). At the same time, the MoE (2017) states that Te Tiriti is “inclusive of all immigrants to New Zealand, whose welcome comes in the context of this partnership” (p. 3). Possible challenges for international students include developing in-depth understanding of what biculturalism and multiculturalism mean in an Aotearoa context, finding their sense of belonging, and understanding how to implement the commitments to Te Tiriti o Waitangi through their practice. Chan and Ritchie (2020) draw attention to the challenge for newcomers to Aotearoa to simultaneously understand both Māori and Western cultures while critically examining the impact of their own cultures and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Drawing on Wright and Heaton’s (2021) explanation that, in te ao Māori, the thresholds between visitors and hosts should be crossed to create a sense of belonging for visitors, we make the following recommendations with the intention of supporting and deepening international student teachers’ understanding and implementation of Tiriti-based practices.

Recommendations for ATs and VLs

- Role model respect for Tiriti partnership and practice. Integrate te reo and tikanga Māori throughout the programme.
- Ensure core values such as manaakitanga and whanaungatanga underpin practices. Provide warm, welcoming environments that nurture student teachers’ wellbeing and learning.
- Support student teachers’ negotiation of their own cultural identity and celebrate their uniqueness as they deepen their understanding of Te Tiriti and Tiriti-based practices and develop a sense of belonging in Aotearoa.
- Help students make connections between their funds of knowledge and Tiriti-based practices. For example, a Chinese student may feel comfortable singing “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” in Mandarin then expand it to te reo Māori.
- Encourage student teachers to engage with *Tātaiako* (Education Council, 2011) to develop cultural competencies for working with Māori children and whānau.

Recommendations for student teachers

- Pay attention to how kaiako use te reo Māori and integrate tikanga, including Māori values, into the daily programme.
- Join in with karakia and waiata with children. Practise using te reo words and phrases. Some students find it useful to keep a notebook or make cue cards to help them remember.
- Locate Māori-related resources in the centre and use these with children, e.g. puzzles, books, and games.
- Be proactive about accessing additional resources to build your understanding and practice, e.g. online dictionaries and te reo Māori apps.
- Read *Tātaiako* (Education Council, 2011) and be mindful of how you are developing cultural competencies for working with Māori children and whānau.
- Reflect on the responsibility you have as a student teacher to develop your use of te reo Māori and deepen your understanding of tikanga with all children who attend the ECE service. What connections do you see to your own cultural background/s? Why is being culturally responsive important? How are culture, language, and identity connected?
- Find ways to integrate te reo and tikanga Māori with your interests and the children's interests. For instance, you might play the guitar to accompany waiata.

Design for learning and learning-focused culture: Understanding teaching and fostering learning within the context of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand

International student teachers are likely to encounter significant differences between their prior experiences of ECE and those in Aotearoa. Murray (2015) draws attention to how the initial practicum can be a shocking experience for some international students, describing it as their “first opportunity to experience the local early childhood education system” and a site in which “cultural expectations are encountered and challenged” (p. 17). Examples of challenges international students may experience on practicum include differing expectations and understandings related to the image of the child (Burke, 2024b), the teacher's role, and corresponding pedagogy. For instance, although international student teachers are likely to have heard of play-based learning, their experience of what it means in a New Zealand context may be very different from what they expected.

Practicum often prompts students to re-think preconceptions and shift from structured, teacher-led approaches to child-centred, play-based pedagogies—shifts that require time, effort, openness, and skilful mentoring. To support this process, student teachers are asked to develop their reflective practice through writing and engaging in professional learning discussions. However, for many international students the concept of reflecting on themselves is new and they may need guidance to understand what reflective practice is. They also need to feel safe to engage in professional discussions in which they are asked to share their thoughts and feelings.

Additionally, international student teachers familiar with transmission-based education systems may struggle to grasp the open-ended nature of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and concepts such as holistic learning, agency, and inquiry. This can lead to frustration when student teachers expect their mentors to provide specific instructions or “the right answer”, while the mentor may be purposefully encouraging the student teacher to think for themselves and find their own answers.

Recommendations for ATs and VLS

- Be mindful that many international student teachers are new to both Aotearoa and ECE. They are likely to feel outside their comfort zone.
- Consider that international student teachers’ prior experiences of ECE may be very different to ECE in Aotearoa. International students are in the process of making significant shifts in their awareness and practice that involve re-thinking their values and beliefs about teaching and learning.
- Mentor students by engaging them in professional learning discussions, modelling desired practices, and helping them to make connections to theory and practice.
- Ask open-ended questions to check student teachers’ understanding.
- Give student teachers constructive feedback that clearly identifies their strengths and areas for improvement. Be explicit about what is a suggestion versus a requirement, as students may not always distinguish between the two. Be direct about any actions you would like students to complete and clearly communicate any concerns that require their attention.
- Guide student teachers to shift from being results-oriented to focusing on meaning-making and process-oriented ways of thinking. This includes encouraging students to facilitate learning experiences that are responsive to children and to use open ended resources that foster problem solving and divergent thinking.

- Explain how teachers in your setting observe, assess, and plan for children's learning. Invite student teachers to read children's portfolios and attend staff meetings. Encourage student teachers to align the learning experiences they plan for children with your programme.

Recommendations for international student teachers

- Deepen your understanding that teaching and learning happen throughout the ECE setting, not just at mat times and teacher-led activities. Spend time engaging with children in different areas of the environment, including outside.
- Pay attention to the richness of what children might be learning as they play and how they set goals for themselves. Focus on children's holistic learning, including their physical, social, and emotional learning.
- Engage in learning-focused discussions with your AT using a credit-based lens. Instead of identifying gaps, use observations of children's interests and capabilities as starting points for designing and facilitating meaningful experiences. Share ideas for learning experiences with your AT and seek input and feedback.
- Invite children's engagement. Children will choose to join in if they think something looks fun and interesting. Focus on inspiring and responding to children, rather than directing their learning. Provide open-ended resources and experiences that encourage children's creativity and divergent thinking.
- Let go of the fear of being "wrong" or making mistakes. Embrace trial and error as a valuable part of the learning process (for children and yourself). Reflecting on what worked, what didn't work, and why (and how to improve) is more meaningful than getting things "right."
- Find out how teachers in your practicum setting observe, assess, and plan for children's learning. Read children's portfolios and attend staff meetings if you have the opportunity. Look for ways to contribute to the programme and work as part of a team.
- Be open to feedback with the understanding that your AT and VL want to support and build on your current and ongoing learning, rather than narrowly focusing on meeting the practicum assessment criteria.
- Make the most of the opportunities available to you. Reflect on your engagement and learning from practicum. How is your understanding shifting or deepening and what does this mean for your practice and ongoing professional learning?

Summary

Studying to become a teacher in a different cultural context requires courage, open mindedness, and perseverance. International student teachers in Aotearoa often face steep learning curves as they adapt to new environments and educational paradigms. Practicum is most effective when student teachers are welcomed and accepted for who they are in the spirit of the teaching profession's core values. While supporting international student teachers to understand ECE within Aotearoa, ATs and VLs can model ako by learning with and from the students they mentor. Through an ethnorelative lens, practicum becomes a shared interpersonal and intercultural space for multi-directional learning, enhancing communication, relationships, and mentoring for all.

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