







“Bringing the Standards to life:” One initial teacher education team’s experiences of the key teaching tasks

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Practicum is essential to initial teacher education (ITE) programmes as it allows student teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life teaching. In 2019, the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand introduced new requirements for ITE providers, including the development of key teaching tasks. This study explores how the team from Manukau Institute of Technology's early childhood teaching programme implemented key teaching tasks and the impact on student teachers' learning. The findings demonstrated that in-depth and ongoing discussions about the key teaching tasks in the classroom prior to practicum helped student teachers connect theory with practice more effectively. Challenges such as limited time to develop in-depth pedagogical understanding during practicum were also noted. The Manukau Institute of Technology team hopes their reflections inspire broader conversations between students, teachers, associate teachers and other ITE providers to enhance key teaching task integration and ensure better outcomes for students and the teaching profession.

Introduction

In 2019 the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand developed a set of requirements for all initial teacher education (ITE) providers to guide the development of new degree level qualifications leading to teacher registration. An important aspect of the requirements was that each provider was to develop a set of key teaching tasks (KTTs) in consultation with sector partners and stakeholders. KTTs are defined by the Teaching Council (2019) as a set of “clearly defined discrete tasks, aligned to the standards” (p.

36). Student teachers develop their understanding of the KTTs throughout their programme and are assessed in practice at multiple points in order to support them to deepen their knowledge and develop professional capacity over time. Graduates of all ITE programmes are expected to be able to carry out the KTTs of their particular programme independently as they enter the teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2019).

During 2019–2020, the early childhood team at Manukau Institute of Technology developed 18 KTTs as part of the redevelopment of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) qualification. The development process was collaborative and extensive, involving regular consultation with key partners such as the programme advisory committee, which is made up of early childhood leaders, associate teachers that support students on the programme, and academics from a range of institutes.

Examples of the Manukau Institute of Technology early childhood teaching programme's KTTs include:

- Integrates into everyday practice and curriculum design opportunities to affirm Māori language, culture and knowledge.
- Consistently models the interpersonal skills and professional behaviours consistent with the commitment of the teaching profession element of the code of responsibility.
- Adapts practices and planning in action according to children's engagement.

The early childhood teaching programme was approved in 2020 and was first taught in 2021 amidst the global pandemic. The pandemic presented unique challenges, particularly in terms of student teachers being able to attend both the regular weekly field based hours (required by the Teaching Council) at their "home" centres and the yearly block practica. In both these settings, the KTTs formed the core of the assessment of practice.

Manukau Institute of Technology's response to practicum during this period has been explored in other research (Perry & Probine, 2020; 2021; 2022). One action was the development of an assessment of practice framework. The assessment of practice framework was created to guide students to record their thinking, informed by theory and research, about each KTT, as well as to document questions, examples from their practice, and future goals.

The assessment of practice framework was initially designed to support students to take ownership in thinking about and reflecting on their teaching practice and to guide

online conversations with their visiting lecturers during the pandemic. However, several other benefits emerged from its use. Students reported that using the framework enabled them to take more responsibility for initiating and leading conversations with their associate teachers and for developing their professional knowledge through collaborative reflection and journaling. Students recounted feelings of empowerment and deeper understanding of their practice (Perry & Probine, 2020; 2021). These findings informed the decision to include the assessment of practice framework in a reconceptualised approach to practicum as part of the redevelopment of the whole Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) programme.

Emerging from several years of disruption, the early childhood education team at Manukau Institute of Technology considered this a pertinent moment to reflect on and critically examine how student teachers are supported in developing their understanding of the KTTs. Team members were interested in interrogating how their pedagogical approaches may be impacting student teachers' understanding and practice and the impact of the integration of the KTTs on student teachers' capacity to teach. This paper examines the findings of a small-scale autoethnographic study which sought to examine these approaches. By sharing this journey, the team hopes that early childhood settings, associate teachers, and other ITE providers can benefit from their approaches in supporting student-teacher understanding of the KTTs. We also encourage others to share their experiences, fostering a broader critical review to ensure the best outcomes for students and the profession.

The role of practicum and assessment within initial teacher education

Practicum is an assessment of student teachers' practical work with children. It is a crucial aspect of any ITE programme as it provides students with an opportunity to put into practice the professional knowledge they are developing in the education setting (Aspden, 2017). Havlik et al. (2019) define this as "active engagement in a rich experience that provokes reflection and change" (p. 1).

In recent years there has been a significant shift in how practicum is approached. ITE providers have shifted from a model of student as "apprentice" to acknowledge "teaching as a profession through reflective academic study" (Starkey & Rawlins, 2011, p. 3). The practicum experience requires the input of early childhood centres, appropriately qualified sector-based associate teachers (requiring full registration) as well as the support of an institution-based visiting lecturer. Students enrolled in ITE programmes in Aotearoa experience practicum multiple times throughout their studies. Practicum placements last a period of weeks, with the duration determined by the

institution. Whilst practices at different institutions may vary, a commonality across all programmes is that students are supported throughout their placements by their associate teacher and are then visited by their visiting lecturer who observes their practice. The student, visiting lecturer and associate teacher then meet for a triadic discussion, where it is determined if the student has met the assessment of practice criteria. Throughout practicum experiences students interact with tamariki, kaiako and whānau in a range of settings across the programme, receiving feedback and reflecting on their practice as they develop knowledge that they then bring to the teaching discipline. Downie and Coombes (2014) suggest practicum is critical in enabling students to “construct their own professional knowledge, to negotiate and shape the curriculum and to make links with theory” (p. 22).

The 2019 ITE requirements were informed, in part, by a literature review which determined the elements of high quality practica in ITE (Whatman & MacDonald, 2017). This review revealed a need to strengthen the integration of theory and practice in ITE, for “transparent formative and summative assessment opportunities to develop and evaluate student teachers’ readiness for teaching” and “the provision of clear criteria for assessment” (Whatman & MacDonald, 2017, p. 3). The Teaching Council (2020) state “it is crucial for teacher graduates to have the knowledge and skills to adapt their practice with new knowledge, current research and teaching strategies throughout their career” (para. 10). In order to achieve this, the Council recognise that students need to develop rigorous knowledge of the Standards for the Profession and to understand how the Standards then inform their developing professional practice throughout their studies (Teaching Council, 2017).

Each KTT is closely linked to one of the six Standards. Whilst previously, students could potentially be assessed on different criteria for each practicum, the introduction of the KTTs means that the same criteria are assessed at multiple points throughout a three year ITE programme. Such consistency enables student teachers to experience the KTTs across a number of education contexts with a diverse range of tamariki and to receive feedback from multiple perspectives (Teaching Council, 2019). Whilst students are consistently assessed on the same KTTs, they are expected to develop their depth of understanding and capacity to enact them as they progress through the programme. At Manukau Institute of Technology, in year one students are expected to achieve each KTT at beginning level, in year two, intermediate level and by year three, at proficient level. Practicum guidelines offer clear guidance for students, associate teachers and visiting lecturers about what is expected at each level, supported by examples of practice.

These changes had significant implications for ITE providers as it became critical that students developed clear understanding of each KTT before embarking on practicum, and that strategies were developed to provoke critical reflection and deepening of understanding and implementation in a cumulative manner across the three years of the degree.

Study design and methods

The study used an autoethnographic approach where the researchers were also the participants. Ellis et al. (2011) describe this as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (p. 273). The six authors of this article are, therefore, both the participants and researchers in this project, giving them first-hand immersive knowledge and experience of the culture of the group involved in these events (Khan, 2018). While the notion of researchers also being participants in research is a key benefit as it gives them first-hand knowledge of the process, a disadvantage of the methodology is the analysis of the research may be subjective (Khan, 2018). As such, we, as the researchers, acknowledge our own subjective lenses on our interpretation of the responses.

Lecturers who actively support students to develop their understanding of the KTTs were invited to participate in the research and to respond to a set of guiding questions developed to support reflection on their teaching of the KTTs and how they value them. The guiding questions were:

- What practices/methods of teaching the KTTs have been most effective for you and why?
- How has your practice in this area changed over time?
- What have been the challenges?
- Do you have any ideas for future practice/for what you might do next? If so why?
- What impact/if any do you think the KTTs have had on students' capacity to teach?

The data were thematically analysed. Terry and Hayfield (2021) explain that this method entails the researchers establishing themes which are patterns based on meaning, as a means of interpreting qualitative data.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the teaching teams' responses, namely: intentionally teaching the KTTs; challenges; and future potential.

Intentionally teaching the KTTs

There was importance placed on strengthening links to the Standards through intentional teaching. We found that each participant/lecturer had made significant efforts to explore the KTTs with students within their classroom settings prior to practicum. For example, one wrote:

I ask them to give me examples or think of stories related to each criterion, as it is easier for students to discuss and write about practical examples. (M.E).

Another wrote:

I have reflected on this a lot and have concluded that I need a range of strategies. In some classes with some students who are willing to share their own practice, we can work as a group(s) to deconstruct what the student has described. In others, I find myself having to make up a scenario to try and role-model what we are talking about. (J.P).

The participating lecturers found that intentional teaching of the KTTs supported students' understanding and linking to personal practice more readily. They valued how the KTTs are practice-oriented, which supports the students' developing understanding of the Teaching Standards. For example, one participant/lecturer wrote:

It has allowed me to be more focused, and to have larger discussions around teaching practice in these areas. It has also spurred me to think of my own pedagogy: how am I teaching my students about the KTTs and is this in a way that is meaningful and authentic for their practice? (L.S).

One participant/lecturer wrote about supporting students to use their assessment of practice framework in class to develop the theoretical knowledge underpinning each key teaching task. She wrote:

I find doing the knowledge/theory section together as a class is important, particularly for the year one class as they're still developing their knowledge around education theory and the literature. For example, we will discuss Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a Standard and then talk through each KTT. Students will suggest links to literature ... and will talk together about what that knowledge/theory looks like in practice. (A.L).

Another participant/lecturer reflected:

Before the development of the KTTs, we would review the assessment of practice criteria prior to students going out on practicum but not in the targeted, intentional, in-depth way that we now do with the KTTs. I think this shift in practice aligns with the Teaching Council, and our aspiration that our students are confident to articulate their practice, why they do what they do in relation to theory and research, and to be able to make clear links with the Standards. I think the more intentional approach in the classroom has further strengthened the links between theoretical/content knowledge and students' practice and pedagogy. (S.P).

These responses highlight a shift in focus in classroom practice where lecturers are dedicating time each week to supporting students to unpack the KTTs prior to practicum.

Overall, the participant/lecturers overwhelmingly expressed a positive impact on students' practice due to the integration of the KTTs. Participant/lecturers noted the consistency of the same KTTs being used throughout the programme allows students to see their progress more clearly and develop the capacity to self-assess. One wrote:

In my opinion, the KTTs have made the Standards "come alive." The Standards can be subjective and broad. The KTTs give the teachers the practical and specific knowledge they need to implement the Standards. (L.S).

Challenges

There were some challenges noted by the participant/lecturers. They identified a range of issues such as "the time and positioning of the practicum" (J.P). Practicum timing is a continuing challenge as there also has to be enough time to support students to

develop their understanding of the KTTs through theoretical and pedagogical lenses before the practicum begins. Another identified that “there is potential for the students to use the KTTs as another tick box they need to complete” (L.S). Similarly, another participant/lecturer shared, “The one challenge I’ve found is that students will focus on their assessment work that has marks/grade attached and not focus too much on working through the KTTs” (A.L). Although the KTTs are assessed in practice, this response highlights that students may not recognise the importance of focusing on KTTs prior to their practicum placement commencing.

Potential for the future

The potential for the future was also mentioned, including further ideas for improving exploration of the KTTs in class. Many of these ideas focused on making changes to their own pedagogy as ITE lecturers, and some suggested creating additional resources. For example, one participant/lecturer shared, “I like the idea of using videos of scenarios that are narrated by various characters rather than just me in the classroom” (J.P) and another shared, “I would like to learn off others and have the opportunity to implement strategies that they are doing with my own class” (L.S).

Discussion

Through our reflective responses and further dialogue, we have recognised that the KTTs allow students to make clearer connections with the Standards (Teaching Council, 2017) and to understand what the practical application of each Standard can look like in practice. The consistency of the KTTs across each year of the programme is particularly important as this allows students to revisit them many times and deepen their understanding over time.

The Teaching Council (2022) declared their aim “is for all newly qualified teachers to be equipped for their first teaching role and have the skills to continue to learn and adapt their practice to meet future challenges” (p. 3). The importance placed on newly qualified teachers being knowledgeable about their own practice has been clear in the Teaching Council’s documentation for some years. The development of the Standards and Code (Teaching Council, 2017) and the now associated KTTs (developed by each ITE provider) means that students can contextualise their developing understanding of their practice in an ongoing manner as they enter the teaching profession.

Whilst we see the consistency of the KTTs across the programme as a strength, we also recognise that this makes it essential that students receive the appropriate support in

the context of the learning environment. Rorrison (2010) argues that learning on practicum is more likely to occur if “it is carefully designed and the learning is not left to chance” (2010, p. 516). Students need to be able to first understand the language of each KTT, and then, beginning with examples from their own and others’ practice, make links to the theoretical and professional knowledge that inform best practice in relation to each KTT. This has meant a significant shift for our team as we have changed our practices to intentionally engage with the KTTs as a core aspect of each practicum paper.

The participant/lecturers identified they are reflecting on adapting their practices as they gain more experience with the KTTs and the needs of students for each practicum. This is a complex process; a view supported by Dayan (2008) who argues that we must find a “way in which students, teachers and supervisors can engage in a democratic process of deliberation and discussion, aimed at advancing professionalism in early childhood education” and that “understanding the complexity of professional knowledge and practice is an important step for all practitioners wishing to improve the quality of their practice” (p. 156). We have also identified that learning from others through professional conversations would be of benefit to develop further strategies and possibilities for integrating the KTTs. Ultimately this could lead to the development of a knowledge base of strategies and resources. We recognise that such conversations would also be of benefit for the wider profession, including associate teachers and other ITE providers.

Where practicum is placed within the semester remains a challenge. There are a number of KTTs aligned with each practicum and ensuring the students have time to familiarise themselves with each KTT in the context of the new course and year level means there is sometimes less time for these conversations. However, as the students become more familiar with the KTTs across each semester, the impact of this challenge of timing may lessen.

Changing the culture of how formative assessment is valued, in order to alleviate the issue of some students approaching the assessment for practice framework and achieving competency for each KTT simply as a tick box exercise is a concern. We recognise there needs to be a shift in how some students value the interface of theory and practice and that they are strongly encouraged to take accountability for not only their learning but to understand that what they do directly impacts tamariki.

Strengthening opportunities for collaborative reflection between the student and visiting lecturer was an effective means of developing students’ autonomy and confidence

during the pandemic (Perry & Probine, 2020). We propose further strengthening opportunities for collaborative reflection in the classroom, as students, associate teachers and visiting lecturers share and develop professional knowledge together. Collaborations and conversations expose students to a wide range of perspectives, as well as fresh ideas for approaching practice.

Whilst we value the consistency of the KTTs within our programme, the fact that each set of KTTs is unique to their institution does potentially present challenges. Lecturers, associate teachers and visiting lecturers all need to think about how to deepen and develop students' practice over time, and how to support students entering programmes at different points so they are not disadvantaged. Exploration of the implications of the development of localised KTTs and approaches to application in classroom practice is something important to consider in future research.

Concluding thoughts

The integration of the KTTs in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) at Manukau Institute of Technology has fostered significant shifts for lecturers who teach practicum papers, in that the KTTs are now intentionally integrated into classroom practices prior to practicum. Through the participant/lecturers' responses, it became clear that opportunities for collaborative reflection and discussion of examples of each KTT are crucial for students to make links between theory and practice, to make connections between each KTT and its related Standard, and ultimately develop their professional knowledge. It is also important to consider how such approaches affirm the professionalism of graduating teachers and their readiness to enter the sector. Whilst we see that the integration of KTTs in ITE programmes has provided opportunities for students to develop their professional capability as they enter the field, we also recognise there is room for further conversations about the pedagogy required to support professional reflection and growth, both in class and in the field. We see a need for developing further resources and a need to create space for conversations across ITE providers and early childhood communities about the KTTs. Wider discussions may support the development of strategies that enhance connections between theory and practice and contribute to future policy directions.

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