



TEACHING & LEARNING
RESEARCH INITIATIVE

NĀU I WHATU TE KĀKAHU, HE TĀNIKO TAKU

Field-based early childhood teacher education: “But they are already teachers...”

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Despite its long history in early childhood initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, there remains a limited research base about the nature of the field-based approach and more specifically student–tutor interactions in the tertiary classroom. This study adds to a growing area of scholarship that seeks to articulate a distinct pedagogical base to field-based teacher education. The tertiary classroom was chosen as the site of study because it affords researchers and teachers opportunity to place an intense focus on students and tutors “doing field-based teacher education” and to explore new understandings that sit apart from traditional pre-service ITE approaches.

Key Findings

Field-based teacher education is a highly social activity

Teaching and learning is mediated and distributed across a web of relationships. Many people are present in the field-based classroom.

The authenticity of experience

Shared experience creates a professional intersubjectivity borne out of both tutors’ and students’ understanding of the realities and rewards of early childhood teaching.

The student is already a teacher

The tutor “has been” an early childhood teacher but the student “is” an early childhood teacher. This situation places demands on both parties yet supports authentic and equitable learning encounters.

Rethinking “transfer of knowledge” in teacher education

Students arrive with knowledge and are asked to convert or translate theory accordingly. The task is to merge the “practice with the theory” rather than to merge the “theory with the practice”.

Major Implications

Field-based teacher education is a highly social activity

Learning to teach is highly contextualised and one needs to be aware of *all* of the relationships in the process and of each person’s contribution (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; McLean, 1999).

The authenticity of experience

Relational aspects between students or tutors and students working within enquiry communities help to shape not only the processes of teaching but also what students learn (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman, 2005).

The student is already a teacher

The knowledge base remains under construction allowing tutors and students to collectively explore possibilities of “ways of knowing” blurring the binary between theory and practical knowledge (Ferfolja, 2008; Taguchi, 2007).

Rethinking “transfer of knowledge” in teacher education

We need to pay more attention to merging “practice with theory” rather than merging the “theory with practice” (Miller Marsh, 2002).

The Research

The field-based approach to early childhood teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand has its roots in the free kindergarten movement where, until the late 1940s, student teachers worked in the kindergarten in the morning and attended teacher training in the afternoons (May, 1997). The continuation of this model in childcare and early childhood education teacher education arose as a pragmatic solution to a shortage of qualified early childhood teachers. The field-based approach challenges teacher education students and their lecturers to constantly construct and re-construct their own “working theories” (Bell, 2004). Currently, field-based ITE programmes support the implementation of the strategic plan for early childhood education, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), and were key to assisting the previous Labour Government to meet its goal of ensuring that by 2012 all regulated staff working in teacher-led early childhood services were registered teachers (or 70 percent registered and 30 percent enrolled in approved ITE programmes) (Ministry of Education, 2008). The current National Government has reduced quality targets for registered teachers to 80 percent. It is difficult to predict how this change will affect enrolments in field-based ITE programmes.

Project aims

This study's aims were to:

- capture the reality and process of field-based early childhood teacher education using the tertiary classroom and learning encounter as units of analysis
- document, describe and characterise the nature and form of field-based early childhood teacher education
- provoke further exploration of conceptual and methodological frameworks for future field-based early childhood teacher education studies
- explore the unique nature of field-based teacher education approaches.

Research question

The research question was:

- What is the nature and form of field-based early childhood initial teacher education?

Within the context of the study, two related questions emerged:

1. What is happening in the field-based initial teacher education classroom?
2. What happens when students are already doing the very activity they are learning about?

Research design and methodology

This study was a descriptive, exploratory case study using ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis to capture the reality of field-based early childhood initial teacher education. The tertiary classroom was chosen as the site of study because it affords researchers and teachers the opportunity to place an intense focus on students and tutors “doing field-based teacher education”. This study provided an opportunity to explore new understandings that sit apart from traditional pre-service ITE models.

The study was carried out by researchers, tutors and students involved in early childhood teacher education and informed by socio-cultural and critical educational frameworks, consistent with early childhood teacher education curriculum and pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Data collection involved direct, detailed description of dialogue, conversations and related behaviours and artefacts as recorded by three researchers across nine tertiary classes. Classes were approximately 3.5 hours in length, with a total of 26 hours of teaching observed. Collection methods included audio-recording and transcription, although pen and paper notes were the main form of data collection, supplemented by researchers' field notes and description of education artefacts such as lesson plans disseminated through paper or whiteboard.

Findings

The findings from this study are descriptive and exploratory in nature. Interactions (n = 128) and discussions were analysed using socio-cultural approaches as a guiding framework.

What is happening in the field based tertiary classroom?

Evidence suggested that tutors contextualise “taught” knowledge in their facilitation of classroom interactions: they make links with the students’ local contexts, and provoke, prompt, question, reflect, theorise practice and share experiences that engage students in the complexities of early childhood teaching. Tutors draw on their own personal and professional experiences to introduce or develop a new subject, concept or practice. This strategy included sharing tutors’ personal experiences of being a student, along with their own family and teaching experiences, to explain personal philosophies of teaching.

What happens when students are already doing the very activity they are learning about?

Students are genuinely interested in seeking and sharing their teaching experiences and constantly examine issues raised in classroom discussions in light of their own work in centres. Relating personal teaching experiences provided students with opportunities for multiple interpretations of practice and opportunities to consider a range of possibilities. Students also had ongoing opportunities to discuss in depth how they understand and implement regulations and policies, to collectively reflect on their professional experiences, and to seek information from other students about a range of teaching approaches.

What is the nature and form of field-based early childhood teacher education?

The key to understanding this approach to initial teacher education is through examining the array of relationships among and between teachers and students that inform the quality, authenticity and richness of student teacher experiences during their programme. We concluded that **humour** and **experience** were closely related concepts that characterised the nature and form of field-based early childhood teacher education. Humour mediated experience, linking the cognitive and affective domains of classroom teaching and learning. Humour-based interactions and learning encounters initially arose out of recognition; it was “funny” because the experience was immediately recognised, shared and understood by all participants. Humour created trust and unity as others “know” and “understand” another’s teaching reality. This mixed sense of fun and relief supported a climate of acceptance and an equity of learning (Bell Hooks, 2010; Brennan, 2007). Tutors also used humour to build rapport with students or refocus classroom interactions. Concurrently, students use humour to build rapport with peers and tutors. We concluded that honest, open sharing of teaching realities are more likely to occur within equitable learning environments pre-empted by warm and humorous interactions.

Discussion

The nature and form of field-based interactions observed in this study created a professional intersubjectivity and depth of discussion more commonly found among colleagues than between students and tutors. Experiences shared in the learning encounters appeared to be of equal significance and as such blurred teacher and learner roles. Learning encounters were often characterised by amused recognition and support of each others’ teaching realities creating a “relational pedagogy” among students and tutors (Mulcahy, 2006).

Henderson (2001, pp. 8–11) describes three basic precepts that characterise student-teacher learning. The first is “intelligence”, which materialises as thoughtful subject learning; the second is “generativity”, expressed as the self as a lifelong learner; and the third is “generosity”, as is seen in social interaction with others. In our findings, it is this third aspect, that of generosity, that characterised the nature and form of field-based early childhood teacher education. Taguchi (2007) explains generosity as adopting an approach that moves away from the certainty of truth to a position of enquiry challenging the traditional roles of novice and expert.

Working in this way requires a generosity on behalf of tutors to share power and the role of “expert”. Our data provided many examples of “power sharing” within the field-based classroom.

Feiman-Nemser (2001) has identified the problematic nature of “transfer” for initial teacher education where knowledge acquired in one setting is seldom used by learners in another setting. Our study contributes to this debate. In the field-based classroom, “transfer” is inverted as students arrive with the knowledge and experience and are then asked to convert or translate theory accordingly. We pose that teacher education subsequently becomes an exercise in trying to make the “practice fit with the theory” rather than the “theory fit with the practice”. The task in field-based teacher education is one of understanding the “multiple ways in which practice is mediated” as the field-based student moves from knowing how and what, to also knowing why.

Limitations

As an initial exploratory study the limitations of scale and generalisation are evident. However, the rich and situated data collected and the frameworks used for analysis of the interactional data provide a foundation for more in-depth study across ITE providers and contexts.

Major Implications for Practice

For practitioners

We found the negotiation of access to other teacher education organisations within TLRI projects to be more complex for tertiary sector research than for partnerships with schools or early childhood services. Tertiary institutions have the research capacity to undertake similar projects, are required to expose their practices to peer scrutiny and are driven by external imperatives for their own staff to be active performance-based research fund (PBRF) researchers.

The research team acknowledges the willingness and commitment of the participant teacher educators to partner us in this collaborative, exploratory study. In this study, the tutors, by choosing to be involved, were committed to investigating the nature of their work and the nature of interactions with the students in their classes. Therefore a high level of trust and collegiality between tutors and researchers was required and achieved. It was important that the researchers were teacher educators with experience teaching in the field-based approach.

An additional dimension has been the development of positive working relationships between three tertiary institutions and a community of practice which extends beyond the research project itself to a more general scenario of support for, and interest in, each other’s work. Significantly, the participants have expressed interest in following through on the findings of this study to research their own pedagogy. This ongoing desire to engage is indicative of the importance of the study for teacher educators’ own professional practice and commitment to ongoing articulation and understanding of effective field-based pedagogies in ITE.

For researchers and the research community

The study provided opportunity for the research team to work collaboratively with others in the tertiary sector to explore the nature and form of field-based teacher education. It provided an opportunity to reflect on personal practice as teacher-researchers, and in collaboration with the participants, to collect ethnographic data and analyse its significance leading to the forming of a community of practice. It involved collective reflection and analysis of the teaching and learning encounters, resulting in shared understandings about evidence informed by observations and also validation of the participants’ practices.

Our findings suggest that in a field-based early childhood teacher education classroom, tutors’ and students’ personal and professional identities inform each other as they collectively engage in the work of teachers.

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