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**Developing identities in the workplace: Exploring student experiences  
of distance early childhood education**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Education (Early Years) at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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## **Abstract**

Distance and field-based early childhood teacher education programmes are a popular option for students in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many students enrolled in these programmes are already employed as teachers in early childhood centres. For these students, the workplace represents an important learning environment. This study draws on theories of situated learning to understand students' experience of distance teacher education by exploring their learning as changes in participation in the workplaces in which they are employed. Using a sociocultural perspective and a case study methodology, interviews with four students were spaced over a trimester of study to gain individual perspectives of their changing participation. Information about students' context was gained from interviews with managers and through centre visits.

Findings from this study suggest that distance teacher education supported students understanding of their workplace and expanded the possibilities for participation that students perceived. The impact of workplace participation on students learning was revealed in a number of ways in this study. Students' interests and insights and the changes they made were aligned with the existing issues and practices in their workplace. Importantly, students' identity within their workplace played a significant role in students' perception of opportunity and motivation to change their practice. This study suggests that early childhood centres can support the learning of students through creating opportunities for them to participate in the ongoing development of their community of practice. This study also suggests that teacher education programmes can support students by exploring learning with and from others as an important goal that develops practice in an early childhood context. The relationship between teacher education and workplace learning is identified as an important focus for further research in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 Introduction.....	1
Rationale for the study .....	1
Overview of the thesis.....	4
CHAPTER 2 Literature review .....	5
What is situated learning? .....	5
Rogoff’s foci of analysis .....	8
Cultural historical activity theory.....	9
Communities of practice .....	10
Summary .....	11
Learning in the workplace.....	11
Informal learning in workplaces .....	12
Cultures and routines in the workplace.....	14
Learning communities.....	15
Summary .....	17
Learning and identity .....	18
Identity and learning to teach.....	18
Identity and agency .....	20
Summary .....	21
Teacher Education – theory and practice .....	22
Teaching practicum.....	23
Closer relationships between theory and practice.....	24
Field-based models of teacher education .....	25
Summary .....	29
Chapter summary .....	29
CHAPTER 3 Methodology and methods.....	31
Theoretical perspective .....	31
Research questions .....	32
Methodology .....	33
Interpretivism .....	33
Case study .....	33
Participants .....	34
Mia .....	36
Tui .....	36
Emma .....	37
Sushma .....	37
Data collection.....	37
Interviews .....	38
Observations.....	39
Data analysis .....	40
Referencing system .....	40
Validity.....	41
Ethical considerations .....	41
Chapter summary .....	43
CHAPTER 4 Results.....	45

Legitimate peripheral participation .....	45
Summary .....	49
Theory and practice.....	49
Understanding practice .....	50
Emerging professional identity .....	52
Summary .....	56
Changing participation in the workplace .....	56
Workplace trajectories .....	57
Negotiating changes in practice .....	62
Summary .....	64
Making a contribution .....	64
Learning communities.....	65
Summary .....	67
Chapter summary .....	67
CHAPTER 5 Discussion.....	69
Teacher education and workplace participation.....	70
The situated nature of students’ learning .....	73
Changes in participation.....	73
Changing identity.....	76
Making a contribution .....	78
Summary .....	80
CHAPTER 6 Conclusion .....	83
Strengths and weaknesses of the present study.....	84
Strengths.....	84
Limitations .....	84
Implications for teacher education programmes and early childhood settings.....	85
Implications for further research.....	87
Concluding comments.....	88
REFERENCES.....	89
Appendix A. Definitions and Course Information.....	95
Definitions.....	95
Course Information .....	95
Students’ courses during the trimester .....	96
Appendix B. Student Initial Interview .....	97
Appendix C. Student Follow up Interview Guide.....	99
Appendix D. Manager Interview.....	100
Appendix E. Human Ethics Application – Massey.....	101
Appendix F. Human Ethics Application – Open Polytechnic .....	102
Appendix G. Student Information Sheet.....	103
Appendix H. Manager Information Sheet.....	106
Appendix I. Consent Form.....	109