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Illuminating the assessment of practicum
in New Zealand early childhood initial teacher education

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Abstract

Practicum is a core feature of initial teacher education. It is the site of induction and mentoring, intended to support the student teacher in their move from neophyte to graduating teacher. Practicum is seen by many to be the most powerful influence in shaping student teachers' practice. Practicum is also a key point of assessment within the initial teacher education programme, leading to a determination of the student's professional development and readiness to teach.

This study illuminates the way in which assessment of practicum was enacted and experienced in four representative New Zealand initial teacher education institutions, offering a critical examination of institutional policy and practice, as well as the experiences of practicum participants – student teacher, associate teacher and teacher educator. Informed by the writings of Barbara Rogoff (2003) a multi-phase, mixed methods QUAL/Quan research design (Creswell, 2003) was utilised to foreground institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that shaped the lived experiences of practicum assessment. In Phase One, key informant interviews with institutional representatives provided understanding of the policies and practices that define the assessment framework for each institution. In Phase Two, an online survey completed by seventy-four student teachers, twenty-six associate teachers and twenty teacher educators captured the experiences of key participants and their descriptions of the strengths and challenges of practicum assessment. Phase Three comprised a case study of one practicum triad from each institution. Interviews with the triad participants examined the way in which assessment of practicum was conducted in the context of relationships, highlighting the critical influence of the interactions between the triad members.

Key findings support a view of practicum assessment as complex and multi-faceted, enacted with institutional parameters, but highly individualised in practice. The need for greater transparency and rigour in assessment practices is implicated in the findings of this study, as well as the importance of meaningful collaboration between participants that addresses entrenched hierarchical patterns within the triad. In highlighting the complexity of practicum assessment, a framework is proposed for conceptualising the way in which the experience of practicum assessment is determined by the influence of multiple institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal variables.

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