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

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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.
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