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Rachael S. Burke

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PREPARING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FOR PRACTICUM IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTRES

Rachael S. Burke

INTRODUCTION

This article reflects on how educators can effectively prepare international students for practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) centres. As Aotearoa New Zealand has become superdiverse due to the arrival of migrants, early childhood settings have also become more culturally and linguistically diverse (Chan, 2020). At the same time, the nation has also seen a rapid increase in the number of international students enrolling to study early childhood education at tertiary institutions (Rana, 2020). This diversification is illustrated in the Master of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) (MTECE) programme at one tertiary institute, where most enrolments are international students. A key component of this 18-month Level 9 qualification is 90 days of practicum in an ECE centre. While a master's programme, it is also an initial teacher education (ITE) qualification. The programme follows a different structure over the three semesters. In the first semester, students attend class three days a week until the final four weeks when they complete a practicum block experience in ECE centres. For the remaining two semesters, students spend two days a week in class, and two days a week in an ECE centre.

For students who are new to the language, culture, and education system of Aotearoa New Zealand, the practicum experience can be particularly demanding. Providing opportunities for reflection can help students to build theoretical and practical understanding, as well as develop confidence in their own abilities. In a similar way, educators working in ITE programmes can benefit from reflecting on the methods they are using to ensure students, particularly those from overseas, are being adequately supported for this experience.

This reflection emerged from teaching culturally and linguistically diverse international students enrolled in a Master of Teaching (ECE) programme and preparing them for their initial four-week practicum block course. To unpack my perspectives and experiences, this reflection was framed and guided by the following question: How can students from diverse cultural backgrounds be better supported to prepare for placement?

CONTEXT FOR REFLECTION

During a professional development course, I was encouraged to critically reflect on my own teaching practice. As part of this course, Smyth's (1989) model of reflection was used to unpack some of the challenges faced by international ECE students as they prepared for their first

practicum experience in an early childhood setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article is a reflective account of professional practice. References to student experiences are presented in a generalised manner and no individual student is identified.

To mitigate the challenges international students experienced, the first step involved introducing three ways to support the MTECE students prior to commencing their practicum. These strategies were visiting a local ECE centre; introducing more games and activities in class that students could add to their kete (basket) of knowledge, and opening up a reflective journal on Moodle for students with formative feedback that I had given. Each of these approaches was underpinned by theoretical considerations. Drawing on the concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the centre visit provided an opportunity for students to authentically engage with the bicultural, play-based context of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Aligned with Brookfield's (1998) reflective model, the Moodle journal was intended to build reflexive capability, while activities such as role plays and group tasks aligned with ako, or the idea that learning is co-constructed (Pere, 1982).

PRACTICUM WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Practicum is a central component of initial teacher education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand, providing a key site for assessing student teachers' readiness to meet the Teaching Council's graduate standards (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017). Within early childhood education, practicum is closely aligned with *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) which reflects a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and promotes a bicultural curriculum for all tamariki (children) (Freeman & Taiapa, 2024; Siu et al., 2023). This guidance requires student teachers to develop culturally responsive practices, including increasing proficiency in te reo me ōna tikanga Māori (Māori language and its cultural practices) (MoE, 2017). Initial teacher education providers are therefore expected to ensure that graduates recognise the unique status of Māori as tangata whenua and demonstrate commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their teaching practice (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019). Practicum experiences are typically structured though triadic relationships between student teachers, associate teachers, and ITE educators. These experiences are critical for enacting bicultural responsibilities in practice (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Freeman & Taiapa, 2024).

However, practicum can present challenges, especially for international students navigating unfamiliar cultural and pedagogical expectations. Many have limited prior exposure to te ao Māori and may have trouble engaging with the bicultural frameworks embed in *Te Whāriki* leading to feelings of cultural disconnection (Cooper et al., 2023; Freeman & Taiapa, 2024). Adjusting to relational, play-based pedagogies and linking theory to practice can also be challenging, particularly for those whose prior educational experiences have emphasised direct instruction (Burke, 2024b; Rouse & Joseph, 2019). These challenges are compounded by the high-stakes and subjective nature of practicum assessment, as well as variability in mentoring relationships and practicum contexts (Aspden, 2017; Aspden & McLachlan, 2017). Targeted support, including explicit scaffolding of bicultural competencies and structured opportunities to integrate theory with practice, is essential to enable international students to meet Te Tiriti obligations and enact culturally responsive teaching within the Aotearoa New Zealand context (Cooper et al., 2023).

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

Cultural concepts shape most of the ideas about appropriate early childhood practice and curricula, but interactions in the early learning space can often go unnoticed or unrecognised as pedagogy because they are accepted as "normal" by those familiar with them (Burke, 2024a; Burke & Duncan, 2015). Navigating these implicit cultural assumptions can be particularly challenging for students who have come from overseas, as they are negotiating their own ideas and expectations about what they perceive early childhood to be in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The ECE visit: Connecting theory with practice

Of the three strategies introduced, the visit to a local early childhood centre appeared to have the greatest impact on students' confidence and understanding of practice. For many students, this was their first opportunity to observe an ECE centre in action rather than learning about it through readings or lectures. The visit provided a concrete context through which they could make sense of theoretical concepts introduced in class.

The experience showed the value of connecting theory and practice through authentic learning experiences. Drawing on the concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), students were able to observe relationships between kaiako, tamariki, and whānau, hear te reo Māori used in context, and see how the principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) were enacted in everyday practice. Following the visit, classroom discussions became noticeably richer, as students were able to draw on lived observations rather than relying solely on readings and prior educational experiences.

One event that provoked a great deal of discussion involved children climbing up a slide rather than using it in the conventional way. Initially, some students interpreted this behaviour as unsafe and questioned why teachers appeared to allow it to occur. Reflecting together on the incident created an opportunity to explore underlying assumptions about children's learning and behaviour. Through discussion, students began to recognise the view of children presented in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which positions them as confident and competent learners and places value on exploration, agency, and risk-taking. This event became a useful prompt for critical reflection, enabling students to examine how cultural assumptions can shape expectations of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 1998; Rink, 2001).

The visit also supported students to develop a deeper appreciation of the play-based philosophy underpinning ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many students came from educational systems where structured learning and academic achievement were strongly emphasised. Observing children engaged in self-directed play challenged some existing assumptions and encouraged discussion about alternative ways of supporting learning. The experience provided a valuable opportunity to consider how cultural contexts influence understandings of childhood, education, and teacher-child relationships (Arndt, 2018; Hedges & Cooper, 2018; Singh & Zhang, 2018).

Another significant aspect of the visit was the chance to observe bicultural practice. Students were able to see how te reo Māori, tikanga Māori, and whanaungatanga (building reciprocal relationships) informed everyday interactions at the centre. Rather than learning about these concepts as isolated course content, they could observe how bicultural commitments were woven through routines, conversations, and teaching practices. This helped students connect programme expectations, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and the Teaching Council's expectations regarding commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and culturally responsive practice (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019).

The visit also prompted discussion about relational approaches to ECE. Students observed the importance placed on reciprocal relationships between kaiako, tamariki, and whānau, a key feature of New Zealand ECE practice (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). For some, these expectations differed from their previous educational experiences, demonstrating the importance of understanding teaching as relational, rather than purely instructional. Discussions around ako further reinforced the idea that learning is a reciprocal process in which teachers and children learn alongside one another (Pere, 1982).

Perhaps most significantly, the centre visit seemed to reduce some of the anxiety students had expressed about practicum. Entering an unfamiliar environment can be daunting, particularly for students who are simultaneously adapting to a new country, language, and culture. Having the opportunity to observe a centre before beginning practicum enabled students to develop greater confidence and a clearer sense of what to expect. This outcome aligns with broader concerns about practicum preparedness among beginning teachers (ERO, 2024) and reinforced for me the importance of providing authentic opportunities for students to engage with practice early in their studies. Of the three strategies trialled, this was the one that most effectively helped students connect theory, practice, and professional identity.

Classwork: Introducing more games and activities in class

In early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, teaching takes place as part of a collaborative team, rather than one teacher being responsible for a particular classroom or group of children. This kind of team-teaching dynamic often contrasts with the educational context in international students' home countries where the teacher might have sole charge of a class of children, resulting in more of a two-party relationship. Yet, as McNairy (1988) has pointed out, teachers can behave quite differently depending on whether they are alone in the classroom or teaching alongside a colleague. When working alongside colleagues, teachers must negotiate roles, share responsibility for decision-making, and make their pedagogical thinking more visible. *Te Whāriki* emphasises the importance of ako, which acknowledges teaching and learning as a reciprocal process (Pere, 1982). However, teachers in other countries may be positioned as the holders of subject knowledge (Han & Han, 2019). This "teacher as expert" discourse portrays teachers as the primary source of knowledge and authority in the ECE setting, rather than positioning themselves alongside children as learners.

Students from educational contexts where teachers are viewed as the "experts" by both children and parents may not be accustomed to engaging playfully or interacting with children at their level. To prepare students better for New Zealand ECE settings, I purposely introduced activities which fostered playfulness in the class. Students took part in role plays where they took on the parts of tamariki, kaiako, whānau, and centre managers, acting out and seeking resolutions to common challenging scenarios. Games, activities, waiata (songs), and karakia (incantations) were shared so that students could use these with tamariki. Students also learnt to work collaboratively in groups which replicates team teaching in New Zealand ECE contexts. For example, for one session students were asked given a range of resources and asked to work together to construct a whare (house) which taught them about working cooperatively, communication, and conflict resolution. This exercise was also a powerful and practical way to cement their understanding of Durie's (1998) Te Whare Tapa Whā model of Māori well-being (another topic they had to master as part of their studies). Feedback revealed that while students agreed that these activities were valuable, they did not rate these as highly as the visit to the ECE centre.

Opening a reflective journal on Moodle for students with formative feedback

The final approach taken in the three-pronged method was opening a journal on Moodle where students were encouraged to reflect each week on a specific event or discussion from class using one of the critical reflective models they had been taught (Brookfield, 1998; Smyth, 1989). This journal was kept private and only shared with me. The intention was to provide a safe space for students to receive personalised feedback they might be hesitant to share with the class, while also allowing them to gradually develop their reflective skills in preparation for practicum. Each week I would set a reflective prompt based around the week's topic and ask them to consider challenges and successes. My own feedback was centred around unpacking students' understandings of the material and offering solutions to challenges or posing further provocations to extend their thinking.

Of all three approaches, the journal was the least successful. Students began by adding reflective feedback on the course topics, and the relationships they were building with their peers, but they gradually did this less as the weeks went by and practicum loomed. When discussing this dropoff of engagement in class, time pressures were cited as the main reason. However, as this piece of work was not graded, it seems possible that students' motivation to complete the journal diminished as pressure to meet other commitments rose. Although the journal was not widely used, critical reflection still occurred through alternative formats, particularly through class discussions, role plays, and the centre visit. While these opportunities were less formal, they still aligned well with Smyth's (1989) model and provided valuable insights into students' developing understanding.

REFLECTION

Smyth's (1989) model of reflection is based on four key concepts: Describe (What do I do?); Inform (What does this mean?); Confront (How did I come to be like this?), and Reconstruct (How might I do things differently?). This section of this article draws on Smyth's model to critically reflect on my practice, employing the first person in line with autoethnography's emphasis on lived experience and educator positionality (Ellis et al., 2010). This reflection is situated within a culturally responsive framework that acknowledges belonging, relationality, and cultural "Otherness" (Arndt, 2018). Arndt argues that ECE teachers from other or minority cultures are often positioned as outsiders to normative assumptions of practice. This reflection recognises that international students entering practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand negotiate marginalisation as they grapple with new ways of knowing and being in early childhood settings.

Describe

Feedback from previous cohorts of students in the MTECE programme revealed that they had not felt adequately prepared for their initial placement experience in a New Zealand early childhood centre. In response, as described previously, I trialled a three-pronged strategy with a new group of MTECE students prior to their first four-week practicum block. This included an ECE centre visit, more playful, collaborative classroom activities, and a reflective Moodle journal with formative feedback.

Inform

Students' cultural beliefs influence how they perceive and interact with children in early childhood settings (Arndt, 2018; Tong, 2023). *Te Whāriki* advocates for child-centred, play-based pedagogy

(MoE, 2017), and these discourses influence the approaches of early childhood kaiako. However, international students who are new to Aotearoa New Zealand may not be familiar with these prevailing early childhood education discourses (Burke, 2024a). Arndt's (2018) work helps frame these students not as lacking, but as negotiating "cultural Otherness" where their prior knowledge can become a point of tension. Culturally responsive pedagogy involves educators creating space for students to examine their own cultural realities and transformations as professionals. In the case of my students, an initial reflective activity became the catalyst for regular, sustained opportunities to reflect on events from practicum, coursework, and pedagogy during each class and through graded assessments on critical reflection tasks and skills using the models developed by Brookfield (1998) and Smyth (1989). This worked to foster students' confidence and deepen their understanding, encouraging them to examine their assumptions and connect theoretical concepts to lived experiences while considering Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood pedagogies.

Confront

Through this reflection, I realised that I had unconsciously assumed a baseline familiarity with young children that many of my international students did not possess. Unlike domestic students, few had experiences with younger siblings or whānau or ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Even those with their own children viewed education through different cultural lenses. Initially, I was reluctant to use class time for games or excursions in a Level 9 programme. My academic orientation, combined with prior experience teaching in Asian contexts, made me value theory and rigour, perhaps at the expense of experiential, relational learning. Given my social anthropology background, I also realised that my own lack of confidence in ECE-specific knowledge led me to lean on the perceived authority of academic literature. At the programme level, staff had underestimated how challenging the transition to life and study in Aotearoa New Zealand would be. Although students attended orientation sessions, these were not sufficient to bridge the cultural divide, particularly in relation to unfamiliar notions of play, biculturalism, and relational teaching.

Reconstruct

As discussed earlier, I have embedded ECE centre visits into the first semester of the programme. These not only help students contextualise theory but promote embodied learning and relational connection which are essential components of culturally responsive pedagogy (Arndt, 2018). Role plays and scenarios now feature more prominently, allowing students to explore unfamiliar dynamics in a safe and collaborative environment. I also changed from managing practicum preparation alone to inviting the Practicum Coordinator into class. Recognising the collective expertise of my team helped me embrace ako with both my colleagues and my students. This reflective process aligns with the autoethnographic view that personal experiences are embedded in wider social, cultural, and political contexts. Examining these experiences can be a powerful way to question dominant norms and foster more equitable educational practices. Regular reflection remains a vital tool for reassessing my teaching in ways that honour students' diverse ways of knowing while supporting their growth as kaiako.

CONCLUSION

This reflective article has identified the importance of targeted support for international students preparing for practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood education (ECE) settings. The diverse cultural backgrounds of students have an impact on their beliefs around the purposes of education, play, and learning, and the role of the ECE teacher. Understanding these factors is crucial for promoting culturally responsive practice (Arndt, 2018) and providing quality practicum experiences (Whatman & McDonald, 2017). This reflection highlights several challenges that may be faced by international students, including cultural dissonance, unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, and anxiety about practicum expectations.

The three-pronged approach—ECE centre visits, interactive class activities, and reflective journaling—proved effective to varying degrees in addressing these concerns. Centre visits emerged as particularly valuable, enabling students to bridge theoretical knowledge with real-world practice while fostering critical reflection. Additionally, role-playing and interactive activities in the classroom helped students to understand the play-based, child-led philosophy of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Reflective journaling proved to be the least engaging. While the journal was less successful, largely due to time constraints and students' unfamiliarity with ungraded reflection tasks, its inclusion demonstrated the importance of scaffolding reflective practice. When structured reflection was embedded into authentic, contexualised experiences such as the centre visit or class discussions, students engaged in a meaningful way and expressed greater confidence. This affirms the value of appropriately situated reflection to support international students for practicum experiences.

This article has several limitations, including its context-specific focus on international students in a single New Zealand teacher education programme. Applying frameworks such as Smyth's (1989) model of reflection encourages educators to continuously assess and refine their teaching strategies, ensuring they are responsive to diverse student needs. This reflective piece highlights the importance of embedding into teacher education culturally responsive pedagogies and relational approaches that support international students' transitions into ECE contexts. Moving forward, greater emphasis on practical, immersive experiences alongside structured opportunities for critical reflection can enhance the preparedness and confidence of international student teachers, ultimately enriching the diversity and inclusivity of Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE sector.

AI statement

Microsoft Copilot was used during the preparation of this manuscript to suggest edits for clarity and style. All final content, interpretations, and conclusions are the responsibility of the author.

Rachael S. Burke (https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0465-7707) is a Senior Lecturer in Human Development at the University of Waikato. Her research focuses on cross-cultural education, social justice, and implicit cultural practices, particularly within early childhood education. She has collaborated on studies examining children's inquiry, rainbow students' safety, and effective strategies for teaching te reo Māori.

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