

# Virtual Practicum

A COVID-19 Story



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## FOREWORD

This monograph details the response the MIT School of Arts and Education made to the different landscape of practicum placements following the first COVID-19 lockdown in Auckland, New Zealand in 2020. Practicum has always been a core element of all three early childhood programmes at Manukau Institute of Technology and the idea of having to react differently to maintain the integrity and robustness of the process drove new ways of approaching this event. The authors of this research invited all the participants whether students, visiting lecturers or associate teachers to comment on their experiences and from this developed a reconceptualization of practicum which far better reflects the socio-cultural paradigms that underpin early childhood education in New Zealand. In this monograph they detail the literature and data and interpretations that are drawn from it. Importantly, they draw together all of this to offer a new model of this important element in field-based initial teacher education which may encourage others to think again about how they perceive practicum.

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Practicum in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes informs the important balance between theory and practice for new teachers. La Paro et al. (2018) suggest it “is critical to ensuring that a high-quality workforce is available to meet the needs of the number of children and variety of settings in which young children receive education and care” (p. 365). Soliman (1997) called it the “decisive test of competency for teaching” (p.35). Although approaches to practicum can vary widely in length, type of setting, and assessment criteria, one commonality across all of these experiences is the system of relationships between the student teacher, their Associate (mentor) Teacher, and their Visiting Lecturer. These interactions were initially conceptualised as equal and collaborative reflecting the bioecological approaches where family, community and societal values and beliefs come together in systems of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, reality, as the literature (Aspden, 2017; Gibbons et al., 2018; Murphy & Butcher, 2011; Ortlipp 2009) and research shows, does not always support this notion (Ellsworth 1992). Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of practicum experiences in initial teacher education, La Paro et al. (2018) argue that there is a need for further research in this area.

### Context

Manukau Institute of Technology is a technical institute situated in South Auckland. They offer a range of field-based, early childhood teacher programmes with differing entry points, including a certificate (level 4), diploma (level 5), and a Bachelor of Education (level 7). Each of these programmes are field-based in nature, meaning students attend face to face classes as well as spending a required number of hours in an early childhood setting each week which is known as their ‘home’ centre. In addition, each programme requires students to spend a number of weeks (ranging from 3-5) each semester on a sustained practicum experience. The teaching practice is assessed against a set of criteria decided upon by the teaching Institute. There is input from the Centre-based teacher (AT), Institution-based lecturer (VL) and the Student Teacher. These placements take place either in students’ ‘home’ centre, or at a different setting (known as their ‘away’ centre). ‘Away’ centre practica are arranged for students by the institute.

In March, 2020, the Covid 19 pandemic resulted in the government of New Zealand enforcing a nationwide lockdown. For students enrolled in early childhood programmes at MIT, this resulted in significant changes to how they studied. Through consultation with, and approval from the Teaching Council of New Zealand, all field-based experience hours were waived for the semester. Students conducted their weekly classes online through learning platforms such as Canvas and Microsoft® Teams meetings. As the weeks in lockdown became months, the MIT early childhood team worked to develop a solution for the longer practicum element required for each course. In consultation with their advisory committee and from further feedback sought from the surrounding early childhood community, the decision was made to implement significant changes to how the semester’s practicum placements were approached. There were three elements to these changes. The first, was to place all students in their ‘home’ centres for a period of three weeks in place of all ‘away’ practicums. The second change was to send all students on practicum at the same time at the end of the semester. A final change was the decision that Visiting Lecturers would conduct their visits virtually through platforms such as Microsoft Teams. They were to conduct a series of weekly ‘visits’ with their students, with the third visit including the Student’s Associate Teacher. These virtual ‘visits’ replaced a single on-site observation conducted by the Visiting Lecturer and triadic meeting (involving the Associate Teacher, Student Teacher and Visiting Lecturer) that has been the Institute’s established approach for some years. These decisions were made to ensure the safety of students and their early childhood communities and yet still maintain the core values of the field-based programme.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this word means student(s) in general when written fully in the lower case and Students of MIT and this research when written with a capital letter.

The early childhood team understood these changes would have a significant impact on students and had potential to cause some anxiety. In response, a reflective framework was created for each cohort. The framework was relatively simple. It outlined each of the criteria students would be assessed on in practice and asked three questions of each, 'What do I know that relates to this criterion?' (Knowledge, theory and what quality practice looks like), 'What are some examples (stories) that I could talk about that demonstrate that I do this in practice?', and 'what have I learned about myself and my role as a teacher that relates to this criterion during the practicum?'.

The aim of this framework was to guide the students in reflecting on their practice, by looking backwards and inwards to plan for what might happen next in the practicum. As the Visiting Lecturers would not be able to observe and assess the student's practice, it would need a triangulation of evidence from the other members of the triadic partnership to show competency in each of the criteria. The purpose of this document was to guide and enhance this developing conversation.

As the practicums unfolded, informal, anecdotal feedback revealed some thought-provoking responses from students. These focused on the weekly 'visits' and the provision of the reflective framework. In particular, the students indicated that the shifts in the planning and documentation for this practicum were helpful in supporting them to more effectively track their professional growth as well as to take greater ownership of their role in the assessment of their practice. This feedback prompted us, as the researchers, to initiate further research in order to discover more about how this unique situation and how our response could now potentially impact our planning for future practicum placements. Therefore, ethical permission was obtained for an anonymous, online survey of the students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers. The survey asked the same two questions (with slight changes of wording to better reflect the individual roles of each partner:

■ **What are your thoughts about the practicum you have just completed?**

■ **Did you find the reflective framework useful in your learning? How and why?**

There was a large response from the students across the three programmes. The survey was sent to 103 degree (B.Ed (ECT), 53 diploma and 27 certificate students. The survey was also sent to 11 Visiting Lecturers and 80 Associate Teachers. Responses were received from 81 students (44.26%), 8 Visiting Lecturers (72.72%) and 18 Associate Teachers (22.5%).

Before moving into the core of the stories from the three triadic partners, it is valuable to create a backdrop of the existing literature surrounding experiential learning in the form of practicum experience and the current issues impacting this approach in initial teacher education.

# Exploring the role of practicum within early childhood initial teacher education: A review of the literature

## Definitions, approaches, assessment

In the context of pre-service teacher education, experiential learning is often termed field-based experience. This takes the form of practicum placements where students spend time working in the industry they are preparing to enter. Havlik et al. (2019) define this as “active engagement in a rich experience that provokes reflection and change” (p. 1). Experiential learning offers students opportunities to actively engage with those already working in the industry and to develop knowledge and skills through a process of reflecting on their experiences (Dayan, 2008; Havlik et al., 2019). An advantage of field-based learning is that students are supported to make strong connections between theoretical and content knowledge they have developed in the classroom and to make sense of this in terms of their work with children (Aspden, 2017; Havlick et al., 2019). Practicum provides opportunities for student teachers to develop the skills to form and maintain relationships with all members on an early childhood community (La Paro et al., 2018). Further, Coombes and Downie (2014) assert that engagement in practicum enables student teachers to experience the messy, complex nature of teaching. These authors argue this allows them to “construct their own professional knowledge, to negotiate and shape the curriculum and to make links with theory” (p. 22). Likewise, Paro et al. (2018) contend that “repeatedly, practicum experiences have been highlighted as crucial to becoming a teacher, and have been identified as one of the most important experiences in teacher education programs” (p. 366).

## Relevance of practicum (experiential learning) in the 21st century

Practicum experience sits at the heart of pre-service teacher education programmes in New Zealand. Field-based programmes have been in operation since the 1960's (Coombes & Downie, 2014). Rawlins and Starkey (2011) assert that in recent years there has been a significant shift in how practicum is approached as initial teacher education providers have shifted from a model of student as ‘apprentice’ to acknowledge “teaching as a profession through reflective academic study” (p. 3). McConnell (2011) maintains that more recent reform in initial teacher education has resulted in an increased emphasis on self-study. This shift aligns with recent changes to the Teaching Council's requirements surrounding re-certification of registration. Registered teachers are no longer required to engage in performance appraisal, a process that requires them to collect evidence of how they meet the Code and Standards (Education Council, 2017).

Instead, the Council's focus has shifted to nurturing professional growth cycles. This shift to a more inquiry-based approach aims to foster collaboration amongst teaching teams and place greater emphasis on how the Code and Standards are integrated within practice (Teaching Council, 2020). Similarly, McConnell (2011) argues that “[s]elf-study recognises teaching as a form of scholarship – a way for teachers to investigate their own teaching and learning” (p. 68). Experiential learning events such as practicum placements expose Student Teachers to the complex, sometimes chaotic nature of the teaching environment, and support students' understanding that solutions to problems encountered are sometimes difficult or impossible to find (McConnell, 2011). Practicum placement, therefore, holds enormous potential for students to experience real world challenges in terms of their own philosophies and knowledge, and to develop the capacity to work collaboratively with others (both at their tertiary institution and their placement centre) as they learn the skills and strategies to inquire into their own practice.

<sup>2</sup> The Teaching Council of New Zealand was formerly called the Education Council.

## Challenges surrounding practicum

The inclusion of practicum experiences can present many challenges. At a macrolevel, Aspden (2017) asserts that “a political climate of increased accountability and greater demand for outcomes-based evidence of programme efficacy means that continued public funding may depend on assessment outcomes” (p. 130). Gibbons et al. (2018) similarly, voice their concern that recent National level policy changes have impacted how students experience practicum. They argue that the omission of early childhood from the Governments initial conversations surrounding “qualification benchmarks for the wider teaching profession” (p. 44) and several changes regarding targets for qualified teachers which have affected how early childhood centres receive funding, have also impacted students, and how students are perceived and supported during practicum.

Supporting students through practicum requires the commitment of early childhood centres, the availability and support of an appropriately qualified Associate Teacher (requiring full registration) as well as the contribution of a Visiting Lecturer. Issues such as availability of time, quality of centre and the experience and professional knowledge of both supporting parties (AT's and VL's) can result in significant variances in students' experiences (Aspden, 2017; La Paro et al., 2018; Havlick et al., 2019).

## Professional knowledge

The knowledge and experience of both the Associate Teacher and the Visiting Lecturer are particularly noteworthy as both play key roles in supporting students to critically reflect on their own practice. McConnell (2011) agrees, arguing “it is not sufficient for student teachers to be embedded in a teaching community only. They must be supported in critical inquiry” (p. 69). Gibbons et al. (2018) assert that the role of the Associate Teacher is both critical and complex. The AT must be able to articulate their own pedagogical choices, their personal processes for self-inquiry as well the ability to guide and support the student to inquire into their own practice. Conversely, Ortlipp (2009) highlights the importance of Visiting Lecturers having sufficient professional knowledge and experience. This author suggests that Associate Teachers are potentially better equipped and better trained in terms of interpreting assessment criteria through the lens of their professional understanding.

## Challenges of the current model of assessment of practice

Competency based assessment, as practicum is, focuses on viewing professional practice against a set of agreed-upon criteria. Students are observed in practice by their Visiting Lecturer, and then, at some point during their placement, engage in a triadic discussion which includes the Visiting Lecturer, Associate Teacher and the Student Teacher. It is usually at this meeting where it is decided if the student meets the agreed criteria.

Ortlipp (2009) questions how Visiting Lecturers view their role in terms of the assessment process and whether they feel able to impose professional judgement on what they see or to what degree they should be fully guided by the set criteria. Zhang et al. (2015) add a further critique to the current model of competency-based assessment criteria concerning the way Visiting Lecturers' judge this largely through a formal observation. They argue that “[a]s a privileged method in positivist discourse, formal observation of episodes of teaching may not achieve its evidentiary purpose in a sociocultural curriculum” (p. 160). These authors further assert that the current model may result in the Visiting Lecturer potentially meeting the Student and entering the early childhood environment for the first time on the day of their observation. Zhang et al. (2015) believe this approach does not consider events that have occurred before or after the observation takes place. Gibbons et al. (2018) support this view, arguing that a focus on meeting competency compromises the student's agency.

An improved approach proposed by Gibbons et al. (2018) is to invite students to be involved in the process of deciding the focus of each practicum. They consider “where assessment is overly prescriptive and standardised student teachers learn to conform” (p. 48). In alignment with this argument, Murphy and Butcher (2011) consider a better approach would be to draw upon the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) as a framework for practicum. These authors, drawing on the work of McDonald (2005) assert that “...students participating in collaborative relationships with opportunities for joint decision making and goal setting would improve their teaching skills and provide opportunities for reflection on their learning” (p. 54). The notion of slowing down the assessment of practice process so that students develop relationships with their assessors is also supported by Gibbons et al. (2018) who argue that “assessment practices for practicum be more flexible to allow for this professional relationship to emerge” (p. 48).

## Professional relationships: Communication and collaboration

La Paro et al. (2018) assert that effective communication between parties is an integral in order for each member involved in the practicum to understand their role. Ma's (2013) study also points to a correlation between relationships and the level of reflection students engage in. She goes on to say:

...high levels of social interaction and collaboration contributed to the establishment of a community of reflective learners, nurturing a space for promoting higher critical reflective thinking through co-creation of new understandings and interpretations for transformative outcomes" (p. 73)

Barbour agrees, but points to the importance of awareness of practice when she states:

...students can be transformed by these experiences, but only if they are able to notice and acknowledge the experiences...students must be engaged and play an active role in their own learning (2013, p. 10)

## Power and relationships in practicum

The issue of power is perhaps a surprising one to be found in this body of literature. It refers to the dynamic relationship between each of the 'players': the student as a member of an Institution and as a member of the centre community, the position of the Associate Teacher in terms of the centre and the Institution and the Visiting Lecturer in terms of representing the Institution and as a guest in the centre. Gibbons et al. (2018) assert that "within practicum placements, the power relations are not easy to trace, and they shift constantly" (p. 48). This could be explained by Aspen's (2017) assertion that practicum is a highly relational process driven by interpersonal interactions between these key players. It is this aspect of practicum that La Paro et al. (2018) argue is worthy of careful examination, particularly given the integral role relationships and interactions also play in supporting children's learning.

Ortlipp (2003, 2009) suggests that Visiting Lecturers may silence themselves, perceiving themselves as powerless if the decision on the Student's practice is disputed. This is based on the idea that the mentor or Associate Teacher sees the Student for longer periods of time than the Institution-based Lecturer. This means that the two views can form an issue when juxtaposed with each other. Being powerless, is also seen as often necessary as the Institution-based Lecturer is a guest in the centre and disagreeing may upset the centre and dissuade them from taking more students.

Whilst Ortlipp (2009) addresses issues surrounding the Visiting Lecturer's perceptions of power whilst operating in an unfamiliar context, Aspden (2017) considers Visiting Lecturers can be viewed by Student teachers and Associate Teachers as holding the majority of the power during the assessment process. This author considers that whilst many Visiting Lecturers are aware of this disparity and work towards creating an environment in which the Student had a greater degree of agency, students can still remain focused on the Visiting Lecturer's role as a summative assessor. Aspden (2017) argues that this may be exacerbated by a lack of clarity surrounding how they might meet assessment criteria. She asserts that "approaches that better select, prepare and support the participants, and openly attend to the subjectivity of practicum assessment are necessary" (p. 140).

The issue of students' perceptions of their power, or lack thereof is particularly concerning. McConnell (2011), drawing upon Fenwick's (2000) work, argues that "differences in power and existing hierarchies may exclude some learners from participation" (p. 69). This can certainly be the case when it is the Visiting Lecturer and the Associate Teacher who are interpreting the Student's practice (Aspden, 2017). The Student may see themselves as not knowledgeable enough to add to the conversation. Aspden's (2017) research found such perceptions can lead to student teacher's adapting their practice according to their perceptions of what they believe their assessor, or their Institution is wanting to see. Whilst this study found these perceptions did not necessarily align with the Visiting Lecturer's expectations in any way, this finding does highlight "the need for greater

transparency and open communication to prevent uncertainty and confusion” (p. 135). A further concern is the vulnerability students can experience regarding relationships or disagreement regarding assessment judgements made by either their Associate Teacher or Visiting Lecturer (Murphy & Butcher, 2011; Aspden, 2017). Ortlipp (2003) asserts that although the triadic assessment model is built on the assumption that consensus can be reached through collaborative discussion, “...consensus in many cases is an illusion because it is gained through someone’s silence” (p. 33). This author argues that there needs to be further emphasis placed on an environment which is safe enough for authentic and critical discussions to take place.

## The roles of the Visiting Lecturer

A complex issue within practicum are the dualist roles of the Visiting Lecturer as both assessor and mentor. Aspden (2017) concurs, arguing “assessment of practicum must weave together elements of supportive guidance for the Student alongside judgements as to the achievement of expected competencies and ultimately, gatekeeping into the profession of teaching” (p. 128). The tension exists in the way that practicum encompasses both formative (assessment for learning) and summative (assessment of learning) assessment, requiring both the Visiting Lecturer and Associate Teacher to balance these sometimes-opposing roles. Whilst overarching governing bodies require clear summative requirements, Aspen (2017) considers that some ITE’s are beginning to place greater emphasis on the formative assessment process.

### a. Assessor

Practicum is positioned in the literature and in Institutions as the assessment of practice, however, it can be situated in different places within individual programmes. For example, it can be tied to individual papers or more holistically, as an ongoing growth in practice for each student (Aspden, 2017). Interestingly, Ortlipp (2009) bases this competency-based process as ‘post-positivist’ thinking that is strongly objective and tied to a set of criteria. This is where the Institution-based lecturer observes and confers meaning on the Student’s practice against the criteria set down. Ortlipp’s discussion, however, also juxtaposes this idea with the professional judgements that are also called in to play when an assessor cannot clearly see the required behaviour and must interpret what they see instead. This is where strong objective views are influenced by the subjective and experiential.

### b. Mentor

As well as their role in the assessment, there is the question of whether the institution-based supervisors should also engage in mentoring the Student in understanding the criteria, articulating their practice and critical self-reflection of what their practice means. Dayan (2008) and Ortlipp (2003) mention this idea of a democratic relationship in which all parties in the triadic relationship are able to contribute confidently and equally to the conversation about competency. In this situation:

The teacher [supervisor] is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who, in turn, while being taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which they all grow.” (Freire, 1970, p. 61)

Aspden and McLaughlan agree with this when they suggest that:

...” positive, open, supportive relationships were seen by teacher educators to be of critical importance for several key reasons, including to support authentic assessment through connection and deeper knowledge of the student teacher; the belief that relationships influence assessment outcomes—both positively and negatively; to develop and maintain ongoing relationships—with the student and the setting; and to promote shared understanding and reduce misinterpretation during the assessment process. (2017, p.26)

## Collaborative reflection: Innovative approaches to practicum

Collaborative reflection is a strong focus in some of the literature (Dayan, 2008; Foong et al., 2018; Ortlipp, 2003, 2009). Traditionally, a common practice during practicum has been the requirement that students create a reflective journal in which they individually reflect on their practice (Foong et al., 2018). Collaborative reflection differs in that instead of expecting the student to be able to deeply and critically reflect on their own practice alone, this approach role-models and adds other ideas and possibilities from both the Visiting Lecturer and the Associate Teacher. Foong et al., (2018) assert that this approach fosters “...higher levels of reflective thinking” (p. 48). This approach also subtly moves the student into the foreground and empowers them to drive this process themselves as they focus on how they work with children. In this scenario, the relationship remains in part assessment-focused but adds a second element of mentoring. As Bullough and Draper point out:

“...mentoring is not simply the road to a successful teacher development but a tale of power negotiation and of positioning and being positioned to influence learning, preserve one’s sense of self and achieve or maintain a measure of control over one’s situation.” (Bullough and Draper 2004, p. 418)

Foong et al. (2018) believe that “[a] collective approach to reflection is capable of bringing new meanings and deeper engagement...In this way, a pedagogy of new relationships between Student teacher, Placement Mentor and College Supervisor is established” (p. 50). The potential for the adoption of or creation of a collaborative reflective model will be discussed in greater depth in part three.

The literature reveals that practicum in the current educational milieu is more relevant than ever. Experiential learning such as practicum allows pre-service teachers to experience real world situations and to reframe their pedagogical knowledge in terms of the complex, unpredictable world of teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Successful practicum placements, however, are reliant on a complex system of relationships including mentors and assessors that are equipped with the resources and professional knowledge to support their students effectively. The notion of power and who holds it is also a complex area worthy of examination, however, a student’s ability to engage authentically in discussing and examining their practice can be supported by shifts to how practicum is structured. Lengthening the process to allow time to develop a relationship between the Student and their Visiting Lecturer and engagement in collaborative reflection across the tertiary setting and the placement setting are two strategies that can support this process. This next section introduces the study design.

## The Study Design

This study came about as the first lockdown of 2020 in New Zealand meant that many centres were not able to accept new people within their 'bubbles'. This prompted the decision to situate all practicum placements in students' home centres. It was also made clear that having a Visiting Lecturer make a physical visit would also not be appropriate. In order to work within these parameters, the teaching team decided to have online visits with the Student each week and a 'virtual' triadic in the third week which included the Student's AT (Centre based supervisor). This was something we had never attempted and had little experience to guide us.

Therefore, the design of the study followed a social constructionist approach following a constructivist grounded methodology. Constructionism is "a set of theories about how individuals' fashion or structure knowledge" (Hruby, 2001, p. 48). Social constructionism "focus[es] on the process by which meanings are created, sustained, negotiated, and modified" (Walker, 2015, p. 37). Both of these elements recognised that each person in the triadic relationship brought their own experiences, values and beliefs to their reflections on the Student's practice (Charmaz, 2017). So, the process was based on negotiating meanings and developing new understanding through the interactions we had weekly in person and through the reflective documents that supported this. A social-constructionist approach also enabled the different world views and previous experiences of the students to guide our reflections and developing theories and made each conversation different from all the others. This methodology also enabled us to follow the data that became available rather than approach with predetermined ideas and theories. Hair and Fine (2012) explain that Social construction is

"the discursive and communal nature of meaning creation, the multiple and contextual nature of "truth," the valuing of many voices, the importance of local, small narratives, and the understanding that power is a crucial factor in how reality and grand narratives are created" (p.605)

As stated previously, ethical permission was received for an anonymous online survey with two questions that were adapted according to the group (Students/Visiting Lecturers/Associate Teachers) being surveyed:

1. What are your thoughts about the practicum you have just completed?
2. Did you find the reflective framework useful in your learning? How and why?

The data received was analysed thematically and compared to the relevant existing literature. The findings that emerged from this analysis are discussed next in part two. Based on these findings, a model for a reconceptualised practicum was developed and is explained in part three.

## PART TWO: FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

This section details the information from the Students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers in response to the first question on the survey and focuses on their thoughts about the way the structure of the practicum was changed in response to the environment. At the same time, it showcases what the Students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers commented about the result of the structural changes.

Overall, the feedback received from Students was positive. 64 of the 81 responses (79.01%) were positive about the practicum. The others (17 of the 81 responses: 20.98%) took the opportunity to comment on the accompanying workload. Of the Visiting Lecturers who responded, 5 out of 8 (62.5%) commented on noticing the change in the Students learning and how their own role in this evolved over the three weeks. All 18 responses (100%) from the Associate Teachers were positive about the practicum process.

Several themes emerged from the data. These were Deep Learning, Visiting Lecturers as mentors rather than assessors, accountability, relationships and a shift in power and the complexities of a student on practicum. The following section details the evidence for each of these themes through the responses of the Students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers.



# Question One:

## The structure and outcomes of the 'virtual practicum'

"Was the best practicum since I started the degree"

### a. Deep Active Learning

The notion of 'deep active learning' was a recurring theme in the data. Students wrote about how the challenge of having to articulate their practice, rather than being 'told' by an observer what they are doing in practice, challenged them to think more deeply about why they do what they do. Although challenging, the Students enjoyed the feeling of being accountable in this process.

#### 1. Students

"Expressing it in words is more challenging"

"It was very good as I had to really think for myself and be accountable for my learning"

"I enjoyed it, found that being forced to talk about my own practice gave me opportunities to identify my growth in an authentic way. It was challenging but so worth it"

"I was more aware of my practice and learned more during it"

#### 2. Visiting Lecturers

"My concern is ensuring the quality of the teaching"

"...it was exciting to hear them talk about their professional growth, deepening understanding of their practice and growing confidence over the three weeks. I think that students having to articulate how they practice and why was really challenging for some, but also hugely beneficial"

"I liked the way the students had to think about their practice to provide the evidence for the criteria"

#### 3. Associate Teachers

"Very systematic and organised"

"I liked how my Student had lots of questions and they were all relevant for her learning"

## b. Visiting Lecturers as mentors rather than assessors

Through the weekly one on one conversations via video or phone, Students felt they were being mentored rather than simply assessed. Some Students expressed how these conversations supported the lead up to the final triadic discussion where they appreciated that there were “no surprises” and they felt less nervous. These conversations were centred around the reflective framework (discussed next) which facilitated these discussions and supported Students to be prepared.

Zhang et al. (2015) question if “[t]he Visiting Lecturer does not know anything that happens before and after the observation, how can s/he make a safe judgment on a Student teacher’s performance based on an observation of a short period?” (p.160). This is a constant concern regarding practicum assessment expressed both in the literature and by the teaching team. This unique situation, however, created an environment in which the weekly meetings and reflective conversations seemed to strengthen the role of the VL in the assessment process. This was because the Student’s issues were known and discussed before the more formal triadic. 5 out of the 7 responses received from the Visiting Lecturers also commented on the change in their role.

### 1. Students

“I enjoyed it because it was the Students who got to tell the lecturers about our practice”

“I loved the way we were assessed, it allowed me to show a lot more about my practice”

“...it was nice to have extra guidance available towards being reflective in our practice and experiences”

“In previous years, we would just be told how our VL thought we met the criteria but never had to justify our practice for ourselves...I believe I gained a better understanding of the criteria and how I personally show this is practice”

### 2. Visiting Lecturers

“It was also great to be able to revisit and draw together threads of stories that continued to be built and revisited over the three weeks”

“I like the idea that I wasn’t telling them about their practice just asking questions that provoked thinking”

### 3. Associate Teachers

“They had shared that they had been having catch-ups with their VL each week so that was really good too”

“We did experience some trouble with the virtual meeting at first, however, we managed to get through the entire process with the lecturer. It worked out great in the end.”

### c. Accountability, Relationships and a shift in power

Interestingly, prior to this practicum, the triadic relationship that sits at the heart of practicum was viewed as an equal and relational one by the researchers. The feedback from all three groups however, drew attention to the way the accountability for interpreting practice has in fact sat predominantly with the Visiting Lecturer. In this practicum, accountability shifted from the Visiting Lecturer to the Student and in doing so, strengthened the relationship with the Student Teacher and the Associate Teacher. The following is the evidence drawn from the responses of each group.

#### 1. Students

"It was very good as I had to really think for myself and be accountable for my learning"

"This allows students to really think about their own practice"

"I got to know my VL on a personal level as well and build a good relationship and rapport. She was able to give me good advice for the following weeks to come and then I could build on it through there"

"I was able to discuss with my Visiting Lecturer how I met all the criteria through examples which was very useful"

#### 2. Visiting Lecturers

"I think I made better relationships with the Students"

"I will be thinking now about how I can create a more supportive space that will encourage students to speak about their practice in a more authentic way. I think that establishing a relationship with the Student is a very important part of this process. I have been thinking a lot about power relationships and how students must feel in these meetings"

"It was a challenging time and we had to do things differently"

"Really enjoyed the engagement with the Students who really had to have a solid handle on how they met the criteria"

#### 3. Associate Teachers

"I think sometimes it's good to see and hear the student in action"

## d. The complexities of being a Student Teacher on practicum

Another recurring theme were the complexities of simply being a student on practicum, particularly in students' home centres where in many cases they have a higher degree of responsibility. Contextual factors such as being in ratio, having limited time due to scheduled break times and a myriad of other factors meant that some students experienced challenges in finding time to schedule weekly meetings with their Visiting Lecturers and felt pressure to complete reflections and other assessment work in addition to their seven hours of contact time with students. These factors may have been heightened by the pandemic climate, however, the early childhood sector has increasingly becoming a complex landscape for student teachers to navigate within (Gibbons et al., 2018). Another factor to consider are the often-complex personal lives of the students themselves, who often juggle study, paid employment, family obligations and other commitments on a daily basis.

### 1. Students

"Awesome, loved it but found it very hard to balance time with all my assessments"

"Difficult due to being employed as well as ill"

"The workload was fine but due to COVID 19 it was a bit stressful getting practicum diaries finished as well as the other assignments"

### 2. Visiting Lecturers

"It took a little organising and tying the Students down to times and technology was interesting"

"They required considerable preparation to document students learning and achievement...Didn't like the lack of visual observation as it was difficult to provide constructive feedback on practice"

### 3. Associate Teachers

"The practicum expectations have been appropriate for the skill level of the student"

"I was confident in my Student's practice and ability but I am not sure it would have been as good if there was a student with questionable practice"

*This next section looks at the feedback from question 2 of the survey. Of the 80 student responses, 69 (86.25%) were positive about the reflective journal document. Of the other eleven responses (13.75%) who were not so positive, 7 simply did not use it, 2 used their own reflective framework, 1 wanted more detail so didn't use the document and finally 1 found the framework restrictive. Amongst the 8 VLs who responded to the survey 7 (87.5%) used the framework or a version of it. Of the AT's 17 out the 18 (94.44%) who responded were positive about the framework. The other respondent was 'not aware' of the framework.*

## Question Two: Introducing Collaborative Reflective Practice

Before moving to the details of the responses to question 2, it may be useful to look at the extant literature to position reflective practice both within teacher education and within this project. The literature on reflective practice is extensive, but it is not the purpose of this work to detail all of it. Here we dip into some of the seminal pieces of work to draw some important points for the process of reflection in initial teacher education and in the processes involved in 'virtual practicum'.

### A brief review of the literature

Reflective practice forms a strong part of many field-based programmes as it enables the student to consider their own practice with children within the present, the past and looking into the future. Dewey & Boysden (1976) described this process as "an endless mulling over of things...It is introspection, theorising and mere speculation" (p.160). Dewey (1933) also explained it as the process of challenging personal values, beliefs assumptions and knowledge to determine where they come from and their impact on the person and their practice. Simply put, it is a process of making sense of events in the present from knowledge built in the past and then applying it to future happenings. Kim and Lee (2002) suggest that "[r]eflection refers to active, intellectual thinking for monitoring one's own learning activity and process, and a continuous internal activity of exploring oneself for new learning. (p.375). Reflection has become an "academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge" (Lynch, 2000, p. 26)

Schon's seminal work on reflective practice drew attention to how practitioners make sense of and then decisions about the events around them in a process of learning from experience. His work focused on the importance of practical knowledge that practitioners develop from involvement in their discipline rather than on the importance of the theory only. This shift focused on the interface between theory and what happens in everyday events. His work discussed the concepts of 'reflection-in-action' (the process of making decisions throughout the day based on the events at the time) and 'reflection-on-action' (the process of rethinking about previous events to make sense of what happened and plan forward) as important elements of the development of understanding professional practice. He positioned this process within the landscape of professional practice where:

There is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution... (Schon 1987, p. 3).

Later, Eraut (1995) disputed the existence of reflection-in-action as having little evidence because teachers were often not aware of doing this or it was difficult to see in the fast-moving environment. However, he added the notion of 'reflection-for-action' which is another dimension of the process in developing and improving practice.

Clearly, reflection has become an accepted part of the development of learning. It can include many levels of thinking from simply describing and assuming to considering the implications of events from many different points of view. At the same time, it can focus on the wider political, ethical and social justice implications for the immediate and wider environments (Harvey, Coulson, & McMaugh, 2016). Mezirow described several layers of thinking involved in reflection from being reflective (how we see think and act) (Bassot, 2016) to probing the assumptions we make, why we make them and how this affects what happens. Bassot (2016) also suggests that “whether we focus on problematic experiences or positive ones, reflecting on them will provide us with opportunities for growth and development” (p.35).

It is this focus on probing beyond simply what happened to engaging with meaning and impact on personal practice that adds many layers to learning. Ma (2013) describes the journey encapsulated in this process as one that “allows for the exploration of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, experiences, myths and needs that ultimately lead to clarified conceptual meanings and heightened self-awareness (p.7). In this view, reflection is an individual process. However, an integral part of this process is to seek multiple perspectives and so a collaborative form of reflection could support this process. Kim and Lee (2002) agree arguing “the activity to compare their own thinking with those of other learners would lead learners to be more articulate themselves.” (p.377). Foong et al. (2018) are also advocates for collaborative reflection, asserting that:

Reflective dialogue is an alternative to the conventional reflection strategies that facilitate reflection and action, enabling group participants to think more critically, uncover taken-for-granted assumptions, and consider multiple perspectives and strategies” (p. 44).

## Reflection and Initial Teacher Education

The process of reflection, therefore, enables students to work through many types of events that may develop at any time in the routine of an early childhood centre and is, therefore, an integral part of the practicum experience.

In terms of initial teacher education, one of the important points emerging from the literature (Light, Chen, & Ittelson, 2012) is that reflection needs to be consciously taught in order for the students to engage with their practice in a deeper and more meaningful way than simply descriptions. They need to see the process role-modelled and engage with colleagues collaboratively to deepen and strengthen the cognitive processes involved in reflective thinking (Epler, Drape, Broyles, Rudd, 2013). The following section discusses how this worked in this research.

## Findings from Question 2

This section outlines the themes that emerged from our analysis of the feedback from question two and the evidence from the Students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers that supports them. The themes were definition and ownership of the roles, guided reflective processes, a place for thinking and questions and a place to think about the criteria of the assessment.

### a. Ownership/defining roles in the triadic relationship

One of the themes suggested that student's recognised their ability to discuss their own practice in a more involved and authoritative way than previously. This was because this had been scaffolded across the weekly conversations and they felt more able to take up this role.

#### 1. Students

"In previous years, we would just be told how our VL thought we met the criteria but never really had to justify our practice for ourselves. Through having to do this, I believe I gained a better understanding of the criteria and how I personally show this in my practice".

"By doing this I actually noticed, recognised and responded to what they're doing by making sure that children are interested, in their pace of learning or play".

"It was really challenging, but I learned a lot from it, and I'm starting to build-up my confidence"

#### 2. Visiting Lecturer

"I liked the way the Students had to think about their practice to provide the evidence for criteria."

"I thought the Students contributed more to the discussions than what I have experienced in the Centre. They really had to think about how they met the criteria...and to explain what they understood about each criterion as well. This made them think about what they had learned through the semester".

"...and it was exciting to hear them talk about their professional growth, deepening understanding of their practice and growing confidence over the three weeks."

#### 3. Associate Teacher

"I liked how my Student had lots of questions and they were all relevant for her learning"

"Yes, they were helpful at giving direction during a time when people were still trying to re-establish some order following lockdown".

## b. Guided reflective process that changed the role of the Visiting Lecturer

A further theme showed that framework was a tool to support the Student's self-analysis and gave them clarity by scaffolding their understanding of each criteria. The framework also served to help them identify gaps and areas of growth over the three weeks. Thus, a change in the relationships within the triadic became evident as the students gradually took over the role of articulating how they met the criteria.

### 1 Students

"It was very useful and it helped with my discussion with my VL and AT".

"I enjoyed practicum this semester. I found it very helpful to have the weekly online meetings with my VL. This meant that when I got to my final triadic, I felt prepared and aware of my progress/areas I still needed to work on"

"We were able to discuss and reflect together"

"The reflective framework that was given was really helpful and important because it evidenced whether the child was actually learning or not because it's important that I capture what the child is developing in their learning. Also, this reflective framework actually gives me more knowledge to respond to the child's needs which is very important".

### 2. Visiting Lecturers

"Liked the way goals could be set throughout the weeks after each 'meeting'. I felt more connected to Students by talking weekly".

"There was something tangible they have reflected on that could help begin a conversation. I think the Students found this really empowering".

### 3. Associate Teachers

"Our Students seemed to know what to do and what to expect"

### c. Provided a place for thinking and questioning

From the feedback to the survey, the reflective framework enabled students to remain focused on the criteria and to track their progress. The weekly visits with the VL also enabled goals to be set and met across the weeks in a different way than the traditional model of practicum.

#### 1. Students

"It was a bit difficult, but it did make me reflect more"

"I felt that it gave me a deeper understanding of my own practice as I could use it to identify how I think I meet the different practicum criteria"

"Yes, I felt it guided me with what I could talk about and it helped me understand the learning outcomes clearly"

"Yes, because the template was useful so we would be prepared before our interviews".

#### 2. Visiting Lecturers

"For the most part, beyond the first meeting where students were nervous, they really articulated some great examples from their practice and about the practice criteria"

"When students used the template or a version of the template, it enabled them to prepare their thoughts and examples of evidence. Some feedback indicated that they found it a challenge but liked the template. Having some type of framework was a good structure and basis for discussion".

#### 3. Associate Teachers

"I think the reflective frameworks are very useful and practical"

"I feel like my Student and I found the supporting documents helpful, especially because it was online on google docs. Throughout the practicum I was able to put up evidence and relate it to what we are currently doing in our room".

#### **d. Providing a place to enhance understanding of the main tenets of the assessment**

The responses to the survey also indicated that the framework was used to unpack and question aspects of practice. With the support of the Visiting Lecturer and Associate Teacher, everyone involved was able to better understand what was required.

##### **1. Students**

"...it helped me and my AT work together and build a really great relationship"

"It triggered better discussions with my AT and team"

"My AT was especially grateful for the template. It meant that the Student knew what they needed to do to achieve the criterion and the AT just had to make sure the Student was on track"

##### **2. Visiting Lecturers**

"It helped to demystify the practicum criteria by asking what they already know, how do they do it in practice and what they want to know/or don't understand yet. They helped to guide conversations with their AT's but also to take ownership of these conversations"

"I think it focused them on what the visit would cover and made it transparent for them. I also think it helped to prepare them for the discussion and meant they weren't trying to 'pull things out of their head'. They had these notes during the discussion to refer to as well, which meant it felt less like a test of their memory"

"The reflective guides were useful to show students where they had strengths and challenges, again allowing them to revisit these in further professional conversations. By the end of the practicum, I believed there to be solid evidence triangulated with the AT about a student sufficiently meeting each criteria"

##### **3. Associate Teachers**

"I really like how the assessment book is prepared and its quite clear and easy to follow for both the Student and the Associate Teacher"

# Discussion and Potential Implications for the 'New Normal'.

The following section begins a process of drawing together of the findings of this research and exploring implications for the future of practicum in initial teacher education and the ever-present 'new normal' of life in and after the pandemic. This discussion is structured around what this could mean for the three key partners involved in practicum, students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers.

## 1. Student Teachers

One of the central themes that arose from both questions was the noticeable change in the depth of learning for everyone concerned in the 'virtual practicum'. At the core of learning in practicum is the interface between theory and practice, between what is learned in the classroom and its application in the field. A challenge noted in the literature is how to fully integrate the two together in an effective balance in the short space of time involved in block practicum placements (Allen, 2011). The feedback received from Student Teachers, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers, reflects that the approach to 'virtual practicum' empowered deeper and more active learning than in previous semesters. The Students were asked to take on the role of reflecting on and articulating their own practice rather than being told how the Visiting Lecturer interpreted it through a relatively short observation. As such, they encapsulated Fullan et al's. (2018) description of deeper learning where they argue "you will find students able to articulate what they are doing and why. They are able to describe the skills they are mastering and the ways they will need to get better" (p. 15).

In many of the responses, the Students suggested that their learning was transformative. Transformative learning is a process of exploring, assessing, and working to change limiting frames of reference and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000, cited in Kirkpatrick, Tweedell, & Semogas, 2011). The mentoring and support role taken on in the first part of the practicum enabled the Students to begin "deepening and extending theoretical knowledge and learning how key concepts are exemplified in practice" (Tanner, 2010, p. 3). In the 'virtual practicum', this was enacted in a way that demanded ownership be taken by the Students in articulating their own practice themselves rather than passively listening to a description of their practice given by someone else. This was commented on many times in the data from the Students.

Although, in essence, the assignment for the practicum did not change for the 'virtual' version, the weighting of role changes did. The weekly 'visits' combined with the use of the reflective framework affected how Students interacted with both their Visiting Lecturer and their Associate Teacher. Thus "[i]t appears that assessment strategies which encourage[d] students to think for themselves, to become critical and creative thinkers, shift[ed] students' focus in a class towards a deeper approach to learning (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 179). These authors go on to mention that their decision to increase the emphasis on formative assessment was "aimed at promoting greater reflection and encouraging the development of students' critical thinking skills" (p.192). In a similar fashion, the 'virtual practicum' was strongly based on collaborative reflective discussion before the summative assessment. Many of the responses referred to the development of confidence in the Students due to the opportunity to articulate their practice in a way they had rarely had to previously. In this way, the reflective framework supported them to develop more awareness and understanding of their own practice enabling them to develop trust in their own abilities (Louizou, 2011).

One idea from which reflection itself stems, is that of teachers' agency in their own professional development. Cubero-Pérez et al. (2019) support this by asserting that:

A practicum of this kind would necessarily require students to view collaborative reflection activities as a positive means of questioning their teaching practice and enabling them to attain a certain level of reflection and knowledge, which will help them identify different possibilities for action [7,39,40]. In short, we are talking about a type of learning situated in cultural practices that are similar to and significant for subsequent professional practice.

Based on the findings of this research, there is value in retaining the use of the reflective framework as the Institute moves back to face to face practicum. Whilst the framework would not be summatively assessed, its inclusion as part of practicum documentation could support the Student's ability to self-assess and track their professional growth over time. This is important, as Aspden (2014) discovered in her research that even though the perspective of the student in assessment was acknowledged, the contribution of student voice was not given a high priority and the final assessment outcome was the sole responsibility of the Institution. The reflective framework is a mechanism through which students can change this by taking more ownership over leading and articulating their learning during practicum. To support students who may find the framework challenging, a set of guidelines will be developed to further facilitate its use. Foong et al (2018) argue that in order for a collaborative approach to reflective practice to be affective, "[a]ppropriate support for all participants to extend their abilities to enrich and sustain higher levels of reflectivity now needs consideration" (p. 50).

The Student feedback clearly suggested that the virtual practicum strongly encouraged students to justify how they met the criteria of the practicum for themselves. The ownership that this gave them could be built on further by creating a place in the practicum assessment where, based on their experiences in their previous practicum, they reflect and plan for the next. In this way the practicum is not just linked to a paper with a set of criteria, it is also seen as an integrated whole across the time-span of the particular programme. This shift aligns with Gibbons et al's. (2018) argument that foci of practicum should be more strongly aligned with each student's unique professional journey and McDonalds (2005) assertion that giving students a greater role in deciding the focus of practicum strengthens their collaborative relationships.

For many Students involved in this research, practicum is a period during which they juggle many commitments both in and outside of their placement centres. The 'busyness' of being a Student Teacher has the potential to be a barrier in regards to students' ability to reflect critically on their practice and learning. There is, therefore, value in thinking about how such time and space could be created. One potential solution is the inclusion of non-contact time during practicum. Another could be moving the summative assessment due date for written reflections allowing students time to process the events of their practicum before handing in their final reflections. Such a change could also give students the opportunity to continue dialogue with their Visiting Lecturer, Associate Teacher, classroom lecturers and fellow students about their practicum experience after the final triadic conversation has taken place.

The critical role of the relationship between the Student and their Visiting Lecturer in supporting transformative learning on practicum is examined next.

## 2. Visiting Lecturers

The findings show that the reflective document and weekly reflective meetings enabled students to take ownership of both the assessment process and their professional practice. In doing this, the role of the Visiting Lecturer in having to interpret what they see against the practicum criteria changed. Because of the altered structure of the virtual practicum, Visiting Lecturers became first mentors, then assessors and the latter role was much more strongly shared with the AT. This shift from the traditional view of the Visiting Lecturer observing and interpreting the student's practice to the student taking greater ownership of this was commented upon by both Students and Visiting Lecturers.

The weekly virtual visits meant both Students and Visiting Lecturers engaged in collaborative reflection with each other over time. This enabled the Visiting Lecturer to mentor and role-model examples as well as use critical indicators to strengthen the Students understanding of the practicum criteria and confidence in their own ability to match them. Tillema et al. (2015) argue "[k]nowledge building is regarded as a discursive activity enacted in interaction between people, aiming for the construction of professional knowledge" (p. 2). Similarly, throughout this practicum, the stronger emphasis on the Visiting Lecturers' capacity to mentor strengthened collaborative knowledge construction. Notions of collaborative reflection and deep learning are strongly linked together where one is essentially the product of the other. Kim and Lee (2002) support this view. They argue that "the collaborative learning situation can provide a social context in which learners can reflect on their ideas or thoughts more effectively than in the individual reflection setting by providing cognitive conflict or the help of capable peers and teachers." (p. 379). This is a clear reflection of the scaffolding of learning inherent in the Zone of Proximal Development expounded by Vygotsky (Lloyd, & Fernyhough, 1999) where new and often deeper learning for the student is supported by a second individual

or teacher. As Kim and Lee (2002) point out “reflective activity is a type of process not limited to individual, internal exploration, but includes the social aspect of learner-learner interaction” (p. 375)

The critical role of relationships in this practicum was clearly evident in the data. In many cases when utilising a traditional practicum model, Visiting Lecturers may not have met the students prior to the assessment of practice visit and may have little access to them before the practicum begins. The limitations of this traditional approach are reflected in the literature. For example, Cuenca et al. (2011) found in their study that “limited contact and a lack of access to both spaces of the student teaching semester led university supervisors to feel disenfranchised in their power to influence the development of their student teachers” (p. 1069). Conversely, in this new form of practicum, students could establish relationships in the meetings before the summative assessment occurred, supported further by the use of the reflective document. Likewise, Cuenca et al. (2011) explain that in their research, the addition of bi-weekly meetings enabled “the development of meaningful collaborative relationships” (p.1069).

In the visits with their Visiting Lecturer, the Students explained what they were bringing forward as a response to the practicum criteria. In this way, they engaged in a process that included...

...high levels of social interaction and collaboration [which] contributed to the establishment of a community of reflective learners, nurturing a space for promoting higher critical reflective thinking through co-creation of new understandings and interpretations for transformative outcomes (Ma, 2013, p.73).

The change in roles through the VL taking on a mentoring role before assessing the final task meant that classic power relationships also shifted. The student, often seen in the literature, as virtually powerless in the triadic relationship was thrust to the forefront and charged with proving how they met the practicum criteria. The importance of establishing collaborative relationships before the formal assessment occurs is therefore critical if students are going to be supported develop the confidence to lead the triadic discussions. This has significant implications for Visiting Lecturers also, who, moving forward, will need to reflect on the purpose of their role and how they are perceived by others involved in the practicum. Visiting Lecturers will need to develop strategies to readdress and realign their approach in order to fracture the historic ‘image of the Visiting Lecturer’ as the power holder in the practicum relationship.

The establishment of ‘pre-visits’ between the Visiting Lecturer and Student prior to the assessment of practice may be one strategy that could enable Visiting Lecturers to build the relationships with the Student earlier. The reflective framework would play a key role in this process. Instead of introducing this to students’ directly prior to their practicum placements, its use could be initiated at the beginning of the semester. Visiting Lecturers could work with students throughout the semester using the reflective framework as a vehicle to guide the conversation and to support students to draw upon what they have recorded there throughout the semester to inform their final reflection and future goal setting. Beginning conversations earlier about the assessment of practice criteria could serve to de-mystify for students, what is expected of them in practice.

A further advantage of extending the discussion surrounding student’s professional growth in relation to the criteria for practicum is to strengthen the moderation element of assessment of practice. The increased documentation of interactions between both the Student and Visiting Lecturer could provide a more robust means to defend a potential challenge to a student’s practice. This would increase the number and quality of evidential artefacts the student collects in order to demonstrate how they meet the Code and Standards (Education Council, 2017) and how their practice has evolved over time (Aspden & McLauchlan, 2017).

In this practicum, the role of the Visiting Lecturer clearly changed with the addition of the element of mentoring. However, due to the remote nature of students’ final assessment of practice there was also a much greater emphasis on the observations of practice made by Associate Teachers. Therefore, the relationship between the Associate Teacher and student is discussed next.

### 3. Associate Teachers

A key finding derived from the feedback from the Associate Teachers and Students was that the Students were able to take more ownership for leading discussions about their learning with their Associate Teachers. Again, this was facilitated by the use of the reflective framework which enabled students to explain their understanding and practice in relation to the practicum criteria in a more succinct manner. As such, the relationships between Associate Teachers and Students were strengthened. Both the findings from this research, and the literature have emphasised the role of authentic and sustained relationships in facilitating effective practicum experiences for students. As the researchers, we have therefore, been reflecting on how we can strengthen relationships between Associate Teachers and Visiting Lecturers moving forward. We acknowledge that the unique circumstances that led to these virtual practicums made establishing these connections more challenging but also, their importance in a revised triadic relationship.

Practicum is an opportunity to test joint processes of reflection-on-action, since it enables students to experience real teaching practice situations in centres, and then to reflect on them with their fellow trainees (Cubero-Pérez et al., 2019). In keeping with this notion, this research demonstrates that there is value in lengthening the overall practicum period to include a 'pre' and 'post' phase. A 'pre-practicum' phase allows time for authentic relationships to be developed between the Student and Visiting Lecturer and a 'post-practicum' period will facilitate deeper critical reflection through engagement with multiple perspectives (including fellow trainees and classroom lecturers). Shifting the lens on how practicum is viewed within the overall structure of a semester could also have implications for the relationship between the Visiting Lecturer and Associate Teacher. As part of the 'pre' practicum phase and initial meeting of the Visiting Lecturer and Student Teacher, a connection could also be made with the Associate Teacher.

Setting up the reflective framework using an online platform such as Google® or Microsoft® could be another strategy to enable all three 'partners' in the practicum relationship to contribute from the outset. Strengthening the connection with the Associate Teacher is significant as Zhang, et al. (2015) assert that supported conversations with the Associate Teacher can deepen the learning process and can result in strengthening the student voice in the practicum. Use of a collaborative online document could also serve to strengthen the Associate Teacher's feedback in terms of robustness as the conversation is conducted and recorded over a sustained period. To support the process of collaborative reflective dialogue centred around the students learning, companion frameworks could be created for papers that are not connected to a practicum placement. The companion framework could guide students to think about their full learning journey in terms of how they meet the Code and Standards (Education Council, 2017) and could be shared with Visiting Lecturers, classroom lecturers, the Associate Teacher and fellow students throughout the semester. Another option is to add a space within the existing framework for students to think about their learning from any companion papers they are studying in the same semester, and to link this learning in terms of their work with children. Both these strategies could also serve to strengthen the triangulation of evidence collected throughout the programme.

Finally, in recognition of the important role Associate Teachers play in practicum the Institute will continue to build on what are currently annual professional development events as a means to connect and initiate relationships.

## Conclusions

There were a range of key concepts that emerged from this research. Focusing on these has enabled several new interlocking theories to foster discussion about the way the requirements of practicum can be engaged with. At the same time, we have been able to consider what a reconceptualised structure might look like as we move in to a 'new' normal. Overall, although challenging, the virtual practicums of 2020 provoked the early childhood team at MIT to reflect on how historically practicum has been approached and to consider what the future could hold.

A key implication of this research is the importance of developing critically reflective teachers in touch with their own practice. The circumstances of this practicum challenged us to think more deeply about how it should be a student-led process. Students should be focusing on their role in children's learning rather than thinking in terms of simply meeting the practicum assessment criteria. Dayan (2008) offers an example of this shift. This author suggests that the Visiting Lecturer could invite the Student to choose one child they have worked with during their observation visit and to tell the story of how they meet the practicum criteria in terms of how they supported their learning. This idea, in alignment with the findings from this research, focuses on empowering the Student to articulate who they are and why they practice as they do as a developing professional. The introduction of the reflective framework to the 'virtual practicum' was critical in supporting such a shift.

Through this research, we have come to understand that many students require better support to guide them through the process of critically reflecting on their practice. Through the introduction of a simple framework, Students were empowered to take charge of this process and they used this document as a vehicle to prompt and lead conversations with both Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers throughout the duration of their practicum. As such, we have been led to question why we are still following a fully assessment-based approach instead of drawing more strongly on the theories that underpin the curriculum we are teaching. Vygotsky's theory of how interaction through language supports understanding and the use of the ZPD are concepts we are familiar with and therefore would slip so easily into a different framework for the way we approach the practicum. Of course, there still needs to be some way of ensuring the Student meets the discipline-based achievement levels as the move towards full entry into the profession, but scaffolding this in a different way, again following the principles set out in Vygotsky's theories can lead to a more articulate, confident, competent beginning teacher. In the next and final section, we outline a proposal for a reconceptualised practicum model underpinned by these concepts.

## PART THREE: RECONCEPTUALISING PRACTICUM

In this final section we draw together all that this research has indicated and offer a model of what this might all look like in practice.

"I would have liked a bit more preparation before the practicum"



## Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, practicum is about an assessment of the practical elements in a programme. It involves set numbers of hours in the workplace developing understanding of how theory and practice fit together, usually with workplace-based experts. There is then an 'assessment' by observation and discussion and involving meeting a number of criteria that are set by the discipline's controlling body in conjunction with an Institution of Study. This research has shown that adding further elements to this process better supports the student's learning.

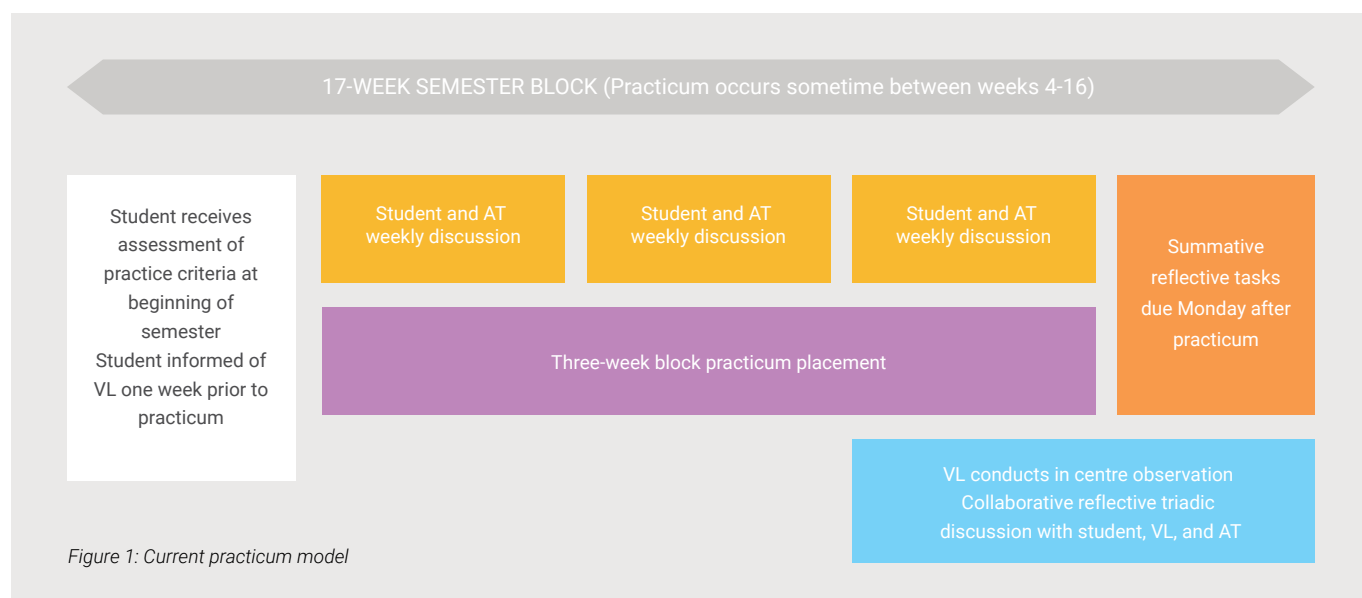
The first element that has been strengthened in this model is the way learning is seen in the practicum. Goodyear and Ellis (2010) argue that tertiary institutions need to reconceptualise how assessment is approached in order to move from current instructional models to embrace constructivist approaches. They argue that in doing so, "the learner is encouraged to be more deeply engaged in a wider variety of learning activities and to take more responsibility for managing their own learning" (p. 109). As early childhood teachers, we understand and work with Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural learning and believe in the importance of interactions supported by language in the building of new knowledge. For this new approach, the shared understandings that come from discussion and collaborative rather than individual reflection are placed centre stage. As Collin and Karsenti (2020) argue, "[s]emiotic mediation is the centre piece of Vygotsky's (1962) theory, which is based on the premise that human cognition and language are developed through social and cultural interactions with significant others" (p. 574).

Other writers agree with this idea of the social and situated nature of learning. For example, Daneshfar and Maharami (2018) suggest "[t]he learning in this theory is defined as a social process formed by human intelligence in the culture or society the learner lives" (p. 601). McDrury and Alterio (2002) comment that "...students discover meaning through social encounter. These encounters enable students to become familiar with the nuances of their contexts and gain assistance with problems beyond their competence" (p.28). So, the process of reflection, discussion and 'trying-out' moves away from the idea of one person's involvement to that of a community of mentors.

Second, at the same time as the collective reflection produced new knowledge for those involved, it also supported the Student through a Zone of Proximal Development as they developed deeper understanding of their own practice with the support of more knowledgeable others (Collin & Karsenti, 2011, p. 576). In this way, the meetings between the Student and the Visiting Lecturer empowered students to consider their practice and articulate it with more confidence. It also begins to develop a shared epistemology where each understand how and what the 'other' has come to know and what it means to them (Dayan, 2008).

Third, the rearrangement of the roles where the Student's position is now clearer and much more is expected, serves to support the emergence of a much more articulate self-assured practitioner who knows about and can discuss relatively confidently their practice. The VL and AT's roles become more strongly focused on triangulation and confirmation of the students thinking. The assessment remains at the end but the onus is now on the Student to explain how they meet the criteria and not for the VL to interpret for them. Finally, the goals for the next practicum are set based on the learning and outcomes of the present practicum.

To better visualise this, the current model of practicum is seen at Figure 1



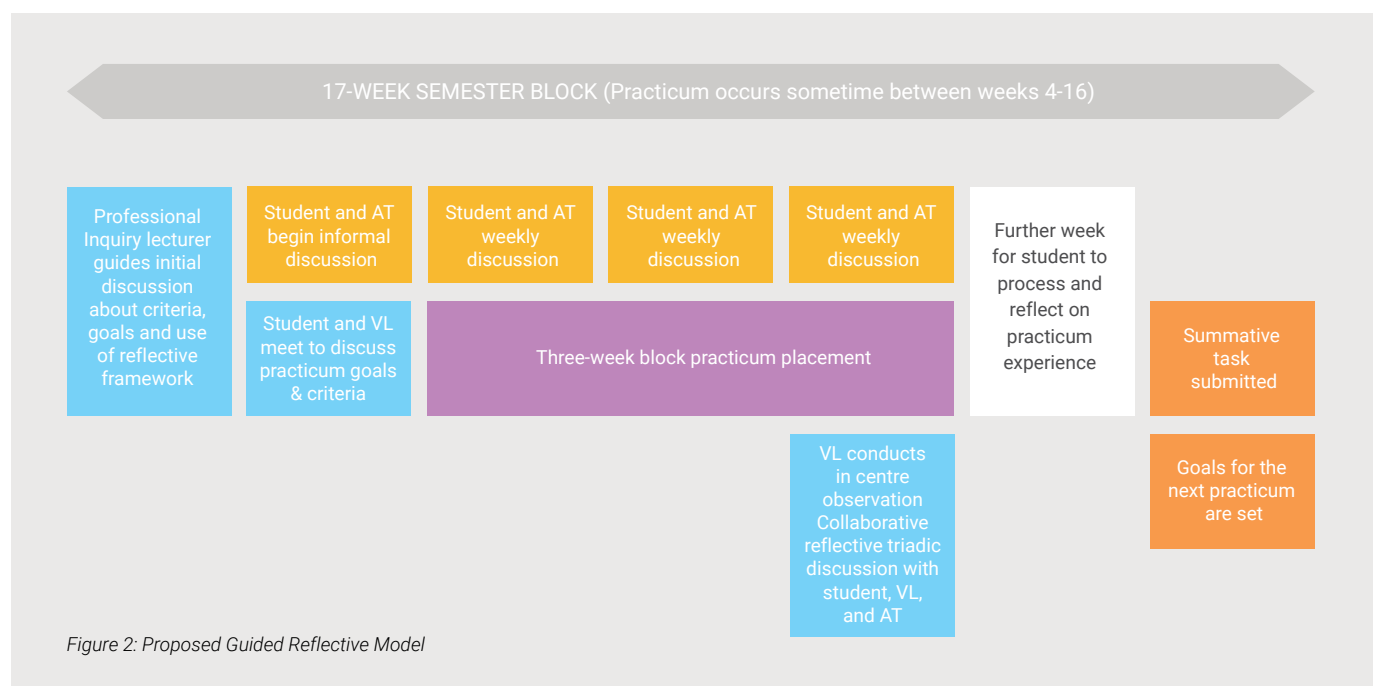
This model involves teaching and assessment. In the run-up to practicum, the classroom teacher who is responsible for the relevant practicum paper will introduce the practicum criteria and answer any questions from the students. The Student is informed of their Visiting Lecturer before they go on practicum and their main conversations throughout the practicum are with the Associate Teacher and other teachers on the practicum site. In this model, there is an expectation that the Student will know what they are doing. Learning in this model occurs through observing the practices of the environment surrounding the Student and reflecting on and discussing with the Associate Teacher about what has happened. In this example, the Student should draw on what they have learned in the classroom (the theory) and use what they have seen (the practice) to change or add to their practice as they go along.

The issues surrounding this model is the emphasis on the relationship between the Associate Teacher and the Student who may only just have met (especially if it is an 'away' practicum). There may also be residual feelings from previous practicum placements and events (Ortlipp, 2003). The Visiting Lecturer's role is to liaise with the Centre, Associate Teacher and Student and to make the final assessment visit close to the end of the practicum's conclusion. This visit can be up to 3 hours consisting of observation and triadic discussion.

In this current model the building of learning sits strongly with the individual Student. It is their place to draw together all the events of practicum, and either make them part of their discipline knowledge or discard them as not relevant. This process is mediated by the Associate Teacher who may or may not be an experienced mentor-teacher. The Visiting Lecturer is not necessarily the class teacher for this practicum and therefore is not involved with the classroom teaching. The Visiting Lecturer does not become really involved until the time of the assessment visit when they are the interpreting voice for the student's practice. Dayan (2008) makes the point that, as early childhood teachers we aim to create student-centred learning, following where the child leads and extending thinking. Yet the practicum assessment in this traditional model is fully lecturer-led and organised in a way that disempowers the student of leading the discussion of their own practice.

A notable observation in this version of the model, is that the practicum placement sits quite separately from the rest of the semester. The teaching, learning and assessments are all conducted by different people with little connection between them other than the student. In this model, the Student maybe asked questions or to explain some parts of what has been seen in the observation but often they must agree with what the Visiting Lecturer has noted rather than being articulate enough about their own practice to showcase what it is that they know. As Ortlipp (2003) questions "Is the structure of the assessment process fair for everyone? Do students hear things that enable the theory-practice link?" (p. 235-6).

Figure 2 shows the possibilities of a different approach explored in this research.



The model that has emerged from this research project has some added elements but has also created stronger connections between existing parts. In this model, the teaching component from the beginning of the semester still includes an introduction to the criteria of the practicum by the relevant class lecturer. However, in this new version, the classroom lecturer will also introduce the reflective framework document and guide students to use this from the outset of the semester. This gives a much stronger emphasis on the pre-practicum reflections of the Student supported by the class teacher and the Visiting Lecturer. Alterio and McDrury (2011) explain the importance of “critical, reflective dialogue and establish[ing] shared meanings that enable us to examine, explain and creatively reconstruct events” (p. 47) in order to reflect and understand them better. This encourages and empowers the Student to focus on what they already know about their practice in relation to the practicum criteria. There is one meeting between the Student and the VL before the practicum begins to establish a relationship and to discuss what the Student already knows. This might include some further questions designed to challenge the students’ reflections to take them deeper in to their practice. There may be further meetings via digital platforms during the practicum to further discuss the reflections and what the Student is discovering about their practice. (These maybe done using online collaborative documents). The Visiting Lecturer will still make the observation and assessment visit to the Centre and enable the triadic discussion with the Associate Teacher. However, it is the student who, with the scaffolded support of their Visiting Lecturer and Associate Teacher, and based on their observations, that leads the triadic. The level of support provided to the Student can be gradually lessened as the Student comes to understand and be able to articulate their practice. As Foong et al. (2018) suggest, collaborative reflection “...gives a different platform for deeper reflection by allowing pre-service teachers to voice their rationale, thoughts and concerns, which otherwise are silenced” (p. 48).

A further change as a result of the findings in this research is to allow a further week for students to complete their reflections that are summatively assessed as their practicum diary. This will enable students to process and reflect on the events of the practicum and set their goals for the next practicum based on what they have learned. In this way, the practicum process is not only embedded in the appropriate papers across the years but each is also linked to the previous and next and so become an integrated part of the Student’s study journey.

We believe the introduction of this new model readdresses how practicum is situated within each semester, providing multiple points for collaborative reflective dialogue with a range of perspectives. It also enables the elements of theory and practice to become equal and integrated partners in the Student’s development of professional knowledge. As Alterio and McDrury (2011) further assert:

...communicative action takes place when we engage others in dialogue for the purpose of making sense of our experience and working together to achieve our respective aims. When we negotiate meanings and purposes rather than passively accept the social realities of others, we enhance our potential to construct new perspectives and bring about change to our practice. (p.40)

## Where to from here?

This research will inform changes made to how practicum and the accompanying practicum diary assessment are approached. From initial beginnings in semester one of 2020 they are being gradually implemented further in semester two. Our intention is to continue our research and to seek the perspectives of Student Teachers, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers to assess the effectiveness of these changes. We also intend to continue our reflection and discussion surrounding the complex web of relationships that exist within practicum and to continue our thinking about how power resides within these spaces. Such reflection will allow us to better equip students to advocate for themselves with regards to their practice. One aspect we have been thinking about is how our role, as Visiting Lecturers could evolve and change throughout the three years of study, for example, shifting from an approach of scaffolding students understanding in year one with the intention of, over time, creating a culture of co-construction. Co-construction positions the learner as agentic and acknowledges the valuable prior knowledge and experiences they bring to a learning encounter. Jordan (2009), in alignment with our proposed new model for practicum, argues that this approach is dependent on rich, authentic relationships where learners feel comfortable to share their stories. It is our hope that further work in this space will enable us to move closer to a place where students, Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers engage in knowledge work with the understanding that each have equal value in this process.

CRITERIA	What do I already know that relates to these criteria?  (This might be theory or something you have read or heard or questions you have)	What are some examples (stories) that I could talk about that demonstrate that I do this in practice?  (This might be what you have already done in a centre or with your own children or have decided to do when you get to a Centre)	What have I learned about myself and my role as a teacher that relates to these criteria during this practicum?  (Again, some of you will not have Centres yet so this might be something you have decided to do when you are in a Centre...don't forget 'why' you want to do this and how you learned about it.)
Builds effective relationships with learners			
Works cooperatively with those who share responsibility for the learning and well-being of others			
Promotes the physical and emotional safety of children			
Demonstrate socially and culturally responsive practice including knowledge of and uses both te reo Māori me nga tikanga in their practice			
Demonstrates an awareness and consistent approach to meeting the professional and personal dispositions/ skills outlined in the graduate profile			

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