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Abstract

Purpose

This paper is about mentoring of initial teacher education (ITE) students whilst on their practicum.

Design/methodology/approach

Informed by a social constructivist theoretical framework, an online survey was used to capture the breadth of quantitative data and the richness of qualitative responses relating to factors that impact student teachers' experiences during practicum.

Findings

Quantitative data indicate many student teachers were positive about the practicum, but this varied across the type of school in which they were placed. The qualitative data analyses showed a greater in-depth understanding of the range of issues that impacted how student teachers are treated in their role as a mentee by the mentor and the wider school community.

Originality/value

This research study repositions the critical nature of effective mentoring of student teachers so that mentor teachers and ITE providers can be informed by the voices and lived realities of these student teachers. The mentoring relationship needs to be critically interrogated to provide a more even and supportive 'playing field' for all student teachers.

Practical implications

Better understanding the experiences of student teachers helps to inform ITE providers of the critical role that mentor teachers play in preparing student teachers. The practical implications are that strategies to develop deep and collaborative partnerships amongst ITE providers, mentor teachers and school leaders, which builds stronger understandings of a mentor teacher's role, are critical in order to support student teachers.

Key words student teachers, primary teaching, mentors, mentees, mentoring, practicum

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Developing initial teacher education (ITE) programmes that are responsive to the sector's needs, as well as changes to education mandates by ministries of education, can be challenging. In New Zealand, a recent policy shift has led to new ITE programme approval, monitoring and review requirements (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2019). Under these new requirements, all current ITE programmes must be approved by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand by January 2022. There has been a clear move towards a change in expectations around the kind of practical experience student teachers require, the nature of the mentoring and support student teachers need and the kind of assessments that will demonstrate they meet the required standards. The role of the practical experience has often been described as a critical element of teaching practicum (Bjørndal, 2020; Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Thompson and Schademan, 2019). Another key element is effective mentoring practices that can support both student teacher and mentor learning (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018).

In New Zealand, where this study is set, student teachers are required by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand to undertake a minimum number of days on practicum

(also referred to as practice learning, professional practice, or placement) with mentor teachers (usually referred to as associate teachers in New Zealand). The mentor teachers provide authentic contexts in today's diverse classrooms and learning environments for student teachers to learn and grow professionally (Darling-Hammond, 2010). During a practicum, student teachers have the opportunity to acquire expertise through observing effective pedagogical practices, interacting with learners, planning and implementing teaching, reflecting upon their teaching, receiving and responding to constructive feedback and constructing a greater sense of themselves as teachers (Bjørndal, 2020). Hence, the social relationships that student teachers construct during the practicums are vital to their personal, cognitive and professional growth (Anderson *et al.,* 2009). These relationships are not just limited to mentor teachers but also include lecturers in their ITE courses, ITE practicum lecturers, other teachers in their placement schools, and children and their families (Anderson *et al.,* 2009; Trevethan, 2017). Often, student teachers are selected by interview into teacher education programmes using criteria which include relevant experiences with children and young adults. The field experiences on practicum can build on these prior experiences and help develop dispositions that student teachers bring from their wealth of life experiences (Lee *et al.,* 2019).

For a student teacher to be in a safe and supportive environment where there is mutual respect, the mentor teacher and the ITE provider must have a shared vision of the goals for the practicum and an understanding of the different roles participants play (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Garza *et al.,* 2018). Continued and sustained engagement between ITE providers and mentor teachers in an attempt to clarify and understand the nature of purposeful, collaborative mentoring is critical and well evidenced in the literature (see, for example, Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018; Garza *et al.,* 2018; Zeichner, 2010). This avoids student teachers having to contend with differing expectations (Trevethan, 2017). Learning whilst on practicum can be very

challenging for student teachers. Not only do they have to contend with dealing with the very emotive aspect of learning to teach (see discussion in Shapiro, 2010, about the relationship between emotion and developing teacher identity), often based around problems of practice and doubts of their own competence (Bjørndal, 2020), but also they are managing the tensions and contradictions implicit in their development (Thompson and Schademan, 2019). The quality of the partnership between the mentor teacher and ITE provider is also critical to student teacher success or failure (Ellis *et al.,* 2020). Frequently, the student teacher is required to navigate a path through their practice experience in an attempt to meet the mentor teacher's expectations within the classroom environment. The stakes are high as the student teacher requires a positive report from their mentor teacher to progress in their initial teaching qualification. However, at the same time, they need to balance the mentor teacher's expectations against the criteria for a pass imposed by the ITE provider. The complexity of this mentoring relationship has been described by Thompson and Schademan (2019) who identified five primary practices that support being an effective mentor teacher. These are negotiating difference, sharing authority, co-mentoring, coaching in the moment, and deep immersion in real-world teaching. Therefore, it becomes even more critical that, in supporting both mentoring practices and student teachers, the triadic relationship between the mentor teacher, the ITE provider and the student teacher is framed around the development of a learning community that is built on collegiality and reciprocity (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008; Zeichner, 2010).

Often, research studies have examined practicum during ITE qualifications from the perspectives of the ITE providers and mentor teachers (see, for example, Haigh and Ell, 2014; Sewell *et al.,* 2017; Sheridan and Tindall-Ford, 2018; Trevethan, 2017). However, student teachers' experiences of practicum are varied and challenging. The whole learning experience can be a very emotive process (Shapiro, 2010) as student teachers try to make

sense of their emerging self-efficacy and teacher identity (Anderson *et al.,* 2009; Bjørndal, 2020), whilst negotiating the complexities of engaging with their mentors (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008).

This study aimed to explore the mentoring experiences of New Zealand primary student teachers during a recent practicum experience within a three-year bachelor's ITE programme. The findings from this research will inform teacher educators' understandings of students teachers' experiences as mentees and the ITE educator's role in supporting mentors' ongoing professional development (see also Hobson, 2016, for a discussion on the need for more support in understanding the often highly variable judgemental practices which occur for beginning teachers whilst on practicum).

Literature

Effective mentoring practice is a hallmark of high-quality teacher education programmes (Black *et al.,* 2016). While student teachers are on practicum, their mentoring can be conceived of as a dyadic relationship (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018). Collaboration between the mentor and the mentee is founded on their joint attitudes and values. Indeed, Ellis *et al.* (2020), in their review of the elements of a quality student teacher mentor, stated that successful strategies of mentoring involve collaboration, collegiality, interaction, a reciprocal exchange of ideas, and the joint creation of new knowledge and meaning. The importance of mentor teachers' ability to develop professional relationships, not only with their colleagues within participatory communities of learning but also with ITE providers, may support the development of a shared professional identity as teacher educators (Andreasen *et al.,* 2019). Establishing genuine and authentic partnerships between institutions and schools, where mentor teachers and ITE providers can create a shared professional identity and have a clear sense of purpose, has been identified as a key feature of high-quality practice that impacts outcomes for student teachers (Whatman and MacDonald, 2017). However, implementing

such a community of practice can be challenging. Often, a misunderstanding of the different 'knowledge cultures' of these spaces can lead to issues of mistrust and disagreement (Andreasen *et al.,* 2019; Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Zeichner, 2010).

The subjectivity of mentor teacher judgements of student teachers may be based on their own teaching service, 'gut feelings' of what type of person fits as a teacher (Ell and Haigh, 2015; Hobson and Malderez, 2013), stereotypes of what is viewed as normative (Phelan, 2005) and mentees' and mentors' experiences of ethnicity and accents (see discussion in Maddamsetti, 2018, about mentor teachers' roles in building inclusive practices where the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of ethnic minority student teachers are acknowledged and accepted). Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018), in their research on student teachers and mentor teachers in Scotland, found that some student teachers had only a 'fair relationship' (p. 61) with their mentor teachers, with collaboration not being highly evident. An improvement in this relationship may increase the reliability of judgements and improve outcomes for teachers.

Mentor teachers are generally intrinsically motivated to commit their own time and support to a student teacher and share their own knowledge and skills for the next generation of teachers (Garza *et al.,* 2018). This selfless concern to provide guidance to an emerging teacher can also enhance a mentee's development. Garza *et al.* (2018), in their examination of mentors' conceptualisations of preservice teachers in the United States, found that mentors were open to new learning which developed their own pedagogical skills and knowledge, and their leadership experience was a valuable skill that enhanced effective mentoring.

Teacher education providers and mentor teachers

Trevethan (2017) explored the views of mentor teachers and those of teacher educators from ITE providers in New Zealand. She found an incongruence between the mentor teachers' perceptions of their mentor role and that presented by the ITE educators. The mentor

teachers' emphasis was on the technical aspects of their mentoring role rather than transformative aspects of teaching, such as improving children's learning. The misunderstanding between mentor teachers and teacher educators can exist even when both parties are committed to supporting reform-minded teaching practice and moving away from a traditional role of teacher mentoring (Wang and Odell, 2007). In other words, as Hobson (2016) advocated, mentors need to take advantage of opportunities to further develop effective mentoring practices. Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018) argued that 'mentoring relationships based on joint decision-making are essential not only for effective teaching and learning … affirming that teachers and student teachers can learn from each other to further develop their professional knowledge and skills through the mentoring process' (p. 65). Trevethan (2017) highlighted the lack of professional development for mentor teachers in their role as high-quality mentors. In this research, she found that mentor teachers were left to draw on their personal constructions of their own experiences when they were student teachers. These findings concur with the recommendations of the Scottish Government in their research on improving teacher education and professional learning of practising teachers (Black *et al.,* 2016). Successful strategies encompassed professional development in mentoring which resulted in mentor teachers more frequently engaging in professional discussions and more teachers engaged in professional learning. Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018) provided an argument for developing a participatory-involved process, where emphasis is placed on mutuality and voice. Such an approach, that recognises and supports mentor teachers as valued members within a community of practice where they are appreciated by ITE educators, can not only improve the self-worth of the mentor teachers but also support the development of their own teacher educator identity (Andreasen *et al.,* 2019).

In New Zealand, there have been changes to the architectural design of school buildings. These large, open, flexible buildings with multiple teachers (two to six teachers) and larger

cohorts of students, often referred to as ILEs (innovative learning environments), are underpinned by a philosophy where students are encouraged to be self-regulated learners with a stronger emphasis on the use of digital technologies (Byers *et al.,* 2018). The move to ILEs from traditional, single-teacher classrooms has provided another challenge in the preparation of graduating teachers. Recent research (Fletcher and Everatt, 2021) on student teachers' perspectives of completing practicums in ILEs found that the more experience student teachers have in ILEs, the more positive they are about teaching in these spaces, including the wider opportunities for collaboration with their mentor teacher and other teachers situated within the multi-teacher ILE.

Thompson and Schademan (2019) described how some relationships between universities and schools are poor or ineffective as a result of student teachers being required to have more of an apprenticeship role, and mentoring practice is therefore limited. Another study (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018) found student teachers sometimes felt they had collaborative experiences whilst on placement, but at other times, they felt like 'outsiders'. They described that, at times, collaboration was constrained, thought of as a task by mentor teachers rather than a core practice of professional learning. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) contended that it becomes the responsibility of ITE providers to support student teachers' intellectual and social capabilities to allow them to responsibly participate within such learning communities.

Furthermore, there needs to be more opportunities for co-generative understanding between ITE educators and mentor teachers, where mentors and mentees work together with a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities during practicum (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018; Andreasen *et al.,* 2019; Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Garza *et al.,* 2018). When mentor teachers and teacher educators develop two-way, sustained dialogue, this can result in the creation of new knowledge and learning for student teachers. This would allow for what Zeichner (2010) termed the 'third space', which occurs when mentor teachers, student teachers and teacher

educators work together in ways that illuminate the boundary crossing (the third space) between learning on the university campus and on school sites during practicum.

Theoretical framing

This research is framed by an epistemology centred on social constructivism. Learning and knowledge are developed by collaborative processes of construction and creation (Ernest, 1995). Underlying social constructivism are context and culture, which are significant in forming deeper learning through internalisation of social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Gaining knowledge, understanding, and reflecting on ideas of others entail engaging in dialogue and open conversations between the mentor and mentee. Social constructivism redirects the mentor's role to providing environments where mentees can collaboratively construct knowledge and learn to mediate the sociocultural space (Adams, 2006). Implicit is the idea of the mentor and mentee being dual agentic in scaffolding and co-constructing learning in safe and culturally relevant contexts. When this does not happen, it may result in what Hobson and Malderez (2013) described as judgemental mentoring (judgementoring), which 'potentially prevents the development of the primary context for learning at this level (the trusting and safe relationship), impedes the mentee's development of informed reflective practice … and negatively impacts the mentee's emotional wellbeing' (p. 101).

The professional relationship between these two key players may comprise two styles of mentoring (Wang and Odell, 2007). First, an asymmetric style between a mentor and mentee can be based on the mentor's power or expertise which may position the student teacher as a visitor within the school, expected to strictly follow the set routines and teaching styles (see discussion in Hobson and Malderez, 2013, around the failure of school-based mentoring to support effective mentoring practices). On the other hand, a participatory-involved approach captures the mutuality and voice within the relationship. Clutterbuck (2004) suggested that

the learning environment needs to be enabling and empowering for mentees. By working collaboratively, the mentor and mentee engage in joint decision-making, with opportunities for the mentee to flourish independently during this participatory-involved process (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018).

The scaffolding framework provided by the ITE provider's requirements for the student teacher whilst on practicum contributes a further dimension, which necessitates a weaving together of the mentor teacher's expectations and those of the ITE provider. For student teachers, the ubiquitous nature of an effective ITE programme is that learning to teach is a collaborative venture between the ITE provider and schools (Mtika *et al.,* 2014). Success in navigating the passage between the joint expectations of the mentor teacher and ITE provider can be heavily influenced by the sociocultural context within the wider learning environment and student teacher's nimbleness to react in a reflective and positive manner to what may be differing expectations (Trevethan, 2017).

Research design

The aim of this study was to gain further insight into the student teachers' mentoring experiences during their practicum in one university's ITE three-year bachelor's degree programme in New Zealand for qualifying primary school teachers. The research questions underlying this investigation were (1) What are the strengths and barriers for student teachers when negotiating their experiences on practicum? (2) In what ways does a student teacher have to navigate between the mentor teacher and the ITE provider's practicum requirements? (3) What factors can influence student teachers' experiences and attitudes towards a practicum?

The mentoring process located in ITE programmes involves archetypal elements such as teacher disposition, effective communication skills and a passion to scaffold student teacher

competence. The differing social dynamics implicit in the role of mentoring student teachers in the diverse range of school types acknowledge the complex nature of capturing the converging factors that can impact the student teachers' experiences. Such complexity is best investigated through multiple research approaches (see discussions in Cohen *et al.*, 2018); hence, a mixed methodology was used to gather data in the current study. This provided a dichotomous method of inquiry where the primary exploration for meaning came from the analysis of the qualitative data, with the analysis of quantitative data being used to support the qualitative interpretations (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003). An online questionnaire was employed to capture the breadth of quantitative data and the richness of qualitative responses from student teachers (approximately one third of potential student teachers) across a three-year teacher education programme.

New Zealand context

ITE providers in New Zealand traditionally develop, deliver and award qualifications that are monitored by a government agency, the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, to ensure the robustness of the qualifications. In New Zealand, ITE qualifications can encompass lectures, online course-specific sites, and workshops. These include quintessential content such as theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning, effective pedagogical practices, knowledge of the curriculum, child development, bicultural practices and learning te reo Māori (the language of Māori who are the Indigenous people of New Zealand), and cultural and special needs of all learners. A statutory requirement of gaining a teaching qualification in New Zealand is that student teachers experience a set amount of time on a practicum, which in a three-year programme is a minimum of 20 weeks of practicum across the three years (Whatman and MacDonald, 2017). Table 1 indicates the overall number and length of practicums for this ITE provider's programme, the days the student teacher is

required to assume the role of a teacher and the main teaching focus during each of these practicums.

Table 1: Profile of student teacher practicums across the three year levels of the three-year degree.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

During this time, the student teacher works with a mentor teacher who oversees their day-to-day teaching activities in the placement school. This mentor teacher is a teacher within the placement school and will have information about the practicum's purpose and the opportunity for training on supporting the student teacher. Mentor teachers volunteer for the role and are approved by the school principal who validates the suitability of the teacher to take on the mentoring role.

In addition, an ITE practicum lecturer from the three-year bachelor's degree programme visits the student teacher to observe them teaching during the practicum. The practicum lecturer provides formative and summative assessment of the learning outcomes for the practicum and offers support and mentoring to the student teacher. They liaise with the mentor teacher about the progress of the student teacher in the practicum. Twice during the year, ITE practicum lecturers undertake professional development focusing on topics such as mentoring and dealing with challenging situations. Professional development workshops have been offered to mentor teachers, but these have had varying and often low attendance, possibly due to the intensive nature of teachers' workloads. ITE practicum lecturers have access to the online practicum course site, which includes practicum documents, readings, guidelines and weekly updates. A proportion of practicum lecturers are sourced externally and include retired principals and teacher educators.

Sampling and data collection procedures

For this investigation, criterion sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Patton, 1990) was used, with student teachers in Years 1, 2 and 3 of the three-year ITE degree invited to complete a questionnaire via their university email. The questionnaire was developed to explore student teachers' views on their experiences on practicum. It comprised questions on the respondent's background, a series of statements about the relationship between the student teacher and their mentor teacher, and open-ended items that allowed respondents to report their own views about their work with their mentor teacher, the support offered, whether they felt part of the wider school community of learning and what opportunities they had to discuss their learning whilst on practicum.

The questionnaire included an introductory section which outlined that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time without penalty and they could skip a question and leave any answer blank by selecting 'prefer not to answer' if they felt uncomfortable with a question. The email was distributed to student teachers soon after completion of their practicum and included a link to a university Qualtrics site where the questionnaire could be completed. This aligned with a time in the academic calendar when there were less demands on student teachers in regard to assignments. Data were collected by one of the authors who was not involved in the design of the degree and did not assess or teach the student teachers; participants were informed of this and were ensured confidentiality of their responses about the practicum. In regard to any risk to the reputations of mentor teachers, as the student teacher responses were anonymous and student teachers were on practicum throughout New Zealand at several hundred different schools, it would be very difficult to identify a mentor teacher with any degree of accuracy.

Five items were specifically related to the mentoring support of the student teacher: (1) 'My associate teacher involved me in evaluating my practice learning', (2) 'My associate teacher involved me in choosing my practice learning goals', (3) 'I was able to discuss my practice learning with my associate teacher', (4) 'I felt supported by my associate teacher during my placement', and (5) 'My associate teacher was a good mentor'. Additional items focused on the wider school community and the relationship with the practicum lecturer: 'I felt a sense of belonging at the school during my placement', 'I did not feel part of a learning community on my placement', 'I felt the staff at the school supported my practice learning', 'The relationship between my associate teacher, professional practice lecturer and myself did not support my professional learning', and 'My professional practice lecturer was a good mentor'. Each item was responded to on a 5-point scale, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* and a central neutral response. Space for comments about these statements followed the forced-choice responses.

The Qualtrics survey was distributed by email with an explanatory letter to all Years 1, 2 and 3 primary degree students after they completed a practicum. The first page asked for informed consent to take part in the study, and about one third of students on the programme indicated consent and completed the questionnaire. Response rates were 71 of 210 students (33% response rate) for Year 1 students, 38 of 170 students (22% response rate) for Year 2 students and 60 of 160 students (38% response rate) for Year 3 students. The differing response rates amongst the year levels is potentially indicative of the demands of other courses within the programme at the time of the surveys and the level of engagement in additional work related to their courses. However, it may also relate to feelings about their studies – see the results described below.

Student teachers were asked about their last placement as we assumed that this would be a recent, and therefore their most salient, professional placement experience which would help

with better recall of details and provide an assessment of up-to-date processes in schools. Statements about their experiences, therefore, also focused on this last placement. A final aspect of schools that we asked the student teachers about was a result of changes that have occurred to the structure of schools over recent years in New Zealand, particularly following the earthquakes around the city of Christchurch seven to eight years before the current study.

The need to rebuild or repair schools has led to the adoption of more flexible school spaces – sometimes referred to as ILEs. This experience is likely to be different from the student teachers' own school experiences, and we wanted to explore how this affected their views of working with a mentor teacher. The multiple teachers in the more flexible classroom space may increase collaboration between mentor teacher and student teacher, as well as provide opportunities for more discussions with teachers across the school. In contrast, the more traditional classroom may allow for more focused support from a mentor teacher and make it easier to observe how the student teacher interacts with children in the class.

Demographics of research participants and practicum contexts

In this study, student teachers were predominantly female and aged between 18 and 22 years. Information from student teachers who volunteered to take part indicated that the last professional placement of the majority was in a state school (87%). Over half of student teachers (52%) were placed in a full primary school (Years 1 to 8), although a sizeable group were placed in a contributing primary school (39%); a contributing primary school is one that covers school Years 1 to 6 only. Most placement schools were in a city (41%) or a town (40%). The majority of these schools were decile 6 to 10 schools: only 29% of student teachers were placed in decile 1 to 5 schools. Deciles indicate the socioeconomic levels of the community around the school, and most schools serve the community within which they are placed; hence, deciles are indicative of the socioeconomic background of many children in a

school, with lower deciles indicative of high levels of poverty and deprivation within a community. The majority of student teachers were placed in English medium schools, whilst 21% reported being placed in schools where the teaching was in both English and Māori. However, placement schools were divided between predominantly New Zealand European backgrounds of children (43% of students were placed in such schools) and a more multicultural mix of children within the school (54% of students were placed in these schools). New Zealand European is the dominant ethnic group (48%) in New Zealand schools, with Māori (25%), Asian (14%), Pasifika (10%) and a range of other ethnic backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Quantitative

Data analysis

The 10 questions of focus (five on the mentor teacher relationship and five related more to the school community) were analysed in terms of frequency of responses. These were then considered in terms of three variables of interest within the study: the year group of the student, the decile of the last placement school and the type of classroom space that was typical of the last placement school. Year group was simply based on the three years within which the student teacher was studying at the time of the study. Decile was coded as low (1 to 4), medium (5 to 7) and high (8 to 10) to avoid analyses including small cell sizes. Type of classroom space was based on four descriptors: (1) school classrooms, mostly newly built ILE spaces though with some adapted ILE spaces, (2) mixed ILE classrooms and traditional classrooms in one school, (3) traditional classrooms adapted to ILE spaces (typically involving removing dividing walls between single-teacher classrooms), and (4) traditional classroom school (typically one teacher per classroom). Tables 2 to 4 show the results of comparisons of these three variables on the frequency of responses to the 10 statements; most

frequent (modal) responses are bold. There were some missing responses to Likert items on the questionnaire, but these comprised only one or two missing data points for each question.

Frequency tables have the advantage of retaining the data in their original form: that is, the number of respondents for each alternative answer, which allows clearer interpretation of the findings from such a questionnaire. This allows two alternatives to be contrasted by the number of responses to each, rather than transforming responses into numbers and interpreting these transformed data. (A transformation to numbers would lead to odd interpretation about scores such as 3.1 differing from 3.5, and the meaning of these values that fall between response options – this would be particularly problematic around the mid-point of the scale as it is unlikely that a 'neutral' response would fall simply at the mid-point between an agree versus disagree response.) Analysing frequencies also maintains the original non-parametric form of the data and avoids problems of violating assumptions of parametric data, particularly when using a questionnaire designed specifically for the purpose of this study. Therefore, appropriate non-parametric analyses were performed (Siegel and Castellan, 1988). For each statement, a χ^2 analysis was performed to look for differences between the year-group levels, deciles and classroom-type variables. Standardised residuals were calculated for each frequency to determine if an observed value was larger (positive residuals greater than 1 indicated by a single underline) or smaller (negative residuals less than −1 indicated by a double underline) than expected based on the distribution of frequencies.

[Tables 2 to 4 about here]

Findings and discussion

Overall, student teachers' views were positive about their experiences in their placement school and relationship with their mentor teacher. In terms of the three variables investigated

to determine if they influenced these views, there was little effect of school decile on student teachers' views: views were very similar whether the student teacher's last placement was in a lower or higher decile school. Given the sometimes-perceived pressures on teachers in lower decile schools, this is a notable finding – though, as indicated, fewer lower decile schools were included in the data set, possibly indicating that other lower decile schools did not feel able to support student teachers because of their workloads.

However, in contrast, there was an effect of classroom type on some of the statements. This seems to suggest that those who had experienced their last placement in a school with mostly built ILE spaces indicated more positive responses about their interactions with their mentor teacher and the school. There was also an effect of year group, which seems to suggest less positive or more variable responses from student teachers in Year 2 of the programme – an effect that may also be associated with the lower response levels of the Year 2 cohort. With the highly complex nature of student teacher experiences within the degree programme, we are unable to identify specific factors or reasons for this variability. However, it is worth noting that in Year 2, student teachers experience only one practicum, and this is in Semester 2. This aspect warrants further consideration as it might be a specific effect of the timing of the practicum or the student teacher experience within the individual schools at that point in time. These two effects (of year group and classroom type) seem to be somewhat independent: around 20% to 25% of Year 2 student teachers were in each of the four classroom types, suggesting that any effect of classroom type was not simply due to a large number of Year 2 student teachers experiencing that classroom type as their last placement. The slightly more positive statements from those last experiencing a purpose-built ILE school may be due to the collaborative nature that these types of classrooms require of teachers. Supporting a new student teacher would also require the mentor teacher, and other teachers in the group, to work together to support the student teacher. It may be that such classrooms are

ideal spaces in which to develop collaborative teaching skills – though placements in a traditional, single-teacher classroom may also be needed for student teachers to experience these spaces and the needs of such a classroom.

Qualitative

Data analysis

The design of the research study was driven by the research questions, and this influenced from whom the data were collected and how these would be collected and analysed. The analysis strategy drew on particular analysis processes used in grounded theory, which included open/initial coding, axial coding and selective coding strategies (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This provided a model of systematic inquiry where the data could be compared. The open-ended qualitative responses items were analysed by identifying the initial themes to develop coding categories (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006). Not all students included qualitative responses. Following the analyses, axial coding was used to detect any connections between the initial coding, such as availability of the mentor teacher to discuss issues with the student teacher and the importance of regular feedback. Last, selective coding was used to find the main concepts that reappeared on a frequent basis (Charmaz, 2003; Neuman, 2000). The qualitative data provided a differing lens to understand the student teachers' contrasting experiences on practicum. Two overarching themes emerged: mentoring role of the mentor teacher and the community of practice within the placement school. These illustrated the differing aspects that impinge on the complexities of providing authentic experiences in the classroom for student teachers.

Findings and discussion

1. Mentoring role of the mentor teacher

Mentoring is a critical role in the development of a student teacher (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018; Trevethan, 2017). Some of the student teachers shared how they experienced mentor teachers who appeared to lack time to give quality support.

> Sometimes I felt it was hard to find the time to discuss things with my associate teacher. Teachers are extremely busy people. (Year 1 student teacher)
>
> As my associate teacher was very busy with a lot of things, I sometimes felt that I would go for two to three days at a time without ever having a conversation with her. In these moments, I sometimes felt a bit isolated and very worried that I would not get the opportunity to gain the teaching and learning experience that I required. (Year 3 student teacher)

Another issue was that some of the mentor teachers did not appear to read and understand the criteria set by the ITE provider that student teachers were expected to accomplish whilst on practicum. This led to feelings of frustration for the student teacher and evidenced a lack of cohesion between the school and university contexts: 'I felt my associate teacher did not have time to watch the briefing videos or read the guidelines provided to support [student teachers]' (Year 2 student teacher).

There appeared to be a disconnect in the 'third space' which can bring together the mentor teachers and ITE educators. This aligns with the concerns expressed by Zeichner (2010) in their rethinking of the connections between practicums and university-based teacher education. Furthermore, being new to the mentoring process was another challenge, as indicated in this student teacher's experience: 'I was my associate teacher's first student

teacher ever and they struggled to understand what was required to support me as a student teacher' (Year 2 student teacher).

This lack of connection and joint understanding between the university and the mentor teachers concur with findings of prior research (see, for example, Trevethan, 2017; Zeichner, 2010).

Other student teachers perceived that discussions with their mentor teacher were around general matters of teaching practice but lacked quality opportunities to collaboratively unpack the explicit acts of teaching (Hudson, 2013). For example, one student teacher said, 'The discussion with my associate teacher was always around general practice … again time was a problem, quality time with the associate teacher in class' (Year 1 student teacher).

A participatory-involved approach (Wang and Odell, 2007) that captures the mutuality and voice within the relationship between the mentor and mentee appeared to be sought by some student teachers: 'It is more beneficial to have discussions and observations from the associate teacher. We did not use it at all to negotiate my learning' (Year 2 student teacher). Similarly, differing styles of mentoring were evidenced, with some mentor teachers using a more asymmetric style (Wang and Odell, 2007) where they initially expected the student teacher to follow the practices of their mentor teacher:

> My associate teacher was very young (I am in my 40s) and I was her first student. Over the five weeks we built a great relationship but it wasn't easy at first. On the first day, she introduced me as practising and told the children they would still need to ask her the questions. However, by the end of the practice even after my full control time finished I was still taking the class while she was able to do testing etc. (Year 3 student teacher)

There was a range of experiences amongst the student teachers, with several experiencing very supportive and nurturing mentor teachers. For example, this student teacher's comment was similar to many other responses: 'I was extremely fortunate to have a very supportive associate teacher who was experienced and knowledgeable' (Year 3 student teacher).

Other student teachers had opposing experiences to their peers:

> My associate teacher was not interested in having a student teacher. Other members of staff were supportive. (Year 2 student teacher)
>
> Unmotivated, disinterested associates who don't know how to support a pre-service teacher is the real problem with this course. (Year 3 student teacher)
>
> I was often compared to [previous more experienced] students at my school so felt inadequate or pressured to undertake tasks I didn't feel equipped to do. (Year 2 student teacher)

Any relationship has two sides, and the perception of one party may not reveal the fuller context which led to these student teachers feeling negative about their mentor support. Nevertheless, from these students' perspectives, this was their lived reality. These findings align with the call by Zeichner (2010) to address the perennial problem of a lack of explicit and focused connection between the ITE courses and practicum experiences.

2. Community of practice within the placement school

As a student teacher, professional learning is clearly situated within their community of practice in the wider context of the whole school. The complexity of engaging in the process of learning during practicum means that the development of relationships in this space is a highly valued component of the experience. Student teachers valued those opportunities where they were able to feel more integrated and be part of a team. This student teacher, similar to others, said,

> An inspirational part of placement was the syndicate I was in. There were two recently trained teachers, another with high expectations. My associate teacher was trained in the last ten years. Seeing the team working together regularly to plan, support and provide so many opportunities for the children was brilliant. (Year 2 student teacher)

Student teachers were very aware of the opportunities provided by such relationships and felt that they could also position themselves as part of the community. Indeed, they saw the benefits of being treated more as an active participant in the relationship:

> My associate teacher and the staff made me feel welcome from day one. I also contributed to the successful learning environment by positioning myself as the learner and later stepping up to be the tuakana [Māori word for teacher] in the learning environment. (Year 3 student teacher)

However, building effective relationships can be challenging. There was not always the level of collaboration between the mentor teacher and other teachers within the school:

> It was such a shame to be welcomed with open arms by all of the staff … only to be blindsided by my associate in my final week. Even the principal provided me with a lot of support, but my associate teacher could not do the same. (Year 3 student teacher)

Student teachers were perceptive to the ways in which other teachers in the school regarded them. Whilst trying to become established within a learning community, student teachers saw a number of challenges. Some student teachers were able to build constructive relationships with the wider school staff, who were willing to work cooperatively with them (Trevethan, 2017), whilst others were unable to move beyond 'pseudo-community' (Grossman *et al.,* 2001; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008). This is where a community may have the external facade

of certain shared values and beliefs, but it is not evident when interacting with all staff in a school.

> Only some staff members made me feel welcome. I was mainly ignored by the others. (Year 2 student teacher)
>
> As opposed to my other placements though, I don't feel a part of the crew. There have been no team meetings except for PD [professional development], nothing to do with planning or a catch up in the syndicate since I've been there. I hardly see the principal with his staff and I feel a bit disconnected. (Year 3 student teacher)

The wider school staff was perceived by the student teachers as another critical part of their practicum placement. Although much of the criteria's focus for the assessment of a successful practicum is the time the student teacher spends with the mentor teacher in the classroom, part of being an effective teacher is having the opportunity to be a valued member of the school community. This finding from our study highlights the wider mentoring nature of a whole-school community in growing and developing confident and effective emerging teachers.

For many student teachers, their experiences on practicum evidenced the high calibre of a supportive, school-wide community. For example, these two student teachers' comments are reflective of many others:

> I felt very lucky that for my first placement I got such a fantastic school. I felt like I slotted into the learning community well and I felt a sense of belonging to the classroom and wider school. (Year 1 student teacher)
>
> My placement school was a community full of support, humour and belonging. I felt part of the team quickly and I was sad to leave. (Year 3 student teacher)

From a social constructivism perspective, the teacher's role and that of the wider school community is to provide environments where student teachers can mutually construct

knowledge and mediate the sociocultural space through relationship building and developing social and emotional skills (Adams, 2006). Practicums are high stakes for student teachers as they provide a crucial site for controlling entry into the teaching profession (Haigh and Ell, 2014). Problems in the assessment of practice in the practicum can lead to non-graduation into the teaching profession. Thus, the challenges faced by the student teachers in this study corroborated how, in these high-stakes practicum environments, they needed to cautiously and skilfully navigate the complexities of professional learning with their mentor and other individuals in their school setting.

Conclusion

In this study, the student teachers reported a wide range of experiences as mentees whilst on their practicums. Notwithstanding that the mentor teachers were situated in a wide range of contexts with differing architectural school buildings, socioeconomic areas, ethnicities and language mediums of instruction, which provides the variability and richness of becoming a resilient and flexible teacher, there appears to be explicit factors that impinged on the quality of the mentoring for some student teachers. Some student teachers reported an apparent lack of professional commitment by their mentor teacher in their knowledge of the requirements for the practicum, little time provided for professional dialogue and feedback, and a general sense of disinterest by some mentors (and in some cases by the wider school community) in supporting the student teacher. This finding reinforces the call by Hobson (2016) in his ONSIDE Mentoring framework that advocates for mentoring to be off-line (non-hierarchical), non-judgemental, supportive of mentee's wellbeing, individualised to the needs of the mentee, developmental and growth oriented and empowering the mentee to be more autonomous and agentic. Yet, for many other student teachers, the practicum environment and quality of mentoring provided opportunities for positive professional growth. Of interest was that students who had been in an ILE, rather than a traditional, single-teacher classroom,

were more positive about the mentoring relationship with their mentor teacher and the wider school community. It may be that in an ILE, developing positive and collaborative professional and collegial relationships are a prerequisite to developing a generative learning environment.

This wide variation in the experiences reported by these 210 student teachers aligns with findings from Hudson and Hudson (2011) in their research in Australia, which reported haphazard mentoring by mentor teachers, lacking in sound theoretical frameworks. Mentor teachers, as Garza *et al.* (2018) outlined, are intrinsically motivated to provide guidance for the student teachers and commit time and wisdom to support student teachers. The important duality of the ITE educators and the mentor teachers in the 'third space' is an area where further collaborative work can be undertaken to enhance the experiences and learnings of student teachers. As Hudson (2013) and Parker (2010) contended, the quality of the mentoring a student teacher receives is key to building the capacity of ITE providers to develop high-quality graduating students. Within a social constructivism framework, the dual-agentic roles of the mentor and the mentee call for the scaffolding and co-construction of learning to occur in a safe and supportive environment (Wang and Odell, 2007).

A key message from this study, which explored student teachers' lived realities of their practicum experiences, is that the quality of communication between both parties who hold the power of decision-making in regard to entry into the teaching profession (the mentor teacher and the ITE provider) needs to be in tune. Critical interrogation of ways to develop deep and collaborative partnerships amongst ITE providers, mentor teachers and school leaders, which builds stronger understandings of the role of a mentor teacher, is critical. Hobson and Malderez (2013) in their research on mentoring in England suggested several factors which could improve the effectiveness of mentor teachers. Concurring with these researchers, we advocate for a national approach to preparation of mentor teachers, not only

in ITE but also internally within schools. For this to occur, mentor teachers need to be released from some of their other responsibilities so they can give quality time and reflection to the critical role of being a mentor.

Additionally, we call for further research into the role of the ITE practicum visiting lecturer within New Zealand, who is the conduit between the ITE provider and the mentor teacher. Similar to the discussion by Zeichner (2010) of teacher educators internationally, in New Zealand, some ITE providers outsource practicum visiting lecturers (e.g., recently retired principals and teacher education lecturers) who, though very competent and dedicated, may have little authority or opportunity to be part of the decision-making processes within teacher education courses and qualifications. This 'black spot' in research within New Zealand will provide wider understandings on the complexities of effectively supporting all student teachers.

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Table 1

Profile of student teacher practicums across the three year levels of the three-year degree.

	Number of practicums	Number of weeks on practicum	Days of assuming the role of teacher	Main teaching focus
Year 1, Semester 1	1	2 weeks	0	Observations and small-group teaching
Year 1, Semester 2	1	4 weeks ideally at the same school and with the same mentor teacher as in semester one	At least 3	Group and class teaching
Year 2, Semester 1	0			
Year 2, Semester 2	1	5 weeks	At least 6	Group and class teaching to sequential days in role of teacher
Year 3, Semester 1	1	5 weeks	10–12	Sequential days in teacher role
Year 3, Semester 2	1	5 weeks	13 –15	Sequential days in teacher role

Table 2. Responses (frequencies) to statements by students in the three year groups.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Chi-Square
1. AT involved me in evaluating practice learning	Year 1	**44**	22	3	2	0	**17.17**
	Year 2	12	**17**	5	2	2	**p = .028**
	Year 3	22	**29**	4	4	1	
2. AT involved me in choosing practice learning goals	Year 1	**31**	**31**	7	2	0	13.24
	Year 2	8	**18**	4	6	2	p = .104
	Year 3	**24**	**24**	5	6	1	
3. Discuss practice learning with AT	Year 1	**46**	22	3	0	0	***13.89***
	Year 2	14	**19**	2	2	1	***p = .085***
	Year 3	**28**	26	4	2	0	
4. Supported by AT during placement	Year 1	**56**	8	5	1	1	**20.27**
	Year 2	**18**	9	3	5	3	**p = .009**
	Year 3	**36**	16	1	3	4	
5. AT a good mentor	Year 1	**49**	14	6	1	1	7.95
	Year 2	**17**	12	5	2	2	p = .439
	Year 3	**36**	13	7	3	1	
6. Sense of belonging at placement school	Year 1	**49**	18	4	0	0	**16.21**
	Year 2	**17**	10	8	2	1	**p = .039**
	Year 3	**37**	17	4	2	0	
7. Did not feel part of learning community	Year 1	0	0	5	25	**41**	***14.56***
	Year 2	1	3	7	13	**14**	***p = .068***
	Year 3	2	3	5	**26**	24	
8. Felt school staff supported practice learning	Year 1	**38**	29	4	0	0	**20.66**
	Year 2	11	**16**	10	1	0	**p = .002**
	Year 3	**31**	25	2	2	0	
9. Relationship between AT, PPL and myself did not support learning	Year 1	0	1	3	29	**38**	**15.53**
	Year 2	1	7	1	14	**15**	**p = .050**
	Year 3	1	5	6	**24**	**24**	
10. PPL a good mentor	Year 1	**41**	25	4	1	0	3.41
	Year 2	**19**	14	4	0	1	p = .906
	Year 3	**33**	20	5	1	1	

Note: Standardised positive residuals (greater than 1) are indicated by a single underline. Negative residuals (less than −1) are indicated by a double underline. Most frequent (modal) responses are bold. Chi-square analysis significant at .05 level are bold, italics-bold are approaching the significance level. AT refers to Associate Teacher (referred to as mentor teacher); PPL refers to Professional Practice Lecturer (referred to as practicum lecturer).

Table 3. Responses (frequencies) to statements by decile of last placement school.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Chi-Square
1. AT involved me in evaluating practice learning	Decile 1–4	**16**	14	2	4	1	5.42
	Decile 5–7	**25**	22	4	2	0	p = .712
	Decile 8–10	**35**	31	6	2	2	
2. AT involved me in choosing practice learning goals	Decile 1-4	11	**17**	4	3	2	9.37
	Decile 5–7	**24**	18	4	7	0	p = .312
	Decile 8–10	27	**36**	8	4	1	
3. Discuss practice learning with AT	Decile 1–4	**18**	17	1	1	0	2.80
	Decile 5–7	**28**	21	3	1	0	p = .946
	Decile 8–10	**41**	27	5	2	1	
4. Supported by AT during placement	Decile 1–4	**24**	4	4	3	2	5.51
	Decile 5–7	**34**	12	2	3	2	p = .702
	Decile 8–10	**49**	17	3	3	4	
5. AT a good mentor	Decile 1–4	**23**	7	3	3	1	6.19
	Decile 5–7	**28**	17	6	1	1	p = .626
	Decile 8–10	**48**	15	9	2	2	
6. Sense of belonging at placement school	Decile 1–4	**24**	8	3	1	1	5.64
	Decile 5–7	**29**	16	7	1	0	p = .687
	Decile 8–10	**47**	21	6	2	0	
7. Did not feel part of learning community	Decile 1–4	1	1	5	11	**19**	2.57
	Decile 5–7	1	2	4	**23**	**23**	p = .958
	Decile 8–10	1	3	8	30	**34**	
8. Felt school staff supported practice learning	Decile 1–4	**16**	14	7	0	0	9.65
	Decile 5–7	24	**26**	1	2	0	p = .140
	Decile 8–10	**37**	30	8	1	0	
9. Relationship between AT, PPL and myself did not support learning	Decile 1–4	0	4	3	**19**	11	5.67
	Decile 5–7	1	3	3	19	**27**	p = .685
	Decile 8–10	1	6	4	29	**36**	
10. PPL a good mentor	Decile 1–4	**22**	12	3	0	0	7.74
	Decile 5–7	**25**	22	6	0	0	p = .460
	Decile 8–10	**43**	25	4	2	2	

Note: Standardised positive residuals (greater than 1) are indicated by a single underline. Negative residuals (less than −1) are indicated by a double underline. Most frequent (modal) responses are bold. Chi-square analysis significant at .05 level are bold, italics-bold are approaching the significance level. AT refers to Associate Teacher (referred to as mentor teacher); PPL refers to Professional Practice Lecturer (referred to as practicum lecturer).

Table 4. Responses (frequencies) to statements by type of classroom in last placement school.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Chi-Square
1. AT involved me in evaluating practice learning	Built ILE	**32**	19	4	1	0	
	Mix ILE	11	**20**	0	1	0	**23.25**
	Adapt ILE	**12**	5	3	2	2	**p = .026**
	Traditional	22	**24**	5	4	1	
2. AT involved me in choosing practice learning goals	Built ILE	21	**26**	7	2	0	
	Mix ILE	12	**15**	3	2	0	13.46
	Adapt ILE	8	**11**	1	2	2	p = .337
	Traditional	**21**	**21**	5	8	1	
3. Discuss practice learning with AT	Built ILE	**31**	21	4	0	0	
	Mix ILE	**18**	12	1	1	0	***20.67***
	Adapt ILE	**10**	9	4	0	1	***p = .055***
	Traditional	**28**	25	0	3	0	
4. Supported by AT during placement	Built ILE	**39**	11	3	3	0	
	Mix ILE	**22**	4	4	1	1	**24.66**
	Adapt ILE	**14**	3	1	1	5	**p = .017**
	Traditional	**34**	15	1	4	2	
5. AT a good mentor	Built ILE	**37**	13	5	1	0	
	Mix ILE	**21**	7	1	2	1	***20.84***
	Adapt ILE	**14**	4	2	1	3	***p = .053***
	Traditional	**29**	15	10	2	0	
6. Sense of belonging at placement school	Built ILE	**39**	11	3	3	0	
	Mix ILE	**20**	8	4	0	0	15.44
	Adapt ILE	**14**	6	3	0	1	p = .219
	Traditional	**29**	20	6	1	0	
7. Did not feel part of learning community	Built ILE	1	2	4	17	**32**	
	Mix ILE	0	1	4	13	**14**	8.46
	Adapt ILE	1	2	3	8	**10**	p = .748
	Traditional	1	1	6	**26**	22	
8. Felt school staff supported practice learning	Built ILE	**29**	20	5	2	0	
	Mix ILE	**14**	**14**	3	1	0	4.31
	Adapt ILE	10	**12**	2	0	0	p = .890
	Traditional	**26**	24	6	0	0	
9. Relationship between AT, PPL and myself did not support learning	Built ILE	0	3	4	19	**30**	
	Mix ILE	0	2	2	12	**16**	16.74
	Adapt ILE	2	2	1	**11**	8	p = .160
	Traditional	0	6	3	**25**	22	
10. PPL a good mentor	Built ILE	**34**	17	5	0	0	
	Mix ILE	**20**	11	1	0	0	13.42
	Adapt ILE	**15**	6	1	1	1	p = .339
	Traditional	23	**25**	6	1	1	

Note: Standardised positive residuals (greater than 1) are indicated by a single underline. Negative residuals (less than −1) are indicated by a double underline. Most frequent (modal) responses are bold. Chi-square analysis significant at .05 level are bold, italics-bold are approaching the significance level. AT refers to Associate Teacher (referred to as mentor teacher); PPL refers to Professional Practice Lecturer (referred to as practicum lecturer).

Initial teacher education students' perceptions during practicum in primary schools: A New Zealand experience

Abstract

Purpose

This paper is about mentoring of initial teacher education (ITE) students whilst on their practicum.

Design/methodology/approach

Informed by a social constructivist theoretical framework, an online survey was used to capture the breadth of quantitative data and the richness of qualitative responses relating to factors that impact student teachers' experiences during practicum.

Findings

Quantitative data indicate many student teachers were positive about the practicum, but this varied across the type of school in which they were placed. The qualitative data analyses showed a greater in-depth understanding of the range of issues that impacted how student teachers are treated in their role as a mentee by the mentor and the wider school community.

Originality/value

This research study repositions the critical nature of effective mentoring of student teachers so that mentor teachers and ITE providers can be informed by the voices and lived realities of these student teachers. The mentoring relationship needs to be critically interrogated to provide a more even and supportive 'playing field' for all student teachers.

Practical implications

Better understanding the experiences of student teachers helps to inform ITE providers of the critical role that mentor teachers play in preparing student teachers. The practical implications are that strategies to develop deep and collaborative partnerships amongst ITE providers, mentor teachers and school leaders, which builds stronger understandings of a mentor teacher's role, are critical in order to support student teachers.

Key words student teachers, primary teaching, mentors, mentees, mentoring, practicum

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Developing initial teacher education (ITE) programmes that are responsive to the sector's needs, as well as changes to education mandates by ministries of education, can be challenging. In New Zealand, a recent policy shift has led to new ITE programme approval, monitoring and review requirements (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2019). Under these new requirements, all current ITE programmes must be approved by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand by January 2022. There has been a clear move towards a change in expectations around the kind of practical experience student teachers require, the nature of the mentoring and support student teachers need and the kind of assessments that will demonstrate they meet the required standards. The role of the practical experience has often been described as a critical element of teaching practicum (Bjørndal, 2020; Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Thompson and Schademan, 2019). Another key element is effective mentoring practices that can support both student teacher and mentor learning (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018).

In New Zealand, where this study is set, student teachers are required by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand to undertake a minimum number of days on practicum

(also referred to as practice learning, professional practice, or placement) with mentor teachers (usually referred to as associate teachers in New Zealand). The mentor teachers provide authentic contexts in today's diverse classrooms and learning environments for student teachers to learn and grow professionally (Darling-Hammond, 2010). During a practicum, student teachers have the opportunity to acquire expertise through observing effective pedagogical practices, interacting with learners, planning and implementing teaching, reflecting upon their teaching, receiving and responding to constructive feedback and constructing a greater sense of themselves as teachers (Bjørndal, 2020). Hence, the social relationships that student teachers construct during the practicums are vital to their personal, cognitive and professional growth (Anderson *et al.,* 2009). These relationships are not just limited to mentor teachers but also include lecturers in their ITE courses, ITE practicum lecturers, other teachers in their placement schools, and children and their families (Anderson *et al.,* 2009; Trevethan, 2017). Often, student teachers are selected by interview into teacher education programmes using criteria which include relevant experiences with children and young adults. The field experiences on practicum can build on these prior experiences and help develop dispositions that student teachers bring from their wealth of life experiences (Lee *et al.,* 2019).

For a student teacher to be in a safe and supportive environment where there is mutual respect, the mentor teacher and the ITE provider must have a shared vision of the goals for the practicum and an understanding of the different roles participants play (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Garza *et al.,* 2018). Continued and sustained engagement between ITE providers and mentor teachers in an attempt to clarify and understand the nature of purposeful, collaborative mentoring is critical and well evidenced in the literature (see, for example, Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018; Garza *et al.,* 2018; Zeichner, 2010). This avoids student teachers having to contend with differing expectations (Trevethan, 2017). Learning whilst on practicum can be very

challenging for student teachers. Not only do they have to contend with dealing with the very emotive aspect of learning to teach (see discussion in Shapiro, 2010, about the relationship between emotion and developing teacher identity), often based around problems of practice and doubts of their own competence (Bjørndal, 2020), but also they are managing the tensions and contradictions implicit in their development (Thompson and Schademan, 2019). The quality of the partnership between the mentor teacher and ITE provider is also critical to student teacher success or failure (Ellis *et al.,* 2020). Frequently, the student teacher is required to navigate a path through their practice experience in an attempt to meet the mentor teacher's expectations within the classroom environment. The stakes are high as the student teacher requires a positive report from their mentor teacher to progress in their initial teaching qualification. However, at the same time, they need to balance the mentor teacher's expectations against the criteria for a pass imposed by the ITE provider. The complexity of this mentoring relationship has been described by Thompson and Schademan (2019) who identified five primary practices that support being an effective mentor teacher. These are negotiating difference, sharing authority, co-mentoring, coaching in the moment, and deep immersion in real-world teaching. Therefore, it becomes even more critical that, in supporting both mentoring practices and student teachers, the triadic relationship between the mentor teacher, the ITE provider and the student teacher is framed around the development of a learning community that is built on collegiality and reciprocity (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008; Zeichner, 2010).

Often, research studies have examined practicum during ITE qualifications from the perspectives of the ITE providers and mentor teachers (see, for example, Haigh and Ell, 2014; Sewell *et al.,* 2017; Sheridan and Tindall-Ford, 2018; Trevethan, 2017). However, student teachers' experiences of practicum are varied and challenging. The whole learning experience can be a very emotive process (Shapiro, 2010) as student teachers try to make

sense of their emerging self-efficacy and teacher identity (Anderson *et al.,* 2009; Bjørndal, 2020), whilst negotiating the complexities of engaging with their mentors (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008).

This study aimed to explore the mentoring experiences of New Zealand primary student teachers during a recent practicum experience within a three-year bachelor's ITE programme. The findings from this research will inform teacher educators' understandings of students teachers' experiences as mentees and the ITE educator's role in supporting mentors' ongoing professional development (see also Hobson, 2016, for a discussion on the need for more support in understanding the often highly variable judgemental practices which occur for beginning teachers whilst on practicum).

Literature

Effective mentoring practice is a hallmark of high-quality teacher education programmes (Black *et al.,* 2016). While student teachers are on practicum, their mentoring can be conceived of as a dyadic relationship (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018). Collaboration between the mentor and the mentee is founded on their joint attitudes and values. Indeed, Ellis *et al.* (2020), in their review of the elements of a quality student teacher mentor, stated that successful strategies of mentoring involve collaboration, collegiality, interaction, a reciprocal exchange of ideas, and the joint creation of new knowledge and meaning. The importance of mentor teachers' ability to develop professional relationships, not only with their colleagues within participatory communities of learning but also with ITE providers, may support the development of a shared professional identity as teacher educators (Andreasen *et al.,* 2019). Establishing genuine and authentic partnerships between institutions and schools, where mentor teachers and ITE providers can create a shared professional identity and have a clear sense of purpose, has been identified as a key feature of high-quality practice that impacts outcomes for student teachers (Whatman and MacDonald, 2017). However, implementing

such a community of practice can be challenging. Often, a misunderstanding of the different 'knowledge cultures' of these spaces can lead to issues of mistrust and disagreement (Andreasen *et al.,* 2019; Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Zeichner, 2010).

The subjectivity of mentor teacher judgements of student teachers may be based on their own teaching service, 'gut feelings' of what type of person fits as a teacher (Ell and Haigh, 2015; Hobson and Malderez, 2013), stereotypes of what is viewed as normative (Phelan, 2005) and mentees' and mentors' experiences of ethnicity and accents (see discussion in Maddamsetti, 2018, about mentor teachers' roles in building inclusive practices where the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of ethnic minority student teachers are acknowledged and accepted). Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018), in their research on student teachers and mentor teachers in Scotland, found that some student teachers had only a 'fair relationship' (p. 61) with their mentor teachers, with collaboration not being highly evident. An improvement in this relationship may increase the reliability of judgements and improve outcomes for teachers.

Mentor teachers are generally intrinsically motivated to commit their own time and support to a student teacher and share their own knowledge and skills for the next generation of teachers (Garza *et al.,* 2018). This selfless concern to provide guidance to an emerging teacher can also enhance a mentee's development. Garza *et al.* (2018), in their examination of mentors' conceptualisations of preservice teachers in the United States, found that mentors were open to new learning which developed their own pedagogical skills and knowledge, and their leadership experience was a valuable skill that enhanced effective mentoring.

Teacher education providers and mentor teachers

Trevethan (2017) explored the views of mentor teachers and those of teacher educators from ITE providers in New Zealand. She found an incongruence between the mentor teachers' perceptions of their mentor role and that presented by the ITE educators. The mentor

teachers' emphasis was on the technical aspects of their mentoring role rather than transformative aspects of teaching, such as improving children's learning. The misunderstanding between mentor teachers and teacher educators can exist even when both parties are committed to supporting reform-minded teaching practice and moving away from a traditional role of teacher mentoring (Wang and Odell, 2007). In other words, as Hobson (2016) advocated, mentors need to take advantage of opportunities to further develop effective mentoring practices. Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018) argued that 'mentoring relationships based on joint decision-making are essential not only for effective teaching and learning … affirming that teachers and student teachers can learn from each other to further develop their professional knowledge and skills through the mentoring process' (p. 65). Trevethan (2017) highlighted the lack of professional development for mentor teachers in their role as high-quality mentors. In this research, she found that mentor teachers were left to draw on their personal constructions of their own experiences when they were student teachers. These findings concur with the recommendations of the Scottish Government in their research on improving teacher education and professional learning of practising teachers (Black *et al.,* 2016). Successful strategies encompassed professional development in mentoring which resulted in mentor teachers more frequently engaging in professional discussions and more teachers engaged in professional learning. Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018) provided an argument for developing a participatory-involved process, where emphasis is placed on mutuality and voice. Such an approach, that recognises and supports mentor teachers as valued members within a community of practice where they are appreciated by ITE educators, can not only improve the self-worth of the mentor teachers but also support the development of their own teacher educator identity (Andreasen *et al.,* 2019).

In New Zealand, there have been changes to the architectural design of school buildings. These large, open, flexible buildings with multiple teachers (two to six teachers) and larger

cohorts of students, often referred to as ILEs (innovative learning environments), are underpinned by a philosophy where students are encouraged to be self-regulated learners with a stronger emphasis on the use of digital technologies (Byers *et al.,* 2018). The move to ILEs from traditional, single-teacher classrooms has provided another challenge in the preparation of graduating teachers. Recent research (Fletcher and Everatt, 2021) on student teachers' perspectives of completing practicums in ILEs found that the more experience student teachers have in ILEs, the more positive they are about teaching in these spaces, including the wider opportunities for collaboration with their mentor teacher and other teachers situated within the multi-teacher ILE.

Thompson and Schademan (2019) described how some relationships between universities and schools are poor or ineffective as a result of student teachers being required to have more of an apprenticeship role, and mentoring practice is therefore limited. Another study (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018) found student teachers sometimes felt they had collaborative experiences whilst on placement, but at other times, they felt like 'outsiders'. They described that, at times, collaboration was constrained, thought of as a task by mentor teachers rather than a core practice of professional learning. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) contended that it becomes the responsibility of ITE providers to support student teachers' intellectual and social capabilities to allow them to responsibly participate within such learning communities.

Furthermore, there needs to be more opportunities for co-generative understanding between ITE educators and mentor teachers, where mentors and mentees work together with a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities during practicum (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018; Andreasen *et al.,* 2019; Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Garza *et al.,* 2018). When mentor teachers and teacher educators develop two-way, sustained dialogue, this can result in the creation of new knowledge and learning for student teachers. This would allow for what Zeichner (2010) termed the 'third space', which occurs when mentor teachers, student teachers and teacher

educators work together in ways that illuminate the boundary crossing (the third space) between learning on the university campus and on school sites during practicum.

Theoretical framing

This research is framed by an epistemology centred on social constructivism. Learning and knowledge are developed by collaborative processes of construction and creation (Ernest, 1995). Underlying social constructivism are context and culture, which are significant in forming deeper learning through internalisation of social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Gaining knowledge, understanding, and reflecting on ideas of others entail engaging in dialogue and open conversations between the mentor and mentee. Social constructivism redirects the mentor's role to providing environments where mentees can collaboratively construct knowledge and learn to mediate the sociocultural space (Adams, 2006). Implicit is the idea of the mentor and mentee being dual agentic in scaffolding and co-constructing learning in safe and culturally relevant contexts. When this does not happen, it may result in what Hobson and Malderez (2013) described as judgemental mentoring (judgementoring), which 'potentially prevents the development of the primary context for learning at this level (the trusting and safe relationship), impedes the mentee's development of informed reflective practice … and negatively impacts the mentee's emotional wellbeing' (p. 101).

The professional relationship between these two key players may comprise two styles of mentoring (Wang and Odell, 2007). First, an asymmetric style between a mentor and mentee can be based on the mentor's power or expertise which may position the student teacher as a visitor within the school, expected to strictly follow the set routines and teaching styles (see discussion in Hobson and Malderez, 2013, around the failure of school-based mentoring to support effective mentoring practices). On the other hand, a participatory-involved approach captures the mutuality and voice within the relationship. Clutterbuck (2004) suggested that

the learning environment needs to be enabling and empowering for mentees. By working collaboratively, the mentor and mentee engage in joint decision-making, with opportunities for the mentee to flourish independently during this participatory-involved process (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018).

The scaffolding framework provided by the ITE provider's requirements for the student teacher whilst on practicum contributes a further dimension, which necessitates a weaving together of the mentor teacher's expectations and those of the ITE provider. For student teachers, the ubiquitous nature of an effective ITE programme is that learning to teach is a collaborative venture between the ITE provider and schools (Mtika *et al.,* 2014). Success in navigating the passage between the joint expectations of the mentor teacher and ITE provider can be heavily influenced by the sociocultural context within the wider learning environment and student teacher's nimbleness to react in a reflective and positive manner to what may be differing expectations (Trevethan, 2017).

Research design

The aim of this study was to gain further insight into the student teachers' mentoring experiences during their practicum in one university's ITE three-year bachelor's degree programme in New Zealand for qualifying primary school teachers. The research questions underlying this investigation were (1) What are the strengths and barriers for student teachers when negotiating their experiences on practicum? (2) In what ways does a student teacher have to navigate between the mentor teacher and the ITE provider's practicum requirements? (3) What factors can influence student teachers' experiences and attitudes towards a practicum?

The mentoring process located in ITE programmes involves archetypal elements such as teacher disposition, effective communication skills and a passion to scaffold student teacher

competence. The differing social dynamics implicit in the role of mentoring student teachers in the diverse range of school types acknowledge the complex nature of capturing the converging factors that can impact the student teachers' experiences. Such complexity is best investigated through multiple research approaches (see discussions in Cohen *et al.*, 2018); hence, a mixed methodology was used to gather data in the current study. This provided a dichotomous method of inquiry where the primary exploration for meaning came from the analysis of the qualitative data, with the analysis of quantitative data being used to support the qualitative interpretations (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003). An online questionnaire was employed to capture the breadth of quantitative data and the richness of qualitative responses from student teachers (approximately one third of potential student teachers) across a three-year teacher education programme.

New Zealand context

ITE providers in New Zealand traditionally develop, deliver and award qualifications that are monitored by a government agency, the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, to ensure the robustness of the qualifications. In New Zealand, ITE qualifications can encompass lectures, online course-specific sites, and workshops. These include quintessential content such as theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning, effective pedagogical practices, knowledge of the curriculum, child development, bicultural practices and learning te reo Māori (the language of Māori who are the Indigenous people of New Zealand), and cultural and special needs of all learners. A statutory requirement of gaining a teaching qualification in New Zealand is that student teachers experience a set amount of time on a practicum, which in a three-year programme is a minimum of 20 weeks of practicum across the three years (Whatman and MacDonald, 2017). Table 1 indicates the overall number and length of practicums for this ITE provider's programme, the days the student teacher is

required to assume the role of a teacher and the main teaching focus during each of these practicums.

Table 1: Profile of student teacher practicums across the three year levels of the three-year degree.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

During this time, the student teacher works with a mentor teacher who oversees their day-to-day teaching activities in the placement school. This mentor teacher is a teacher within the placement school and will have information about the practicum's purpose and the opportunity for training on supporting the student teacher. Mentor teachers volunteer for the role and are approved by the school principal who validates the suitability of the teacher to take on the mentoring role.

In addition, an ITE practicum lecturer from the three-year bachelor's degree programme visits the student teacher to observe them teaching during the practicum. The practicum lecturer provides formative and summative assessment of the learning outcomes for the practicum and offers support and mentoring to the student teacher. They liaise with the mentor teacher about the progress of the student teacher in the practicum. Twice during the year, ITE practicum lecturers undertake professional development focusing on topics such as mentoring and dealing with challenging situations. Professional development workshops have been offered to mentor teachers, but these have had varying and often low attendance, possibly due to the intensive nature of teachers' workloads. ITE practicum lecturers have access to the online practicum course site, which includes practicum documents, readings, guidelines and weekly updates. A proportion of practicum lecturers are sourced externally and include retired principals and teacher educators.

Sampling and data collection procedures

For this investigation, criterion sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Patton, 1990) was used, with student teachers in Years 1, 2 and 3 of the three-year ITE degree invited to complete a questionnaire via their university email. The questionnaire was developed to explore student teachers' views on their experiences on practicum. It comprised questions on the respondent's background, a series of statements about the relationship between the student teacher and their mentor teacher, and open-ended items that allowed respondents to report their own views about their work with their mentor teacher, the support offered, whether they felt part of the wider school community of learning and what opportunities they had to discuss their learning whilst on practicum.

The questionnaire included an introductory section which outlined that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time without penalty and they could skip a question and leave any answer blank by selecting 'prefer not to answer' if they felt uncomfortable with a question. The email was distributed to student teachers soon after completion of their practicum and included a link to a university Qualtrics site where the questionnaire could be completed. This aligned with a time in the academic calendar when there were less demands on student teachers in regard to assignments. Data were collected by one of the authors who was not involved in the design of the degree and did not assess or teach the student teachers; participants were informed of this and were ensured confidentiality of their responses about the practicum. In regard to any risk to the reputations of mentor teachers, as the student teacher responses were anonymous and student teachers were on practicum throughout New Zealand at several hundred different schools, it would be very difficult to identify a mentor teacher with any degree of accuracy.

Five items were specifically related to the mentoring support of the student teacher: (1) 'My associate teacher involved me in evaluating my practice learning', (2) 'My associate teacher involved me in choosing my practice learning goals', (3) 'I was able to discuss my practice learning with my associate teacher', (4) 'I felt supported by my associate teacher during my placement', and (5) 'My associate teacher was a good mentor'. Additional items focused on the wider school community and the relationship with the practicum lecturer: 'I felt a sense of belonging at the school during my placement', 'I did not feel part of a learning community on my placement', 'I felt the staff at the school supported my practice learning', 'The relationship between my associate teacher, professional practice lecturer and myself did not support my professional learning', and 'My professional practice lecturer was a good mentor'. Each item was responded to on a 5-point scale, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* and a central neutral response. Space for comments about these statements followed the forced-choice responses.

The Qualtrics survey was distributed by email with an explanatory letter to all Years 1, 2 and 3 primary degree students after they completed a practicum. The first page asked for informed consent to take part in the study, and about one third of students on the programme indicated consent and completed the questionnaire. Response rates were 71 of 210 students (33% response rate) for Year 1 students, 38 of 170 students (22% response rate) for Year 2 students and 60 of 160 students (38% response rate) for Year 3 students. The differing response rates amongst the year levels is potentially indicative of the demands of other courses within the programme at the time of the surveys and the level of engagement in additional work related to their courses. However, it may also relate to feelings about their studies – see the results described below.

Student teachers were asked about their last placement as we assumed that this would be a recent, and therefore their most salient, professional placement experience which would help

with better recall of details and provide an assessment of up-to-date processes in schools. Statements about their experiences, therefore, also focused on this last placement. A final aspect of schools that we asked the student teachers about was a result of changes that have occurred to the structure of schools over recent years in New Zealand, particularly following the earthquakes around the city of Christchurch seven to eight years before the current study.

The need to rebuild or repair schools has led to the adoption of more flexible school spaces – sometimes referred to as ILEs. This experience is likely to be different from the student teachers' own school experiences, and we wanted to explore how this affected their views of working with a mentor teacher. The multiple teachers in the more flexible classroom space may increase collaboration between mentor teacher and student teacher, as well as provide opportunities for more discussions with teachers across the school. In contrast, the more traditional classroom may allow for more focused support from a mentor teacher and make it easier to observe how the student teacher interacts with children in the class.

Demographics of research participants and practicum contexts

In this study, student teachers were predominantly female and aged between 18 and 22 years. Information from student teachers who volunteered to take part indicated that the last professional placement of the majority was in a state school (87%). Over half of student teachers (52%) were placed in a full primary school (Years 1 to 8), although a sizeable group were placed in a contributing primary school (39%); a contributing primary school is one that covers school Years 1 to 6 only. Most placement schools were in a city (41%) or a town (40%). The majority of these schools were decile 6 to 10 schools: only 29% of student teachers were placed in decile 1 to 5 schools. Deciles indicate the socioeconomic levels of the community around the school, and most schools serve the community within which they are placed; hence, deciles are indicative of the socioeconomic background of many children in a

school, with lower deciles indicative of high levels of poverty and deprivation within a community. The majority of student teachers were placed in English medium schools, whilst 21% reported being placed in schools where the teaching was in both English and Māori. However, placement schools were divided between predominantly New Zealand European backgrounds of children (43% of students were placed in such schools) and a more multicultural mix of children within the school (54% of students were placed in these schools). New Zealand European is the dominant ethnic group (48%) in New Zealand schools, with Māori (25%), Asian (14%), Pasifika (10%) and a range of other ethnic backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Quantitative

Data analysis

The 10 questions of focus (five on the mentor teacher relationship and five related more to the school community) were analysed in terms of frequency of responses. These were then considered in terms of three variables of interest within the study: the year group of the student, the decile of the last placement school and the type of classroom space that was typical of the last placement school. Year group was simply based on the three years within which the student teacher was studying at the time of the study. Decile was coded as low (1 to 4), medium (5 to 7) and high (8 to 10) to avoid analyses including small cell sizes. Type of classroom space was based on four descriptors: (1) school classrooms, mostly newly built ILE spaces though with some adapted ILE spaces, (2) mixed ILE classrooms and traditional classrooms in one school, (3) traditional classrooms adapted to ILE spaces (typically involving removing dividing walls between single-teacher classrooms), and (4) traditional classroom school (typically one teacher per classroom). Tables 2 to 4 show the results of comparisons of these three variables on the frequency of responses to the 10 statements; most

frequent (modal) responses are bold. There were some missing responses to Likert items on the questionnaire, but these comprised only one or two missing data points for each question.

Frequency tables have the advantage of retaining the data in their original form: that is, the number of respondents for each alternative answer, which allows clearer interpretation of the findings from such a questionnaire. This allows two alternatives to be contrasted by the number of responses to each, rather than transforming responses into numbers and interpreting these transformed data. (A transformation to numbers would lead to odd interpretation about scores such as 3.1 differing from 3.5, and the meaning of these values that fall between response options – this would be particularly problematic around the mid-point of the scale as it is unlikely that a 'neutral' response would fall simply at the mid-point between an agree versus disagree response.) Analysing frequencies also maintains the original non-parametric form of the data and avoids problems of violating assumptions of parametric data, particularly when using a questionnaire designed specifically for the purpose of this study. Therefore, appropriate non-parametric analyses were performed (Siegel and Castellan, 1988). For each statement, a χ^2 analysis was performed to look for differences between the year-group levels, deciles and classroom-type variables. Standardised residuals were calculated for each frequency to determine if an observed value was larger (positive residuals greater than 1 indicated by a single underline) or smaller (negative residuals less than −1 indicated by a double underline) than expected based on the distribution of frequencies.

[Tables 2 to 4 about here]

Findings and discussion

Overall, student teachers' views were positive about their experiences in their placement school and relationship with their mentor teacher. In terms of the three variables investigated

to determine if they influenced these views, there was little effect of school decile on student teachers' views: views were very similar whether the student teacher's last placement was in a lower or higher decile school. Given the sometimes-perceived pressures on teachers in lower decile schools, this is a notable finding – though, as indicated, fewer lower decile schools were included in the data set, possibly indicating that other lower decile schools did not feel able to support student teachers because of their workloads.

However, in contrast, there was an effect of classroom type on some of the statements. This seems to suggest that those who had experienced their last placement in a school with mostly built ILE spaces indicated more positive responses about their interactions with their mentor teacher and the school. There was also an effect of year group, which seems to suggest less positive or more variable responses from student teachers in Year 2 of the programme – an effect that may also be associated with the lower response levels of the Year 2 cohort. With the highly complex nature of student teacher experiences within the degree programme, we are unable to identify specific factors or reasons for this variability. However, it is worth noting that in Year 2, student teachers experience only one practicum, and this is in Semester 2. This aspect warrants further consideration as it might be a specific effect of the timing of the practicum or the student teacher experience within the individual schools at that point in time. These two effects (of year group and classroom type) seem to be somewhat independent: around 20% to 25% of Year 2 student teachers were in each of the four classroom types, suggesting that any effect of classroom type was not simply due to a large number of Year 2 student teachers experiencing that classroom type as their last placement. The slightly more positive statements from those last experiencing a purpose-built ILE school may be due to the collaborative nature that these types of classrooms require of teachers. Supporting a new student teacher would also require the mentor teacher, and other teachers in the group, to work together to support the student teacher. It may be that such classrooms are

ideal spaces in which to develop collaborative teaching skills – though placements in a traditional, single-teacher classroom may also be needed for student teachers to experience these spaces and the needs of such a classroom.

Qualitative

Data analysis

The design of the research study was driven by the research questions, and this influenced from whom the data were collected and how these would be collected and analysed. The analysis strategy drew on particular analysis processes used in grounded theory, which included open/initial coding, axial coding and selective coding strategies (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This provided a model of systematic inquiry where the data could be compared. The open-ended qualitative responses items were analysed by identifying the initial themes to develop coding categories (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006). Not all students included qualitative responses. Following the analyses, axial coding was used to detect any connections between the initial coding, such as availability of the mentor teacher to discuss issues with the student teacher and the importance of regular feedback. Last, selective coding was used to find the main concepts that reappeared on a frequent basis (Charmaz, 2003; Neuman, 2000). The qualitative data provided a differing lens to understand the student teachers' contrasting experiences on practicum. Two overarching themes emerged: mentoring role of the mentor teacher and the community of practice within the placement school. These illustrated the differing aspects that impinge on the complexities of providing authentic experiences in the classroom for student teachers.

Findings and discussion

1. *Mentoring role of the mentor teacher*

Mentoring is a critical role in the development of a student teacher (Aderibigbe *et al.,* 2018; Trevethan, 2017). Some of the student teachers shared how they experienced mentor teachers who appeared to lack time to give quality support.

> Sometimes I felt it was hard to find the time to discuss things with my associate teacher. Teachers are extremely busy people. (Year 1 student teacher)
>
> As my associate teacher was very busy with a lot of things, I sometimes felt that I would go for two to three days at a time without ever having a conversation with her. In these moments, I sometimes felt a bit isolated and very worried that I would not get the opportunity to gain the teaching and learning experience that I required. (Year 3 student teacher)

Another issue was that some of the mentor teachers did not appear to read and understand the criteria set by the ITE provider that student teachers were expected to accomplish whilst on practicum. This led to feelings of frustration for the student teacher and evidenced a lack of cohesion between the school and university contexts: 'I felt my associate teacher did not have time to watch the briefing videos or read the guidelines provided to support [student teachers]' (Year 2 student teacher).

There appeared to be a disconnect in the 'third space' which can bring together the mentor teachers and ITE educators. This aligns with the concerns expressed by Zeichner (2010) in their rethinking of the connections between practicums and university-based teacher education. Furthermore, being new to the mentoring process was another challenge, as indicated in this student teacher's experience: 'I was my associate teacher's first student

teacher ever and they struggled to understand what was required to support me as a student teacher' (Year 2 student teacher).

This lack of connection and joint understanding between the university and the mentor teachers concur with findings of prior research (see, for example, Trevethan, 2017; Zeichner, 2010).

Other student teachers perceived that discussions with their mentor teacher were around general matters of teaching practice but lacked quality opportunities to collaboratively unpack the explicit acts of teaching (Hudson, 2013). For example, one student teacher said, 'The discussion with my associate teacher was always around general practice … again time was a problem, quality time with the associate teacher in class' (Year 1 student teacher).

A participatory-involved approach (Wang and Odell, 2007) that captures the mutuality and voice within the relationship between the mentor and mentee appeared to be sought by some student teachers: 'It is more beneficial to have discussions and observations from the associate teacher. We did not use it at all to negotiate my learning' (Year 2 student teacher). Similarly, differing styles of mentoring were evidenced, with some mentor teachers using a more asymmetric style (Wang and Odell, 2007) where they initially expected the student teacher to follow the practices of their mentor teacher:

> My associate teacher was very young (I am in my 40s) and I was her first student. Over the five weeks we built a great relationship but it wasn't easy at first. On the first day, she introduced me as practising and told the children they would still need to ask her the questions. However, by the end of the practice even after my full control time finished I was still taking the class while she was able to do testing etc. (Year 3 student teacher)

There was a range of experiences amongst the student teachers, with several experiencing very supportive and nurturing mentor teachers. For example, this student teacher's comment was similar to many other responses: 'I was extremely fortunate to have a very supportive associate teacher who was experienced and knowledgeable' (Year 3 student teacher).

Other student teachers had opposing experiences to their peers:

> My associate teacher was not interested in having a student teacher. Other members of staff were supportive. (Year 2 student teacher)
>
> Unmotivated, disinterested associates who don't know how to support a pre-service teacher is the real problem with this course. (Year 3 student teacher)
>
> I was often compared to [previous more experienced] students at my school so felt inadequate or pressured to undertake tasks I didn't feel equipped to do. (Year 2 student teacher)

Any relationship has two sides, and the perception of one party may not reveal the fuller context which led to these student teachers feeling negative about their mentor support. Nevertheless, from these students' perspectives, this was their lived reality. These findings align with the call by Zeichner (2010) to address the perennial problem of a lack of explicit and focused connection between the ITE courses and practicum experiences.

2. *Community of practice within the placement school*

As a student teacher, professional learning is clearly situated within their community of practice in the wider context of the whole school. The complexity of engaging in the process of learning during practicum means that the development of relationships in this space is a highly valued component of the experience. Student teachers valued those opportunities where they were able to feel more integrated and be part of a team. This student teacher, similar to others, said,

> An inspirational part of placement was the syndicate I was in. There were two recently trained teachers, another with high expectations. My associate teacher was trained in the last ten years. Seeing the team working together regularly to plan, support and provide so many opportunities for the children was brilliant. (Year 2 student teacher)

Student teachers were very aware of the opportunities provided by such relationships and felt that they could also position themselves as part of the community. Indeed, they saw the benefits of being treated more as an active participant in the relationship:

> My associate teacher and the staff made me feel welcome from day one. I also contributed to the successful learning environment by positioning myself as the learner and later stepping up to be the tuakana [Māori word for teacher] in the learning environment. (Year 3 student teacher)

However, building effective relationships can be challenging. There was not always the level of collaboration between the mentor teacher and other teachers within the school:

> It was such a shame to be welcomed with open arms by all of the staff … only to be blindsided by my associate in my final week. Even the principal provided me with a lot of support, but my associate teacher could not do the same. (Year 3 student teacher)

Student teachers were perceptive to the ways in which other teachers in the school regarded them. Whilst trying to become established within a learning community, student teachers saw a number of challenges. Some student teachers were able to build constructive relationships with the wider school staff, who were willing to work cooperatively with them (Trevethan, 2017), whilst others were unable to move beyond 'pseudo-community' (Grossman *et al.,* 2001; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008). This is where a community may have the external facade

of certain shared values and beliefs, but it is not evident when interacting with all staff in a school.

> Only some staff members made me feel welcome. I was mainly ignored by the others. (Year 2 student teacher)
>
> As opposed to my other placements though, I don't feel a part of the crew. There have been no team meetings except for PD [professional development], nothing to do with planning or a catch up in the syndicate since I've been there. I hardly see the principal with his staff and I feel a bit disconnected. (Year 3 student teacher)

The wider school staff was perceived by the student teachers as another critical part of their practicum placement. Although much of the criteria's focus for the assessment of a successful practicum is the time the student teacher spends with the mentor teacher in the classroom, part of being an effective teacher is having the opportunity to be a valued member of the school community. This finding from our study highlights the wider mentoring nature of a whole-school community in growing and developing confident and effective emerging teachers.

For many student teachers, their experiences on practicum evidenced the high calibre of a supportive, school-wide community. For example, these two student teachers' comments are reflective of many others:

> I felt very lucky that for my first placement I got such a fantastic school. I felt like I slotted into the learning community well and I felt a sense of belonging to the classroom and wider school. (Year 1 student teacher)
>
> My placement school was a community full of support, humour and belonging. I felt part of the team quickly and I was sad to leave. (Year 3 student teacher)

From a social constructivism perspective, the teacher's role and that of the wider school community is to provide environments where student teachers can mutually construct

knowledge and mediate the sociocultural space through relationship building and developing social and emotional skills (Adams, 2006). Practicums are high stakes for student teachers as they provide a crucial site for controlling entry into the teaching profession (Haigh and Ell, 2014). Problems in the assessment of practice in the practicum can lead to non-graduation into the teaching profession. Thus, the challenges faced by the student teachers in this study corroborated how, in these high-stakes practicum environments, they needed to cautiously and skilfully navigate the complexities of professional learning with their mentor and other individuals in their school setting.

Conclusion

In this study, the student teachers reported a wide range of experiences as mentees whilst on their practicums. Notwithstanding that the mentor teachers were situated in a wide range of contexts with differing architectural school buildings, socioeconomic areas, ethnicities and language mediums of instruction, which provides the variability and richness of becoming a resilient and flexible teacher, there appears to be explicit factors that impinged on the quality of the mentoring for some student teachers. Some student teachers reported an apparent lack of professional commitment by their mentor teacher in their knowledge of the requirements for the practicum, little time provided for professional dialogue and feedback, and a general sense of disinterest by some mentors (and in some cases by the wider school community) in supporting the student teacher. This finding reinforces the call by Hobson (2016) in his ONSIDE Mentoring framework that advocates for mentoring to be off-line (non-hierarchical), non-judgemental, supportive of mentee's wellbeing, individualised to the needs of the mentee, developmental and growth oriented and empowering the mentee to be more autonomous and agentic. Yet, for many other student teachers, the practicum environment and quality of mentoring provided opportunities for positive professional growth. Of interest was that students who had been in an ILE, rather than a traditional, single-teacher classroom,

were more positive about the mentoring relationship with their mentor teacher and the wider school community. It may be that in an ILE, developing positive and collaborative professional and collegial relationships are a prerequisite to developing a generative learning environment.

This wide variation in the experiences reported by these 210 student teachers aligns with findings from Hudson and Hudson (2011) in their research in Australia, which reported haphazard mentoring by mentor teachers, lacking in sound theoretical frameworks. Mentor teachers, as Garza *et al.* (2018) outlined, are intrinsically motivated to provide guidance for the student teachers and commit time and wisdom to support student teachers. The important duality of the ITE educators and the mentor teachers in the 'third space' is an area where further collaborative work can be undertaken to enhance the experiences and learnings of student teachers. As Hudson (2013) and Parker (2010) contended, the quality of the mentoring a student teacher receives is key to building the capacity of ITE providers to develop high-quality graduating students. Within a social constructivism framework, the dual-agentic roles of the mentor and the mentee call for the scaffolding and co-construction of learning to occur in a safe and supportive environment (Wang and Odell, 2007).

A key message from this study, which explored student teachers' lived realities of their practicum experiences, is that the quality of communication between both parties who hold the power of decision-making in regard to entry into the teaching profession (the mentor teacher and the ITE provider) needs to be in tune. Critical interrogation of ways to develop deep and collaborative partnerships amongst ITE providers, mentor teachers and school leaders, which builds stronger understandings of the role of a mentor teacher, is critical. Hobson and Malderez (2013) in their research on mentoring in England suggested several factors which could improve the effectiveness of mentor teachers. Concurring with these researchers, we advocate for a national approach to preparation of mentor teachers, not only

in ITE but also internally within schools. For this to occur, mentor teachers need to be released from some of their other responsibilities so they can give quality time and reflection to the critical role of being a mentor.

Additionally, we call for further research into the role of the ITE practicum visiting lecturer within New Zealand, who is the conduit between the ITE provider and the mentor teacher. Similar to the discussion by Zeichner (2010) of teacher educators internationally, in New Zealand, some ITE providers outsource practicum visiting lecturers (e.g., recently retired principals and teacher education lecturers) who, though very competent and dedicated, may have little authority or opportunity to be part of the decision-making processes within teacher education courses and qualifications. This 'black spot' in research within New Zealand will provide wider understandings on the complexities of effectively supporting all student teachers.

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