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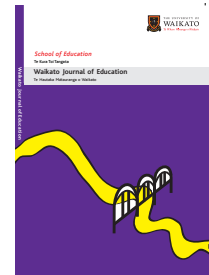
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The influence of an intentional sustained practicum in a low-decile primary school on pre-service teachers' knowledge of teaching priority learners

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Abstract

New Zealand has a persistent problem of inequitable educational outcomes between different student groups, which has led to New Zealand being designated a high achievement-low equity country. A key policy lever in the quest to lift educational achievement for priority learners, identified by the Ministry of Education as Māori, Pasifika, students with special learning needs, and students from low socio-economic communities, is improving teacher quality. Hence there has been a renewed policy focus on improving the quality of initial teacher education. The context for this study is an innovative Master of Teaching primary programme that includes an intentional practicum placement in partner schools with a high proportion of priority learners. This paper reports a qualitative study of how this practicum enhanced pre-service teachers' knowledge of teaching, particularly the teaching of priority learners. A general thematic analysis of post-practicum reflective statements written by two cohorts of Master of Teaching students immediately following their practicum (n=41 [25+16]) indicated four major themes—Difference, Diversity, Differentiation, and Difficulty. A directed thematic analysis of the reflective statements was then carried out. Overall, the findings indicated that the intentional placement in a school with a high proportion of priority learners disrupted the pre-service teachers' prior beliefs about such schools and their expectations of priority learners.

Keywords

Teacher education; practicum; equity

Introduction

New Zealand, in common with many countries, has a persistent problem of inequitable educational outcomes between different student groups. Māori (indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pasifika students and those from poor communities are over-represented in the low-achieving group, while students from wealthier communities, mainly Pākehā (of European descent) and Asian students, are over-represented in the high achieving group (Snook & O'Neill, 2014). This situation has led to New



Zealand being designated as a high achievement-low equity country (Office of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011).

As has happened in other nations, New Zealand policy makers have adopted the education reform discourse that views educational underachievement as being a problem with teacher quality (UNESCO, 2014). The assumption is that improvements in teacher quality will result in increased student achievement, which will reduce or eliminate inequitable student outcomes so that New Zealand becomes a high equity and high achievement country. It is therefore not surprising that initial teacher education (ITE) has become a key policy lever in the quest to improve teacher quality in order to lift educational achievement. In 2009, for example, the Minister of Education established the Workforce Advisory Group to advise her on ways of improving the quality of ITE in order to raise the overall quality of teaching across the school system. In their subsequent report, *A Vision for the Teaching Profession* (Ministry of Education, 2010), the advisory group recommended substantial changes be made to ITE, including requiring a post-graduate qualification to enter teaching and the need to significantly strengthen university-school practicum relationships.

These ideas re-emerged in 2013, with the New Zealand Ministry of Education's (2013) competitive tendering process for 'exemplary postgraduate initial teacher education (EPITE) programmes' aimed at lifting the quality of pre-service and graduate teachers' practice in order to raise student achievement, particularly that of 'priority learners' (Māori, Pasifika, students from low socio-economic communities, and those with special learning needs). Additional funding of \$6000 per Master's student on top of regular funding was provided to successful tenderers to develop innovative programmes that met the Ministry's criteria of being more intellectually demanding than traditional programmes (a higher entrance criteria and postgraduate status), with a greater focus on practice (robust partnerships with schools and more time on practicum). That would increase ITE graduates' ability to work effectively with priority learners. Such learners are predominately located in socio-economically disadvantaged (known in New Zealand as low-decile) primary schools.¹

The University of Auckland's proposal was accepted in the first round of the tendering process. This provided the university with the opportunity to design an innovative Master of Teaching (MTchg) primary programme that aimed to respond to Sonia Nieto's (2000) call of many years ago, to purposefully take account of social justice issues in teacher education by placing "equity front and center" (p. 180). Nieto also argued that it would take a major rethinking of goals, commitments and arrangements if ITE was to succeed at preparing teachers who can work effectively with disadvantaged students to promote more equitable educational outcomes. While the MTchg has been designed with a number of new arrangements to meet the goal of equity-centred ITE in the New Zealand context (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016), this article focuses on the key arrangement of an intentional practicum placement for all MTchg students in low-decile schools with a high proportion of priority learners. While the term 'decile' is contested, it is used in this article as the Ministry of Education currently employs decile ratings to allocate funding to schools.

The following sections include a review of the literature on practicum in ITE; a description of the research context, methodology and methods; and, following the findings, a discussion and implications for practice and further research.

Practicum in ITE

The practicum is universally recognised in international research, policy reviews of ITE, and by pre-service and experienced teachers alike, as being a critical component of teacher preparation

¹ Currently, all New Zealand state schools are allocated a decile rating from one to ten with students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities most likely to attend low-decile schools. Low-decile schools receive more funding per student in recognition that students from low socio-economic communities face more barriers to learning than students from high-decile schools.

programmes. Indeed, the perceived importance of the practicum has increased as school populations have become more linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse and evidence of educational inequalities between historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups of students has become more pronounced (Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013). At the same time, ITE, particularly university-based teacher education, has come under increasing criticism for its inability to prepare teachers who can foster all students' learning and achievement (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2016). Such criticisms have led to what has been called the 'practice turn' (Reid, 2011; Zeichner, 2012) in ITE.

A key assumption behind the 'practice turn' is that university-based ITE privileges theory over actual teaching practice and that because of this, there is a big gap between what pre-service teachers (PSTs) learn in teacher preparation programmes and what they actually need to be able to do as teachers of an increasingly diverse range of learners (UNESCO, 2014). A consequence of a greater emphasis on practice is that more value is put on PSTs experiential learning in practicum settings than on their campus-based learning. Hence Australia's review of ITE, *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (TEMAG report, 2014), identified the need to strengthen the practicum parts of ITE programmes, and advocated for greater collaboration and integration between ITE and schools, while in England Carter's (2015) *Review of Initial Teacher Training* highlighted the importance of effective school-based experiences and robust ITE-school partnerships. Such ideas are also evident in New Zealand with, for example, the recent Education Council's (2016) paper *Strategic Options for Developing Future Oriented Initial Teacher Education*, that reinforces the importance of the practicum and advocates for a more integrated and collaborative approach between teacher education providers and schools.

There is little doubt that teachers' work is more complex, challenging, and difficult now than before (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016), particularly in the context of increasing student diversity and increased accountability demands on teachers. Likewise, learning to teach has become more complex and demanding. It is therefore hard to dispute Darling-Hammond's (2012) view that extended practicum experiences are necessary to prepare high quality teachers. However, merely providing PSTs with extended practicum opportunities is not sufficient, as more time in schools does not necessarily lead to better PST learning (Grossman, 2010). Rather, it is the quality of the practicum experience that matters. Le Cornu (2015) argues for the need for high quality practicums, that is, practicums that focus on improving PST practice through collaborative support for their professional learning. According to Le Cornu, key ingredients of such practicums include high quality mentor teachers, a high level commitment from school leaders, and high quality school-university partnerships.

High-quality practicum experiences present PSTs with key opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about learners. Given the increasing diversity of school populations, it would seem to be particularly important that PSTs examine their assumptions and beliefs about diversity and diverse learners (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). For example, a seminal work by Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon (1998) argued that beliefs regarding diversity influenced how student teachers experienced their teacher preparation programmes, and shaped the kind of teachers they became. In line with global trends, New Zealand teachers are predominantly white and female (Education Counts, 2017) and are more likely to come from higher socio-economic communities. They are unlikely to have had much prior experience with children whose backgrounds are different from their own, and this lack of exposure to diversity may lead to deficit views of students who are different from them (e.g., Sleeter, 2008). Some scholars also contend that learning to teach diverse learners is further complicated by PSTs beliefs about the nature of society and the purpose of schools. Picower (2012) argued that many PSTs entered ITE believing that society was just, that schools offered all children equal opportunities to learn, and that learners were responsible for their own success or failure. Such scholars argue that such beliefs about society, schools, and individual responsibility need to be addressed in ITE if PSTs are to learn to value diversity and work effectively with diverse learners.

The ideas outlined above informed the design of the in-school arrangements of the University of Auckland's new MTchg primary degree. The MTchg is located in Auckland, the largest Polynesian city in the world and New Zealand's most diverse city with over 40 percent of the population born

overseas. Auckland also has significant areas of disadvantage, exacerbated by the current housing crisis. The programme is taught in collaboration with 12 Auckland partner primary schools with very diverse populations in terms of student ethnicity, culture, language and socio-economic status. The teachers in many of those schools are also ethnically diverse, unlike the MTchg PSTs who are predominately Pākehā (of European descent) with limited previous experience with diverse communities. Unlike other University of Auckland's ITE programmes, the Master's Programme begins in the middle of the academic and school year and finishes in the middle of the following year (July–June).

The PSTs work intensively in two different schools over the programme. All of the MTchg schools have had long-term practicum partnerships with the university. In their first six months, a group of four to six student teachers work in a high-decile, ethnically diverse school for two days a week and undertake a three-week full-time practicum in the same school. In the final six months of the programme, a different group of four to six student teachers are intentionally placed in a low-decile school with a high proportion of priority learners. In addition to being in the school for two days a week, the MTchg students engage in a three-week full-time practicum at the beginning of the school year and a culminating six-week full-time practicum in the same low-decile school. Placing PSTs in the same low-decile school for approximately three months of their final six months in the programme (from the start of the school year in January to the end of June) was an intentional design feature of the Master's programme. The aim was to facilitate the PSTs' sustained engagement with the school as a community and to develop strong pedagogical relationships with the learners in their class. The research question for this study was: *How did an intentional sustained practicum in a low-decile primary school enhance PSTs' knowledge of teaching priority learners?*

Method

This paper is framed socio-culturally (Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Qualitative approaches were selected, as the intent was to capture reflexively the participants' perspectives of the particular "specific, delimited, local, historical situation" (Flick, 2006, p. 19), in this case the opportunities for professional learning during an intentional sustained practicum at a low-decile partner school that occurred over the last six months of their ITE programme. As noted above, the second practicum schools had been intentionally selected as the students attending these schools were predominantly 'priority students' and had long-standing practicum relationships with the university. To answer the research question, we accessed assignment material in the form of post-practicum *reflective* statements written by two cohorts of PSTs from two different intakes immediately following their final practicum. For both cohorts, the majority of respondents were female; the median age group was 21–25, and English was the first language for most.

The post-practicum assignment task for the PSTs had been scaffolded by the lecturer. Students from both cohorts were asked to consider what they had learnt about being a teacher who can effectively contribute to the learning and achievement of priority learners. There was no set format for the reflective statements. We received Ethics Committee approval and participant consent to access PST assignments as data for research purposes. As per ethics requirements these had been anonymised before they were released to us.

We carried out two rounds of analysis on the post-practicum reflective statements from 25 of Cohort 1 (all of the PSTs who gave consent for their data to be used) and 16 from Cohort 2 (of a possible 30). The 41 post-practicum reflective statements, many of which ran to two or three typed pages, provided rich data for analysis. We first undertook a general thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). On completion of this analysis we identified four higher level themes embedded in the data, which led us to carry out a 'directed content analysis' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify examples of these four themes.

In the next section we report on the findings from the directed content analysis, using PSTs' voice. We have used PST voice to take account of criticisms of ITE research that do not sufficiently consider student teacher perspective when investigating ITE programmes (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). Codes used are C1P = Cohort 1, post-practicum reflection; C2P = Cohort 2, post-practicum reflection. We took care to ensure that PST comments from across the two cohorts were captured in the findings.

Findings

As we considered the themes emerging from the general thematic analysis of the reflective statements we identified four higher level themes embedded in the data. These were *Difference*, *Diversity*, *Differentiation*, and *Difficulty*. As noted above, we explored these themes using directed content analysis. They are addressed in turn.

Difference

This second sustained practicum placement in a low-decile partner school presented the PSTs with different 'learning to teach' experiences from those in their first placement in a high-decile partner school. The schools were also frequently very different in nature from that experienced by the PSTs in their personal life and educational histories. This difference, while challenging them, offered opportunities for learning, for example:

I have learnt a lot about how appearances often mislead. I have had little interaction with priority students or their families before this programme. I quickly learnt about the similarities we have and the rich things we could learn from each other. Probably the most poignant thing I learnt through working in a low decile school is just how divided my society is, it almost feels segregated at times. ... [This practicum] has left a deep impression on me of a wider view of New Zealand society. We have a lot of problems ahead if we don't start doing something about the gap between the rich and the poor, high and low decile. (C2P)

Not only was difference experienced regarding the nature of the school community but also in approaches to teaching that would enhance the learning of all students in the school. For example, for one PST, teaching in a low decile school deepened their understanding of the concept of communities of learning:

Developing a community of learners in the classroom was an approach to teaching that I had little understanding prior to this ... I found that the ideals involved in this type of approach were very aligned with my values and beliefs about teaching and learning, about supporting priority learners in their school life. (C2P)

For some PSTs this sustained placement in a low-decile school served to challenge stereotypical views of these schools:

Many of my assumptions about low-decile schools were also tested and proved to be false. I had assumed that maybe being at a low-decile school, learners might not have access to rich resources and therefore be disadvantaged in learning—however, I learnt very quickly that this was not the case. There were ample resources at the school that teachers could access and students could use, and my associate teacher provided students with a very learning-focussed, rich and comprehensive programme aimed at developing an independent, self-directed culture with the class. (C1P)

For a small number of the PSTs these low-decile schools reignited memories of their own school experience. For them, the placement was more of a recognition of similarity, a 'coming home', rather than difference, for example:

Walking into the school I felt more or less at home. I grew up in poverty, fought my way out of it, but ended up there [again] after immigrating and then getting divorced ... I understood the ways many of the parents in this area lived each day because I had lived it myself ... My previous practicum in a decile 10 school was probably more uncomfortable. (C2P)

The difference or non-difference experienced by the PSTs was primarily linked to notions of diversity, visible in many forms.

Diversity

Whether it engendered feelings of challenge or familiarity, all the PSTs met a greater range of diversity in their second practicum placement in a low decile school, as was intended by the programme. Diversity was visible in academic achievement, in children's behaviour patterns, in home-life difference, socio-economic status, in cultural, linguistic, and ethnic affiliation. This variety challenged the PSTs to consider diversity's impact on student learning, and their teacher role in enhancing learning outcomes, broadly defined, for all children but specifically for priority learners. For example, one PST reflected on how to be an effective agent for change under these circumstances:

To be an agent of change for priority learners I have learned that children come from a diverse set of backgrounds ... This identity will be part of who they are in the classroom—an environment where each and every individual will have their own set of values and beliefs ... The challenge is being able to provide a teaching and learning programme that is inclusive for each individual and give each child the ability to trust that their knowledge, questions and learning will be welcomed and respected in the classroom. (C2P)

A number of students reflected how their own sense of identity and agency influenced their ability to work in a very diverse context, as one PST expressed:

I have developed a strong sense of personal identity and an open mind and an open heart which allows me as a teacher to value my students and their role and place within our community of learners. Thus, I understand the importance in recognising and celebrating my students' cultural identities and the knowledge they bring with them ... Embracing cultural identity became a key feature in my pedagogies. (C2P)

Another indicated how the children's approaches to diverse life challenges had influenced his/her own personal professional growth:

Children's resilience has also surprised me. From my time in a low decile school, I realise that these students are going through some incredibly tough times outside of the classroom. By seeing them come to school and doing their best, and their positive attitudes has helped me develop my own resilience. If they can come in everyday and put forward their best, then so can I. (C2P)

All the PSTs addressed the diversity they met by recognising the students' individual learning needs and adopting differentiation as a teaching approach.

Differentiation

Although few of the PSTs used the term 'differentiation' when describing how they changed and framed their practice to meet diverse individual student needs, their reflective statements included examples of differentiation practice. Examples provided were linked to provision of different academic learning experiences, behavioural management, provision of individual support and being

culturally responsive. Notions of differentiation were expressed both as ‘big ideas’ about responding to individual students and as more specific examples of actual practice.

Examples of ‘big ideas’ included:

As a teacher who wants equity and the best for each student, I need to recognise the potential and diverse strengths in each student by allowing students multiple ways to success in the classroom. (C1P)

For a learning community to be equitable it is important that I choose content or provide shared experiences that allow all students to contribute to the discussion, to make connections between their prior knowledge and what they are learning. Students are much more likely to grasp big ideas when what they are learning is meaningful to their lives. (C2P)

In New Zealand many Māori and Pasifika students are struggling in an education system that does not meet their needs. I have come to understand that different cultures construct knowledge in a multiple of ways and that I have to be mindful that my teaching does not disadvantage culturally diverse students. (C2P)

Rather than approaching every situation from a European cultural lens, I was able to draw on the knowledge and expertise of the children and allow them to come to the learning environment from a position of cultural validation and strength. (C1P)

I was developing my lessons in consultation with the students, asking for ideas and input, trialling ideas with students before delivering to the whole class, and developing differentiated learning for small groups and individuals that was led and based on student need. (C2P)

More specific examples of actual practice included:

I have discovered children are enthusiastic about learning to express themselves in another language and for Māori students in particular this was empowering. (C1P)

My Pasifika boys loved rugby, and this was an area of interest that I leveraged into my word problems. (C1P)

I got really excited about figuring out what students can do and then working out ways to help them to progress. For example, I enjoyed looking critically at the skills needed for each maths strategy I taught, working out what individual students could do and how they were doing it and then determining their next steps. (C2P)

I attempted to tailor my teaching to make it relevant to [children from a wide range of cultural backgrounds]. I used Samoan, Tongan and Māori language and culture a lot in my teaching. (C1P)

The reflective statements of these students about the need for differentiation in their teaching can be summed up by this comment from a PST in the first cohort:

All students learn differently and they come from different backgrounds and experiences, and it is my responsibility as a teacher to take an inquiry stance through using evidence to provide a supportive learning environment [for each individual student]. (C1P)

Being placed in a practicum context that was different from most of the PSTs’ personal backgrounds, recognising the challenges and potential of diversity and developing differentiated teaching approaches was not always easy for the PSTs. They expressed the difficulty they experienced in their reflective statements.

Difficulty

This difficulty was often expressed in terms of ‘challenge’, for example:

I found the practicum to be an extremely rewarding experience, although one of the most challenging experiences I have faced. (C1P)

Teaching for diversity requires adaptive expertise, not just in what you teach, but in when and how you teach. At times I have found this to be both exciting and overwhelming. (C2P)

Some challenges were associated with managing children’s learning:

Something I was challenged to constantly do and think about was creating a learning-focused and respectful and supportive environment. (C1P)

Other challenges were associated with establishing sound relationships based on mutual trust:

I had to work hard to earn the trust of all the students in my class, and even today I still feel there were some that I didn’t quite get there. It wasn’t until the end of my practicum that I realised that I could have tried harder, and that was a little difficult to take. (C1P)

The intentional and sustained placement in a low-decile school appears to have been a rich ‘learning to teach’ experience for the PSTs as it disrupted many of their prior understandings. For example, they commented that it had disrupted any deficit thinking they may have brought to the placement, broadened understandings of children’s ability, challenged understandings about behaviour management, and caused them to reconsider how long it might take some children to learn a particular concept. But there was also considerable emphasis on the significance of relationships in the learning environment (both in class and collegially). PSTs were realising the complexity inherent in the practice of teaching. There were many comments recognising how their experiences had changed their understanding of teaching and learning, for example:

I now understand that teaching and learning are reciprocal exchanges of knowledge in which all individuals are valued, respected and included. (C1P)

[During the practicum] I developed an understanding of knowledge being constructed rather than learnt from an expert which is what I believed before. This will definitely influence the way in which I teach, as I will now ensure that there are lots of opportunities for students to learn from each other and engage in their own conversations to develop their own understandings. (C2P)

For one PST this practicum had been very significant on a personal and professional level. He/she talked about how this occurred:

In terms of priority learners, in particular Māori students, I have seen a massive shift in myself to viewing the culture as something I am entitled to be part of. More so from my second practicum. I recognised that being Māori and having that culture is a huge asset to students and to myself ... I also have an appreciation for the culture and recognise the importance of engaging with it in a meaningful way. (C2P)

In summary, the following PST’s comment encapsulates how, for many of them, the intentional and sustained placement in schools with high numbers of priority learners was a transformative experience:

My mission as a teacher is to accelerate and enhance the learning of priority learners so that their education is truly transformative. I truly believe that effective

relationships that incorporate the concepts of manaakitangaⁱⁱ and akoⁱⁱⁱ are at the heart of this transformation. This is what the final practicum has meant to me. (C2P)

Discussion and implications

This article has reported MTchg Primary PSTs' perceptions of how undertaking a sustained practicum in a low-decile school influenced their knowledge of teaching priority learners. Despite limitations to this study, including a reliance on self-report data, the findings showed that their practicum experiences did impact on their learning as teachers. In itself, this finding is hardly surprising given the extensive literature that shows student teachers across all jurisdictions consider the practicum to be an important component of ITE, with many claiming it to be where they learnt most about teaching (e.g., Hoban, 2005). However, the findings from this study begin to shed light on what Anderson and Stillman (2011) refer to as a 'black box' of the practicum: how student teachers use the practicum to "cultivate a knowledge base that is specifically applicable to teaching in urban, high needs schools, where the need for well-prepared teachers is arguably greatest" (p. 446). In line with Anderson and Stillman, the authors of this article consider that the PST 'knowledge base' includes affirmative beliefs about the capabilities of diverse learners and an understanding of, and commitment to, equity-centred practice.

A key component of the knowledge base that was cultivated through the sustained practicum in low-decile schools was the PSTs' understanding of the importance of getting to know and build relationships with the students in their class. While getting to know students is fundamental to building relationships that boost student engagement in learning (Margonis, 2004), according to Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011) knowing one's students is often difficult and challenging, as it involves understanding the unique set of background experiences and learning preferences that learners bring to the classroom. Knowing and building relationships with students becomes especially difficult when teachers' lived experiences are very different from that of their students (Bishop, Berryman, & Wearmouth, 2014), which was the case for the majority of the MTchg PSTs. As noted previously, the participants in this study were predominately Pākehā with limited familiarity with poor and/or diverse communities, which is the reality of ITE internationally (Sleeter, 2008). However, this disjunction between the participants' lived experience and that of their students did not result in a deficit approach that blamed the students and their families for lack of achievement (Rank, Yoon, & Hirschl, 2003). Instead, the experience challenged participants' stereotypical views of the quality of resources and teaching provided in low-decile schools. The experience also helped them recognise the resilience students showed in the face of tough out of school happenings. These understandings reinforced for the PSTs the need for them to ensure that they provided safe, inclusive learning environments which recognised and capitalised on what each child brought to the classroom.

Thus the findings suggested that the sustained practicum in a low-decile school was a catalyst for the PSTs to reconsider their own assumptions about socio-economic and cultural diversity. For many of them, the practicum was initially a challenging experience that appeared to disrupt their prior beliefs about priority learners and low-decile schools. It could be argued that for the PSTs such disruption resulted in what Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, and Davies (2009) refer to as 'change-provoking disequilibrium' because, rather than reinforcing deficit views, the practicum helped the PSTs to revise their assumptions about diversity and see the children in their class as individuals with different learning needs and capabilities. Gorski (2012) maintains that teachers need to recognise that diversity exists among disadvantaged groups and that such learners must be challenged educationally. Seeing their students as individuals appeared to encourage the PSTs to take on the responsibility of promoting the learning and achievement of all the children in their class by setting high, but realistic, academic expectations for each of them. Because the PSTs were in the schools over a long period of time, they

ⁱⁱ Manaakitanga is a Māori word that loosely translates to 'hospitality'.

ⁱⁱⁱ The concept of ako describes a teaching and learning relationship, where the educator is also learning from the student.

had time to get to know the children as learners and to make meaningful connections with their lives and experiences. As Hayes (2016) describes, they began to curate “pedagogical repertoires” (p. 211) to respond to the complex and changing work involved in teaching priority learners.

This research indicated that the sustained practicum placement in a low-decile school strengthened MTchg PSTs feelings of confidence in establishing relationships with, and being responsive to, the learning requirements of the diverse learners they taught. Writing about the influence of teacher expectations and efficacy on teachers’ practice, Rubie-Davies (2015) notes that some teachers have more confidence in their ability to make a positive difference to diverse student learning, and that such teachers have high teacher efficacy. She also argues that high efficacy teachers are also likely to have high expectations for their students because they have strong beliefs that they can have an effect on student achievement regardless of student background. This seemed to be the case for the participants in this study. The practicum in a low-decile school sharpened PST understandings of what equity-focused teaching meant in practice, including the belief in their ability to positively influence diverse students’ learning. Providing conditions that support the development of high expectations and self-efficacy in PSTs would appear to be critical given the increasing demands and complexities of teaching in today’s highly diverse schools.

While this study points to the learning potential of situating practicum placements in low-decile schools, further research is required to identify the key factors that generate changes in PST beliefs and how that plays out in actual teaching practice with learners from diverse backgrounds with diverse needs. Perhaps intensive and longitudinal case studies that follow graduates into teaching may yield insights into the decisions and outcomes of teachers’ curation of their pedagogical repertoires in the service of culturally and linguistically diverse students. More research is also needed into other components of the ‘knowledge base’ (Anderson & Stillman, 2013) that is important to high quality teaching in low-decile schools. As the practicum comprises one component of an ITE programme, albeit an important one, further research should investigate other ITE programme arrangements that support PSTs to teach in equity-centred ways that are responsive to the particular demands and challenges that are the reality of teaching in low-decile schools. Nevertheless, it is also important that those involved in teacher education heed Snook and O’Neill’s (2014) caution regarding the tension between the idea that teachers have a responsibility to address inequities in the classroom and recognising that teachers and schools by themselves cannot alleviate the impact of historical societal inequities. It is important that pre-service and beginning teachers do not become so overwhelmed with the education reform discourse that blames inequitable outcomes mainly on schools and teachers that they eventually leave teaching. New Zealand has a serious need to recruit and retain effective teachers for low-decile schools.

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