



## **Working with student teachers ‘at risk’ during early childhood practicums: Reflections from five Associate Teachers**

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**SUE STOVER**

*Auckland University of Technology,  
Auckland, New Zealand*

**NATASHA COUGHLAN**

**KIM HARRIS**

**ZOE LETICA**

**ROBYN MUNDY**

**CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON**

*Early Childhood Teachers,  
Auckland, New Zealand*

### **ABSTRACT**

*In this study, the focus is on five Associate Teachers’ remembered experiences of working with early childhood Student Teachers nearing graduation who were at risk of failing practicum. Using Rogoff’s overlapping ‘planes of analysis’, the subjective experiences of the Associate Teachers are analysed, bringing into focus the personal, interpersonal and institutional complexities involved in attempting to assess the Student Teacher on practicum. Ethical and philosophical issues become apparent, particularly in the clash between protecting a Student Teacher’s privacy and the open communication valued in the relationship, between Associate Teachers and the Initial Teacher Education provider.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Student teaching practicum is a key aspect of initial teacher education (ITE) and is pivotal in determining progress towards the status of qualified professional teacher. In the context of early childhood teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand, a student on practicum is assigned to an Associate Teacher (AT) for guidance, supervision and assessment.

The focus of practicum assessment is often on the final summative judgement, usually made at or soon after a triadic meeting between the Student Teacher (ST), the Associate Teacher (AT), and an evaluative lecturer appointed by the ITE provider. There is, however, significant formative assessment occurring throughout the practicum, often through informal observations of the ST by the AT. By the end of the practicum, the AT is expected to pass judgment on the efficacy of the ST.

This is a high trust model of assessment which Aspden (2017) described as complex for the AT because it “must weave together elements of supportive guidance for the student, alongside judgements as to the achievement of expected competencies and ultimately, gatekeeping into the profession of teaching” (p. 128).

Drawing on Barbara Rogoff's (1998) analytical framework 'planes of analysis', Aspden's (2017) research identified practicum assessment processes as occurring principally in the 'interpersonal plane' – between the AT and ST – which according to Hastings (2004), can be volatile and emotional. Yet the other planes – the 'personal' and the 'institutional' are intertwined. The personal plane is evidenced in how experiences are processed and expressed; impressions and assumptions play a part in this and impact on communication and how the AT and the ST see each other. The institutional plane is evident in multiple ways, including nationally set graduating standards (see Teaching Council of New Zealand/ Matatū Aotearoa, 2019b). When the ST is also nearing the end of their studies, the 'institutional plane' positions the AT as 'gatekeeper' for the profession: asking – is this student teacher ready to step into the role of qualified teacher within the next few months? (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Zhang et al., 2015).

A teacher's readiness to take on the role of AT is determined largely by centre management. Coming through a range of ITE providers, ATs in early childhood education (ECE) centres will be working as part of a teaching team, have a practising certificate issued by the Teaching Council of New Zealand and so will have at least two years of teaching experience. Although ITE providers offer opportunities for AT's professional learning and development, these may or not be taken up.

Thus, local knowledge – ways of knowing, ways of working with STs, ways of assessing the efficacy of a student – will likely shape the day to day interactions between the AT with a ST. These can be fraught for a number of reasons, including clashes in personality as well as disagreement about philosophical approaches to ECE (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017).

For the AT, the point when a student appears to be at risk of failing is likely to be the point at which the 'usual' ways of interacting with a student become difficult; more specifically, when feedback (verbal, written or enacted through role modelling) appears to be ineffective, or excessively time consuming and therefore unsustainable in a busy early childhood setting.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT, METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

New Zealand research is limited as regards ECE ATs' lived experience of assessment – particularly formative assessment of students at risk of failure – however, recent relevant studies show that a recurring theme is the complexity of the practicum assessment process, especially when there are points of dissensus (Aspden, 2017; Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Zhang, 2015). This was recognised by Perry (2008) who described working with a “marginally capable students” as a “difficult process to negotiate involving skill and diplomacy” (p. 22). This current study amplifies what skills and capacities can be drawn on by ATs in such situations.

This qualitative research article has its genesis in a professional learning forum for ATs which was offered by an ITE provider in Auckland in 2017. The

forum consisted of a panel of experienced ATs who were known by the ITE lecturers to have worked professionally with students at risk of failing practicum. Each panel member was asked to respond to a series of provocations (see Table 1). Although the original forum focus was on ATs working more generally with STs at risk of failing, the ATs' experiences of STs nearing graduation prompted in-depth discussion amongst the panellists and the audience of ATs at the forum. The possibility of a collaborative paper was discussed afterwards when it was clear that amongst the other ATs attending the forum, there was significant interest in the challenges described and the strategies attempted by the ATs on the panel.

The initial research data was the ATs' written responses to the questions, identified themes, highlighted material that could be quoted, and circulated the analysis to the contributors for comment and amendment. Changes were made as a result.

**Table 1:** Provocations for Associate Teachers who have worked with early childhood students 'at risk' on practicum

**PART 1 - Thinking about specific experiences:**

Think of one or two students that you have had as student teachers in your centre and that you considered to have been at risk.

- Please give each student a pseudonym if you want to talk about a specific student.
- How far through their studies were these students?
- Consider what made a student 'at risk'. Were you aware beforehand that this student could be at risk? Or did this become evident, e.g. through observations by teachers? Perhaps the student disclosed information which you felt made them at risk?

In what way did their 'at risk-ness' affect the way in which you worked with them as an associate teacher?

How did having a 'student at risk' affect you professionally and personally? How did it affect your colleagues?

**PART 2 - Thinking about processes:**

If you have ever felt that a student should not pass a practicum – what was that process like?

Did you seek help from the ITE provider?

If so, did you find the help adequate? Or did it leave you feeling uncertain? Unsupported?

Can you see a way that this process can be made any kinder, fairer, more transparent, or more efficient?

**PART 3 - Professional Learning:**

Do you think the experience of working with a student at risk helped you become better at being an Associate Teacher? If so, how?

Is there anything you know now that could have been taught to you beforehand? Or is your capability as an Associate Teacher the result of your experiences and therefore not something that anyone could teach you?

In order for this article to focus on the ATs' subjective experiences without identifying any particular early childhood setting, each of the authors was given a pseudonym. Throughout this paper, the authoring ATs are referred to by those pseudonyms. Because of its reflective nature, and the fact that those providing the research data are also named authors, this study did not require ethics approval.

A problematic aspect of this research methodology is its focus exclusively on the remembered experiences of ATs which inevitably involve other people, especially STs. Drawing on the results of recent New Zealand studies of EC practicum foregrounding the experiences of the various stakeholders (Aspden, 2017; Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Zhang, et al., 2015), it is reasonable to assume that an AT's version of practicum assessment challenges would be seen differently by the ST and others. So while the emphasis here on the ATs' subjective experiences, it is acknowledged that there are other voices not included.

Nor does this study directly address the power imbalances inherent in the assessment of STs on practicum. Its focus on ATs' experiences of formative assessments of students at risk does not include the outcomes for those students. The ATs were not asked to indicate whether a student at risk passed or failed the practicum. Thus, the emphasis is not on the summative assessment, nor does it trouble the widespread use of triadic meetings, a practice which Zhang et al. (2015) found was experienced as "threatening," "dishonest", "uncomfortable" and "stressful" (p. 159).

The subjective nature of the research data could also be seen as a major limitation of this study. The research data is personal, subjective, retrospective and without any external validation. The juxtapositioning of multiple subjectivities offers some validation, however, especially when commonalities become evident (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). In addition, according to Peter Lind, a past head of New Zealand Teachers Council, teaching experience becomes personal knowledge, and is often difficult to share because it is often subject-specific, contextual and held tacitly (cited by Stover, 2008). Regardless, Patton (2003) saw little value in labelling research as 'subjective' or 'objective'. His pragmatic solution was to avoid both labels, and to focus on a research study's "trustworthiness and authenticity" (p. 50).

A strength of this study is its collaborative nature. This is in line with Gibbons, Tesar, Steiner and Chan's (2018) call for closer research partnerships between ATs and tertiary ITE providers in order to amplify the voices of ATs. They argue that although ATs are a key component of teacher education, their perspectives and expertise are often silenced in the consideration of policy directions.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Note: italics are used to indicate a quote from one of the five Associate Teachers authoring this paper.

### ***Who is a student at risk?***

In this study, the ATs agreed that they might start to recognise a student 'at risk' when the student's behaviours and teaching practices were not influenced through feedback from the AT. AT Olive recognised this when STs appeared to be "*shaky*". The reason why a student might be 'shaky' may, however, have to

worked out by the AT; a ST's past failure was not necessarily made known to the AT.

Another prompt for significant concern was when an AT observed a final year ST reluctant to engage socially. For example, AT Olive spoke of recognising a ST "*not wanting to be there - parents have enrolled them in the course.*" Other behaviours were triggers for concern. For example:

From AT Martha:

*Lack of professionalism (lateness, unexplained absence)  
Questionable comprehension of theories relevant to teaching, such as human development  
Inability to recognise safety risks (real &/or potential)  
Sub-standard documentation*

From AT Olive:

*Sleeping on the job  
Scared of the 4 year olds  
Phones 'on the floor' [using a cell phone while at the same time, having responsibility for children]  
Swearing in everyday conversation*

AT Tui said she recognised that a student could be at risk because of their personal circumstances impacting on their student teaching. For example:

*Student with partner in prison; four young children...  
Inability to relax with staff and parents – shame...  
poverty...time  
Drug-taking... no idea of assignments... moody... angry...  
lack of engagement with adults and intermittent with children...  
Unwilling to listen to qualified teachers or take any advice, therefore hard to engage in professional dialogue. Lots of excuses. (Ellipses in the original.)*

### **Rogoff's planes of analysis**

The research findings from this study were considered in terms of key relationships and the themes arising from the ATs' reflections were organised according to Barbara Rogoff's (1998) 'planes of analysis'; the 'personal', the 'interpersonal' and the 'institutional' planes providing the basis for analysing the experience of the ATs. While the 'planes' can be understood separately, they inevitably overlap, and this is reflected below. The 'personal' and the 'interpersonal' planes are considered first, followed by the ATs relationships with ITE providers – the 'institutional' plane.

**The personal and interpersonal planes: Relationships between ATs and at risk students**

*I think I did my growing around supporting those at risk before becoming an AT. ... my own experiences have helped me to stop and put myself in the student teacher's shoes, so I do try to be understanding, however that requires a level of disclosure and building up trust.... (AT Tui)*

The ATs identified two particularly challenging responses from STs: defensiveness and no response. For example, AT Betsy recalled how feedback caused an angry and defensive response from a final year student:

*She was very sensitive to feedback and took this as a personal attack... She dismissed my feedback as she believed it wasn't necessary, upon discussions she deflected my critiques on to others in the team and myself.*

Reflecting on her work with an at risk student, AT Violet described herself as "frustrated" by the limited engagement and lack response to feedback. She was left wondering how "to inject enthusiasm while guiding and supporting children in their learning". She tried to focus on communicating each day, as well as prioritising weekly meetings:

*During our weekly meetings and at the end of the day, I encouraged the student in conversations about how her day was, how she was progressing through her work, what she had achieved and what was her next step. She had a quiet and at times unresponsive manner during our conversations. I found this challenging as I was unsure on how to respond or how to support her.*

A situation like this may reflect a student's shyness, cultural deference to an authority figure or low confidence as a ST. But equally challenging are STs who presented as overconfident.

AT Tui spoke of such a situation in which "huge issues developed: lack of trust, honesty, interest in children, ability, understanding.... The process was challenging as I needed evidence to back up my concerns." She explained it was a ST who had disclosed a disability and appeared to expect that the disability could justify behaviours that AT Tui saw as undermining the success of the practicum:

*Examples began to build up showing lack of integrity – saying one thing and doing another; saying they wouldn't do something, and then doing it; written work appearing to be written by someone else as there was so little connection between what was written and what the student was known to have been doing on session, and their limited ability to articulate rationale for practice.*

Disclosure of personal trauma may help to explain an ST's attitudes and behaviours, but it can also provoke deep personal responses from the AT. In such a situation, AT Tui recognised her first response was not necessarily the most appropriate response:

*I guess it was the inclination to rescue (her) but then I had to balance that with the fact that she was at the end of her practicums and that [her] attitude could be damaging for children and their families in the future.*

*I was especially aware of how fragile she could become as issues that had been buried had suddenly resurfaced .... I found it harder to balance giving constructive feedback, so I was really really careful about what to focus on.*

Normally, when personal issues become evident in a ST's interactions, AT Tui indicated that she worked with a student to focus "*on the present – on the children, to separate their personal lives for the period of time that they are a student...*"

All the ATs had mentored at least five ECE STs on practicum. They all they saw making time for regular sustained professional conversations was a key to a successful practicum. For AT Tui, this included establishing a professional mentoring relationship in which the ST was asked to step into an active space of dialogue and feedback. She expected each ST that she mentored to answer positively to two questions:

*Are you open to feedback?  
Will you bring a question to ask me every day?*

According to AT Tui, these questions usually had the desired effect of creating a reflective pattern of communication about teaching and learning. It also indicated a willingness to be mentored. The sustained prioritising of mentoring conversations meant that "*issues*" became quickly evident especially when a student is "*unable to follow simple instructions*"; or "*they don't comprehend what is required.*"

Similarly, AT Betsy prioritised frequent "*critical*" conversations away from "*the floor*" to clarify mutual expectations. These conversations, she identified, as particularly important when the student needed to be "*aware and prepared of the possibility of failing her practicum.*"

### ***The personal and interpersonal planes: ATs and their colleagues***

*I am aware that some teachers do not see their role as being supportive of the student teacher as a human being – just as being an associate. (AT Tui)*

All the ATs who contributed to this study pointed to the importance of the teaching team as a support for the AT – especially when an AT was finding it difficult to work with a ST. AT Olive pointed to her centre's commitment to appointing two ATs to work together to mentor a ST. The rest of the teaching team was expected

to only support – not critique – the ST. This system of collaborative support enabled AT Olive to keep a positive perspective on her role, despite the stressors of working with a student at risk.

Other ATs spoke of the importance of having a 'go to' person within the centre; someone that the AT looked to for their own professional learning when they found themselves out of their depth.

Colleagues are not always supportive of the AT, however. AT Tui recalled working with a ST who was uncomfortable around men and who became agitated when she realised that the practicum centre's gate was not locked – this was to enable community access. During a reflective discussion with AT Tui, the student was pressed to consider the intensity of her concern in this area. As a result, tears flowed and the student's deep-seated fears came out which, according to AT Tui, needed to be addressed in order for the student to move on as an EC teacher.

Because she was unwilling to divulge to colleagues the significance of what the student was addressing personally, AT Tui got a reputation of being harsh with student teachers:

*I did tell them she was not comfortable with our open door policy but I did not tell them specifically what she was upset about and accepted that our conversation had triggered her distress.*

*I felt that my colleagues were more supportive of her in the days following and made comments then and months later about me making students cry. I think my colleagues took extra effort to counteract what they saw as me breaking her. However, I felt it was not my place to share with my colleagues the way I had connected the dots....*

*It raises the issue of how much is okay to tell our colleagues and how much isn't and whose role is it and how important it is to clear with the student what they are comfortable being talked about and who does the talking.*

For AT Olive, it was important that the teaching team was focused on only positive feedback for the student (regardless of whether they were at risk), thus attempting to keep troubling conversations away from children. AT Tui went further and identified that the presence of an at risk student in the centre can detrimentally affect children directly. The situation also raised stress levels amongst members of the teaching team:

*For me while I am at work, the emphasis is on the children and their families that we are responsible for. Having students at risk ... can impact on the quality of care and education that children receive because teachers are preoccupied.*



### ***The interpersonal and the institutional planes: The AT, the student and the ITE provider***

Having brokered the student teaching placement, the ITE provider's relationship with the AT is central to the practicum's scope and purpose, yet day to day, it is usually in the background. Generally, the ATs expressed appreciation for support from ITE providers, that they could phone up for advice, as well as when there were "open conversations with visiting lecturers" (AT Tui).

Despite the AT's role being pivotal in any student teaching practicum however, the AT has relatively few rights to information about the student's background – even when it may affect practicum. Several ATs raised this as a problematic ethical issue. This came particularly strongly from AT Martha who argued that ATs should be informed about "aspects that could affect the outcome/success of the prac". If they do not have background knowledge, ATs can find themselves trying to diagnose a situation, when similar situations – unbeknownst to the AT – had happened on previous practicums.

This is what happened for AT Betsy when she realised that a student was known by the ITE provider to be at risk of failing:

*I had no history of the student, no understanding of how she responded to feedback or ways I could support her. I feel this made it extremely challenging to work with her over the first 4 weeks. I was left feeling uncertain of how she got this far in her practicum placements, as in my opinion she lacked in basic areas of engagements, knowledge, understanding and professionalism. ...*

*I think that ATs could be provided with some of the student's practicum history, areas they need to work on, areas of growth or struggle. By doing so it will aid in the support they are given, as this will be adjusted to each individual student from early in their practicum rather than later.*

AT Martha urged caution, however, about what should be shared from previous (especially if unsuccessful) practicum, though once having canvassed her colleagues, she offered a checklist of what should be disclosed (as well as what should not have to be disclosed):

- ✓ Learning disability
- ✗ Antidepressants
- ? Mental issues - Depends what type
- ? Personal circumstances - Depends on circumstance
- Confidentiality:
- ✓ Nothing should be disclosed to AT without student's permission.

AT Martha recognised that disclosure to an AT – especially at the start of a practicum – may, however, be too difficult for a student, unless there was active support from the ITE provider. She maintained that a professional goal for a student could be to confidently and appropriately raise uncomfortable topics such

as a long-term disability or a mental illness, if these could impact on their teaching.

Especially when a student at risk was also close to graduating, ATs felt responsibility for ensuring that the student was working professionally. When they were put in a situation where failure was possible, questions arose about how the student could enter teacher education (AT Tui proposed that "passion for working with children" should be discerned through pre-entry interviews); and how students could progress through a series of practicum when there were ongoing issues affecting their teaching.

As AT Betsy put it, ATs need to be willing to make concerns known during ST's early practicums:

*To make this process kinder, fairer, more transparent, or more efficient, I think we as Associate Teachers need to be able to engage in professional critiques and feedback, so a student doesn't get to her final practicum and be confronted with a possibility of failing.*

This raises challenging questions for ITE providers about the balancing of rights: how do teacher education systems ensure that students are able to learn through experience, and that while they are learning, they are treated fairly and respectfully?

While at the same time, how do teacher education systems ensure that students who struggle through one practicum after another do not graduate and become struggling early childhood teachers?

## DISCUSSION

In line with the literature, a key finding of this small qualitative study is that sustained interpersonal communication is at the core of a successful practicum outcome (see Aspden, 2017; Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Hastings, 2004; Lind, 2008; Perry, 2008; Zhang et al, 2015, as examples). Thus, the breakdown in communication and an inability to establish and maintain a relationship between AT and ST were major indicators of a practicum student 'at risk'.

Student response to feedback was seen as evidence of whether or not the practicum was working effectively. Defensiveness is not an unusual response to critical feedback, and the AT needs some theories of mind to explain why this might happen (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). AT Tui illustrated this, arguing that ATs need to be able to: "*distinguish between lack of understanding, lack of motivation, or something else (e.g. grief, trauma, alcohol or drug abuse)*".

This capacity to discern underlying reasons for attitudes and behaviours may grow out of an AT's personal life experience and is likely to be further shaped by the teaching and learning communities of their professional lives. These reflect interaction between all of Rogoff's planes: the 'personal', the 'interpersonal' as well as the 'institutional' planes.

The available knowledge base about working with STs may well rest in the shared experiences of an early childhood teaching team. In a centre where there are opportunities for sustained professional conversation, an AT may be able to tap into the broader understanding, though not all teaching teams can ensure effective support for a struggling AT, and the role of the ITE provider becomes

particularly important in several ways. One is the immediate availability of personnel to engage effectively during a difficult practicum, but the wider question is the assumption that a certificated teacher has all the skills needed to mentor a student teacher. This speaks not only to professional learning opportunities for EC teachers who might step up to the role of Associate Teacher, but also to the content of ITE programmes for ECE teachers.

While an EC teacher's communication skills may be extended through teacher education, the mentoring and assessing of adult learners (such as a student on practicum) are unlikely to be directly addressed in ITE. In addition, while assessment of children is a key component of initial teacher education, for New Zealand early childhood graduates, this is normally assessment that is narrative in structure, positive in perspective, and sociocultural in its emphasis (Ministry of Education, 2017). In fact, within the early childhood sector there is strong resistance to summative assessments of children (deVocht, Macky, & Hill, 2017). Further, there may be a reluctance to complicate existing relationships between EC centres and the ITE provider by failing a student teacher (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017).

Therefore, the requirement to pass judgement and potentially provide sufficient evidence to fail a ST, may be a new and untested domain of professional practice for an AT, and may also reveal wider issues which push towards allowing a marginally capable student to pass a practicum. In addition, negative judgement can be distasteful or run counter to the pedagogical and social ethos of an AT.

At the same time, a focus on children's rights and on a strong sense of responsibility to the wider sector to ensure all graduates are capable teachers positions the AT as a gatekeeper to the profession (Zhang et al., 2015). This is illustrated by AT Tui's foregrounding of her professional priorities: the children and their families. Focusing on children and their families can justify an AT's determination to expect an ST to address personal issues, and in the extreme, to recommend failing a ST whose practices and/or attitude cause concern.

Although standards exist for all graduates from New Zealand ITE providers (see Teaching Council of New Zealand/ Matatū Aotearoa, 2019b), the literature suggests that while there may be adherence to named competencies, there is also assessment of ST's 'soft skills' which may be harder to pin down (Ortlipp, 2009). A recurring meme amongst those who assess early childhood student teachers is 'Would I want this person to teach my child/grandchild?' (Aspden, 2017; Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Zhang, et al., 2015). An area for future research could include how subjective and intuitive assessments interplay with the Teaching Council of New Zealand's recently introduced requirements for ITE provider to offer professional learning opportunities for Associate Teachers to "fully prepare" ATs for their role (Teaching Council of New Zealand/ Matatū Aotearoa, 2019a, p. 24).

While the intuitive and the subjective may be seen as undermining objective criteria for teaching requirements, Aspden (2017) maintains that the intuitive can reflect the depth of knowledge about teachers and teaching, especially within a particular context. Further, she recognised that in the exercise of professional judgements, there is an overlap between the subjective and expert knowledge. While intuition may help an AT to understand a troubled ST, it would, however, be unlikely to provide robust assessment information. As AT Tui

indicated, as well as working to understand an at risk ST, she also had to gather “*evidence*” to back up her assessment that a student should fail practicum.

## **CONCLUSION**

This qualitative research has foregrounded personal narratives from five Associate Teachers working in early childhood centres in Auckland. All have had responsibility for mentoring and judging STs on practicum whom they identified as being at risk of failing. Their stories illustrate the tension between creating a trusting relational space in which a student can take risks as a teacher, and at the same time the expectation that the AT will be assessing continuously whether the ST is moving towards predetermined professional goals. In situations like this, the professional/institutional and personal/interpersonal merge as the ST has to enact effective teaching. This is an embodied performance which is tested in the interpersonal space between ST and children, and which is observed and discussed in the interpersonal space between ST and AT, and at times, a representative of the ITE provider.

This is also a space in which the institutional requirements interface with the personal and interpersonal – both the AT and ST are expected to understand, interpret and apply the standards for graduates (Teaching Council of New Zealand/ Matatū Aotearoa, 2019b).

When the interpersonal relationship between adults in ECE is highly stressful, this easily ripples into the children’s experiences. This situation illustrates a complex ethical space where the rights of children can be adversely impacted, and where the ST also has the right to be respected, and to be assessed in a fair and professional manner. As an agent of the wider profession of teachers, the AT has to navigate that space.

While this study has amplified the experiences of seasoned ATs and highlighted areas where issues especially with ITE providers could be explored, there are larger hovering questions unanswered. For example, what responsibility does an ITE provider have to work in the interpersonal space between AT and ST when a student is facing significant personal challenges?

Further, and more controversially, this study amplifies the question: ‘Who can be teachers?’ More specifically:

- How ethical is it to accept a student into teacher education with a known disposition or known condition which, while potentially manageable, is also likely to have significant challenges? What room is there in the teaching profession for qualified teachers who have ongoing mental health issues? Or a significant physical or learning disability?
- What is lost by failing a ‘different’ student who might bring dissonance into an early childhood team, but who might also have a perspective or a contrasting capability that is beyond what is currently mandated?

These questions are open for discussion.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

### SUE STOVER

*Auckland University of Technology  
Auckland, New Zealand*



After 16 years in teacher education, Sue Stover is now semi-retired. She is currently an early childhood teacher, writer, editor, researcher and Playcentre grandmother.

### NATASHA COUGHLAN

*Early Childhood Teacher  
Auckland, New Zealand*



I am an Early Childhood Teacher passionate about seeing teachers and children develop to their full potential. I believe that it takes a village to raise a child and that every teacher plays an important role. I have been married to my husband for the past 24 years and am the mother of two teenage children though many other children call our house home.

## KIM HARRIS

*Early Childhood Teacher  
Auckland, New Zealand*



I took my degree at the Auckland University of Technology, specialising in the Montessori Method of Education. Through Montessori I am able to follow the children's interest and extend their learning. Over the last few years I have enjoyed supporting Montessori teachers in training, in the role of an Associate teacher. My hobbies include reading, playing badminton, jogging and extending my teaching knowledge through attending Professional Development.

## ZOE LETICA

*Early Childhood Teacher  
Auckland, New Zealand*



Zoe India Letica, Bachelor of Education, Early Childhood teaching, Auckland University of Technology 2011. Attended multiple professional development seminars both nationally and internationally; engaging in one on one conversations with some of the worlds most renowned Reggio Emilia philosophers. Undergone extensive leadership conferences alongside my local and international community of professional learners. Worked closely with and managed a large demographic of teachers.



## ROBYN MUNDY

*Early Childhood Teacher  
Auckland, New Zealand*



Robyn is head teacher at a non-profit centre on the North Shore. She has been teaching for over 13 years and believes in empowering children through their engagement in Real Play.

## CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON

*Early Childhood Teacher,  
Auckland, New Zealand*



Charlotte's involvement in early childhood community-based settings has been as a volunteer, parent, teacher, manager and tutor. She is currently a teacher with the Auckland Kindergarten Association where she enjoys the stimulus and responsibility of being an Associate Teacher. She is a committee member of OMEP, a world organisation for early childhood and the International Play Association and a member of Child Rights Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand and Child Poverty Action. She was awarded the Margaret M. Blackwell Travel Scholarship in 2019 to research how teachers can support children of prisoners.

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