

# Why does it have to be so flashy? Student perspectives on academic tasks

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## **Abstract**

*Student academic identity represents the willingness and commitment to engage with academic ways of knowing, being and doing and as such in an important aspect of becoming academically literate. This paper reports on findings associated with student engagement with academic tasks in the undertaking of a field-based programme of early childhood initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Data was collected from students, Teacher Educators and Associate Teachers using qualitative tools including open-ended questionnaires, group and individual interviews. Participation was gathered from four tertiary providers of field-based early childhood initial teacher education within Aotearoa New Zealand. Additional contextual data being sought from the wider early childhood community in which field-based study was situated. Interpretation of the findings indicates that student academic identity is influenced by the nature of academic tasks and the associated experiences of dissonance as students move from the comfort zone of everyday ways of being knowing, and doing to those required of the academe. Relevance of academic tasks with future professional practice was also identified as significant to student engagement. The research findings reveal that attention to academic tasks within wider programme curriculum design in field-based programmes is significant in supporting students achieving successful academic outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Student academic identity, Discourse, field-based initial teacher education, Aotearoa New Zealand.

## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to provide insight into student perspectives of academic study with the intention that such insights be used to inform understanding of student academic identity through the direct representation of student experience. Student academic identity refers to the willingness and commitment demonstrated towards the appropriation of academic values and practices within a sense of self during the experience of becoming academically literate. The academic values and practices in question relate to those associated with field-based initial teacher education (FBITE) within the field of early childhood education.

## Field-based programme design

To fully appreciate the issue of academic identity for students with FBITE it is necessary to first have an understanding of the context in question. Early childhood initial teacher education within Aotearoa New Zealand has a strong foundation within field-based programmes which draw on regular student experience working, as volunteers or paid employees, within early childhood centres as part of their teacher education. This field-based option for credentialing in the ECE sector is of particular interest as on a regular basis these students move between the practices of the academe and those of early childhood centres; continually negotiating ways of being, knowing and doing from one context to another. It is further acknowledged that the draw of such students into the academe in the first place is that of obtaining a professional credential for practice outside of the academe.

A programme of FBITE consists of study across sites other than the main institutional provider's campus (Kane, 2005). For students these study sites typically consist of the academic classroom, the work-experience early childhood centre for regular weekly teaching practice experience, and additional early childhood centres forming the practicum elements of the programme. This crude outline however misses the significance of the roles that students undertake within these various sites of learning. For instance during classroom and the practicum based learning students may clearly hold the label of 'student'. In their work experience centres they may actually be regarded as students, or as volunteers, as relief workers or even as teachers in a paid or unpaid capacity. Participation in these multiple sites of learning draws on a degree of adaptability on the part of the student so that they can adequately function in these multiple roles, across multiple contexts, and within multiple and possibly contested Discourses (Gee, 2001; Lea, 1998; Mezirow, 2000). The term Discourse in this context, using a big D, draws on the work of Gee (2000) around the behaviour of social groups and as such relates to the wider concepts of social participation, agency and identity. Understanding how student academic identity fits within the overall experience of FBITE is deemed important to the wider issues of student engagement, retention, and success.

The credentialing of teachers in the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has faced a turbulent history, which remains unsettled even to this day. Despite claims that participation in quality early childhood education (ECE) is critical to building firm foundations for children's later learning and development (Ministry of Education, 2002), the credentialing of early childhood teachers as a contributing factor to quality provision remains open to the whim of Governmental preferences at any one time. The requirements to introduce professional registration and increase the numbers of qualified early childhood teachers, established within the strategic plan *Pathways to the Future* (Ministry of Education, 2002), were a step towards establishing equality within the early childhood sector. To raise the profile of early childhood teachers the move to attain pay parity with the compulsory sector early childhood teachers gained momentum with a requirement that early childhood teachers attain qualification at bachelor degree level, despite the two year diploma

being the agreed minimum credential to meet registration requirements (Ministry of Education, 2002). It was the academe that took on the role of providing authority and legitimacy to the credentialing process, and with this academisation of initial teacher education comes the increasing challenge of navigating academic Discourse (Gee, 2001).

### **Academic literacies**

By joining the academe students are agreeing to participate in the Discourse of the community, which is defined by a system of symbolic action defined by the academic community and communicated through a distinct body of practices (Gee, 2001). Academic literacies relate to becoming conversant in the Discursive practices of the academic community and as such are a necessary part of success in academic study. Becoming academically literate means that students will need to learn the ways of being, doing, and knowing constituting the Discourse of the academic community. Academic Discourse in its simplest form revolves around the generation and dissemination of knowledge.

Within academic Discourse the generation of knowledge is primarily associated with methods of inquiry, critical thinking and the analysis and evaluation of information or data, and the sharing of findings within the relevant discipline community. There is a reliance on reading and writing for the dissemination of knowledge. Academic Discourse consists of rules and expectations, the most widely promoted being that of ownership of knowledge and the detrimental act of plagiarism. Becoming academically literate involves not only being aware of the rules and expectations of the academic community but also being able and willing to follow them. It is well documented that many students, particularly at the beginning of higher education, find the rules of the academic community daunting and challenging especially if they have had limited prior exposure to academic Discourse (Gourlay, 2009; Ivanič, Edwards, Satchwell, & Smith, 2007; Lea & Street, 1998).

Through the duration of their study students become more exposed to the social practices of the academic community, typically moving from using the prior generated knowledge of a discipline through to developing and generating new knowledge through their own research as students. This exposure also facilitates deeper involvement and participation within the academic community (Wenger, 1998), and becoming literate relates to these degrees of involvement and participation within a given community. Movement from the periphery of the community of practice is facilitated through the enhancement of competency in the required Discourse (Gee, 2001; Smith, 2009). Through being exposed to and participating in the academic community the student as social actor is opened up to constructing new meaning, adopting new ways of mediating the world and as such new ways of locating self (Stets & Burke, 2005).

It is acknowledged that social actors may be negotiating ways of being within a number of communities at any one time and through entry to a new community social actors learn that Discourses vary between contexts and communities (Reveles & Brown, 2008). For the student this means that they are not only learning to navigate the Discourse of the academic community but they are also participants in other

communities such as work sites, social communities, and the community of family. Also known as communities of practice, such social groupings are defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, n.d, para. 2). Membership of multiple communities of practice is referred as a nexus of interconnected communities of which a person may participate as forming a “living landscape of practices” (Wenger, 1998, p. 165). Participation in a landscape of practices reflects not only the multiplicity of roles that are held by social agents, but also the complexity inherent in attributing meaning to the world of everyday experience (Kilgore, 2001), and negotiate identity as ways of being a person.

### **Student academic identity**

Navigating academic study requires competency in academic literacies are seen as academic practices which include the values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships, which connect to and shape interactions with the academic world (Perry, 2012). A comprehensive definition of academic literacies therefore acknowledges the academic context in which specific literacies practices are situated. This understanding of literacies as socially situated acknowledges the place of power, agency and identity as students learn to read the academic word and the academic world (Street, 2003). Through this line of argument, developing an academic identity within and towards academic practices is argued as a constituent part of becoming academically literate (Lea, 2004; Northedge, 2003). Within the literature it is identified that the concept of student academic identity is associated with five core elements of self-theory, achievement indicators, agency-beliefs, motivation and dispositions.

### ***Self-theory***

Self-theories are based on a combination of internal and externally derived knowledge and are associated with a belief in one’s own self to behave in a particular way (Bandura, 1995). Self-esteem is an important aspect of self-theory and relates to the emotional dimension of self-perceptions (Krause, Bochner, & Duchesne, 2003). Self-esteem may be positive (high) or negative (low), and in the academic context self-esteem is linked with self-comparison with fellow students, the relationships formed within the academic environment potentially influencing student engagement and participation in academic tasks. Self-efficacy also relates to self-esteem in the academic context (Krause et al., 2003). Higher self-efficacy is associated with higher levels of self-confidence, which are important for managing challenges and stresses within academic study. High self-efficacy is associated with a personal sense of agency, influence and control, to attain successful outcomes. Conversely low self-esteem is associated with feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy, which may impact on further elements of academic identity such as motivation.

Perceptions of future or possible selves are also important in academic situations. According to Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, & Bunuan (2010, p. 1351) future or possible selves involve: “casting the self in terms of the future and possible also implies a goal that is anticipated and may be realized”. Future or possible self emerge are derived from desires and hopes, as well as fears, and reservations for the self, which are said to be specific and significant rather than any imagined role

(Markus & Nurius, 1986). In relation to student academic identity the future aspirations for self have an influencing role on motivations, self-regulation, and self-concepts associated with the learning behaviours.

### ***Achievement indicators***

Achievement indicators refer to the degree to which a student realises their educational goals (Sepehrian Azar, 2013), and achievement indicators act to gauge the likelihood of meeting with academic success. In relation to student academic identity, achievement indicators provide essential messages informing a sense of self in terms of confidence, efficacy, and a future sense of possible self associated with the likelihood of achieving academic goals (Was, Al-Harthy, Stack-Oden, & Isaacson, 2009).

Feedback is an example of an achievement indicator, involving the provision of information about performance or understanding enabling students to gain insight into their academic ability (Schunk & Mullen, 2013; Timperley, 2013). Feedback can be both formative and summative, in that it can be used to inform a student as to areas for future development prior to a final measure of success (Brown & Race, 2012). Positive feedback in terms of areas of student success can lead to an increase in positive self-perceptions, and increases in motivation. Negative feedback, on the other hand, in the form of poorer than anticipated or desired grades or lower expectations on competency measures, can be related to negative impacts on self-beliefs and lowered motivation and engagement in academic study (Timperley, 2013).

### ***Agency-beliefs***

Agency-beliefs refer to personal strategies and how students use them in order to attain academic success. Agency-beliefs are associated with knowing what to do to achieve academic success, and are closely aligned with but remain separate from the motivation to achieve (Walls & Little, 2005). In this way agency within the academic context relates to degrees of activity, passivity, and perceptions of personal control that students hold in relation to learning (Ryan, 2009). In terms of student actions such agency relates to strategies such as: time-keeping, organisation, taking notes, using effective research skills to gather information, managing academic workloads and assessment deadlines, and the prioritising of commitments (Lai, 2011a).

Agency-beliefs utilise self-regulatory processes through which a student as proactive agent directs their own learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulated learners demonstrate autonomy through knowing how and when to seek help in achieving goals, with help seeking behaviour being defined as “requests for assistance, clarification, information, and checking-of-work from teachers” (Calarco, 2011, p. 865). As such agency beliefs and self-regulation processes comprise the thoughts, feelings and behaviours a student holds towards goal achievement.

An associated feature of agency and self-regulation is that of procrastination. Academic procrastination, also referred to as temporal discounting, is said to consist of: “failing to perform an academic activity within a desired timeframe or postponing until the last minute activities one needs to complete” (Jackson, 2012, p. 20). Acts of

academic procrastination are counter to effective self-regulation and have been associated with the need for constant reassurance, defensiveness, self-handicapping behaviours, and poor academic decision making (Berzonsky, 2004; Was et al., 2009). Furthermore it is also negatively associated with academic self-efficacy and reportedly most likely to occur in relation to academic reading, writing and examination preparation (Jackson, 2012).

### ***Motivation***

Motivation, as an element of student academic identity, consists of a number of components including beliefs around task value, goal orientation, and affect. In terms of task value, motivation relates to whether the student is setting out on a learning pathway of their own choosing, intrinsic motivation, or one in which they are fulfilling the academic expectations of others, usually parents, termed external motivation (Dweck, 2000). Intrinsic motivational properties consist of orientations towards learning, such as whether learning is regarded as meaningful and enjoyable, and hence the commitment and willingness displayed in engaging with academic practices. Furthermore, student academic motivation is said to be influenced by factors such as the student's self-concept and self-efficacy, making a connection across to academic identity as self-theory (Rodriguez, 2009).

Motivation is also associated with goal orientation. Achieving goals is associated with the personal approaches taken within learning situations, and whether students engage in actions of pursuing or avoiding learning situations. Through connection with goal orientation achievement indicators relate to student motivation towards learning situations. As such goal orientation relates to student academic identity in a number of ways; motivationally and the achievement of personal learning goals; self-theory, in terms of comparison of self with peers on academic tasks; agency, in terms of energy, the desire to learn and activity applied to learning; and dispositions, associated with intellectual curiosity (Howell & Watson, 2007). Motivation enables continued engagement in depth of thinking, and is associated with the dispositions of effort and persistence (Lai, 2011b; Rodriguez, 2009).

### ***Dispositions***

Dispositions consist of "habits of mind" (Lai, 2011b, p. 16), including values and beliefs, strategies and intentions (Freeman, 2003). The dispositions and qualities a student holds are examples of personal resources influencing navigation of, and participation in the social world. Examples of dispositions associated with a positive academic identity include, inclination to open oneself to experience, preparedness to explore, and preparedness to listen (Barnett, 2007, p. 102). Such dispositions are associated with orientations to the world, a readiness to move forward, to take action, and as such relate to motivation, agency, and self-theories. In relation to the academic context general academic dispositions include attitudes towards working hard, paying attention, participation, commitment to academic study, ways of recovering from set-backs, how challenges are approached and points of focus such as seeing personal failings or challenges to overcome (Bandura, 1995). Dispositions also relate to student attitudes towards knowledge construction in the form of information processing styles. These cognitive strategies influence how events are perceived, experienced and interpreted, the meaning that is attached to them, and in

turn future patterns of responding to like situations. These styles of processing relate to how receptive students are to new knowledge and are also associated with perceptions of knowledge and intelligence (Dweck, 2000), including: “what knowledge is, how knowledge is gained, and the degree of certainty with which knowledge can be held” (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006, p. 17).

### Methodology

As the overall aim of the research was to investigate student academic identity an interpretive methodology was chosen utilising qualitative data collection methods. The interpretive methodology was informed by the principles of phenomenology in which attention is given to the life world (Van Manen, 1997) or the “everyday world of practical experience” (Ladkin, 2005, p. 112). In this life world it is within the subjective experiences of participants that phenomena are given meaning. Meaning is derived from how social actors look at their experiences with, or in the words of (Schutz, 1967, p. 42): “meaning is a certain way of directing one’s gaze at an item of one’s own experience”. The interpretive researcher gathers the meaning of lived experiences by asking how and why questions; thereby systemically uncovering the nature of subjective experiences of phenomena in the form of rich detailed descriptions of lived experience from a reflective stance (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Finlay, 2009; Yin, 2009).

In relation to the investigation of identity within an educational environment, it is argued that there are three groups of contextual features playing an influencing role within the development of identity in an educational environment: the self, pedagogy, and the institution (Vermunt, 2005). The context of self being aligned with the personal experiences of academic identity of students; the pedagogical context being aligned with the academe and the institution being perceived at the wider societal level of the early childhood education sector. Given the importance of context in relation to identity development research participation was sought not only from students for whom academic identity was a lived experience but in addition from across academic, community and socio-political contexts. The contexts and participation sought for the research are represented in Figure 1.

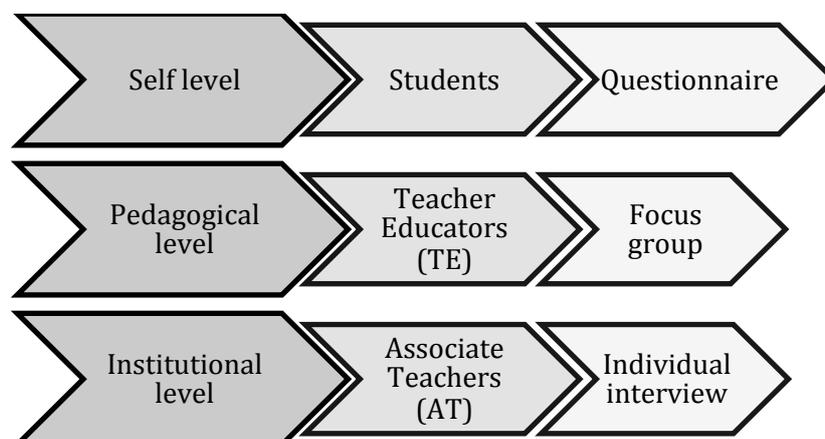


Figure 1. *Research contexts, participation and methods*

Participants were identified according to specified criteria within purposive sampling procedures (Patton, 2002). In relation to student participants, the first and final semesters of study were deemed significant points of transition associated with academic identity in which identity is most open to investigation (LeCourt, 2004). Further to this point it is argued that by reading identity “against the grain” (Hall, 1996, p. 18), it is possible to engage in the narratives of experience of crossing over into new structures of meaning, positions of being, and ways of looking at and interpreting oneself and the world (Topp, 2000). Student data was gathered through the use of open-ended questionnaires distributed to first year and final year students undertaking a field-based Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) from across four tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand. The open-ended questionnaires were designed to acknowledge, but not specifically compare, the differences between student experiences commencing academic study with those of students coming towards the end of their academic study.

Data was collected from 205 student participants: 134 first year students in their first semester of study, and 71 final year students in their final semester of study. There was an overall response rate of 66% for first year and 45% for the final year student samples. Additional participation was sought from group interviews, or focus groups with Teacher Educators (TE) involved in the delivering of the programme of FBITE from each of the four institutions. Further participation was sought from a small sample of five Associate Teachers (AT) who as qualified and registered teachers had supported students from a range of institutions in the teaching practice components of their teacher education. Data from ATs was gathered through individual interviews.

## **Presentation of findings**

Within the overall research findings academic tasks were identified as a major theme that emerged from the thematic analysis of data from multiple participant samples. The process of coding and categorisation of themes was supported through the use of QSR Nvivo software. The main themes associated with academic tasks are presented and in keeping with the presentation of qualitative data, examples of data will be provided through accompanying vignettes in the respondent’s own words.

### **Academic discussions**

Academic discussions were favourably associated with exposure to alternative perspectives, the promotion of deepening thinking and providing an opportunity for feedback. For example in the following first year student response appreciation is expressed to being exposed to the multiple perspectives of others: “I really like participating in discussions or conversations as you get different perspectives/views from other students and this can help me further develop my learning and understanding”. A sentiment also echoed by another first year student, who said it was: “Helpful to hear other people’s views, experiences and opinions. Provides different ways of seeing things and dealing with things”. Further benefits of academic discussions included enhancing engagement and exposing students to deeper thinking. For instance in the following example a first year respondent identified that academic discussions not only facilitated access to new thoughts and ideas but could

also provide an opportunity for feedback: “I think it’s a great idea to open up areas that we could discuss that maybe we hadn’t thought of alone. Get new feedback too”.

When identified in questionnaire responses, a preference for face-to-face over online as represented in the following first year student response: “I find online discussions difficult but I am always up for face-to-face when possible”. More specific reasons for disliking on-line discussions included digital literacy and the ease with which questions could be asked on line, as shown respectively in the following first year student responses: “I feel that on-line is not for me as I am not ICT literate. However face-to-face is good as I am able to understand what we discuss in a conversation” and “I prefer face to face as you can ask questions easier. I do not like forums and online discussions”.

A less consistent response was evident in relation to how discussions could potentially impact self-concepts such as confidence, efficacy and worth. Responses in this regard were a mix of both positive and negative outcomes. For example in relation to instances when discussions had a positive effect one first year respondent said: “I think it’s great because it builds confidence in ourselves if we have discussions or conversations together”. Conversely the negative perceptions of academic discussions relating to self-confidence and a sense of personal exposure are identified in the following first year student response: “I hate it. Its awkward and I’m not confident sharing with others”.

### **Academic writing**

Academic writing was reported as being less favoured than discussions but still preferable over academic reading. Academic writing was reported to potentially increase self-confidence resulting from a sense of achievement. First year student positive responses towards academic writing included: “I don’t mind these as I find I learn quite a bit from researching for my written tasks” and “While I write my knowledge of the related topic expands. I enjoy it”. Accomplishing academic written tasks was associated with feelings of personal achievement even if the experience itself was challenging, for instance one first year respondent said: “When completed I feel absolutely stoked that I achieve it”, and another first year respondent commented that academic writing: “Can be difficult but rewarding and encouraging when you get a good mark”. Students also reported that academic writing tasks provided them with acknowledgment of the efforts they put into their learning, as represented by one first year respondent: “More achievable to have something to show for it when completed rather than reading”.

There was however an equal risk of confidence being lowered. Typical generalised negative responses to academic writing included: “I don’t exactly like these (essays) me and a lot of others experience difficulties with those and “I understand their value, but I’m not a fan”. More specific reasons associated with the dislike of academic writing included self-doubt and a lack of confidence. For instance one first year respondent said it was: “Hard especially when your second guessing yourself and work” and another commented that they experienced: “Lots of self-doubt but I’m more than capable”.

According to the Teacher Educators academic writing was not just an issue for first year students and was indeed regarded as challenging even at the later stages of study. One Teacher Educator said: “By year 3 they struggle with academic writing, if they’re going to struggle with anything that’s what they’ll struggle with. Being able to put their thoughts down in a clear, concise way that flows”.

### **Academic reading**

Overall academic reading was the least favoured academic activity. Learning style and academic skills were identified as affecting engagement in academic reading. Responses from students included expressions such as “hate it” and its “got to be done” and “have to do it”. For example first year responses included: “I hate reading will skim over and not really take in, will get bored and procrastinate”, and another first year student commented that: “I struggle with readings – I’m sorry I just don’t retain it. Probably because I have never been a reader, I am lucky to pick up a magazine. I find reading really boring”. Another first year student commented on the language of academic reading, saying: “Some reading is well over the top”.

Even the Teacher Educators remarked on how resistant students were to academic reading. For example in one of the group interviews one Teacher Educator said: “For some reason or other, they’re not reading enough in order to develop a good knowledge base there. I’m amazed at how many students will quite openly admit they actually don’t read, they don’t like reading so they don’t read”.

It was further evident in responses that engagement with reading tasks was associated with levels of interest in study in general as well the specific texts themselves. For instance one first year student said that whilst overall enjoying study they had limited motivation to read: “I find it very interesting and I do all assignments, hand them in on time. But I don’t really engage in class discussions, or read many readings”. Likewise in the interview an Associate Teacher commented that “If they are really interested in the academic learning and they want to listen to what you suggest that they maybe go and read further”. Another first year student said identified the importance of reading being meaningful for engagement: “I don’t like reading novels but I enjoy reading tasks for acquiring knowledge. I engage in text when it’s meaningful” and conversely another said: “I like to read but sometimes what we have to read doesn’t interest me”.

Both academic reading and writing were regarded as time consuming which was also associated with challenges such as time-management. The following vignettes provide exemplars of first year student experiences with academic readings: “I have a hard time trying to read them. But that is all down to time management” and “Not so good, never have enough time”. A further response identified academic reading as being: “Time consuming – trying to put in words what I am thinking is hard”. Academic language also posed a challenge to students and could act as a barrier between student attitudes towards study and hence engagement. The following first year student response from one student clearly portrays the negative feelings associated with the language of academic readings “[I] go cross eyed, complain about why it can’t be said or written so everyone can understand it!! Why does it have to be so flashy? Who are we trying to impress?”

The final year students were more discerning in their attitudes and tended to identify specific academic tasks of interest. A common factor influencing motivation to engage in academic tasks was level of interest in the topic forming the focus of the activity, rather than the format or nature of the academic act per se. Academic tasks were attributed more value if they were perceived as aligning well with the professional role of early childhood teacher such as observations, teaching philosophies and applied tasks such as student led research projects. For example one final year respondent said: "Exploration, discovery, preparation and presentation of my personal philosophy has been by far the most rewarding experience of all" and final year another respondent said:

An understanding of observation methods and planning has allowed me to better understand planning on interests and the importance of it. Research has also demonstrated the importance of further knowledge gaining and the importance it can have on the environment you work in.

Furthermore respondents identified the place academic tasks had on building connections between the theory of teaching and the actual practice. For example one final year student referred to the role of the developing their own teaching practice philosophy and the impact this had on practice: "I began to understand the importance of beliefs and that theory was just confirmation in my beliefs. [It] made learning fun for me". A further final year respondent particularly emphasised the value of the research paper that was applied in the early childhood centre regarding: "seeing it implemented and reflecting positive change". Meanwhile research enabled the following final year respondent to recognise their independent learning skills: "[I came] to the conclusion that I can teach myself and not just learn in a formal setting".

Time spent in academic study was no guarantee of being more engaged. For instance whilst some students reported feeling more engaged in the final year than they were during their first year of study, for yet others waning levels of immersion in academic study were reported as students reached the final phase of their study. For example the following final year respondent commented that: "It is nearly the end of 3yr degree and it is now starting to feel like it is dragging on" and another final year respondent said: "I am still interested in ECE and believe I will continue to work within it for at least 10 years, but am definitely finding myself a lot less interested as time goes on."

Furthermore, an interest in continuing academic study after graduating was limited with the majority of final year students expressing either ambivalence or a total lack of interest. At times there was a contradiction in responses between the value of academic practice and undertaking further academic study. For example the following final year respondent said initially about academic study: "It makes you keep wanting to learn and develop as a meaningful teacher". However later in the questionnaire the same respondent claimed: "I'll never study again!! (Well that's how I'm feeling at the moment)."

### **Rewarding academic tasks**

The most rewarding academic tasks were those that related specifically to professional practice as a teacher. For instance tasks associated with: student

(action) research; observation applied in the teaching context; pedagogical documentation and planning for children's learning; and cultural learning in relation to Te Ao Māori (the Māori world). For example one final year respondent valued academic tasks that: "Involve observing, analysing children and working with peers. Then applying academic learning to the situation". A further final year respondent went into detail as to the applied nature of a task: "We were required to plan and extend a child's learning and development based on our observations (running records) and conversations with other teachers and child's family". Finally in the following vignette a further final year respondent identifies the specific value of undertaking research: "[Research] prepared me to think outside the box and has shown me that there are many ways to look at the same events or issues. Ethics has been an area that has increased my professional role as an early childhood teacher".

Support for student perspectives on rewarding academic tasks was evident in Teacher Educator responses whereby again less tension between the academic and field of early childhood education was perceived when there was a sense of practical fit, as expressed by the following participant: "I think that if they are engaged in change making and it's to the benefit of the centre then it's recognised and acknowledged". Furthermore, relevance was also essential to engagement as identified by another Teacher Educator: "If it's not relevant to what they're doing then they [final year students] start to question why are they doing it, so to them it needs to support what they do in their centres or what they plan to do with their future careers".

The field-based aspect of the initial teacher education programmes enabled Teacher Educators to build relationships with students, which enhanced understanding of student academic work. Through their knowledge of students in their field-based contexts, Teacher Educators identified that they were more likely to be able to enhance their understanding of student's academic work. For instance one Teacher Educator talked about this in relation to written reflections:

Because you've been to see them, you're reading the reflection through the lens of the context that you know they're working in. I can picture them in a space that they're describing so it just makes it easier for me to give really good authentic feedback because I know their context.

However, the nature of a field-based programme of study was identified as complex in terms of finding a balance between academic and practice demands. For instance the Teacher Educators expressed concern that increased academic demands were taking students away from and diluting these experiences. Phrases such as 'attached to' rather than 'embedded within' were used to describe the place of the practice component of the degrees: "It seems somehow we have moved to a field-based programme, which is a full-time degree programme with some practice attached to it".

## Discussion

The data show that the nature of academic task, levels of interest and relevance to emerging professional practice are important influences on student academic identity. The core constituent elements of student academic identity were represented in the data with reference being made to aspects of: self-theories through perceptions of self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-worth; agency beliefs through the impact of time-management on self-regulation and evidence of procrastination; achievement indicators through the sense of personal achievement as well as the value attributed to receiving feedback; and motivation with interest in academic tasks being enhanced when academic tasks and aligned with the context of professional practice. However student academic identity was identified as being an unpredictable phenomenon.

The specific nature of an academic task was identified as playing a significant contributing role in the unpredictable development of student academic identity. As such the different academic tasks varied in the part they played in developing student academic identity. For example discussion tasks allowed academic ways of being, knowing and doing to be kept somewhat at a distance. This distance is maintained through the use of everyday language systems, interpretations, and expressions in the process of meaning making through being able to talk with peers, bounce ideas off each other and grapple with alternative perspectives. Whilst focusing on a study related issue, discussion with peers does not mean that academic Discourse is being engaged with. Instead discussion tasks may permit students to remain within their known Discourse base – their Discursive comfort zone. The positioning of peers as co-constructors of knowledge within the act of discussion can signal equality between participants. In the space of co-construction students can begin to step into academic Discourse as it is in this shared space of co-action that meaning is made to the content of academic study (Aspelin, 2011). However, it would appear that through discussion based tasks opportunity is provided to engage in deeper thinking and the exposure to multiple perspectives; both of which are key aspects of academic Discourse. Therefore it can be surmised that discussion based activities provide worthy opportunities to transition students into academic Discourse at the point where they reside at the periphery of the academic community (Gee, 2001; Smith, 2009; Wenger, 1998).

The challenge to discussion tasks came when they took place within online environments, which as well as posing technical challenges also move discussion out of the verbal and into the textual realm. Discussion activities within online contexts position participants differently as thoughts and ideas are necessarily more formularised and then communicated in a less flowing and conversational manner. The relational nature of learning then shifts, especially if online discussion contexts require students to use their 'academic voice'. Online discussions therefore highlight the role of text within academic Discourse and the development of an academic identity. Through academic writing students begin to use an academic voice and not their everyday voice. Hence there is potential for the level of Discursive dissonance

can increase due to the degree of disparity between everyday Discourse and academic Discourse. For instance the qualities of academic Discourse that cause tension are identified as: “verbal economy, logical coherence, clarity, dispassionate demeanour, comprehensiveness and certainty” (Gergen, 2011, p. 222). Challenges with academic writing were associated in part with students being able to take on board this way of writing and replicate in their own writing. Therefore being able to not only recognise but then also replicate Discursive expectations of a social group is significant to developing a sense of identity with that group.

Academic reading and writing place different demands on students in relation to engagement with academic genres (Aranha, 2009). Compared to discussions and writing, reading is a relatively passive enterprise in that it does not allow an actual exchange of communication directly between author and audience within the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The distance between creator and receiver is not enhanced by the nature of academic language itself. A point well represented by the words of Gergen:

The flat formality establishes a barrier. The reader is effectively informed, “I will reveal nothing personal to you, because ultimately you mean little to me.” Or more dramatically, “I am primarily interested in your admiration”. Further, I am not invited to have a voice in the issues at hand. The logic is complete within itself; it strives to reach a conclusion that is so perfectly developed that the readers admiration and sense of inferiority are sufficient to the day. (2011, p. 223)

In a discussion the participant can for instance question, challenge, and clarify. In the act of reading academic works the reader, as audience, is more alone; a passive recipient of a message more dependent on their own competency with the Discourse of the academic genre to be able to engage with the content of the reading. Academic reading requires the student to become more immersed in academic Discourse, and is different again to discussion or written tasks in relation to how the student is positioned in the Discursive process, as represented in Figure 1.

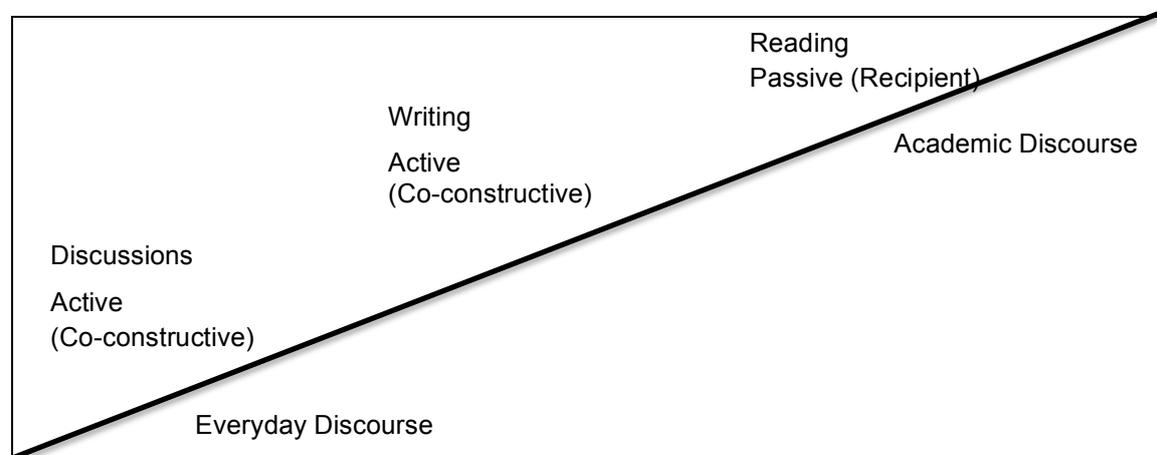


Figure 1. *Academic task and immersion in academic Discourse*

Reading of academic text is the primary way in which students are exposed to and become immersed in academic Discourse. Such exposure therefore also breeds familiarity with the disparate qualities of everyday and academic Discourses. A concern when students appear to be so resistant to reading. Through this familiarity Discursive dissonance can potentially be reduced. The student has to not only be on the receiving end of such Discourse but also, as part of the process of acquiring an academic identity, demonstrate the ability to produce work of this same nature. Such production involves the student conveying their academic voice. A primary means of which is through academic writing.

Experience with academic Discourse through time spent in study was no guarantee of a stronger academic identity. Rather, it was the relevance of academic tasks to the future goal and sense of self that held significance. Tasks only requiring reference to theoretical knowledge left students feeling disconnected and unanchored, typically resulting in lower student performance. Students were far more able and willing to engage with academic tasks requiring them to situate their knowledge within the experiences of their own teaching practices in the early childhood centre. This aligns with the claim that: “personal interpretations of events, not events in themselves constitute a person’s reality” (Berzonsky, 2004, p. 305). Within this line of argument, it is the student’s subjective interpretation of an academic experience which holds significance, not the academic task itself, which may further explain the unpredictability in the development student academic identity. In this way experiences for some people act as doors opening to new possibilities in terms of self, whereas for others experience of the same event can act as a barrier to potential success (Yoder, 2000).

The data show that rewarding academic tasks were more likely to be those associated with professional practice; reflecting a stronger identification with the professional rather than the academic domain. This is in keeping with undertaking study for credential purposes but does highlight the challenges facing field-based programmes with the academisation of initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Balancing the demands of academic requirements with those of practice and building relevancy are an important part of curriculum design and as such play an influencing role in the development of student academic identity. Furthermore academic related learning was not widely considered for on-going learning, with preference reported for non-credit bearing professional development. The academic seemingly being tolerated for the purposes of initial credentialing with emerging professional identities holding more influence within a sense of future self.

## **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the unpredictability in the development of student academic identity and variability of student engagement in academic Discourse. The nature of academic tasks was identified as contributing to this identity process with some academic tasks calling for more engagement with academic Discourse than others. Overcoming Discursive dissonance and stepping out from a zone of comfort with everyday ways of being, knowing and doing calls for well considered curriculum design and exposure to academic Discourse. This is particularly the case with field-

based programmes of study, which draw on applied pedagogies (Downing & Herrington, 2013), with relevance to academic processes emerging from their alignment with practice requirements and realities.

Student engagement with field-based study is ultimately driven by a desire for professional credentialing with students valuing the opportunity to apply learning within professional practice contexts. As such the academic aspect of the learning experience can become a tolerated part of achieving this ultimate professional goal. Academic identity therefore seems to be more precarious within field-based programmes of study and may require more careful consideration if the academisation of initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand continues. The precarious social position of early childhood teachers within wider Aotearoa New Zealand society continues to pose a challenge for programme development. As the academe has taken on the role of providing authority and legitimacy to the credentialing process, sufficient attention needs to be maintained to the challenge of developing new identities through the navigation of academic and practice Discourses.

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