Ondine Jayne Bradbury
Daniela Acquaro *Editors*

# School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education

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ISBN 978-981-19-5056-8 ISBN 978-981-19-5057-5 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5

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# Foreword

Teachers work in schools but they are prepared, at least initially, in universities. To help teachers become familiar with their future workplace, universities typically have programs to place teacher candidates in schools for certain periods of time. The teacher candidates can be observing or doing practice teaching. Thus, universities have typically developed relationships with schools so that they can run these programs. However, these relationships may or may not work all the time as schools and universities may have different visions, different priorities, different expectations and different arrangements. The relationships that can work better are the ones that universities and schools work in partnerships for a sustained period of time.

Partnerships are beyond simple relationships. Partnerships are deep relationships. To be in a partnership means both parties are equal but with different and complementary contributions. A partnership also means both parties have a shared view of teaching and learning as well as how to prepare teachers. It further means clear and well-understood responsibilities and work mechanisms. Healthy partnerships can greatly benefit initial teacher preparation. They provide a common vision of high-quality education for teacher candidates. They expose future teachers to high-quality teaching and learning. They give teacher candidates a rich experience of education. More importantly, they provide future teachers authentic opportunities to interact with both university professors and school teachers.

High-quality partnerships are also extremely valuable for both universities and schools. Building good partnerships requires gives and takes from both universities and schools. It is a process of mutual learning. Such learning, if done properly, can significantly improve university's understanding of schools and vice versa. Moreover, the gives and takes can help both parties not only improve their operations of the partnership but also visions of education.

It cannot be neglected that developing healthy partnerships is a process of reinventing education. It reinvents teacher education by providing smooth and natural experiences to teacher candidates in both universities and schools. It is moreover a process of educational innovations in universities and schools. Building partnerships pushes both universities and schools to reimagine the purpose and operation of education. At a time of immense uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and

new global geopolitical changes, both universities and schools can reinvent education so as to meet the needs of all students (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). However, high-quality partnerships are not easy to develop and are not in existence naturally. Such partnerships require both parties to be committed to improving education through collaboration. Both parties must share the understanding that school-university partnerships are a meaningful way to improve teacher education as well as education in schools and universities. Furthermore, high-quality partnerships need time and effort from both parties over a long period of time. Partnerships develop over time with genuine care and thoughtful actions. Of course, partnerships must meet the needs of both parties.

School-university partnerships for initial teacher education are not necessarily new. The idea has been implemented in various forms in different parts of the world (Campoy, 2000; Zeichner, 1992). But it is certainly not common practice in teacher education today. There are many reasons for the lack of school-university partnerships, but one of them is that high-quality partnerships are difficult and costly to develop and maintain. This book, *School-University Partnerships: Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, edited by Ondine Jayne Bradbury of Deakin University and Daniela Acquaro of The University of Melbourne, offers a great collection of chapters about building and maintaining high-quality partnerships. These chapters report authentic experiences within university-school partnerships in Australia.

This is a significant book. The experiences reported in this book cover a wide range of aspects of school-university partnerships. The documentation of these experiences provides readers the opportunity to see how partnerships develop and how they touch significant issues such as identity and vision. The reflections of these experiences are insightful and inspirational.

This is also a timely book. With the disruption of COVID-19 and increasing interest in educational transformation, this book adds to the growing body of literature about educational changes. It highlights new possibilities for both universities and schools beyond teacher education because partnerships could be a new way of education. The boundary between universities and schools should perhaps be erased in future.

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**Daniela Acquaro, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor of Education and Director of Initial Teacher Education within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She has been an educator and leader in the secondary and tertiary education sector for over 25 years. She is the university lead of the Melbourne Teaching Academy of Professional Practice (TAPP) school-university partnership and is a co-lead on a Multiprovider Greater Shepparton TAPP school-university partnership, each funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Her teaching and research centre on initial teacher education and educational leadership. She is committed to school improvement and is engaged in various research projects including school-university partnerships, teacher transitions into the workforce leadership development.

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# Chapter 1
# An Introduction to School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education

**Ondine Jayne Bradbury and Daniela Acquaro**

**Abstract** School-university partnerships have now become a fundamental foundation of initial teacher education programs across Australia. Firmly embedded in the program standards required to accredit pre-service teacher preparation courses, the importance of these partnerships is widely recognised. Incentivised through policy, the focus on school-university partnerships is front and centre within initial teacher education; however, the emphasis is now shifting towards the quality and sustainability of partnerships. Embedding of successful sustainable partnerships requires a deep understanding of contextual factors that are both unique and common to each partner. Understanding the strengths and needs of each partner creates the necessary conditions for innovation. This chapter introduces this edited collection of Australian school-university partnerships. The contributions are first-hand accounts from those who oversee the school-university partnership within each institution, providing both theoretical and practical understandings of how these partnerships are formed, their function and future considerations for the sustainability of these partnerships. Each contribution is distinct, each showcasing unique approaches to partnership and each demonstrating the transformation emerging from cross-sectoral collaboration.

## 1.1 Introduction

Partnerships between schools and universities have become an integral component of Initial Teacher Education underpinning the quality of programs and the provision of professional experience across Australian Universities. Establishing a partnership agreement and adopting a shared commitment and vision has now become mandatory for all Initial Teacher Education providers and has positioned Australia uniquely with

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_1

partnerships now a pivotal role in all Initial Teacher Education programs (AITSL, 2018a, 2018b).

The Teacher Education Managerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report reforms in 2014 set about a shift in how schools and universities ought to be working together in order to lift the quality of graduate teachers and initial teacher education more broadly. Fundamental in the TEMAG reform agenda was a need to ensure schools and universities worked together to bridge the theory practice divide, create a seamless transition between coursework and professional experience and create opportunities for reciprocal learning. In an effort to achieve this, a formalised mutually beneficial partnership was amongst the thirty-eight recommendations identified in the report. Since the release of the recommendations, policymakers have sought to incentivise universities to establish school-university partnerships.

Several years on, the policy context in Australia is now shifting towards an emphasis on the sustainability of school-university partnerships where innovations are embedded into university and school practices. Moving from finite arrangements to sustained practice is necessary in order to maximise the reach of partnerships and to develop ways of working that are not reliant on policy changes leaving them on a razor's edge to determine their longevity. As initial teacher education reform seeks to establish formal partnership agreements at a systemic level ensuring a shared vision and mutually beneficial initiatives, this collection provides some insights into the power and potential of cross-sectoral vision.

This collection explores innovative partnerships between and within schools and university contexts, and the opportunities and implications of policy-informed practices when developing, maintaining and sustaining partnerships between educational contexts like schools and universities. The chapters showcase what we have come to know about successful and sustainable school-university partnerships, that they are reciprocal, mutually beneficial and contextualised to the needs of the stakeholders. The importance of boundary crossing roles is also explored which sheds light on ways of working in partnerships to improve coherence and preparation for pre-service teachers as they move to and from university and school settings.

Many partnerships within this set of contributing chapters are developed within policy-informed funding applications and incentives. Financial incentives can become the focus for the university where its core business is driven by funding for research. Therefore, the challenge lies in sustaining a partnership borne from the funding itself. As a result, the partnerships strive for continued relevance often in the form of developing innovative and impactful strategies to continue to justify the need for the funds. The tensions and challenges within the partnership then potentially lie in adapting to and managing the outcomes that align with the funding body, with no guarantee that the funding will continue.

Despite these challenges, what is evident within the chapters of this collection are a range of partnerships that are focused on learning which generates opportunities for growth between schools and universities who work together to continually evolve in their design and explore opportunities to work to support learning both across schools and universities at all levels. This is also evidenced within the creation of the chapters themselves which are often co-authored by school and university staff with

one goal, to share their work together which celebrate the innovations and identify the challenges which have generated important learnings throughout the process.

This collection showcases various models of Australian school-university partnerships and provides a platform to explore collaborations emerging from each unique partnership. A variety of stakeholders within the partnerships are represented, and in some cases, school-based stakeholders are empowered to co-author with experienced university scholars. Each chapter is an original contribution by authors written specifically for this edited book exploring various foci and approaches which uniquely reveal the contribution and advances emerging from the partnership. Specifically, these chapters draw from three states across Australia and collectively outline a strong body of evidence with global significance to other countries looking to reform initial teacher education.

The following section summarises each school-university partnership that is supported or influenced by government policy and highlights varied approaches in the application of government funding and partnership agreement models. These examples of school-university partnerships create important dialogues around co-generative learning across sectors as many of the chapters draw on the voices of academic researchers, school mentors and leaders in the partnerships.

The edited volume commences with Chapter 2 *Working relationally to bridge the divide: An exploration of an Australian school–university professional experience partnership from the perspectives of five stakeholders* which highlights the influence of a policy-informed, school-university partnership founded in 2014 in Victoria, Australia, and their journey in creating a community of practice between the various stakeholders involved. Initial discussions in the chapter outline the ways in which these partnerships have transformed over time to include this focus on collaborative approaches to teaching learning across the university and the schools in the partnership. The reciprocal nature of this partnership has developed through a shared interest and passion in specific teaching and learning foci. Viewed through the lens of Edwards' (2010) theory of relational agency, reflections across various stakeholder voices are gathered and explored. The findings showed an emergence of '5C's' in relation to the ways of working within the partnership. This illustrated commonalities and unanticipated benefits including an influence on course design and additional coordination personnel in this long-standing school-university partnership.

Chapter 3 *Reimagining the school-university partnership and the role of the school-based Professional Experience Coordinator: A New South Wales case study* provides an outline of the HUB schools initiative, a policy-informed school-university partnership initiative based in New South Wales. Key elements of these partnerships included a boundary spanning role titled the Professional Experience Coordinator. Funding for 24 schools to participate in this initiative over a three-year period provided insights and implications relating to the design and delivery of new and evolving school-university partnerships that were borne from professional experience opportunities and concluded with an increased opportunity for professional learning of all stakeholder groups. This chapter concludes with a series of findings, insights and future recommendations relating to policy-informed partnerships.

Chapter 4 *A once in a lifetime opportunity to experience twenty-first century teacher education* provides a blueprint model for professional experience that builds upon extended placement designs from across the globe. With the intention of a more transformational experience, Zbaracki and Green discuss an immersive and extended experience for the pre-service teachers involved in the Embedded Teacher Formation Experience. Based in school-university partnerships across school contexts in the catholic sector, the approach not only speaks back to policy documentation and suggestions, the program draws upon authentic experiences for pre-service teachers to participate within an extended placement that further enables the 'life of the teacher' to be explored. Upon evaluation of the program through data collection from key stakeholders, four key outcomes emerged. These included not only the outcome of extended periods of time in placement with the inclusion of authentic school experiences, but also highlighted the essential aspects of partnership development and key stakeholder feedback to the continuation of the program.

Based in a school-university partnership in regional Victoria, Chapter 5 *Sink or swim: A Common Induction Program for Pre-Service Teachers* reports on new ways of approaching preparation and orientation to placement for their pre-service teachers. Drawing from school stakeholder and pre-service teacher feedback, Edwards et al. explore what they term as a 'third space' of working within the partnership itself. Within the discussions between each stakeholder, new approaches to bridging the preparation of pre-service teachers came to the fore, highlighting the variety of preparation processes that were occurring across the partnership. This chapter highlights the needs for well-defined, uniform and agreed upon processes that are developed collaboratively and informed by all interested stakeholders. Subsequent proformas of practical strategies and resources are provided to inform the reader about what is possible when school-university partnership stakeholders come together and support the professional experience preparation processes.

Influenced by the Queensland pandemic policy, Chapter 6 *Partner Perspectives Matter: Lessons learnt when navigating continued pre-service teacher placements during disruption* discusses the ways in which COVID-19 had impacted ways of working in placing pre-service teachers in innovative ways. This chapter reports on one university context that against all odds proceeded to provide opportunity for pre-service teacher placements, ensuring that the connection between theory and practice continued for their pre-service teachers. As a result of the continued placements, a large focus on modification and augmentation of the delivery of the placement was considered and implemented. These approaches were embedded and subsequently evaluated with survey responses from pre-service teachers, university staff and key personnel in school contexts. The results arising from the stakeholders' responses includes the importance of both providing dynamic options for placement and of developing a triadic partnership between the schools, pre-service teachers and the university.

Chapter 7 *'We're in it for the long haul': connection, generation and transformation through a school-university partnership* draws upon over a decade of working within school-university partnership models, providing an opportunity for discussion

and reflection on a model titled RESET and containing successful factors of school-university partnerships. With supporting literature outlining the direction that policy is taking in relation to educational partnerships, the RESET model ensures that the focus is drawn to frameworks for mitigating the issues of sustainability in relation to these partnerships. Theoretically, Chapter 7 discusses notions of practice architecture as well as the underpinning motivations of developing and sustaining school-university partnerships. Key to the RESET model is the transformational approach, with relationships being one of the central elements in school-university partnership designs. In conjunction with these central elements, additional aspects working in unison within the RESET model are provided with supporting suggested actions that can be embedded.

Within Chapter 8, *Value of mentor professional learning through a digital micro-credential in a school-university partnership*, an innovative approach to school-university partnerships through the development of micro-credentials for mentor teachers is explored. This approach to professional development is aimed specifically at building mentor teacher understanding of evidence-based assessment to support differentiated teaching practice. Their partnership focused on professional development and making high-quality professional learning accessible across their partnering schools. Data collected suggests that the mentors not only improved their understanding of the approach taken within the initial teacher education program, thereby improving the level of support to pre-service teachers when using data to differentiate their teaching, but shifts in their approach to assessment were also noted at the school level.

Chapter 9 *Perspectives from academia and school leadership boundary crossing roles in one Alliance school-university partnership* uncovers three themes from three cases of boundary crossing roles in one example of a uniquely designed school-university partnership called an Alliance. Historically, a range of boundary crossing roles exist in school-university partnerships from conducting research, to working with PSTs and mentors. This chapter highlights first-hand accounts from those in the role of the Ashwood Alliance Academic Mentor and a principal of an Ashwood Alliance partner school. Additionally, the data collection within this chapter was conducted while schools and universities were working in remote and flexible contexts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interesting findings include the theme of disruption and the importance of a strong sense of identity and purpose in these boundary crossing roles. Both the Academic Mentors and the school principal boundary crossing roles maintain the position that the partnership holds a purpose to impact student learning within the context of both sectors. Implications of these roles and what they mean to the future of the partnership are explored.

Each chapter provides an insight into individualised performance and impact data that points to the ways of working so that mutual benefits are experienced by both school and university partners. Drawing together various examples of partnerships provides an important reference for all initial teacher education providers, schools and educational stakeholders into how schools and universities can connect, learn from one another and inform future practice.

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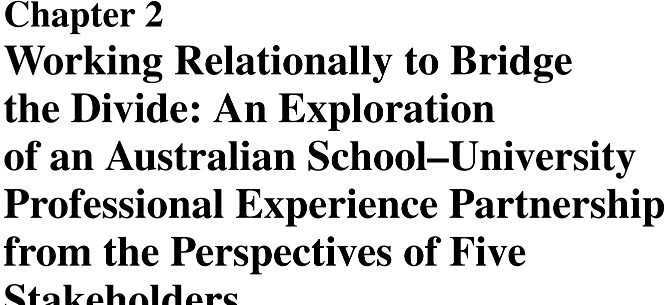

# Chapter 2
# Working Relationally to Bridge the Divide: An Exploration of an Australian School–University Professional Experience Partnership from the Perspectives of Five Stakeholders

**Melanie Nash, Allison Byth, David Whewell, Michelle Leonard Kilkenny, and Rachel Hickey**

**Abstract** The theory to practice divide has long been a recurring theme across international research literature on initial teacher education (ITE). It refers primarily to the tension between university-based learning about teaching, which is seen as theoretical, and school-based learning, which is seen as situated practical experience (Baumfield and Butterworth, Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice 13:411–427, 2007; Ng et al., Teaching and Teacher Education 26:278–289, 2010; Nguyen and Loughland, Teaching Education 29:81–97, 2018). In an attempt to bridge the theory to practice divide and enhance quality-integrated professional experience, Australian policy reform has focused on university and schools establishing strong partnerships that deliver a collaborative approach to ITE. This chapter presents a study of one such school–university partnership that has sought to develop an authentic relationship between school and university teacher educators through the co-design and shared delivery of a core professional experience course (term "course" is used to describe an individual subject or unit) within an undergraduate ITE program in Australia. Using a case study methodology that incorporated a collaborative, autoethnographic

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_2

approach (Hernandez et al., Auto/Biography Studies 32:251–254, 2017), we were all active participants in the partnership, shared their experiences and respective motives for engaging in this cross-institutional endeavour. Findings from this study offer insights into how universities and schools can reconnect through the co-design and shared delivery of ITE courses, building strong, mutually beneficial, and trusting relationships that help eliminate the perceived theory–practice divide.

## 2.1 Introduction

In the wake of several reviews into initial teacher education (ITE; Council of Australia Governments [COAG], 2009; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), 2014), an Australian Government policy mandate has been that ITE providers and schools develop a more rigorous and collaborative approach to the provision of professional experience for preservice teachers. This mandate was derived from two perceived issues within teacher education: an inconsistency in preservice teachers' experience and the theory to practice divide (TEMAG, 2014). Considering this mandate, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2015, 2016, 2019 ) outlined the development of "partnerships" as one of six key principles for national accreditation, stating that partnerships must involve "shared responsibilities and obligations among teacher education providers, schools, teachers, employers, and teacher regulatory authorities" (AITSL, 2016, p. 1). A significant outcome of this change to accreditation requirements has been recognising the importance of developing collective agency through opportunities for ITE providers and schools to combine knowledge, skills, and resources (AITSL, 2016).

In response to both TEMAG and the National Inquiry into Teacher Education findings (TEMAG, 2014; Top of the Class, 2007), the State Government of Victoria introduced an initiative called Teaching Academies of Professional Practice (TAPPs). The TAPPs initiative offers significant financial support to build partnerships between a cluster of schools and one or more university ITE providers (Grimmett et al., 2018; Victoria State Government Education and Training, 2020). Initially, the TAPPs brief was to form collaborative partnerships to facilitate immersive preparation opportunities for preservice teachers and to use innovative approaches to strengthen the links between theory, research, and practice (Grimmett et al., 2018; Victoria State Government Education and Training, 2020). Over time, this has extended to encompass other needs such as providing professional learning for school-based staff, strengthening mentoring practices, and developing collaborative research leading to enhanced course delivery (Victoria State Government Education and Training, 2020).

In 2015, RMIT University successfully bid for a TAPPs grant and set up a community of practice with a cluster of 15 local primary schools; this became the North Melbourne TAPP. Over the last seven years, this community of practice has evolved and developed in line with changing pedagogic priorities and directions. These changes have been made possible by university and school educators adopting a

conscious cycle of reflection, planning, implementation, and adaptation in a quest to continually strengthen professional experiences for preservice teachers.

This chapter briefly explores the idea of communities of practice and how it has been employed in this school–university partnership. It documents the significant changes that have occurred in the past four years of the North Melbourne TAPP and brings together the voices of five stakeholders who occupy distinct roles within the community to explore their experiences and motivations for engaging within this school–university partnership.

## 2.2 Literature Review

Leading research into ITE (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Grudnoff et al., 2017) suggests that to redress the theory to practice balance and develop quality ITE programs, strong partnerships need to be leveraged between universities and schools. Miller (2015) contends that to be successful, school–university partnerships must set aside their individual institutional cultures to form a "third culture" that promotes a clear set of beliefs and practices, not dominated by either partner. The North Melbourne TAPP community of practice provides such a cultural space, where partners are involved in a genuine reciprocal relationship and work in concert to redress the theory to practice divide.

The term community of practice was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) who used it to describe the situated learning associated with apprentices in professional communities. Expanded by Wenger (1998) and his associates (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015), the communities of practice model have since been used widely in both business and educational settings to explain and develop relationships between individual and organisational learning (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Hawkman et al., 2019; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Hord, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

Central to the community of practice model is the idea that a group of people who share an interest in or passion about a particular subject work collectively on an ongoing basis to broaden their knowledge and expertise about this subject (Wenger, 1998). Through this engagement, it is anticipated that the members of the community will develop shared practices, skills, resources, and common perspectives. Although communities of practice may take a variety of forms, Wenger et al. (2002) state that they possess three elements that distinguish them from other organisational structures: a domain of common knowledge, a community of people who care about the domain, and the shared practice that is developed.

The domain of knowledge is what brings the members of a community of practice together; it is the joint enterprise that shapes the community's learning, defines its identity, and gives meaning to its actions (Wenger, 1998). A well-developed domain legitimises a community in the eyes of its members and gives it status and visibility within the wider community (Wenger et al., 2002). This in turn leads to community

members being recognised for the competence and expertise they demonstrate within the domain.

The community is the social fabric that develops when members interact and share an interest in the domain. For collaborative participation to occur in the community, members must interact regularly and learn in concert. Edwards' (2010) theory of relational agency—that is, the "capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations" (p. 169)—offers a way to cultivate the community's social fabric. The theory describes how strong forms of agency can develop through collaborations that involve working across or spanning boundaries between cultures and practices—for example, university educators, school-based coaches, mentor teachers, and preservice teachers working collaboratively across a school–university partnership.

Relational agency develops as a two-stage process within a constant dynamic that consists of:

1. Working with others to expand the "object of activity" or task being worked on by recognising the motives and the resources that others bring to bear as they, too, interpret it and
2. Aligning one's own responses to the newly enhanced interpretations with the responses being made by the other professionals while acting on the expanded object (Edwards, 2010, p. 14).

Edwards (2010) explains that when working with others in response to a complex problem or task, community members have the capacity to further the community's learning and build capability. She considers that the community's social fabric provides support for those who are less confident in their knowledge and "is relevant to the work of practitioners who may feel vulnerable when acting responsively and alone without the protection of established protocols (p. 14)". To further support the community's development, Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003) maintain that five key characteristics need to be in place, which are the five Cs: conversation, collaboration, connectivity, communication, and capability. The five Cs can be explained as:

- Conversation: essential to learning as this is where the process of questioning, problem-solving, and creating new knowledge begins;
- Collaboration: acknowledging that we do not work in isolation as initial teacher educators and benefit from collaboration with our partners in schools to find solutions to challenges within our practice;
- Commitment: the promise to participate in fulfilling the community's purpose and progressing its goals;
- Connectivity: the ability to create networks that allow people to use their skills and expertise within face-to-face and virtual environments;
- Capabilities: the knowledge, resources, skills, and attitudes that we bring to the partnership to achieve a successful partnership.

Practice, the third element of the community described by Wenger et al. (2002), is the use of a shared repertoire of resources that has been developed over time. This repertoire is evident in the knowledge that is valued, the way community members

behave, the common language used, artefacts and tools they have developed, and in the way they approach common problems. Through this active participation in shared practice, community members learn, develop their identity, and acquire their perspectives of how the domain should and could be enacted.

The joint enterprise in which the members of the North Melbourne TAPP have engaged over the last seven years has led to the development of a quality school–university partnership. This partnership provides a strong social fabric where stakeholders engage relationally to expand their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of teacher education and to build capacity across the community.

## 2.3 Situating the Research

The School of Education's successful tender to establish the North Melbourne TAPP led to the development of an innovative partnership model that linked a core course within the Bachelor of Primary Education (BEd Prim) program with 15 local primary schools. RMIT's initial model resulted from the collective vision of 15 educators from those partner schools working in tandem with RMIT educators.

The model was collaboratively designed in 2015 and first implemented in August of that year as a core second-year professional experience course titled Professional Experience: Connected Classrooms. The heart of the design is an interconnected course made possible by merging two spaces at the university (first space) and in schools (second space) to facilitate third space learning. This third space encompasses a learning community that offers a range of opportunities for preservice teachers and educators to collaborate, professionally connect, and interact. It has been accomplished through distributed expertise, shared responsibility, interactive learning, and localised and adapted core content (Elsden-Clifton & Jordan, 2015). Key structures were established within the schools, and community roles were designed to support these structures. For more information pertaining to the initial model and how this Distributed Open Collaborative Course (DOCC) pedagogical approach was adopted, refer to Elsden-Clifton and Jordan (2015, 2016). Over a period of seven years, RMIT educators have worked relationally with school-based educators to continually grow and develop the TAPP partnership. The intended focus of this case study was to document the significant changes that have occurred over the past four years.

In 2018, RMIT's TAPP course underwent major changes that involved a complete rewrite of the course to align with current Department of Education and Training-Victoria initiatives for professional learning communities and evidence-based pedagogies. Recognising that collaborative learning cultures are synonymous with effective educational practices, RMIT educators collectively approached the reconception of the course. Again, a team of RMIT educators and school-based educators worked with the brief of building course content that would represent the latest pedagogical approaches and emulate professional learning communities' (PLCs) structures and practices from within the partnership schools.

The course's overarching framework, which is delivered equally across the two sites of the university and partnership schools' campuses, was retained, with the belief that this unique structure distributes the course's theory and practice elements and addresses the theory to practice divide that had previously existed. The course structure continued to deliver the first five workshops on the university campus, and the equivalent learning, a further five workshops, delivered within the partnership schools.

A significant addition to this new iteration of the course was to incorporate the delivery of practical components within the university-based workshops. This was made possible by implementing mock PLCs in which preservice teachers collaboratively moderated work samples, analysed mock data sets, and participated in focused PLC discussions. Crucial to the success of this component was bringing school-based coaches into the workshops through the incorporation of mini podcasts. This inclusion allowed coaches to deliver practical components connected to the course theory and emphasised the relevance of the campus core content by demonstrating the activities that preservice teachers would be engaged in within the school setting, simultaneously ensuring content relevance for preservice teachers through linking theory to anticipatory practices from partnership schools.

The school-based practical component was planned to enable each school-based coach to host a large group of preservice teachers within their school, with the coach acting as a "boundary rider" between connecting the university-based learning to preservice teachers' experiences in school-based practice. This was achieved through delivering school-based workshops focused on professionalism, reflection, lesson planning, lesson sequencing and using assessment, data, and reporting. These focus areas had been highlighted during the co-design conversations between school and ITE partners. In addition to the workshops, the coaches conduct individual coaching sessions with each preservice teacher, which provides opportunities for feedback and rich discussions in relation to the preservice teacher's classroom teaching. Coaches are also heavily involved in allocating the preservice teacher to the mentor. Their role extends to providing first-level support to mentor teachers and knowledge of the course content, placement, and RMIT expectations.

This North Melbourne TAPP community of practice is reliant on the commitment to a common focus, shared practices, and clearly defined community roles that are performed by both university and school partners. Table 2.1 briefly illustrates these roles and the nature of the key responsibilities involved in each.

## 2.4 Methodology

As the TAPP is built on the foundation of co-construction and relies on close collaboration between school and university staff, we employed a qualitative case study methodology utilising collaborative autoethnography (CAE; Hernandez et al., 2017). CAE involves two or more researchers sharing their experiences of a sociocultural

**Table 2.1** Community roles and key responsibilities of RMIT's TAPP partnership

| Title of stakeholder | Role and responsibilities |
|---|---|
| School-based coordinator | A school-based educator who holds responsibility for the administrative coordination of education placements within their school; they liaise with RMIT's professional placement office |
| Course coordinator | Facilitates the co-design process with school-based educators to write the course materials; has responsibility for preparing materials and assessment tasks for the course<br>Communicates directly with the school-based coordinators and coaches and manages the online learning platform<br>Hosts annual professional learning days for coaches, with an emphasis on increasing coaching and mentoring capacity within partnership schools<br>During the professional experience period, responsibility for visiting all schools to work with coaches, maintaining relationships with partnerships stakeholders, engaging with preservice teachers to celebrate successes, and addressing any challenges where preservice teachers are not meeting the required expectations (based on the AITSL graduating standards) |
| School-based coach | An innovative role created by RMIT for this TAPP partnership and paid RMIT short-term sessional position; ideally selected by the school to ensure they have established relationships with the mentor teachers, school leadership, and intimate school-based knowledge; acts as a "boundary rider" between RMIT and the school and the first point of contact for preservice teachers and mentor teachers alike<br>Delivers course content by facilitating site-based workshops to connect theory to practice and individual weekly one-to-one coaching sessions for each preservice teacher |
| Mentor teacher | A classroom-based teacher who hosts the preservice teacher within their classroom; works closely with the school-based coach within the course framework |
| Preservice teacher | A student enrolled into the second-year course titled Professional Experience: Using Assessment, Data, and Reporting; assigned to one class and one mentor teacher for the duration of the placement |
| Partnership schools | Host large cohorts of preservice teachers to facilitate community collaboration with their "colleagues"<br>Schools are in the north and east of Melbourne and are selected on the basis that they demonstrate best practice in the implementation of PLCs and application of data for evidence-based pedagogies |

practice and collaboratively analysing and interpreting these experiences to identify commonalities, differences, and individual priorities.

This methodological approach allowed for the construction of autoethnographies from each stakeholder's separate position. Stakeholders shared their perspectives to collaboratively enable a deeper knowledge and understanding of the TAPP project's impact on both university and school partners. This approach is sympathetic to the concept of relational agency as it provides participants with a way to share through narrative their professional standpoints, values, and motives for being involved with

the project, and this in turn expands understanding of the project or "object of activity" (Edwards & Kinti, 2013, p. 136).

The participants in this research included a mentor teacher, a school-based coach, a school vice principal, the ITE course coordinator, and the ITE academic director of professional experience. Each participant followed the format of responding to a set of prompts to construct their autoethnographies, and these were then collaboratively analysed and emergent themes identified.

We also selected CAE as a research methodology as it permitted us to readily navigate qualitative field work and data collection during the time of the pandemic. Roy and Uekusa (2020) state that, "in the context of the current challenges (working-from-home-orders, social distancing, school closures and remote learning) the use of self-reflexivity and dialogical analyses of one's own narratives"' (p. 385) offers a viable alternative for productive qualitative research. While this research followed university ethical guidelines, the case study is unique in that its authors were also its research participants and therefore readily identifiable. The five stakeholders from the North Melbourne TAPP who contributed to this CAE are as follows:

Allison, a lecturer at RMIT School of Education, began work within the North Melbourne TAPP partnership in 2016. She was employed to support coaches and help them triage any issues that might eventuate while preservice teachers were on placement. The role placed her in a unique position where she worked closely with coaches and mentors and established strong working relationships. In 2018, she was appointed course coordinator for this core professional experience course and, during her time in this role, she led the changes to the course design and continued to be heavily involved with partnership schools.

Melanie joined RMIT's School of Education in 2018 as the academic director of professional experience (ADPX). In her capacity as ADPX, she became involved in the Committee of Management for the TAPP and contributed to professional learning days for coaches. With Allison and the then program manager, she contributed to the re-envisioning of the course and co-design process.

David is the vice principal of a primary school, which was one of the inaugural partnership schools. He has been active in the TAPP partnership adopting a role on the Committee of Management and leading collaborations both inside and outside this program.

Michelle is a school-based coordinator at a primary school and took on the dual role of school-based coach in 2019. She is passionately enthusiastic about the benefits of hosting preservice teachers within a fully supported partnership model.

Rachel is an early career teacher with four years' teaching experience at the same primary school as Michelle. In the past two years, she has adopted the role of mentor teacher and, having experienced this partnership model as a graduate of RMIT, she has a unique perspective on what it is like to be a participant within this structure.

## 2.5 Voices from the Field

In this section, we collaboratively reflect on the participatory experiences we have shared within the North Melbourne TAPP. These reflections are organised into themes by applying the architecture of the five Cs—conversation, collaboration, commitment, connectivity, and capability—as defined by Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003).

### *2.5.1 Community Conversations*

Within the partnership, we identified conversations as key to the success of establishing a shared community across the two sites of university and schools. Allison, as the course coordinator, reflected that these conversations occurred through a range of online and face-to-face forums where all educators were able to reflect on interventions needed to maximise preservice teachers' learning opportunities and experiences. She noted that over the past four years, key changes have resulted from shared dialogue, reflection, and exploration in the co-design and co-delivery of the course. Annual professional learning days and maintaining continual dialogue between her and the school-based coaches have been essential. Conversations about learning have followed a cycle of reflect, plan, implement, and adapt, with both the school-based coaches and university staff working in tandem, resulting in a continual refinement of the course and its delivery. A significant learning for Allison has been that:

> As a university educator, I have abandoned a view of universities "running" or "owning" the professional experience as this view assumes a higher ground and potentially discredits the expertise and skills of school-based educators. (Allison, 2021)

Instead, within this course, she viewed professional experience as a joint endeavour by all educators, with her role being to convene the partnership and work closely with the school-based coaches. She considered that an important aspect of convening the partnership has been mutual acknowledgement and valuing each educator's perspective, noting how she learned through continual dialogue with leading teacher educators across a broad range of school settings.

David identified the school-based coach as an essential role that significantly enhanced the partnership's success:

> This individual [the school-based coach] acts as a conduit between the university and the school, ensuring that both are on the same page and informing stakeholders of what is happening and what needs to be done. The TAPP partnership is the only preservice program with an onsite supervisor, and this is a major factor in the project's success. (David, 2021)

Similarly, Michelle considered that the benefits of a coaching role were realised by not only the preservice teacher but the entire school:

> The coaching role provides the preservice teachers with an ally in the field, promoting them, offering advice and guiding them in the right direction. (Michelle, 2021)

She went on to state:

> RMIT has a great rapport with [our] school; the bond and trust has built up year on year through connection and open communication between university and school staff. Mentors are more willing and committed to take on preservice teachers from RMIT where the TAPP project is in place because it works seamlessly, knowing they have that layer of emotional support should something go wrong. (Michelle, 2021)

Rachel noted that the high level of communication between the university and the school-based coach ensured that mentors had clear placement expectations, enabling mentors to focus on building relationships with the Preservice Teachers (PSTs) and facilitate informed guided conversations around the placement requirements:

> I know when I have a student from RMIT the expectations are clear. There is not that phase of getting to know the student while at the same time trying to understand the expectations of their placement. I can first focus on building a relationship with the preservice teacher and allow them to build relationships with the class. We can then have a conversation about the expectations. (Rachel, 2021)

Community conversations between stakeholders in this section indicate that the school-based coach is integral to the success of the partnerships and productive enquiries (Wenger et al., 2002). Coaches work at the boundary of the school–university partnership, acting as boundary riders able to reconcile the two cultures to effectively manage information and interpret practices across both.

### *2.5.2 Collaboration Between Partners*

The culture developed in this community of practice is one that respects the opportunity for knowledge sharing and valuing participants' expertise, a feature identified in all five stakeholders' narratives. This culture allows educators to develop mutual trust and respect, which has resulted in collaborative and innovative approaches to solving problems and working together (Edwards, 2010).

For Allison, collaboration has been central to the co-design and co-delivery of the new course. She maintained that collaboration has been continual during the four years, from the initial rewrite with school and university educators to the contribution coaches have made in developing the workshops, processes, and templates:

> With collaboration comes shared ownership, which has not only allowed all educators to authentically lead the delivery of their component of the course, but to be able to contribute at all levels. (Allison, 2021)

Both Michelle and Allison considered that meeting face-to-face once a year for a school-based coach professional learning day (PLD) was central to the collaboration's success. The yearly PLD offers opportunities for school-based coaches and university educators to build capacity as a community of learners. Valued activities include the chance to reflect on current practices and how they might be enriched,

cross-pollination of ideas between schools, and participating in professional learning modules, such as managing difficult conversations.

David's comment evidences collaboration in relation to trust and working with the school when a problem or issue arose:

> I trust RMIT to act swiftly when support is required, and I trust that the program will enhance mentor capacity due to the quality of the people involved. In turn I feel trusted by RMIT staff as I cater for preservice teachers in the best way that suits our school's environment. (David, 2021)

Melanie echoed this sentiment:

> Having such a close relationship with the schools and working with the school-based coaches offers the university a great deal of knowledge of and trust in the experiences that our PSTs will receive. We know that PSTs will be supported and that communication lines are always open if issues arise. (Melanie, 2021)

Michelle considered trust and collaboration to be important in the emotional support that the preservice teachers required in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. She and Allison both believed that the coach alleviated this additional emotional load, which would have previously fallen on the mentor teachers:

> [A]nxiety levels in PSTs are higher than previous years due to many factors and the need for support is greater than ever before … as the coach I can assist them overcoming some issues through talks, role plays and positive re-enforcement to build self-esteem. (Michelle, 2021)

The collaborative nature of the TAPP community of practice meant that participants were able to draw upon the expertise of a wide variety of practitioners and through joint enterprise to solve problems. The nature of the collaboration has resulted in the solutions to problems becoming a shared resource to others within the community (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

### *2.5.3 Commitment to the Partnership*

The continual and tireless work by small groups of university educators and professional staff has resulted in the formation of strong relationships and the evolution of the North Melbourne TAPP community. The commitment of these educators reflects a belief that the partnership does make a significant difference, not only in this course but within the overall Bachelor of Education (Primary) program.

Allison believed that the energy given to the TAPP project emanated from her involvement with school-based educators in the process of co-designing a course that she considered traversed the theory to practice divide. She excitedly described the course as being holistically delivered by school-based coaches and her as the course coordinator, a model she believed to be unique within the Bachelor of Education program at RMIT:

> …working towards a common goal collectively university and school-based educators have gone beyond what a single organisation could achieve, and this [in itself] is invigorating. (Allison, 2021)

David emphasised that the energy RMIT educators provided inspired all key stakeholders to commit to the partnership:

> I could not speak more highly of the staff at RMIT and their commitment to the partnership. A standout has been the positive influence of RMIT educators on the partnership, as they are invested in its success, and this is evident in each stage of the process. (David, 2021)

He deemed one of the most powerful aspects of this partnership model was that it took pressure off the schools involved:

> Out of the six universities I deal with, RMIT provides the most support and the clearest, open lines of communication. This support is even more prevalent in the TAPP placement where the school-based coach alleviates the pressure on the mentors and preservice teacher coordinator. (David, 2021)

Michelle explained that her primary school and RMIT had established and developed a rapport over the years:

> The bond and trust have been built year on year through connection and open communication between the university and our school staff. A positive outcome of such a strong relationship is that mentors are more willing and committed to host RMIT preservice teachers because of the layer of support should something go wrong. (Michelle, 2021)

Rachel reflected on how the reciprocity of the relationship and the layered support within the partnership provided support for her:

> As a mentor teacher, I am not only confident of the support I will receive from the onsite coach [Michelle] I am confident in the support and guidance I will receive from the RMIT staffing community. Dealing with the same people for several years builds a strong rapport where they understand and respect my classroom and expectations and I clearly understand and respect their guidelines and expectations. (Rachel, 2021)

Melanie recognised the huge commitment of school leadership in their support and development of the course and the preservice teachers:

> [H]osting between eight and 20 students at a school at one time and supporting staff members to take time out from regular duties to perform the role of the coach is a significant undertaking, and a testament to the commitment of the senior leadership of primary school to the TAPP CoP [community of practice]. (Melanie, 2021)

These comments illustrate the massive undertaking that participation in the TAPP involves and reflect the commitment that partnership schools make in hosting large groups of preservice teachers.

> It is a big obligation to allow so many undergraduate second-year preservice teachers to come into the school, not only once but several times throughout the year. It shows the commitment the school has in training preservice teachers and the strength of the partnership that exists with RMIT. (Rachel, 2021)

Commitment to a community of practice, such as the North Melbourne TAPP, is demonstrated by partners providing resources, time, and trust. In this community of practice, both the School of Education senior leadership and school leaders from each partnership school committed to the project's value.

### 2.5.4 Connectivity within the Partnership

Online infrastructure has added to the success of this partnership, connecting all stakeholders via a shared learning management system (LMS), Canvas. Canvas provides the course coordinator, school-based coaches, and preservice teachers with a shared platform for course and information delivery. Allison discussed the importance of maintaining the integrity of the materials that had been developed in collaboration with school-based educators as she shaped them into a course within the Canvas LMS:

> It was important to be mindful of the need to connect the course content that was delivered at university to that delivered within the schools, with emphasis on the university-based content authentically reflecting current assessment, data and reporting practices within partnership schools. Equally important was writing the school-based content in a way that could be flexibly delivered by coaches in situ. (Allison, 2021)

Having a shared learning platform has been well received by coaches who have readily learned and adapted to using RMIT's LMS Canvas. Michelle explained how she found the site beneficial:

> It has easy access links to placement information and forms which need to be accessed at various points. It is also user friendly and allows coaches to easily access the preservice teachers' assessment task, with aligning rubrics to guide the marking process. (Michelle, 2021)

This comment was important to Allison who oversaw the moderation process with up to 20 coaches, considering the course site was more than a shared working space:

> It is a platform where our shared collaborations are housed in a fully transparent way, with the coaches having access to my online podcasts, pre workshop activities and the key theoretical readings that the preservice teachers engage with prior to their placement. It makes the shared delivery less haphazard, with clear guidance provided and a clear connection between the university and the school components of the course. (Alison, 2021).

The connectivity of the course's Canvas site was also beneficial during the pandemic when Allison used a podcast initiative to connect preservice teachers to coaches and partnership schools at a time when they were unable to access schools due to enforced school closures. In 2020, Michelle was one of the several coaches who recorded a podcast to add to the Canvas platform. Her podcast explained how she employed differentiation for student learning in her role as mathematics intervention expert. A positive outcome moving forward is that the coaches' expertise will

continue to be delivered through Canvas via focused podcasts explaining schools' PLC practices, reporting processes, and their use of data to differentiate teaching practices.

Michelle also appreciated how Canvas enabled her to stay linked to the program and course material prior to preservice teachers attending her school:

> As coaches we can stay up to date with the latest university announcements and updates, which is important as it allows the coaches and the preservice teachers to be on the same page. (Michelle, 2021)

Rachel found knowledge of Canvas supported her to facilitate conversations with not only the second-year preservice teachers in this course but also other RMIT preservice teachers:

> Through my understanding of the learning platform, I could easily sit with the placement students and navigate with them what I needed to fill out as well as how to support them uploading/printing documents. Regardless of the year they are in I am still able to support them using the same platform. Having personally used this platform as well I had a further understanding to the benefits of it. (Rachel, 2021)

Connectivity, whether it be through the face-to-face PLD or the online learning system, has facilitated participants working relationally. This is demonstrated through participants' preparedness to further the communities of practice, provide mutual support, and share information and resources (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003). The use of technology also offers an immediacy and interdependence, which has allowed members to communicate without the need to always go through a central university gate keeper.

### *2.5.5 Capabilities and Capacity Building within the Partnership*

The schools within the North Melbourne TAPP have often used the school-based coach role as an opportunity for staff to increase their leadership capabilities within the school structure. RMIT recognises that partners have unique requirements and so has never imposed an agenda for the way the role is managed or rotated; therefore, subtle variations have emerged over the TAPP project's seven-year duration.

The most tangible reward for David has been the opportunity to use the TAPP partnership as a way of capacity building within his school. This has been achieved by linking the TAPP partnership with the school's leadership advancement plan, with the school allocating the coaching role to a new emerging leading teacher each year. Evidence of the strength of this approach is that staff who have successfully taken on the role of school-based coach or have been a mentor teacher within the program have progressed in their leadership careers at the school or via promotion to an external position.

David explained that his school has invested considerable time and resources into preservice teacher placement for two reasons: first, the belief that each school has a

duty to play an integral role in preservice teacher education, and second, the value of the school's involvement, noting the link between placements and recruitment of teachers to the school. David explained that over the years, the school has seen considerable growth and currently had 1267 primary students accommodated in 53 classes, noting that 33 of these classes were staffed by teachers who had completed a professional experience placement at the school. A key recruitment strategy of the school has been to embrace preservice teacher placement and build relationships that lead to the recruitment of effective teachers. To date, of 33 preservice teachers who had benefited from this recruitment strategy, 19 were RMIT graduates. Allison observed that these figures were common among RMIT's TAPP partnership schools and clarified that many schools involved in the community recruited preservice teachers from education placements.

At Michelle's school, the coaching role has been allocated to three part-time leading learning specialists over the seven years of the program. Michelle, as the current coach, said that her two coaching predecessors spoke highly of their involvement with the program, particularly in terms of what they gained from the role. Three years into the role, Michelle attributes her increased confidence in coaching capabilities to time and experience, which has enabled her to develop a more open-minded perspective and empathy. Empathy has come from learning to see things from the preservice teacher's perspective. Michelle considered that she was also more creative in the course delivery to adult learners by "reading the play and playing to the crowd", and when the preservice teachers were not responsive, she learned to be adaptable. Allison, who worked closely with Michelle, noticed her increased capacity to build rapport with each preservice teacher and to understand how individual sociocultural contexts shaped the young adult learner.

Rachel reiterated this point by noting that during her tenure at this school, the person undertaking the role of coach had changed:

> Even though the onsite coach has changed, Laurimar's commitment to the program remains strong. The support in the program begins at the very top with our principal class and is filtered down to the teaching staff. (Rachel, 2021)

She also reflected on how the role of mentor had resulted in personal growth:

> As a mentor throughout this program, I have developed my skill in not only modelling and explaining my teaching and reasons behind my teaching, but I have also developed personal skills. Having only taught for a few years I have quickly developed my professional and personal practice. With support from Michelle and other mentor teachers, I have worked through challenging conversations and developed the skills to deal with these professionally. (Rachel, 2021)

In contrast to the two schools discussed in this study, Allison explained that some partnership schools had retained the same coach for the duration of the seven-year partnership. In these schools, she noted that capacity building was evident through the continuity of the roles, enabling the growth of coaches' capabilities as they became familiar with the community process and developed capacity as they worked with both preservice and mentor teachers.

Melanie recognised that the university also benefited from capacity building through the TAPP relationship:

> The TAPP relationships have resulted in colleagues from schools contributing to the wider teaching of courses within the BEd Prim program. This has added to the program's currency and ensured that our courses are providing preservice teachers access to teachers who are currently practicing their craft in school. We have also been fortunate to have senior leaders from TAPP partnership schools participating in RMITs industry advisory committees. (Melanie, 2021)

It is apparent from the comments reported here that these stakeholders considered the North Melbourne TAPP to have provided various ways for both capacity and capability to be increased within and across the community. Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003) regard capabilities as the link between a community's strategy and its performance. When knowledge is put to work across the community and practitioners work relationally, unanticipated features and benefits are revealed (Edwards, 2010), as evident in this TAPP community of practice.

## 2.6 Conclusion

RMIT's re-envisaging of the North Melbourne TAPP continues to be underpinned by a structural framework established seven years ago and through the foundation of the school-based coach role (Elsden-Clifton & Jordan, 2015). In the past three years, RMIT staff and school-based educators have collectively forged new ground within the partnership, and this CAE has foreground many positive outcomes.

The framework's strength and the nature of the relational agency between the course coordinator and school-based coaches are evident, both of which have been identified as integral to the initiative's sustainability and the community's stewardship. Also evident is the coach's capacity to empower the mentor in a fully supported way, achieved by maintaining a balance between the tensions of ownership and openness (Wenger et al., 2002).

Thematically, it appears that the sustainability of the program's structure hinges on the school-based coach role—a role that is resource demanding in terms of time, commitment, and cost, but is pivotal due to the intimate first-hand knowledge that the coach holds about the school and the course content. Equally evident is the importance of the relationships that the coach has with RMIT educators, school staff, and mentor teachers, noting that the coach's work alleviates the pressure on the school, places an immediate RMIT representative into the setting, and creates a segue between the university "theoretical" content and the "practice of teaching" for the preservice teachers.

The program's success also resides with the course coordinator and a core group of school-based educators who acknowledge the reciprocity of learning within the relationship. They continually identify opportunities to embrace ways of expanding

the TAPP's focus and incorporate new learning with the integration of evidenced-based pedagogies into the course. With an influx of new ideas, approaches, and some new relationships, this community has reinvigorated the relevance of their domain.

The community's social fabric has been revitalised with the innovative use of the course LMS Canvas and the introduction of coaches' voices early in the course through podcasts. While community membership has been relatively constant over the last four years, some schools have chosen to take a rest from the partnership, and new school partners have been onboarded. It is important to acknowledge that some relationships did not survive the change of focus, while others did not sustain a change in leadership or were unable to continue to commit the time and energy required to incorporate the program into their mentorship of preservice teachers. This organic evolution has been instrumental in bringing fresh ideas and new personnel to the coaching role. With a new focus for the domain and the vitality of new membership, the community has introduced new practices, collaborated to develop new resources, and aimed to stay on the cutting edge.

The stakeholders who participated in this chapter used the architecture of the five Cs to illustrate how the community's evolution promotes both individual and community capacity and provides a dynamic site for participants to learn and contribute to building knowledge capability (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

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# Chapter 3
# Reimagining the School-University Partnership and the Role of the School-Based Professional Experience Coordinator: A New South Wales Case Study

**Matthew Winslade, Tony Loughland, and Michelle Eady**

**Abstract** Whilst the notion of school-university partnerships is not new, in locations such as New South Wales (NSW), Australia, there has been a renewed interest in consolidating these partnerships in order to develop sustainable mutually beneficial relationships. In recognition of rising tensions between universities as Initial Teacher Education providers (ITE) and schoolteachers as supervisors of pre-service teachers (PST) whilst on professional experience placements, the NSW Department of Education initiated the HUB schools initiative. The initiative aimed to identify school sites that were actively engaged in the PST supervision process and link them with a partner university to support the codesign and development of more effective boundary crossing projects that met the needs of both stakeholders. The initial iteration of the program provided the opportunity for twenty-four schools across the state to partner with a university with varying levels of engagement and tangible outcomes. This chapter will trace the development of the initiative and then explore the value of the role of the school-based Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC) as an integral piece in a school and university relationship.

## 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we acknowledge that the notion of the school-university partnership is not new and is supported by a growing body of literature both internationally and in Australia. However, whilst the concept of professional experience in higher education has been well researched (Green et al., 2020; Le Cornu, 2016; Moss, 2008), the literature does not necessarily reflect on the emerging area of partner-driven Work

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_3

Integrated Learning (WIL) inclusive of university and school stakeholder collaboration (Loughland & Ryan, 2020). This has the potential to not only identify change mechanisms that can directly influence policy and practice but codesign the process of teacher education. Tangible partnerships between universities as teacher education providers and schools in the development of pre-service teachers provide an increased level of authenticity and relevance to the work of each stakeholder group in regard to their role and shared vision in the preparation of future teachers (Loughland & Nguyen, 2020).

Teacher education professional experience (PEx) programs are a space where theory and practice intersect and a site for tensions between stakeholders, such as universities and schools who may have differences in expectations for these experiences (Zeichner, 2010). It was this space, and perceived tensions in regard to expectations, that prompted a reimagining of partnerships between the New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DoE) and universities. The aim was to support both sets of stakeholders to work in a more collaborative way in order to develop more efficient preparation programs with increased levels of support for PSTs whilst they transition into the classroom. These reimagined partnerships were formed under the umbrella of the HUB schools initiative. This chapter will explore the HUB school model with a specific focus on the role of the school-based Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC) as a legitimate boundary crosser (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) and critical link to successful pre-service teacher (PST) engagement in the space that exists between partners. The chapter will unpack the perceived efficacy, impact, and status associated with the PEXC role and discuss the time, resourcing, and responsibilities that underpin this key role in driving successful professional WIL placements.

## 3.2 Background

University-based initial teacher education (ITE) programs have come under criticism from schoolteachers for being detached from the daily operational needs of schools and being more aligned with pedagogical theory instead of authentic skills (Clarke & Winslade, 2019). Historically, there have been tensions around the notion of "whose knowledge counts" when it comes to what should be taught in teacher education training courses (Zeichner, 2018). These tensions have been heightened, for ITE students when they are required to move from the theoretical lecture room of the university into school classrooms and the practical reality of professional experience (Green et al., 2020; Zeichner, 2010). This tension between universities and schools can impact the collaborative development of teaching practicums designed to produce profession ready graduates amidst a chronic teacher shortage across Australia.

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There is a growing literature on the opportunities that school-university partnerships can afford (Smith, 2016; Winslade et al., 2021). Successful school-university partnerships provide the opportunity to bring together two disparate cultures to create an environment where ITE students can experience the best of both worlds in a synchronised theory/practical environment conducive to successful student transition into the classroom (Moran et al., 2009; Zeichner, 2021). For universities, a partnership approach provides a genuine opportunity to change the way they view schools from a site that provides placements or as a source of potential research data towards being strategic partners engaged in course and subject design and delivery. For schools, there is an opportunity to benefit from the expertise of universities in generating rigorous evidence to support the development of professional learning materials. For most partnerships, the challenge is how to more actively engage both partners in the process of bringing theory and practice together for the common goal of the preparation and supervision of PEx placements.

## 3.3 ITE Professional Experience—An Enduring Challenge

Professional experience has been positioned as a challenging part of ITE preparation. The challenge is attributed to a range of factors including political agendas, cultural differences, and the challenging operational environment that schools often find themselves in (Grima-Farrell et al., 2019). Unfortunately, it has been noted that these challenges can limit the potential value of professional experience to another mandatory, albeit high stakes, course assessment rather than an opportunity for professional learning (Ingvarsson et al., 2014).

As mentioned, criticism of university-led ITE programs has been noted not just in Australia but around the world (Darling-Hammond, 2010) with concerns around the perceived ad hoc nature of universities' approach to and facilitation of placements. Issues such as time pressure, calendar and timetabling constraints, the perceived oversupply of ITE students as pre-service teachers, and subsequent demands on schools including a lack of appropriately qualified supervising teachers in hard-to-staff discipline and regional locations have all been identified as contributing to the complexity of PEx. Underpinning this study and the push for reimaging partnerships were the findings of such reports as the Top of the Class: report on the enquiry into teacher education (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). This report highlighted concerns around perceived weaknesses in the way the current system linked theory and practice. These included the perception of a lack of relevance that exists in some aspects of teacher education courses including the ability of both pre and beginning teachers to cope with behavioural issues and classroom management concerns, reporting, and communication with the wider community.

## 3.4 School-University Partnership Elements of Success

Successful partnerships are underpinned by a clear understanding of the elements that contribute to partnership efficacy. This understanding is supported by a growing amount of international literature around effective implementation and sustainability of partnerships. Despite the diversity evident across various partnership models, a number of key commonalities appear worldwide. These include the level of value aligned to sustained relationships, acknowledgement, and mitigation of perceived imbalances that may exist in the space between both university and school operations and cultures, the role of leadership, communication, ability to implement a staged approach, shared vision, incentives, and the significance of an effective boundary crosser (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Sound, sustained relationships enhance the effectiveness of school-university relationships by fostering increased levels of trust and reciprocity (Green et al., 2020; Ingvarson et al., 2014; Le Cornu, 2012). It is also apparent that there is a need for partnerships to acknowledge and address any perceived issues of imbalance that may exist. An example of this may include the notion that for university providers, professional experience placements are a mandatory part of operations whilst for schools, the choice to engage in the process is voluntary. This potentially leads to a perceived power imbalance, exacerbated by such factors as shortages of placement opportunities (Top of the Class report, 2007). Whilst for schools, there also exists a valid concern that having a student teacher may disrupt normal operations and class dynamics due to the requirements for supervising a PST whilst on placement (Rowley et al., 2013).

The role of leadership has also been identified as a key factor contributing to partnership efficacy. Often this starts at the top with the school principal and then cascades down through all levels of staffing at the school. The adoption of a distributed leadership model provides a positive framework to support partnership sustainability and helps to bridge any perceived cultural or practical divide that may exist (Allen & Peach, 2007; Le Cornu, 2012; Greany, 2015). The ability to broker a shared vision and understanding between stakeholder groups is another significant factor, particularly relevant with regard to what constitutes a partnership in relation to teacher education with particular emphasis on the clarity around roles and role statements (Loughland & Ryan, 2020). For this reason, the scope and definition of the roles in addition to titles selected to represent those roles are considered important for partnership sustainability and succession planning (Greany, 2015; Trent & Lim, 2010). Further, Loughland and Ngyuen (2020) proffer that the ability of stakeholders to reach a shared vision is paramount if a partnership is to be successful, drawing from collective efficacy to engage in authentic partnership planning and identification of shared feasible objectives. Greany (2015) identifies that adoption of a staged approach in establishing and maintaining partnership activity, supported by a clear communication strategy, linked to identified shared objectives, and an inclusive culture in regard to decision-making and evaluation (Rowley et al., 2013) are vital to mitigate any plateauing of activity.

## 3.5 Refocusing the School-University Partnership

In recent times, there has been a genuine attempt to align university practice with specific industry and workforce needs. In NSW, this has been supported through a state-wide initiative aimed at producing both innovative and sustained quality learning opportunities and professional practices aligned with the transitional activity of teacher education professional experience (Winslade et al., 2021). The HUB school program, initiated by the NSW DoE, sought to bring together a range of schools and universities supported by a school-focused research paradigm. The aim was to establish a knowledge bank of evidence-based practices to support the needs of not only pre-service teachers but also their placement schools and universities (Bruniges et al., 2013). As such, the program has provided the opportunity for both school and university stakeholders to connect, or in many cases reconnect, in a meaningful and respectful way to spend time exploring each culture and gaining a better understanding of the needs, priorities, and perspectives that represent their individual approaches to teacher education. This space has been referred to by some including Ziechner (2010) as the third space, a space where expertise from differing ITE preparation perspectives overlaps in efforts to provide the best teacher education practices possible.

## 3.6 Details of the NSW Partnership—The HUB Schools Program

Historically, concerns have been raised by school-based practitioners around ITE in Australia and the perceived lack of authentic links to the needs of students transitioning to the classroom. This concern was reflected in the 2014 Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) review, highlighting the need to address the classroom readiness of graduate teachers. The review emphasised the need for greater collaboration between universities as higher education providers and school systems, with the aim to improve student outcomes inclusive of professional experience as a critical element (Craven et al., 2014).

In NSW, the accrediting body, the NSW Standards Authority (NESA) mandates that every pre-service teacher completes between sixty and eighty days of professional experience in schools (NESA, 2017). Following the release of the TEMAG evaluation and the NSW Great Teaching Inspired Learning [GTIL] blueprint for action, the NSW DoE HUB initiative was introduced as a means of providing a platform to allow school and universities to re-engage in partnership conversations. This blueprint provided the opportunity for recognition of concerns that both sets of stakeholders had become distanced with regard to their contribution to teacher education impacting on the perceived level of graduate quality and classroom readiness (Clarke & Winslade, 2019). The initiative identified twenty-four NSW DoE schools recognised for their commitment to supporting PEx programs with the capacity to

engage with university providers in order to explore options and pathways to work together to increase the perceived quality of the overall PEx for PSTs. Each of the identified schools was partnered with a university, based on appropriate location and ITE course profiles (NSW DoE, 2021). The initiative was underpinned by a strengths-based philosophy. The view was to shift away from a model of adding practice to an established theoretical foundation to a more inclusive model with both sets of stakeholders (university and school) more actively engaged in developing innovative delivery methods. In this way, the stakeholders were supporting a smoother transition from PST to a classroom ready graduate.

The DoE articulates that objective of the HUB schools program being introduced was to target initiatives supporting the professional development of both pre-service teachers and supervising teachers (Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation [CESE], 2018, p. 7). For PSTs, this was inclusive of innovative and revised induction and supervision models, increased levels of professional development availability and the provision of additional support mechanisms. For supervising teachers, the focus was increased levels of recognised professional learning in addition to increased access to support structures in the partnership. One focus of the study underpinning this chapter was the inclusion of funding and support to revise and develop the ITE preparation course content and deliver it in a way that benefited all stakeholders and promoted collegiality (CESE, 2018). Recommendations outlined in the GTIL (2013) blueprint for action identified that, "Specialist professional experience schools will showcase high quality professional placement practice" (Bruniges et al., 2013, p. 10). In response, the NSW DoE established the opportunity for schools to engage in a partnership building activity. This partnership was initially tested on a three-year pilot cycle, with an opportunity to extend, where partnerships were sustainable and focused on strengthening the relationships between schools and ITE providers. Key focus areas in the first three years of the initiative included the establishment of a mentoring website to provide state-wide support for partnership teams and study of assessment in professional experience. The second three-year iteration of the HUB school program was characterised by a shift towards a more empirical approach to collecting data as evidence. This second iteration focused on the sharing of practice and learnings from the first iteration. The developing role of the Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC) was identified as a key element from these meaningful partnerships.

One of the key elements of university involvement was the opportunity to work closely with the NSW DoE to provide an evidence-based approach to address issues raised in the TEMAG (2014) report. One of these issues was the need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders including ITE providers, education departments, schools, and authorities in an effort to prioritise needs, tasks, and accountabilities (Craven et al., 2014). For ITE providers, the partnership also provided the opportunity not only to leverage relationships with schools to make more meaningful connections, but to increase the quality of PEx for PSTs, and also collect significant data to be utilised as research-based evidence to share with the wider ITE community (McIntyre, 2017). A key focus area that emerged from this process and underpinned

the research paradigm was the role and responsibility of the school-based PEXC as central to the success of the school-university partnership.

## 3.7 The Role of the Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC)

The NSW PEx HUB study has shown that role of the PEXC is central to perceived efficacy of the HUB schools project if it is to be considered a community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). Jones et al. (2016) highlights that the role of the PEXC has been both under-researched and underestimated and refers to PEXCs as the unsung heroes of PEx. PEXC is a role that is often surrounded by a lack of clarity around the complex and layered nature of the role. In order to provide meaning to the study, it was important to unpack the position of the PEXC as a legitimate boundary crosser with the ability to navigate between two differing cultural settings providing connection and commonality to all stakeholders (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016; Greany, 2015; Mutton & Butcher, 2007). Literature suggests that the positioning of the PEXC in the school hierarchy is important. For example, if the PEXC role is aligned to the principal or deputy principal, the PEXC may be perceived in an administrative capacity and removed from the PST supervisory process. Therefore, the PEXC position needs to be more closely aligned to the PEx and the quality learning outcomes (Martinez & Coombs, 2001). Whilst the PEx Framework (NESA, 2015) provides a level of clarity around the PEXC role, anecdotal evidence would suggest that this has not been enacted through policy implementation. The significance of the PEXC role becomes clear when examining the TEMAG review with its focus on the need for ITE graduates to be *classroom ready* and to have the ability to take up a teaching role directly following graduation. One of the key elements that support this outcome is the assurance of quality PEx that are aligned with the Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017). Key issues identified in PEx include a perceived variance in the quality associated with PEx as experienced by PST, the perceived low value and profile of PEx in schools, mentors, and coordinators (Craven et al., 2014). These issues along with the impact of the PEXC will be unpacked in the findings of this chapter.

## 3.8 Methodology

This section of the chapter draws on a collective research project that underpinned the second iteration of the NSW HUB school initiative (2019–2021) focusing on the role and responsibility of the school-based PEXC.

The study was qualitative in nature and adopted a quasi-narrative approach to collecting data. Data were collected from ($n = 24$) school-based Professional Experience Coordinators ($n = 20$), and Principals ($n = 20$) from participating HUB schools in addition to partner university-based Professional Experience Coordinators ($n = 12$). Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. The research method was considered appropriate in order to provide an understanding and reflection on the specific experiences of the three identified stakeholder groups within the specific context of the NSW HUB school program.

The study was informed by the following research questions:

1. What is the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC) in enhancing professional experience in teacher education?
2. What strategies do PEXCs, Principals and University Coordinators in partner universities see as supporting the development and quality of the PEx HUB school program?

## 3.9 Data Analysis

As data were collected from three sources (school-based PEXCs, school principals and university PEXCs), triangulation of evidence was feasible in addressing the identified research questions. The research project, led by the University of New South Wales, was granted ethics (HC190505) and approval to conduct research in schools through the NSW Department of Education (SERAP2019413). Data were analysed thematically through the lens of key constructs aligned with identified literature. The research analysis was conducted by the three lead investigators (comprised of the chief investigator and 2 independent research assistants) from the lead university on behalf of the larger collective. They adopted a cyclical approach supported through regular research meetings allowing for discussion of emergent themes. This process provided a level of mitigation through verification and corroboration to ensure that researcher bias would not be a factor. An independent research assistant provided a mitigating mechanism against the risk of data reductionism aligned with coding through the use of NVivo and in conjunction with the research team. The research team then returned to the interview transcripts to verify claims made in the report. The draft report was then circulated to participants, in order to affirm accuracy and representation of the data.

## 3.10 Discussion of Summarised Findings from the Study

The following section of the chapter will provide a summarised overview of the findings of the study that have been consolidated into a report to be presented to both the NSW DoE and the NSW Deans of Education.

The study found that there was strong evidence that the PEXC played a significant role in determining the efficacy of school-university partnerships, particularly in the development and sustainability of a professional learning culture. It was also shown that the role of the PEXC enhanced the status of professional experience in schools, with direct alignment to an increased number of teachers willing to supervise PSTs in addition to an improvement in the standard of that supervision. This reduced the level of historical variance with regard to quality of supervision. The study also identified a range of potential strategies that could be adopted including improved clarity with regard to roles and responsibilities, accountability, communication, and documentation processes. In addition, factors such as placing a greater emphasis on the coordinator role in terms of program planning, development, and delivery of ITE courses in both school and university contexts were identified.

There were a number of challenges highlighted with regard to the role of the PEXC including sustainability of the role. A key factor of sustainability was the time allocated to the role and the need to ensure sufficient workload capacity to undertake the responsibilities required to successfully support a PEx program. A successful element of the second iteration of the HUB program was the dedicated funding for time release of PEXCs in each HUB school. This financial commitment resulted in recommendations that an appropriate funding model to support the release of time required for a PEXC was necessary. Findings suggested that by incorporating the PEXC role in the executive structure of schools would provide an opportunity for a broader role that would ensure a higher degree of quality assurance for PSTs and provide professional learning and development for stakeholders. Ultimately, the study found that there was a strong consensus with regard to the positive impact of the PEXC on PEx programs across the network of HUB schools. The PEXC was identified as key to raising the profile, value, and status of PEx as a core activity of the school by improving both the quality and consistency of supervision and assessment protocol. Further, it was shown that that PEXCs were considered critical in shaping the culture of PEx within the school and fostering a more positive seamless transition from university study into the teaching environment. Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that the PEXC had significant influence on the outcomes of PEx experiences.

This study also found that the professional, personal, and social domains and the overall position of professional experience within the wider teacher education framework were highly influenced by the PEXC. These key areas included modelling professionalism, establishing collaborative collegialism, understanding school activities and multiple stakeholders in a holistic sense, and increasing PST's confidence, efficacy, and sense of belonging inside and outside the classroom. It was noted that a PEXC role was valuable in terms of ensuring that PEx was prioritised in the school ensuring a quality experience for the student teacher. Further, and of significance to universities, one of the most significant impacts of the PEXC was seen in relation to the way in which PSTs "at risk" were managed and resolved. It was identified through the study that the importance of relationships built on trust and understanding of how a CoP operates. This was exemplified through the example of a particular PEXC managing and resolving a situation where a PST required additional support in order to successfully complete their placement. The study identified that PEXCs

help students get over the line and are needed to build relationships and connect with appropriate people needed to develop support plans and mechanisms. This included the development of process and support structures and the ability to take a framework and align it with the needs of the particular school, university, and student specific to that situation.

Funding and time were identified as key issues impacting sustainability across all three stakeholder groups with clear identification of appropriate workload (time) allocation to PEXC activities. This is inclusive of the time required not only to design and deliver effective programs, but to also adopt a proactive approach to the process in order to integrate innovative practice, and increased and active reflection. It was shown that the increased emphasis on funding and alignment to expected outcome deliverables of the HUB program, such as development of professional development material, clearer placement protocols, and induction procedures elevated the value and perceived status of the PEx programs. Further, it was identified that there needed to be a degree of flexibility associated with the allocation of time in recognition of the complex nature of the role and the range of variables that need to be taken into account. Timetabling issues such as the impacts on the individual school depending on the time of the term and where the term sits were further impacted by the timings of the university year and ability to integrate into the school calendar. The complex nature of the PEXC role was likened to a project manager pulling together the strings that underpin the complex web of relationships contributing to PEx. The PEXC role was seen to involve a number of key phases including an establishment phase with a focus on the establishment of relationship building with key stakeholders in order to produce a range of processes and procedures and supporting structures to facilitate placements. Following the establishment phase is a period of consolidation focusing on improvement and growth leading into the opportunity for reflection.

The role of the PEXC was found to be critical to ensure that the facilitation of the PEx process was efficiently managed, inclusive of clear channels of communication. This was particularly recognised from the stakeholders representing university programs as vital to a smooth and efficient transition of the PST into their placement. For universities working with both dedicated PEXC and schools that operated without a coordinator, there were noted operational differences with regard to time, space, and attitudinal approach. A flexible approach to workload and use of funding was identified as a key enabler supporting schools to build quality PEx. This included the ability to allocate time to the professional development of supervising teachers, increased emphasis on planning and liaison with stakeholders such as the PST prior to placement, and university PEXCs supporting a more cohesive CoP. Further, the flexible use of time allocation also allowed the PEXC to attend a range of workshops and conferences building their own skillset and profession network outside of the school environment. The notion of time as an allocated resource was viewed as critical if there is to be increased levels of buy in from school-based staff to take on the role as supervisors of PST in order to engage in professional dialogue and training and develop a consistent and quality approach to supervisory practices. In doing so, this supports moving away from an individual educators obligatory sense of having to give back to the profession and viewing supervision as another task to

be undertaken on top of an already perceived busy schedule, towards an active role in a well-designed quality and integrated component of a PST's professional journey.

## 3.11 Conclusion

The study described throughout this chapter was underpinned by a collective approach between NSW ITE providers to gather evidence to support the push for increased recognition of the significant role that school-based PEXCs play in raising the status of PEx in ITE. The initiation of the HUB school program by the NSW DoE has provided a new opportunity for NSW university PEx providers to collaborate as a legitimate community of practice aligning professional practice with a research-focused paradigm. As such, this is new ground for many working in the PEx space and has helped to build collegiality across the field with a range of new working groups and research projects being negotiated; whilst this was not an original key outcome of the study, it has been a welcome addition. Significantly, the study has shown that the role of the PEXC is an under-researched and underestimated position that if provided with the appropriate recognition, value, and resources, has the ability as legitimate boundary crosser to raise the status, profile, and quality of PEx programs, benefiting all stakeholders.

## 3.12 Recommendations

A tangible outcome from the collective NSW study was a series of recommendations; these included increased recognition and remuneration of the PEXC role aligned with an executive appointment inclusive of quality assurance of PEx programs and student teachers. Secondly, that PEXCs are given increased opportunities to work more closely with university ITE providers, codesigning, delivering and reviewing teacher education programs and actively lecturing and tutoring in the university setting. The study also recommended that the collective of universities involved in the HUB school program and the school partners work together in future iterations of the program to codesign and develop a standardised approach to PEx documentation. This includes the PEx handbooks consisting of common core elements that exist across all ITE courses in NSW. Finally, it is suggested that regular meetings that have been established to bring together the state-wide HUB school PEXCs which has become a legitimate CoP continue into the future to develop consistent practices across NSW aligned to relevant DoE priorities and strategies.

## 3.13 Limitations

The authors acknowledge that this particular study was aimed at gathering the perceptions of a group of stakeholders aligned to the HUB initiative, and as such, the sample might not be reflective of the wider school community across the state or from other schooling systems. The study also did not collect data from PSTs with regard to their perceived efficacy of the school-university partnerships. Whilst individual partnerships have explored the perceptions of PSTs, they are not represented in the findings here. The decision to support and fund future iterations of the HUB program will provide the opportunity to bring other stakeholders such as student teachers into the research paradigm. Additionally, it must also be noted that the PEXC results provided in this study were identified as the result of a funded release for PEXC, and as such, generalisability of results would be dependent on availability of similar funding models or support for appropriate workload release.

## 3.14 Impact of COVID-19 on the Project

The timing of the pandemic had a noticeable impact on both the community of practice that forms the school-university partnerships that underpin this chapter and the timeframes required for partnerships to achieve intended outcomes. During 2020 and 2021, the NSW school system experienced an unprecedented level of disruption to day-to-day operations with a significant shift to online learning leading to reduced PEx opportunities. This was accompanied by various restrictions and ability for schools to provide access to non-essential personnel. The study informing this chapter occurred during a unique socio-political context fuelled by high levels of uncertainty, characterised by backlogs of placements, and university organisational restructures resulting in loss of corporate knowledge. This increased the pressure on school and university relationships.

## 3.15 Where to Next?

The submission of a report to the DoE on behalf of the PEx collective and supported by the NSW Council of Deans of Education coincided with the end of the second three-year iteration of the HUB school program. The report consolidated the learnings achieved during this time and supplemented a series of individual acquittal reports from each of the school-university partnership groups. After considering individual reports and evaluating the impact of the partnerships across the state, the Department and Deans of Education have agreed to enter a third round of partnerships and are currently in discussions to determine the direction and outcomes that will underpin a new wave of school-university relationships. Early discussions have identified

that the future focus will look to develop partnership strategies to address potential workforce shortages in particular regions and disciplines across the state, whilst also maintaining a clear focus on the continued development of practices that support quality PEx and transition from university to the teaching environment.

**Acknowledgements**
Dr Jennifer Barr: University of New South Wales
Associate Professor Iain Hay: Macquarie University
Associate Professor Fay Hadley: Macquarie University
Jacqueline Humphries: Western Sydney University
Nicole Hart: University of Sydney
Associate Professor Wayne Cotton: University of Sydney
Professor Boris Handal: Notre Dame University
Sarah James: Southern Cross University
Dr Robert Whannel: University of New England
Chrissy Monteleone: Australian Catholic University
Dr Deb Donnelly: University of Newcastle

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# Chapter 4
# A Once in a Lifetime Opportunity to Experience 21st Century Teacher Education

**Matthew D. Zbaracki and Kathy Green**

**Abstract** This chapter is based on a year-long embedded placement that provides third-year Bachelor of Education primary students with the opportunity to be placed in a primary school one to two days every week for the entire school year. They work in partnership with their mentor teachers, and because this partnership is with Catholic schools, they also have a faith companion that mentors them in the teaching of religious education. The main goal of this program is to provide an innovative and improved model for teacher education that provides a more meaningful and authentic placement experience. From an evaluation perspective, we have conducted surveys from PSTs for the past two years and have conducted Zoom interviews with a number of PSTs as well. This data has helped revise and improve aspects of the program to ensure its success and sustainability with the PSTs, participating schools and the university.

## 4.1 Details of the Partnership

Initial teacher education courses continuously explore and investigate innovative approaches to enhance their students' learning, and subsequently their graduates' performance, so they are better prepared to enter the classroom. In transforming the education space of the twenty-first century, teachers are challenged with the task of providing authentic learning experiences, based in meaningful endeavour, that require thoughtful problem solving, reasoning and the novel application of skills (Perkins, 2009; Ritchhart, 2015). While this shift in pedagogical goals and approaches challenges teachers, and for many, requires a significant change in their practice, it also raises the question of how we are forming the new generation of teachers in their undergraduate training. Is what we consider best classroom practice

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_4

at a primary and secondary level of schooling reflected in the tertiary level preparation of teachers? Almost a century ago, Dewey (1929) proposed a model of teacher training that exposed pre-service teachers (PSTs) to the real classroom, encouraging them to use their theoretical knowledge to resolve the problems of classroom practice. Through meaningful engagement in teaching, he suggested that the PST has the opportunity to develop as a more reflective practitioner. The more opportunity the PST has to be a part of the real classroom, the greater their awareness and sensitivity towards students and how their learning develops. This means the traditional block placement could or should be significantly extended. Encountering the problems of the classroom in authentic situations affords them the experience of applying, contextualising and evaluating the theoretical tools presented in their studies of education (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

### *4.1.1 The Professional Development Schools Model*

Across the world, we see different education systems responding to the need for the transformation of initial teacher education. The emergence of Professional Development Schools (PDS) in the USA, the Partner Schools model in Norway, extended initial teacher education programs that include a year-long intensive professional placement and a range of school-university partnership projects focus on the potential of integrated professional placement for undergraduate teachers. They work to break down the fragmentation of theory and practice, in models that celebrate the collaborative integration of coursework and classroom experience (Hoffman et al., 2020). They also seek to stop the recycling of what Churchill (2018) refers to as the "apprenticeship of teaching", whereby the greatest influence on the PSTs' practice is their own experience of school and how they were taught in the classroom.

The traditional model of schools playing host to PSTs on professional placement, running parallel to their university studies, fails to capitalise on the full potential of university faculty and current school practitioners collaboratively sharing their expertise and knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2020). The PDS model seeks to intentionally bridge the gap between academic study and in-place teaching experience by combining a set of mutually developed goals and experiences that bring together and value the voices of the university, the schools and other non-aligned educational organisations (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2020). The partnerships in the PDS model are predicated upon a dedication by all parties to the education of future teachers and a commitment to innovative and reflective practice. These collaborations are nurtured and sustained through reciprocal models of professional development, recognising that all partners have something to offer and something to learn from the partnership (Polly & Martin, 2020). The challenge, however, is to ensure that this commitment goes beyond just the rhetoric and sees all stakeholders actively and intentionally planning for engagement in the partnership, to enable positive outcomes for all participants (Farrell, 2020). In resolving to be focused on a vision to be truly transformative rather than simply collaborative, we

must reach for a much richer experience and a greater wholeness in the experience of teacher education (Hoffman et al, 2020; Ryan et al., 2016).

### 4.1.2 The Partner School Model

The Norwegian innovation of Partner Schools offers examples of the mutually beneficial ways in which universities and schools can work together in the Initial Teacher Education space. Schools apply to be a part of the partnership, highlighting the benefits they can bring to the program through models of quality teaching, and the universities offer opportunities for teacher professional development and accreditation in further study (Smith, 2016). This illustrates the reciprocal partnership suggested by Polly and Martin (2020) and like the PDS model, involves the schools and universities in the revisioning of teacher education at both a pre-service and in-service level. In this transformation, it is interesting to note that both participants promote their own areas of expertise and contribution, but in coming together they create a new conversation around education that synthesises their individual strengths. Zeichner (2010) refers to this as a "*third space*" in initial teacher education and one that is built on constructivist principles of learning in action. This initiative creates the potential for strong, well-informed, democratic partnerships, to support initial teacher education and preparedness for teaching.

In a trend where universities are offering intensive teacher education courses, the opportunity for rich and rewarding professional placement is limited by time. In a two-, three- or even four-year undergraduate or initial teacher training program, the division of attention between pedagogy, subject knowledge and practice weakens the overall content of the course (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Innovations into extended and embedded teacher placements within initial training courses have been successfully implemented across Australia, Canada and Finland (Darling-Hammond, 2017). The success of these programs has been measured in the evidence of greater student satisfaction and confidence in their learning; appreciation of schools for the better preparedness of graduate teachers; and interestingly, a decrease in the attrition rates of teachers in their early years of their career (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The extended, embedded experience within a school affords the pre-service teacher the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of learners, how they think and the diverse ways in which they present within the classroom. They come to understand the cause and effect impact of their teacher actions through authentic application and learn to deal with the challenges of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Given that the knowledge, actions and empathy of a teacher have significant influence on student learning (Hattie, 2003, 2011), sustained and intentional classroom practice over time can be seen as worthwhile and meaningful endeavour.

### 4.1.3 The Embedded Teacher Formation Experience

The Embedded Teacher Formation Experience (ETFE) was based on this idea of providing a larger amount of time in the classroom which allows PSTs the chance to truly experience a year in the life of a Catholic school teacher. The program has been running in the Melbourne area for the past four years. It began as a project between the Melbourne Archdiocese of Catholic Schools (MACS), formerly known as Catholic Education Melbourne, and Australian Catholic University (ACU). The aim of the program is to support PSTs during their placements in Catholic schools and provide them with an extended experience in schools to allow them to learn and understand the role of a Catholic school teacher as well as become an active member of the school community. The project provides third-year Bachelor of Education primary students with the opportunity to be placed in a primary school one to two days every week for the entire school year. The PSTs work in partnership with their mentor teachers, and because this partnership is with Catholic schools, they also have a faith companion that mentors them in the teaching of religious education. The PSTs maintain their normal university academic studies through intensive units in summer and winter as well as a minimum of three units a semester. There is no reduction in load or expectations for the university requirements, yet students are able to better see the nexus of theory and practice with their university assessment tasks because of their classroom experiences. PSTs apply to participate in the program, the applications are reviewed by the Head of School of Education, and then, the students are interviewed by the school-university liaison. Partnerships with schools have been established for placing the students, and when the number of students in the project grows, the university continues to recruit interested schools. The experience began in 2018 with three students. Through strong recruitment, the number rose to 13 students in 2019 and dropped slightly to 8 students in 2020. There has been another increase in 2021 to 11 students, and the goal is to grow the program to 20 students to provide an opportunity for PSTs to have onsite tutorials in a school. This is the desired outcome so that participants are continuously able to see the nexus between theory and practice.

The ETFE connects with both the current Australian and Victorian governments' high priority focus on the ongoing improvement and reform of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs, so as to maintain high standards for teaching and learning, through the continuous development of a high-quality teacher workforce. The project responds to the report from the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) and the Australian Government response *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (2015) addressing five key themes to drive future action. One significant theme called for "Improved and structured practical experience for teacher education students". The response to this theme recognises the importance and the influence of strong partnerships between universities, schools and other education authorities, in creating substantial and effective classroom practice opportunities. Further to that, the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2021) has built upon the national agenda ITE with a set of eight key reform actions. Reform action six again

focuses on the relationship between key stakeholders in the education industry, to work collaboratively in the improvement of initial teacher education and to "Support and sustain necessary partnerships between ITE providers and schools with a focus on improving teaching practice, and increasing Victoria's knowledge on best practice ITE". With this idea in mind, and considering the research evidence and all of the varied approaches, the goal of ETFE was to meet these reform priorities through strong and sustainable partnership.

## 4.2 Government Support

It is important to note that this program receives state government funding from the Department of Education and Training through the Teaching Academies of Professional Practice (TAPP) of $50,000 over two years. This money supports the coordination of the program with a university-school liaison, professional development for the mentors, faith companions and PSTs, as well as evaluation and research. There is a Committee of Management group that has representatives of each of the stakeholders in the program, including school leaders, university faculty, as well as representatives from Melbourne Archdiocese of Catholic Schools. The committee meets throughout the year to discuss any issues that arise as well as address how the money for the program is allocated. With this government support, reports are provided to the DET to ensure the money is being spent properly and the program is evaluated.

## 4.3 Goals and Outcomes of the Partnership

The overarching goal of the ETFE is to provide an innovative and improved model for Initial Teacher Education that enables a more meaningful and authentic practical placement experience. Being actively and consistently present within the classroom for an entire year provides the PSTs with opportunities to see a much wider range of typical classroom scenarios and situations and observe the practices and pedagogical strategies that experienced teachers implement, with insight into the decision-making that sits behind them. The experience of being present for the whole school year opens their eyes to the multitude of factors that influence and impact upon the design for learning in any classroom.

Within the research into effective and innovative Initial Teacher Education models, four key themes were identified: extended time, authentic experience, combining theory and practice, and partnership. These themes provide the basis for the set of outcomes selected to guide the collection of data and evidence that measures the levels of success within the ETFE:

Outcome 1: The provision of extended time on placement on the pre-service teacher's development.
Outcome 2: The creation of authentic school experiences.
Outcome 3: The link between theory and practice is made evident in the experience.
Outcome 4: The development of effective partnerships between ACU, MACS, schools and pre-service teachers.

## 4.4 Data and Evaluation

Since the beginning of this project, evaluation has been designed to determine what areas have worked well, what needs improvement, and how well the key participants, the PSTs, have learned and benefited from participation in the program. This has been done through surveys, interviews and discussions with the PSTs. This has provided a wealth of data that has led to changes and improvements throughout. This evaluation section will connect the responses from the surveys and interviews with the four major outcomes listed in the above section.

### *4.4.1 Outcome 1: The Provision of Extended Time on Placement on the Pre-Service teacher's Development*

As suggested by Darling-Hammond (2000), extended time on practical placements can offer the pre-service teacher a broader understanding of the teacher experience. Time enables continuous cycles of observation, practice and reflection to drive the development of the PST. Data gathered across the first three years of the program, through PST reflections, indicates their appreciation of the benefits of time. They acknowledge that the experience has taken them beyond what the standard university program offers and the benefits of the frequency and consistency of the classroom interactions, the continuity of a year-long connection with one class and the opportunity to witness, rather than just learn about, all aspects of classroom and school life. A PST from 2020 articulates this idea clearly in her reflection and credits the importance of the extended time on task in developing skills and understanding, "The more you're in the classroom, the more you're perfecting your craft, if you will. The better you're going to be it's just invaluable to have the experience over the whole year". Or as another PST eloquently described, "…a whole year allows you to see the various seasons of a classroom". These reflections indicate evidence of a positivity and awareness of the benefits that extended and consistent time provide in this practical experience.

They also acknowledged the "added experiences" such as meeting with parents, camps, excursions, whole school concerts and sports days, report writing, beginning and end of year routines and celebrations. This is significant in that the PSTs are able

to recognise the value of an opportunity to see behind the scenes into the working life of a school. “Much more knowledge and understanding of teacher identity, acceptable practices, what works, lesson ideas, tips and tricks, planning, data collection…the list just goes on!” This more well-rounded experience as defined by the PSTs isn’t possible in a short-term placement. The demands of the standard limited placement are such that professional learning days, interview days, sports days and excursion are often not counted as days of professional practice experience, and schools aren’t given clear direction about the expectations of including students in meetings, professional learning teams and parent interactions. This seems somewhat counter-productive as the logistical planning and implementation of co-curricular activities outside the classroom are expected components of the classroom teacher’s responsibilities. Time to participate in and learn about these activities adds to the PSTs skill set, supports schools with the much sought after extra supervision required for many of these activities and results in graduate teachers who are better prepared to take on all aspects of classroom teaching and management more confidently.

These experiences within the extended learning model impact upon the PSTs’ confidence in their own growing ability as a teacher, their understanding of children and how they learn, and the causal connections within learning management (Darling-Hammond, 2005). This was evident in the PST responses. One PST reported that taking on the challenge of the embedded experience was a way to push herself and see what she was capable of. Another acknowledged a lack of confidence in her classroom readiness before starting the program. Resoundingly, all talked about the boost to their confidence, their image of themselves as a teacher and the resilience they built across the extended placement stating, “Time gives us the opportunity to try something, reflect on the experience and learn from the successes and the failures”. Progress over time suggests not just a passing of time, but that there is improvement and development within the period. This again is highlighted as this PST recognises the metacognitive cycle of learning that the extended placement experience offers:

> as you progress in the program…you find ways to be more successful. It is like learning to swim or riding a bike by having a go, falling down, reflecting, and getting back up to try again. This cycle is what I have come to observe as I rose from the challenges and accepted it as a way of building confidence which this program does to a tee.” Significantly, for this PST, time has allowed him to learn, understand and grow, and subsequently gain insight into his own capacity as an adult learner and a reflective teacher

Continuing this concept, another student described the program as a way to build their confidence saying in an interview, “100% it’s confidence. The more you’re in the classroom, the more you’re perfecting your craft, if you will. The better you’re going to be, it’s just invaluable to have that experience over the whole year”. Both of these students recognise the importance of having an extended placement, and how being in the school for an entire year provided a more authentic experience to learn about the craft of teaching.

### *4.4.2 Outcome 2: Creating Authentic School Experiences*

Another key outcome of this program is to provide an authentic experience for PSTs. By being able to be in the classroom for an entire year, PSTs have the benefit of consistent interaction with students, building stronger relationships with them and better understanding the learning process and the ever-changing nature of the classroom. These meaningful experiences connect with what Perkins (2009) and Ritchhart (2015) discuss about learners, in this case the PSTs, being able to apply the necessary skills in context. Darling-Hammond (2000) also addresses this idea of application of theoretical skills in an authentic situation. By being in the classroom one to two days a week for the entire year, PSTs were provided with a plethora of opportunities to work with children in meaningful, natural ways that help them put into action various theories and strategies.

Many of the PSTs involved in this program recognised how they were afforded the opportunity to have an authentic learning experience. One student from 2019 discussed this:

> Being so authentic in your learning, getting to go to a school a couple of days a week, rather than just for a 3 week block, you see the whole thing. You see first day of school, the last week of school. You see excursions, preparing kids for that. How we do routines

The student was able to articulate how the experience provided more insight into teaching than a traditional three- or four-week block. She expanded on this point, stating how the placement allowed her to "see the full cycle. It's a meaningful way to do placement. Just a really fantastic way to get the full picture of what it is to teach".

Coming at this same idea with specific examples, another PST from 2020 noted:

> I had the opportunity to run series of unit plans (which I had the chance to create) for a range of subjects. This allowed me to develop the real-world practice of data collection, assessment, student management/engagement, and transferring theory to practice (TLC Teaching and learning cycle, constructivism, 5E's inquiry model, etc...)." What is most insightful about the response from this PST is that they provide very specific teaching approaches. Clearly, the time in the schools helped them develop their teaching, and learn about a number of approaches in the teaching and learning cycle

Again, connecting this idea to specific teaching opportunities, a PST from 2020 noted:

> You learn so much, have the opportunity to implement your creative lesson/unit ideas in a real-world/meaningful setting, and are guided by the mentor teacher so that you have a real confidence boost which is required in becoming a more well-rounded and effective teacher

This student connects to the previous outcome and the PST who discussed confidence. and it also connects to the previous points about how the teaching techniques and approaches learned on placement are strengthened by this program.

### 4.4.3 Outcome 3: The Link Between Theory and Practice is Made Evident in the Experience

One of the greatest challenges for ITE courses is to assist PSTs in finding the link between theory and practice. Nearly a century earlier, Dewey's (1929) model proposed exactly that helping future teachers learn how to link the theory they had learned into the school classrooms. One of the goals of this program is creating a new approach to this idea of linking theory and practice as Hoffman et al. (2020) also suggest. While the PDS model mentioned earlier also believes in this approach, the creation of a PDS can be a challenge, but the beauty of the ETFE is that it creates more partnerships with schools thus creating more stakeholders in the concept of helping prepare graduate teachers to understand how theory and practice can be interconnected.

As mentioned above, one of the major issues (factors) in any Initial Teacher Education course is assisting students in seeing the connection between theory and practice. Research has presented these challenges many times (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Dewey, 1929; Hoffman et al., 2020). Placement experiences are meant to help PSTs see how theory and practice are connected. The participants in this program were able to identify the nexus between theory and practice. One PST from 2019 noted, "This year long teaching program was well beyond what we would have experienced at uni. Things that we got to see behind the scenes, things we wouldn't see at uni or talk about at uni". This differentiation or separation even between what is learned at university and seeing in the classroom is intriguing and was identified by another PST from 2020 as well:

> The Embedded Placement complimented my studies and I saw the theory I was learning in class in practice, in real time. I could then reflect on what I was learning in both arenas and use it to inform my teaching along the way. When completing uni assessment tasks, I was also able to utilise the expertise of my Supervising Teacher to guide me and offer valuable advice from the field.

What is striking about this PST's comments was the connection between both "arenas". The student is not placing one area above another, but instead recognising the "real time" practice of teaching, and how the supervising teacher has expertise that can assist in connecting with university learnings.

A few other comments from different PSTs made observations about how the year-long placement assisted them in making specific connections between the university and the school, and how this made them a stronger teacher and better prepared them for when they are a graduate teacher. For example, a PST from 2020 wrote:

> this experience has only made me more excited for the day when I eventually have my own classroom. It helped me to solidify a lot of the learning I had done at uni and I know I will be able to refer back to my time at the school as I continue my teacher training

The solidification of the learning from university is indeed astute, and another PST from 2020 carried this further with the idea of creating a strong toolkit for teaching:

> ultimately, it gives you the confidence that is required as an official teacher for example, when you become a teacher and encounter a difficult scenario, you will have developed a toolkit that you can draw upon from your experience in the Embedded Formation Project.

Finally, one student from 2020 made a most remarkable connection in how this experience assisted in their learning and especially within the context of COVID-19 and remote learning. The student wrote:

> This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience 21st century teacher education. The amount of time spent in the school is unlike any other and the learning cannot be recreated in a university lecture theatre or traditional placement. It is such a unique way to network yourself with school that will put you in a good position for future employment as it makes you stand out from the crowd

What emerges from this reflection is the recognition that university and traditional placement are insufficient when compared to this extended placement. This final observation connects with both the outcomes of authentic experience and theory and practice. However, it goes one step further and connects to the outcome addressing the importance of partnerships and networking as well.

### 4.4.4 Outcome 4: The Development of Partnerships Between ACU, MACS, Schools and Pre-Service Teachers

The PDS model of ITE highlights the importance of open and collaborative partnership between all stakeholders. It calls for equitable balance of power, contribution and reward, through the partnership (Hoffman et al., 2020). ETFE is built upon the partnership between ACU, MACS and participating schools. This coming together of university, school system and primary educators is significant in that it creates a much richer context in which to base initial teacher education. It seeks to draw upon the knowledge and expertise of all sectors to enhance the development of PSTs.

Schools have had an ongoing relationship with ACU through the practical placement of PSTs. These placements are traditionally short- to medium-term intensive blocks of anything from a week to eight weeks in length, and the content of which is determined by the university. MACS maintains ongoing relationships with schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne offering guidance in leadership, governance in management and professional development in teaching and learning. In the past, ACU and MACS have partnered in the provision of sponsored post-graduate study programs for practising teachers. The ETFE has a vision of bringing the benefits of these partnerships together and creating a more robust, worthwhile and reciprocal relationship between all participants.

In the beginning years of the project, evidence of building this partnership can be seen in the collaboration of liaison staff working together, from both ACU and MACS, to entice and invite schools into this project. The communication with schools before and during the year-long placement is a feature of the partnership. Also, the

Committee of Management brings together representatives from the school participants, MACS and ACU, to collaborate on the management and development of this initiative. This provides a forum where all voices can be heard and perspectives considered equally.

Another bonus of the partnership, not previously considered, is the way in which the PSTs are supported and introduced to the education industry. This helps them to identify the different support mechanisms that will be open to them as practising teachers, beyond just the connection to their supervisors. Understanding the position of the classroom within the school community, and the partnership this requires with colleagues and families, along with understanding the position of a school within the broader context of the MACS community, opens their eyes to the mechanics of the entire system and enables them to begin building their own professional networks.

PSTs reflected upon their experience of partnership and community throughout their placement year. Feeling welcomed and valued was a common theme among their responses. They also came to appreciate the importance of the relationships they need to build within the school, with staff, students and parents. Articulating the feeling that they were working with others and not in isolation and feeling like they were a part of a team highlights the added value of an extended placement. "Learning what it means to be a part of a community" and that a "school supports its community and the students rally around each other to get their work done" are reflections that show the PSTs developing awareness of the role of the school in its community, and that partnership and relationship are crucial aspects of schooling that underpin success. And finally, knowing that, "By the end of the year I could walk into the staffroom and converse with teachers, Learning Support Officers and others in a professional and personal sense", is a powerful reflection that illustrates the PST's growing awareness of their role and contribution within these partnerships.

## 4.5 Limitations

As the main source of data in this case study is based on the testimony of the PSTs, it is limited to their perspective of the experience. Their responses clearly demonstrate a positivity and valuing of the program. They are also able to articulate their own growth over the year-long engagement. What this data cannot measure, however, is the affordances and limitations of the program from the perspective of the schools, ACU or MACS. While the research highlights the need for the voices of all stakeholders to be heard (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Polly & Martin, 2020), they aren't heard through the PSTs' reflections. Moving forward in the ETFE, it is important that the perspectives of the mentor teachers, schools, university faculty and education system departments are considered. This recognition could be facilitated through the Community of Management and through further research into the achievements and challenges of this partnership model. The creation of reflective tools, intentionally designed to gather data from all stakeholders, in the four outcome areas, would give a broader picture of the project and provide formative data for future planning.

## 4.6 Conclusion

Initial Teacher Education courses will continue to change and pursue innovative approaches in both delivery of units and practicum experiences. One of the strongest benefits of Initial Teacher Education courses is how they implement what quality teachers do, which is reflective practice. This means that there is constant evaluation and changes to new innovative approaches and ideas. This project is no different and aims to continue to expand and grow. The main objective is for further growth in both the primary and secondary PST cohorts. This is same for the partnerships with schools, and the intention is to grow the number of partnership schools so that there is a greater number so when schools need a break from such an intense partnership, and others can participate while one rests and then come back on board in the next year.

Earlier in this chapter, the research identified the measurable success of these extended classroom placements in terms of influence on a PSTs level of preparedness for the classroom; their ability to reflect upon their actions and decisions as a teacher; and overall a growth in confidence which directly connects with Darling-Hammond's research (2000, 2005). The following testimony from one of the initial three participants in the first year of the project from 2018 articulates those ideals. To prepare a PST for the classroom is the goal, but for that PST to be able to appreciate and acknowledge that preparedness in themselves, raises the bar even higher.

> This program not only strengthens your ability to teach and manage behaviour within the classroom but also allows you to participate in the school community. You are continually engaging with leadership, receiving daily feedback, having conversations with the principal, teaching units of work, contributing to staff meetings and planning sessions which will ultimately make you well prepared when you are a graduate teacher.

The saying goes that "confidence is key", and the strongest element of this project is the confidence that the PSTs walk away with. The ultimate goal is to build this confidence to make the project come full circle by having former PST participants enter the program again, but this time, as a mentor teacher ready to share their confidence in the future.

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# Chapter 5
# Sink or Swim: A Common Induction Program for Pre-service Teachers

**Debra Edwards, Phillip Britton, and Meredith Fettling**

**Abstract** This chapter focuses on a Professional Practice partnership between one university and five government secondary schools in regional Victoria. The partnership is supported by a Victorian Department of Education Teaching Academy of Professional Practice competitive grant, with a view to developing excellence in Professional Practice for pre-service teachers. Discussions with the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators in each of the schools indicated that there was an uneven profile of preparation for both mentor teachers and pre-service teachers for the professional experience. Collaborative planning was undertaken to achieve two outcomes. First, to refine the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator role and second, to develop, implement and refine a common and best-practice model of pre-service teacher induction. The goal was to develop a model that could be both operational for the specific school sites but also inform supervising mentor teacher and pre-service teacher pedagogy. Challenges involved collaboration across five disparate sites, staff changes, pre-service teachers from multiple courses and campuses and developing common understandings of quality placements. Findings indicate that the final induction package, induction process and common evaluation form have been beneficial for mentor teachers and pre-service teachers as well as having potential to inform professional experience practice at other sites.

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_5

## 5.1 Introduction

Amy was about to undertake her final, graduate placement at a local secondary College. She was cautiously excited that she had been invited into the school on the Friday before she commenced her experience, to meet with her fellow pre-service teachers, pre-service coordinator, and supervising teachers. While she had contacted her supervising teachers prior to her previous placements, being invited to a group "meet and greet" was new.

Professional experience remains an integral part of initial teacher education across multiple reviews into teacher education. The debate is not should it occur, but rather what is the most effective model for ensuring quality experiences for both pre-service teachers and mentor teachers. Alongside, this debate runs a parallel discourse of perceived problematic disconnection between the university-based delivery of teacher education, theory and practice (Grimmett, 2018; White et al., 2018). While different approaches are suggested in the teacher education literature, the importance and value of developing partnerships between universities and schools remains consistent in the conversations (see for example Allen & Wright, 2014; Forgasz et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020; Grimmett et al., 2018; Zeichner, 1992, 2010).

Following the Australian Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014 meeting, increased emphasis has been placed on establishing formal partnerships between universities and schools as a 'third space' bridging both the physical and conceptual differences in location (Forgasz et al., 2018). While this difference is consistently portrayed in the academic literature and social discourse as a theory–practice divide (Green et al., 2020), it is also in our experience a systems and cultural divide. Whereby the operating systems of universities and schools vary in orientation, size and complexity, communicating with each other at a surface rather than integrated level. The culture surrounding both understanding and actioning of professional experience also varies, both across school communities and the university school interface. In this chapter, we explore the experience and outcomes of one university and five regional secondary schools within a Victorian State government funded school-university partnership. The five secondary schools comprised four year 7–10 secondary colleges and one senior secondary college years 11–12. This model of one senior secondary school and multiple junior secondary schools feeding into the senior secondary has been in place in this city for several decades.

One of the university campuses is based in the regional city, however, pre-service teachers from all campuses and other universities undertake placement in the secondary schools.

## 5.2 Sinking or Swimming

Amy quickly found that she was part of a group of pre-service teachers about to start placement and was heartened that she would have peer support. The group was then guided through an induction program specifically designed to meet the needs of a pre-service teacher. Amy

was delighted; she found it a great opportunity to get to know the school and some of the teachers.

The existing partnership afforded the opportunity to create a third space where existing practices and knowledge could be questioned and reconceptualised as common practice (Gutierrezet et al., 1995). To physically as well as conceptually provide a third space, a Committee of Management model was adopted where each stakeholder had an equal role chaired by one of the school representatives. Meetings were also held in a neutral space equidistant geographically from school and the university campuses, and later by zoom as we entered COVID-19 lockdowns. The Victorian Department of Education Teaching Academy of Professional Practice competitive grant funding provided the financial support for schools to release the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators to participate in the Committee of Management meetings and to trial new approaches. Employment of a project officer provided additional support. Mutual trust and respect developed over the course of regular meetings between the stakeholders was crucial for creating shared ownership of the Bendigo TAPP and working together to achieve common outcomes.

Initial discussion quickly established that Pre-service Teacher Coordinators in each school were hearing a common theme in their conversations with pre-service teachers. Pre-service Teacher Coordinators noted that:

> In our discussion with pre-service teachers, they remark on how full on schools are.
>
> From the moment they arrive they are swept up in the unrelenting business of the school day; dealing with students, teachers, and parents, attending to administrative matters – roll marking, collecting forms, and teaching and the realisation that effective teaching and learning requires thorough planning as well as ensuring that all the required technologies will work. Then there is yard duty and the regular cycle of after school meetings.

While pre-service teachers acknowledge and appreciate the support their mentoring teachers provide, they also frequently say:

> You are pretty much left to your own devices, and it is a matter of **sink or swim.**

In his investigations into induction processes, Howe (2006) found that in the United States, the sink or swim paradigm prevailed and there is every indication that the same situation exists in Australia. Gray et al. (2019) for example use the same paradigm in their examination of pre-service drama teacher's experience of placement. Conversations with mentor teachers indicate that sinking or swimming is often considered the purpose of a placement.

> The 'sink or swim' metaphor is so ingrained in … teaching culture that it would be difficult to find a teacher unfamiliar with this cliché. However, it is more than just a trite saying as nearly every teacher can relate to the difficulties encountered by beginning teachers... This is not a new phenomenon and is widely considered a traditional 'rite of passage' that all teachers must endure. (Howe, 2006, p. 289)

Mentoring teachers also acknowledge the intensities a school environment provides, and they understand that for a pre-service teacher, every situation is new,

as pre-service teachers have not yet developed the routines to deal with these instinctively. The Pre-service Teacher Coordinators each considered this to be a critical component in pre-service teacher placement mentoring.

White and McSharry (2021, p. 321) refer to pre-service teachers '"as liminal beings on the threshold of professional status'. They further consider initial teacher education as 'a site of embodied transition for pre-service teachers' (2021, p. 321) and we argue that the professional experience placement is a key aspect in this transition from pre-service teacher to graduate teacher. In the placement space, pre-service teachers are both student and teacher as they both learn and enact that learning. Therefore, the induction process into being a graduate teacher commences on a pre-service teacher's first professional experience placement. Quality induction provided throughout placement is part of the acculturation required to successfully navigate the graduate teacher as well as professional experience placement space.

The regular Committee of Management meetings involving the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators from all partner schools, the project officer and university academics, afforded opportunity for a forum for discussion within a problem-solving framework. The definition of a common role for the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator in schools, developed out of conversations within the Committee of Management about the range of practices to support the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator. Similarly, the development of a flexible and adaptable induction process arose from discussions within the Committee of Management meetings about practical problem solving and sharing of knowledge for effective induction processes for pre-service teachers. Providing the opportunity to further develop and enhance feedback and professional conversations as an extension of the Induction process is an important future focus.

Consultation with pre-service teachers, Pre-service Teacher Coordinators and mentor teachers led the Committee of Management to confirm the importance of a process or processes that helps pre-service teachers cope with and manage the demands of day-to-day teaching. Information conveyed to pre-service teachers prior to and at commencement of each placement allows them to process tasks before they have to execute them and takes some of the inherent complexity out of the situation. An effective induction process that does not rely on individual mentor teachers can provide the space to allow pre-service teachers and mentor teachers to focus on developing a teaching and learning relationship.

A common school induction process also has potential to enhance the mentor teacher, pre-service teacher relationship. Korhonen et al. (2017) note the often individualised experience of the pre-service, mentor teacher relationship. Drawing on literature examining graduate teacher induction (see for example Bell et al., 2021; García-Carrión et al., 2020), a common induction process across a geographical cluster of schools potentially ensures a common experience and shared information reducing this as a possible site of friction.

Prior to the commencement of this school-university partnership, each school in the cluster had some elements of an induction program in place. Some schools had instigated meetings with all pre-service teachers about to commence placement prior to the starting date of the placement. They would also provide procedural, policy and

curriculum related information to the pre-service teacher. This outlined the ethos of the school community and expectations of teachers, students and families that would be useful for pre-service teachers during their placement. This ranged from use of the staffroom and utensils to codes of conduct and pedagogical considerations for their cohort of students. While providing procedural information, these induction meetings also helped convey the culture and often hidden expectations of pre-service teachers within that school community. For other schools, induction was more an individualised process between the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator or mentor teacher and the pre-service teacher, often not occurring until the placement had commenced. Therefore, a key outcome for this partnership project was to develop and implement a consistent induction program across all partner schools. Thus, ensuring a comprehensive induction program regardless of place and time.

In recent years, the importance of induction processes for new staff in schools has been highlighted (Buchanan et al., 2013). Accordingly, all Australian states, including Victoria, have developed and implemented a graduate teacher induction program tailored to the needs and character of their school, for all new teaching staff to the school. In particular, a standard, systematic process for induction of graduate teachers has been developed for Australia (AITSL, 2016) and for Victoria (DET, 2019). However, a similar process would address the variation existing in the induction process provided for pre-service teachers. This variation is partly due to logistics as pre-service teachers are undertaking their professional experience placements at multiple times throughout the year and the length of the placement varies. Schools also have pre-service teachers from a range of universities, plus the configuration of placements can vary considerably. Nevertheless, as our survey findings indicate, an effective induction program maximises opportunity for pre-service teachers to derive the optimum benefit from their professional experience.

The partner secondary schools have previously engaged in a process which led to the development of a common Education Plan (DET, 2006) across the city. The focus of the common Education Plan is on improving student learning outcomes for students in twenty-first century learning spaces. Following the adoption of this plan, the State schools were rebuilt and renamed. These schools were designed around the concept of 'learning communities' or what has also been referred to as 'open plan schools' (Horwitz, 1979). Specifically, the schools were designed so that a small cohort of students 100–150 could remain together for the four years of their year 7–10 education, building a sense of identity and connection to their fellow students, their school teaching and other school staff.

The non-traditional spaces provide the opportunity for student choice of activities and personalised learning experiences in a technology rich environment. Research by Prain et al. (2014) and Deed et al. (2014) provides a reflection of the design principles of these schools and their success in action. The flexible spaces incorporated into the new schools, provide large spaces that can be used for up to three classes at a time, other spaces, about the size of a regular classroom and smaller spaces for study, small classes or discussion groups. Students from year 7–10 are placed in learning communities and stay in the community for their duration at the school. A substantial part of their time is spent in their community, but they do move to specialist facilities

for subjects as required. Teachers work in teams within each learning community teaching substantially within the community and may move with students from year to year. Depending on the school context, the learning communities are year-based or across years. To facilitate the building of relationships, students are assigned to an 'advisory group' and their advisory teacher often stays with the group for years 7–10. This also helps to develop positive relationships with parents. Pre-service teachers are often unfamiliar with this model and the common induction process facilitates a smooth navigation of this new teaching and learning space.

When the funding for this school-university partnership was acquired, we were forging a new partnership and this involved crossing traditional boundaries between, schools, pre-service teachers and the university. Daza et al. (2021) point out that if we are to rely on partnerships to improve professional practice, we have to purposefully work on the partnerships to ensure all voices are heard and effective discourses develop. They refer to Lillejord and Børte's (2016) mapping of partnership research to highlight the complexity of partnerships as 'complex enterprises that require cross institutional resources, infrastructure and knowledge to truly support professional learning' (Daza et al., 2016, p. 2). Part of the funding agreement was to have regular meetings of what is called a Committee of Management. The committee consisted of a nominated Principal's representative from each school and a university representative. For four schools, this was the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator and for one, it was an Assistant Principal. For the university, it was the Professional Experience Coordinator and locally based academics responsible for placement subjects or degree oversight, plus a project officer. As we worked and regularly met together as a group, with equal representation from partner schools and the university, we established processes for effective discourses and problem solving. The common goal of building shared resources had the unexpected benefit of developing into a supportive community of learning for the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators as they shared insights, resources, problems and solutions.

The first task the Committee of Management undertook was to look at the role of the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator in our partner schools. This role was seen as pivotal to the success of our partnership as it contained the central coordination role between the University and Pre-service Teachers. It was important to define this role within the partner schools as this was a new role in some schools. For other schools, it was new personnel with a variety of seniority within the school. The role was not only about coordinating pre-service teacher placements, but also working in partnership with the university to improve the placement experience. We also wanted to emphasise the collaborative community paradigm underpinning professional experience practice. By defining the role, the intention was to create a professional experience space where learning occurs across and between all the partners.

## 5.3 Developing a Common Process

> Amy acquired practical information, an understanding of the school's underlying ethos and approach to learning and it's goals and priorities. The tour of the school even had accompanying maps, from which she gained a good idea of the layout of the school and where to find things, even practical information about the best place to park! The tour also provided a valuable insight into the demographic of the school and how students and teachers interacted. She was also given an information pack, which provided in one package, all the information she required about the school policies, procedures, protocols, timetable, lesson planning proformas, contacts, using the photocopier, google classroom and more to ensure a successful placement experience.

We drew on the literature detailing effective professional experience in initial teacher education, findings from pre-service teacher surveys about their placement experience, and discussion with mentor teachers in each school, to guide decision-making and the development of a Role Statement for a Pre-service Teacher Coordinator detailed below.

### *5.3.1 The Role Statement*

The existing role statements for individual Pre-service Teacher Coordinators varied from school to school as did the allowance provided. The development of a common Role Statement was important to establish the base for a common induction process for pre-service teachers. It has two key aspects; planning and administration, and capacity building to ensure a successful pre-service and mentor teacher experience. In the section below, we outline the different aspects of the Role Statement and discuss each of these.

1. **To plan and administer the school-based professional experience program for pre-service teachers in TAPP schools.**
   - **Ensure effective planning, communication and monitoring processes are in place for all pre-service teachers and their mentors.** This involves ensuring that all involved understand the requirements of each pre-service teacher and the documentation requirements.
   - **Liaise with the University to establish placement dates and number of pre-service teachers.** This has become very important during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, as we were able to explore a range of new, flexible placement arrangements.
   - **Select and brief mentor teachers.** We have had extensive discussions about the problem of finding sufficient suitable mentor teachers. It seems that while many teachers want to support pre-service teachers, the demands on their time make them reluctant to take this on board. As the quality of the experience for pre-service teachers is highly dependent of the mentor teacher and the quality of feedback. This is a significant issue to be addressed.

- **Induct the pre-service teachers (and mentor teachers) into the school program according to the agreed protocols and procedures to ensure roles, involvement, school procedures, the college context, priorities and strategic focus are understood**. Findings from the pre-service teacher surveys and conversations, mentor teachers indicated that there was some anxiety about pre-service teachers navigating a new school community. The intent was to establish procedures that reduced pre-service and mentor teacher anxiety.
- **Develop in conjunction with the mentor teacher and pre-service teachers a 'research question', which gives the pre-service teacher an opportunity to integrate theory and practice.** This is an ongoing piece of work. We are currently developing guidelines for the initial meeting between the pre-service teacher **and** their mentor, based on a 'professional conversation model'.
- **Support the pre-service teachers to work in a team-based teaching and learning context.** Each of the Year 7–10 partner schools have an open plan design with teachers working in teams in learning communities. While the configurations vary from school to school, there is a shared emphasis on team-based planning and delivery in an open plan environment that pre-service teachers may not have experienced before.
- **Ensure mentor teachers and pre-service teachers have a common understanding of the assessment requirements and procedures and that these are carried out in a timely manner.**
- **Liaise with University staff members in relation to all professional experience matters.** Having common protocols across the schools was perceived also as a way to create a two-way dialogue about the quality of professional experience as well as operational matters.
- **Provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to become actively involved in the broader school and extra curricula program.** This provided opportunity to 'value add' to the shorter placement experience for pre-service teachers as well as providing the school with longer-term additional support.
- **Provide support for pre-service teachers while they are at the secondary school.** This provided multiple levels of support for pre-service teachers and indirectly the mentor teachers**.**

2. **To build the capacity and effectiveness of the professional experience partnership program**

- **Attend professional experience partnership Committee of Management and network meetings.** As indicated previously, this unintentionally became a site for capacity building of the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators, with shared learning that could be taken back to the individual school. It also flagged to school principals that this was a requirement that was to be factored into classroom time release.
- **Build mentor teacher capacity, which may involve the delivery of professional learning activities**, **across and within schools.** Small things such as providing coffee vouchers help to recognise and value the contribution of mentor teachers.

While this Role Statement refers specifically to a Pre-service Teacher Coordinator in a partner school, it can be readily adapted to a Pre-service Teacher Coordinator role in any setting.

### 5.3.2 *The Induction Process*

The next step was to design the Pre-service Teacher Induction Program.

The process commenced by:

1. 'Brainstorming' all the required elements of a successful induction program tailored to the specific needs of a pre-service teacher. This included not only the information required, but attention to the development of relationships so that pre-service teachers would feel welcomed into being an integral part of the school.

Following this, each school used the checklist to derive their own induction package. In subsequent meetings, we shared the induction packages to consider site differences and common approaches. Ultimately, the induction process was divided into the following parts:

1. The pre-placement orientation induction meeting.
2. The first day at the school
3. The induction 'package'
4. End of placement survey—to determine the effectiveness of the induction program and feedback on how to improve it.

### 5.3.3 *The Pre-Placement Orientation Induction Meeting*

This usually takes place in the week before the professional experience is due to commence as a group induction.

It involves:

**A one-hour meeting** that covers the following:

- Pre-service teacher introduction to mentor teachers, Pre-service Teacher Coordinator, each other and members of the leadership team such as the Principal and Assistant Principal.
- The Pre-service Teacher Induction Package is then provided to all pre-service teachers and their mentor teachers. The Pre-service Teacher Coordinator workshops this document with pre-service teachers highlighting key documents and procedures. (Details of the content of this package is described in the section titled Induction Package.)
- Discuss the school's specific teaching strategies and priorities, for example while all schools use the *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes* (FISO) (DET,

2021), there are a range of strategies deployed to improve student outcomes. Examples include, model lessons, specific criteria for learning intentions and success criteria.
- Provide copies of the Annual Implementation Plan, so pre-service teachers can gain an appreciation of the school priorities, goals and strategies.
- The school ethos, values, goals are explained, with examples of what this looks like in practice.
- Interactive Technology (IT) issues include access to the school's server/internet and relevant software, for example Compass, google classroom, teams and the school intranet. In addition, pre-service teachers are informed about how students use IT in the school, for example policies such as 'bring your own device' are explained. Information about how to access communication software, printing and photocopying is provided.
- Introduce the school's student management policies and procedures. Findings from the surveys indicated that this is very important to the pre-service teacher. They typically report that their major concern is student management. Providing pre-service teachers with the document and the time to work through this can help them approach student management with confidence knowing that they understand the process. Pre-service teachers have the chance to observe how this works in practice, while they are undertaking classroom observations.
- Ensure pre-service teachers know what to do if they are late or absent. Reinforce the expected hours of attendance.

**A tour of the school**. Ideally from both the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator and pre-service teacher perspectives provide insider knowledge of navigating the physical space. School tours by secondary students may provide a further perspective.

## 5.4 A Meeting with Their Mentor Teacher

- Individual pre-service teachers or pairs of pre-service teachers meet with their mentor teacher. So, the following matters can be addressed:
- Provision of a workspace/desk for each pre-service teacher.
- Clarification the school's day-to-day procedures and priorities.
- The timetable and how it works.
- Review the mentor teacher's teaching schedule and discuss the classes in which the pre-service teachers will be working.
- The pre-service teacher's goals for this placement.
- Any university subject related requirements for this placement.
- The scheduled teaching and learning activities, and topics for the classes the pre-service teacher will be teaching or observing.
- Discussion about relevant curriculum and planning documents.
- Discussion of the requirements of the placement, such as many lessons the pre-service teacher will be planning for and teaching.

- Child Safety standards and mandatory reporting.
- Support options available to pre-service teachers.

### 5.4.1 The Induction Package

The specific contents of this package will vary from setting to setting, but common items to be included:

- Staff photographs, staff names and contact details
- Welcome letter from the principal.
- Parent/Caregiver perspectives of the school
- Map of the school, including yard duty areas
- School ethos and the Annual Implementation Plan
- Class teaching guide of the fundamental ideas/strategies that inform teaching and learning in the school—could include documents like *High Impact Teaching Strategies* (DET, 2021) and *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes* (FISO) (DET, 2021).
- Canteen Information
- Emergency response and medical information
- Child Safety standards and mandatory reporting
- Use of photocopier, IT resources—including specific software, for example Compass
- Timetable
- Attendance and Assessment Policies
- Uniform options for students
- Dress code for teachers
- Post it notes and a pen.

While some of this information is also provided in the pre-placement meeting, we have found that it is useful to present important information in both verbal and written form to be referred to at any time.

### 5.4.2 The First Day at the School

- Introduce the pre-service teacher to all staff including the teaching, support and office staff and members of the leadership team.

### 5.4.3 During the Placement

Providing pre-service teachers with a common comprehensive group induction prior to starting placement affords opportunity for pre-service teachers to enter any of the schools within the partnership with prior knowledge of how to navigate the school community. Initial results from the surveys conducted with pre-service teachers about the induction process indicate that they felt well prepared. Pre-service teachers who had completed previous placements at non partner schools also reported they felt less anxious than on previous placements which they attributed to the induction process.

While team-teaching is the main approach in the partner schools, the professional experience process follows a traditional pattern, where one mentor teacher is allocated to a pre-service teacher or pair of pre-service teachers. As part of the design of the learning communities in the partner schools, teachers work together in common spaces, to facilitate collaboration and which are 'open' to students. Pre-service teachers undertaking their placement are in this space; they therefore can hear and participate in conversations about students, teachers and organisational issues. This also provides some practical and emotional support for pre-service teachers. These open plan arrangements and communal work spaces provide an environment where there is opportunity for the collegial culture that promotes learning and improved practice (Curtis et al., 2019; Le Cornu, 2015). However, pre-service teachers are still assigned one designated mentor teacher and their teaching and subsequent feedback requirements occur in their mentor teacher's classes.

### 5.4.4 Post Placement

The Committee of Management revisited the existing post placement surveys that the university and individual partner schools had been using and developed a common survey that could be used across the schools. Pre-service teachers were invited to complete these online at the end of their placement.

A group post placement meeting was also established with pre-service teachers and mentor teachers to discuss and celebrate the placement experience. Pre-service teachers were also invited to continue to participate in the school events and professional learning. While not all pre-service teachers took up this opportunity, there are a number of pre-service teachers continuing to participate in the school community post placement. This also provided a pool of potential tutors to work with small groups of students for two of the schools. In some instances, pre-service teachers re-joined the school community as graduate teachers.

## 5.5 Swimming Not Sinking

> Amy found the specific information helpful. The school used a 'model lesson plan' and this template helped her understand the teaching approach adopted by the school while providing a clear framework for her planning and delivery of lessons. The school's Behavior Management Plan outlined the school's philosophy and provided a clear step by step outline of the management strategy.

Once the initial Induction Package was developed, it was trialled with the next intake of pre-service teachers. While the partner schools consistently take large numbers of pre-service teachers, they had also decided to undertake similar induction meetings even for single pre-service teacher placements. Anecdotal data were collected at the induction meeting about the pre-service teachers' feelings and perceptions about commencing placement prior to and after the induction meeting.

For most of the pre-service teachers, this was the first time they had been invited to a school prior to placement, although such meetings had at times occurred once they commenced placement. Post placement, pre-service teachers were invited to complete the surveys, and informal discussions were held with mentor teachers.

Findings from the surveys and discussion groups indicated items that we had not considered pre-service teachers would find useful, such as a print and digital format of the Induction package, the overall direction and goals of the school, lesson plan templates and expectations of the learning and behaviour standards for each year level.

> Having the specific information of all the year level expectations for students… allowed me to consider what all students at the college are striving for.

The findings also showed less useful aspects which included all the school policies or all of the Staff Handbook information.

Over a twelve month period, the Committee of Management revisited the common process, refining elements and trialling across the schools with each intake of pre-service teachers following a cyclical process of trial, survey, and informal discussions, refine, trial. Findings from the surveys with pre-service teachers were cross-checked with conversations with the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators. The findings indicated that, by working collaboratively, the school-university partnership has been successful in creating streamlined induction processes that are effective for both the mentor teacher and the pre-service teacher. The commitment to establish a common process for induction of pre-service teachers across the partner schools was successfully implemented, despite staffing and role changes in the partner schools and the university. While aspects of the common induction process may seem intuitive, the previous approaches in each school had varied considerably, despite the schools being in a common geographical region with shared student cohorts and a shared Education Plan. Consequently, pre-service teachers had received an uneven professional placement experience.

The regular Committee of Management meetings afforded opportunities for Pre-service Teacher Coordinators from the partner schools and university academics, to

sit at a common table for discussion within a problem-solving framework. These meetings provided school representatives with the opportunity to raise professional experience placement related issues, and work together to solve these issues, such as the induction process. The meetings also provided a communication process between schools and the university placement team. Lillejord et al. (2018 p. 561) note that one of the problems with university and school partnership has been 'the teacher education institutions' historically dominant position in teacher education'. A key focus of this partnership project has been the quality of the professional partnership, with an unexpected outcome being the disruption to previous understandings of the university school relationship. Having each school and the university as six equal stakeholders has broadened the lines of communication between the schools and the university, individually, and as a group. These regular meetings also afforded opportunity for the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators to communally problem-solve and create common processes and structures. These processes then allowed space to focus on other aspects of a quality placement experience for both pre-service teachers and mentor teachers.

## 5.6 Conclusion

> Amy commenced her placement with confidence based on a sound understanding of the processes. She felt that she had started this placement 'miles ahead'. Thanks to the induction program, she was in a great space to enjoy the placement and build her skills to become an effective teacher.

The Bendigo professional experience partnership supported by the Victorian Department of Education Teaching Academy of Professional Practice competitive grant, provided the space and legitimacy for the Pre-service Teacher Coordinators in each school and university to work together. Commitment from each stakeholder to regular Committee of Management meetings was a vital part of the process. These provided the opportunity for shared conversations, space and time to develop a mutually beneficial and sustainable cooperative relationship between the university and the five local secondary schools. This has resulted in a demonstrated improvement in the induction experience component of their professional experience placement for pre-service teachers in these schools. It has also deemphasised the often individualised nature of the placement experience where the quality of the experience relied largely on the relationship developed by the mentor teacher with the pre-service teacher.

Mutual trust and respect is developed between the stakeholders. The Committee of Management has been able to define a common role for the Pre-service Teacher Coordinator in schools and develop a flexible and adaptable induction process with long-term commitment from each partner school. Providing the opportunity to further develop and enhance feedback and professional conversations is an important future focus.

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# Chapter 6
# Partner Perspectives Matter: Lessons Learnt When Navigating Continued Pre-service Teacher Placements During Disruption

**Tania Leach and Anita Louise Wheeldon**

**Abstract** It is well understood that authentic and mutually beneficial school and university partnerships are vital to maintaining quality placements for pre-service teachers. The function of these formalised partnerships is twofold; first they regulate placement requirements and support student progression and secondly, they ensure universities are graduating classroom ready teachers. The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the importance of these partnership arrangements more than ever. For pre-service teachers, the pandemic critically disrupted the school environment in which they were expecting to undertake their placement. Despite this, an Australian regional university made the decision to continue with as many placements as possible as the first wave of the pandemic unfolded. This at a time when placement-based work integrated learning (WIL) was being cancelled across Australia. The voices of the university, schools and students were captured during this time. This qualitative case study illuminates the findings from a large-scale survey and email communications distributed to all pre-service teachers and schools at the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Findings show that while the continuation of placements was welcomed by the university and schools, the capturing of students' voices illuminated a significantly different perspective. Despite the University and school's best efforts to support student placements, their decisions were based on formalised accreditation requirements, with an assumption that students could cope and would appreciate the experiences the disrupted teaching environment would provide. This proved not to be the case for all. Implications from this study illuminate the problem of the peripheral positioning of students in the placement partnership and the need for them to be positioned as authentically central.

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_6

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs within Australia are nationally accredited against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST's) (AITSL, 2019) to ensure pre-service teachers develop an array of knowledges and skills that enable them to demonstrate a combination of technical and personal competencies (AITSL, 2015). Within each ITE program, there are two key components, theoretical work (curriculum, pedagogy and learning theory) and WIL that takes the form of professional experience placements (AITSL, 2011).

The application of these national accreditation standards within ITE programs require the development of formal partnerships between universities and education contexts that are "agreed in writing… and used by providers and schools/sites/systems to facilitate the delivery of programs, particularly professional experience for pre-service teachers" (AITSL, 2022, para. 1). It is through these partnerships that universities graduate "classroom ready teachers" (TEMAG, 2014) with assurance from industry (school/sites/systems).

The policy positions the use of a dyadic partnership (Nguyen & Loughland, 2018), to implement an "arrangement" (AITSL, 2022, para. 1) for the provision of placements. Within the policy documentation, the use of prepositional language such as "for" and "of" positions pre-service teachers as passive stakeholders rather than active partners. Put simply, the policy outlines that the partnership "does things" to the student, rather than with them.

On the 25th of March 2020, as a response to the global pandemic, the Australian government, via the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission and in collaboration with all States and Territories, developed and implemented a coordinated national response. In Queensland, that response was translated into the Queensland Whole-of-Government Pandemic Plan (Queensland Government, 2020) that resulted in statewide lockdowns. During this period, the chief Medical Officer outlined that the transmission of COVID-19 within educational settings was limited. As a result, schools remained open during the first pandemic wave, transitioning into a period of hybrid learning; home-based online learning for most students, face-to-face learning for children of essential workers.

As school closures began to occur across Australia, the continuation of pre-service teacher placements was questioned. Within Queensland, the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) advised that university "programs [would] show flexibility to minimise any impact on pre-service teachers" (QTU, 2020, para. 20). Subsequent communication from the QCT identified that professional experience placements should continue where possible. As a result, one regional Queensland university, referred to from this point as 'the University', continued to provide students with the opportunity to complete placements. To achieve this, the University implemented a flexible placement strategy focused on maintaining the University and school partnership along with accreditation requirements. This study triangulates the school, University and student perspectives during this time.

## 6.1 Literature Review

This literature firstly examines the role of partnership in quality placements, along with student perspectives as captured in extant literature. We then turn to the disruption of placements during the COVID-19 pandemic to explain the context in which this study occurred.

### *6.1.1 Quality Partnerships and Placements*

From industry, there is a deep understanding and commitment to WIL and the role that partnerships have in the delivery of quality WIL experiences (Jackson et al., 2016; Venville et al., 2021). Where students experience problematic placements, impacted by factors such as a lack of confidence in their own readiness for placement, limited learning outcomes and difficult interpersonal relationships while on placement, belief in the learning opportunities offered during a placement can waiver (Aprile & Knight, 2019). On the other hand, where there is a strong, shared understanding between universities and industry of the purpose and meaning of WIL and what constitutes a quality placement, more successful placements result (Jackson et al., 2016).

Engagement with industry partners is critical to understanding how their contribution to WIL can be supported (Ferns & Lilly, 2015). Enduring partnerships are built on effective communication between universities and industry partners (Jeffries & Milne, 2013) and although formal agreements are important, it is the informal relationships that are highly valued (Venville et al., 2021). As an important feedback mechanism to students, well supported industry supervisors understand their role and have confidence in the performance assessments they are required to make (Yepes-Rios et al., 2016; Lasen et al., 2018). The support of universities to industry during placements is therefore key.

Quality partnerships go beyond just the placement. Industry sees WIL as an important mechanism in the supply of skilled graduates and as a creator of suitable talent pools from which future workforces can be drawn (Jackson et al., 2016). In light of teacher shortages in Australia (Weldon, 2015; Whiteford et al., 2021), the supply of quality WIL placements is vital in assuring this workforce pipeline. For this reason, the continuation of placements with no delay of graduation was a driving concern during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pelden & Banham, 2020).

### *6.1.2 Student Perceptions of Placement*

The student relationship to the WIL experience is understood to be one of perceived benefit. Students agree that WIL is an important driver in their work-readiness and

preparedness for their future careers, extending their ability to navigate career pathways and form a professional identity (Jackson, 2019; McManus & Rook, 2021). The broadening of professional networks while on placement is seen as an important enabler to future employment (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2020). Even though students can see the positive benefits of WIL and believe in the learning experience it promises to deliver, students feel that the value of the placement can be negatively influenced by the host organisation (Patrick et al., 2008).

An avoidance of experimentation, initiative and independent decision-making can occur when students feel their mentor teacher exercised unnecessary power over their ability to succeed on placement, through the attainment of a positive assessment (Aprile & Knight, 2019). More personally, many students experience financial stress when they have to forgo paid employment to undertake placement. They may be impacted when coping with caring duties along with the rigours of attending placement and their well-being can suffer as a result (Grant-Smith et al., 2017). During COVID-19, the psychological well-being of students took on urgency as significant impacts to learning, mental well-being and escalating levels of anxiety and stress were reported across the nation's student body (Dodd et al., 2021).

### *6.1.3 COVID-19 and Disrupted Placements*

In February 2020, the global pandemic impacted learning at Australian universities. Very quickly universities changed their teaching and assessment practices from being on campus to 100% online. At this time, WIL was particularly impacted as placements that would normally occur in the workplace were postponed or cancelled by most universities. Disrupted placements can significantly impact disciplines such as ITE because existing accreditation standards make alternative placement types problematic (Kay et al., 2019). As a result of these mass cancellations, significant numbers of pre-service teachers missed their scheduled placements, causing a bottlenecking of available placements once WIL restrictions were removed (Hoskyn et al., 2020).

## 6.2 Positioning the Study's Research Approach

The study commenced in September 2020 upon receipt of human research ethics approval. With a focus on exploring placement experiences during the pandemic, this qualitative case study captured the perspectives of the University, its students and partner schools.

This study analyses:

- The University perspectives captured through placement documentation, including the placement strategy, accreditation documentation and communications
- Student perspectives captured through survey data from 129 pre-service teachers who completed a placement during the first pandemic wave
- School perspectives captured through placement communications that resulted in a total of 29 school responses.

The subsequent thematic analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Smith et al. (2009). During initial analysis, narratives collected in student and school responses were read and reread, with initial notations made. Secondly, the narratives collected were thematically coded for emergent themes before these themes were connected across all data sources. Utilising these identified themes, the collective University and school perspectives were then juxtaposed against the student perspective (See Table 6.1).

## 6.3 Contrasting Perspectives

In this section, we reflect upon the partnership perspectives illuminated within the following four identified themes: (1) placement expectations, (2) adherence to regulatory requirements, (3) mutually beneficial partnerships and (4) placement context.

### *6.3.1 Placement Expectations*

Placement expectations during COVID-19 were modified to meet the evolving landscape. Regulatory bodies at the national (AITSL) and state level (QCT) collaborated with the Queensland Council of Deans of Education to determine how the current climate would support graduating ITE students to sufficiently demonstrate the APSTs at a graduate level.

#### 6.3.1.1 University Perspective

For the University, a number of modifications were made that supported the directives of all the regulatory bodies. These were:

- Temporarily revised professional experience thresholds of 60 days for secondary and primary undergraduate programs and 45 days for secondary and primary postgraduate programs, noting that “professional experience beyond this threshold should continue where possible” (QCT, 2020, para 4).

**Table 6.1** The University and school perspectives compared to student perspectives

| | **The University perspective** Supporting quotes and citations from literature | **School perspective** Supporting quotes and citations from literature | **Student Perspective** Supporting quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Placement Expectations | "Temporary revised professional experience threshold" (Professional experience beyond this threshold should continue where possible) (QCT, 17th March 2020, email communication received by Queensland universities) | "What a wonderful experience for pre-service teachers, thank you for modifying the requirements" (School #4)<br>"I have taken these modifications back to my Executive Committee again and our concern was for the amount of teaching and engagement with the children over the placement but if with the understanding that we may or may not have any children any given day and that it may be only through limited online learning experiences then We are prepared to go ahead with the placement" (School #25) | "The professional experience was challenging because, though I knew where I was going for the prac, no staff could tell me what would be undertaken. I was not surprised by that. It was challenging to not know what new tasks I was to be allocated each day" (Student #92)<br>"The school did not really want me there during COVID as they were also juggling with the differences at that, particularly difficult time" (Student #51) |
| Adherence to regulatory requirements | "Students looked to their universities for some consolation and alternate plans. They wanted assurance that they would graduate on time or as planned before the onset of the COVID-19 drama" (Pelden & Banham, 2020, p. 2) | "USQ students are truly embracing the current circumstances that they are on placement in and are stepping up and beyond to what is expected of them" (School #5)<br>"COVID is really playing havoc with placements! You guys are doing an amazing job!" (School #28) | "[the university] did not pull their students from placement like other universities did, putting the health of their students at serious risk" (Student #153)<br>"It has been epic and I am ready to quit" (Student #113) |

(continued)

**Table 6.1** (continued)

| | **The University perspective**<br>Supporting quotes and citations from literature | **School perspective**<br>Supporting quotes and citations from literature | **Student Perspective**<br>Supporting quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mutually Beneficial Partnerships | "more official processes that participants believe would enhance knowledge, and support collaboration and exchange regarding assessment regimes and competencies. Importantly for Universities, partners expressed the need to guard against a mechanistic approach above a collaborative approach based on rigorous and careful understanding of the placement context" (Venville et al., 2021, p. 22)<br>"Quality WIL programs, which are flexible and inclusive to stakeholder needs, could be an important step in developing career-readiness across student groups and heightened prosperity for all." Jackson (2018, p. 32)<br>"Institutions are partnering with organisations—both domestically and internationally—in a multitude of ways to ensure that the WIL experiences offered to students are dynamic, meaningful and opportune" Universities Australia (2019, p. 9) | "We will do whatever it takes to honour our commitment to provide the best experience for the students" (School #12)<br>"Both students have completed days all this week—they have been a great help to our school and staff and their assistance is greatly appreciated" (School #3)<br>"We truly value the partnership we have developed with your university and look forward to working with USQ in the near future" (School #22) | "The school did not really want me there during COVID as they were also juggling with the differences at that, particularly difficult time" (Student #51)<br>"I had to wait for the principal to confirm that he was still happy to have me at the school, he did keep me but strongly suggested I consider whether it was an effective use of my time or a productive learning experience (leaving the impression that it was a waste of time)…The school allowed me to stay, however my mentor teacher and myself struggled to get any decent information from the university" (Student #142)<br>"It was challenging as the university was unclear on the expectations of students on placement and what requirements we had. It was difficult teaching online with no guidance from the university" (Student #160) |

(continued)

**Table 6.1** (continued)

| | **The University perspective** Supporting quotes and citations from literature | **School perspective** Supporting quotes and citations from literature | **Student Perspective** Supporting quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Placement contexts | "we opted to incorporate nonplacement WIL activities including having the PSTs critically reflect on the teaching of a peer from the previous year's cohort [via previous recordings]" (Eady et al., 2021, p. 9)<br>"there are many models of WIL beyond conventional work placements" (Wood et al., 2020, p. 331)<br>"Virtual WIL clinics are a suitable substitution for WIL clinical activity and ideally suited to the COVID-19 context" (Rasalam & Bandaranaike, 2020, p. 573) | "This combined with the extraordinary absentee rates in schools would mean that students may be planning and teaching lessons to less than 10 students in a classroom situation, this is surely not an appropriate learning experience for the pre-service teachers" (School #13)<br>"I think any placement at the moment is not going to be good for the students and teachers. We only have limited students and things are changing every day and sometimes by the hour" (School #15) | "During COVID-19 my placement was challenged by the method of teaching. The school used the program 'Blackboard' to have online lessons. This was challenging as the sessions were only an hour long and the students and myself were unfamiliar with the program" (Student #37)<br>"It was challenging in the sense that we couldn't interact with all students due to some of them being online… We couldn't teach them anything new as we could not disadvantage the children learning from home" (Student #72)<br>"It was challenging because students were learning from home, so I didn't feel like I got what I most needed, being in the classroom with them" (Student #10) |

- A combination of revised professional experience thresholds for early childhood undergraduate and postgraduate ITE programs including 30 days in childhood settings for undergraduate and 20 days for postgraduate (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2020).
- Virtual placements for pre-service teachers which involved the students conducting the teaching component of their placement online. Depending on the placement arrangements, the pre-service teacher would either be physically located at the school site or at their home.
- Provisional registration with a course completion condition for pre-service teachers that do not meet the temporary revised professional experience threshold.

The University response to these revised placement expectations was to continue with placements, utilising the revised thresholds only in the event that pre-COVID placement thresholds were unable to be resolved prior to graduation. This modification supported flexible contextual placements, where the mode and amount of planning and teaching was individually negotiated between each school site and pre-service teacher. Pre-service teachers within this context would therefore need to engage in ongoing reflection and negotiation activities that went "beyond the acquisition and demonstration of practical teaching skills" (Aprile & Knight, 2019, p. 870).

#### 6.3.1.2 School Perspective

Within the initial negotiation of placements with schools, the University explicitly outlined the modified placement expectations to host schools. These host schools welcomed the modifications with comments from Coordinators such as "what a wonderful experience for pre-service teachers, thank you for modifying the requirements" (School #15). It was commonly expressed that a placement contextualised to the needs of individual schools during COVID-19 would be a valuable experience for pre-service teachers. One Coordinator stated:

> I am sure this will be one of the most unique experiences [our pre-service teachers] will have during their teaching career. It [was a bonus for [student x] to get to work in the midst of this irregular time and see how true teamwork overcomes challenges... we could not have done it without her. (School #2)

#### 6.3.1.3 Student Perspective

While the University and host schools embraced the opportunity to continue placements during this time, the students expressed vastly different views. Students (n = 91) indicated that they experienced some level of negative influence on their placement due to COVID-19 challenges. Students (n = 22) identified that the flexibility and contextualised placement expectations resulted in a lack of clarity that contributed to increased anxiety and stress. One student expressed, "anxiety levels were high, without knowing what to expect of the placement venue, social distancing

measures in schools…" (Student #56). Students also identified that they felt the lack of placement expectations and clarity of their daily tasks contributed to a feeling of uselessness:

> At times I felt kind of useless. There was not a significant amount of work to do during my professional experience. I tried to help out at all times but... I spent most of my time supervising students, prepared learning resources or completed administrative tasks. (Student #21)

#### 6.3.1.4 Learnings

These contrasting perspectives illuminate that while the flexible and contextualised nature of the placement was welcomed by schools, the enactment of these measures and resulting communication of placement expectations to students was limited. This learning highlights the importance of supporting students and mentor teachers to collaboratively understand, reflect and negotiate placement expectations to meet the required APST's (2019) in the removal of explicitly defined placement tasks.

### *6.3.2 Adherence to Regulatory Requirements*

A critical component of maintaining the revised regulatory body requirements was to ensure any program modifications proposed by universities would be overseen and approved prior to implementation (QCT, 2020). This resulted in universities developing a variety of strategies that ranged from pausing placements and engaging in virtual placements to support the continuation of placements (Eady et al., 2021), including the involvement in departmental teaching at home projects.

#### 6.3.2.1 University Perspective

The University's strategy to continue placements was perceived by schools as a way of supporting the profession during this time as they were deemed as essential workers and therefore had no working from home or government support options. The continuation of placements, in as many instances as possible, also ensured there was no delay in the graduation of pre-service teachers in the longer term and that no learning standards were lowered. There was recognition from schools that students undertaking placements during this COVID-19 disruption would have a unique learning experience.

While placements continued for most students, the university strategy also enabled students to identify if they were able to complete placements. If their placement was interrupted due to a site closure or they were unable to undertake a placement due to carers' duties, the requirement to isolate or were medically compromised, an individualised placement program was developed in partnership with the student.

#### 6.3.2.2 School Perspective

Within the host school responses, the University's flexible response and alignment to government directives was viewed positively. Coordinators expressed their desire to support the university in placing students:

> As always [we are] committed to ensuring our partnership with [the University] is strong and are more than happy to further assist with placements if you need assistance (especially with two of the Uni's withdrawing all placements next term- [we] have increased capacity should you require it! (School #5)

Utilising placement processes during these modified placements ensured students were able to demonstrate the required teaching standards as reflected within the APST's. This was again highlighted within school responses as reflected within the following example, "we will cover with them all...how the APST's can still be achieved through the placement experience… and the opportunities to seek out to do so" (School #26).

#### 6.3.2.3 Student Perspective

While the University strategy aligned to government directives and was well-received by host schools, students expressed safety concerns about continuing placements. One student stated, "It made me wonder why it was safe for us to go on placement" (Student #12). A similar notion was depicted by another student who questioned why the University "did not pull their students from placement like other universities did, putting the health of their students at serious risk" (Student #153).

Safety concerns were further exacerbated by the modification of University support. University liaisons, assigned to provide individual support to students while on placement, were unable to attend schools in person, due to non-essential visitor restrictions within schools. This lack of face-to-face support was a source of confusion, with students questioning the safety of placements as reflected by one student who said, "I did not get a school visit from a university employee during my placement, as it was too dangerous for them to visit" (Student #11). The student perspectives highlighted the importance of explicit and regular communication with students during uncertain times to ensure clarity of the rationale behind selected strategies.

#### 6.3.2.4 Learnings

The University's strategy to continue placements was developed to minimise impacts on student engagement and progression within their program. The strategy was supported by schools, who expressed their positive support of the continuation of placements. Despite the adherence to the regulatory requirements during the COVID-19 disruption, these matters of progression were eclipsed by the student's own safety concerns. This learning identified that the assumption underpinning the University

strategy and school decisions to host students was that students would also embrace the University direction. Concerns of program progression and graduating without delays were not mentioned by students, instead they identified levels of fear and anxiety.

### *6.3.3 Mutually Beneficial Partnerships*

With universities across Queensland and Australia navigating the continuation of professional experience placements, the opportunity for collaboration with schools to co-construct flexible placement strategies emerged. At this time, the University was considering how to continue student placements to meet regulatory requirements and graduate classroom ready students, whereas schools were problem solving how to support their current and future workforce. Driven by this mutual need to place students in schools, and in alignment with regulatory requirements, a mutually beneficial COVID-19 placement strategy was developed.

#### 6.3.3.1 University Perspective

The strong existing relationships built with schools enabled the University to continue to place students in education settings during the first pandemic wave. During this time, the number of students placed within host schools increased significantly (see Table 6.2). Some school sites increased the number of pre-service teachers by more than 50%, seemingly indicating an increased need or capacity to host students.

**Table 6.2** Comparison of the Number of Students Placed in School Sites Before and During COVID-19

| Overall placement number comparisons | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| In 2019: 1052 Schools and Early Education Centres hosted the University students<br>In 2020: 486 Schools continued to host students during COVID-19<br>In 2021: 906 Schools and Early Education Centres hosted the University students | | | | |
| Industry Partner | Pre-service teacher placements hosted in Semester 1 of each Year | | | |
| | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
| School #2 | 10 | 11 | 71 | 69 |
| School #5 | 12 | 3 | 20 | 21 |
| School #13 | 4 | 9 | 19 | 36 |
| School #25 | 14 | 7 | 19 | 15 |
| School # 32 | 8 | 6 | 14 | 12 |

#### 6.3.3.2 School Perspective

Host schools viewed the inclusion of pre-service teachers within their communities as mutually beneficial. As students continued to be placed in school sites, host schools were able to leverage the opportunity to gain additional human resources (the pre-service teacher) to support their current teaching staff. One Coordinator stated that "most other universities have cancelled placements, so we can work with whatever the decision as we are obviously still here and teaching!" (School #27). A similar sentiment was reflected by another Coordinator who outlined that they "have things planned for students [pre-service teachers] where they will be making a vital and positive contribution for the staff, students and wider school" (School #23).

One Coordinator also expressed the benefits to current teaching staff that hosting pre-service teachers during the pandemic could have:

> Thank you for your communication. It sounds as if [the University] students may be teaching the teachers! We will very much appreciate the support of [the University] students! (School #19)
>
> Students will begin recording lessons tomorrow and one was able to conduct a PD for staff on how to use Zoom and other digital technology. (School #1)

#### 6.3.3.3 Student Perspective

In contrast to this, students perceived the continuation of placements as "very challenging…[the] uncertainty was concerning [as] it was an unknown/unfamiliar setting for teachers" (Student #78). In total, 22 students described how the changing class dynamics and compositions impacted on their ability to plan in advance, and carefully consider how to cater for student learning needs. Student #150 outlined that:

> It was difficult getting to know [school] students over the phone and trying to work out what content students were to learn/revise. It was incredibly stressful as my mentor went on leave and there was so much uncertainty around it. (Student #150)

In addition to the uncertainty in the classroom, some students described a lack of support in the classroom, largely due to the emotional strain the mentor was experiencing because of the COVID-19 environment. Student #94 stated:

> I believe[d] that my mentor was under a great deal of strain and that unfortunately, she took this stress out on me and made it difficult for me to continue. (Student #94)

The opposing perspectives challenge the notion that the University partnerships with the schools are translated to all levels of the school. The student responses indicate that they have different day-to-day experiences based on a variety of placement understandings and expectations.

#### 6.3.3.4 Learnings

When schools positively accepted placements, it was assumed that the sentiment was carried throughout the teaching community of the host school. This was not the case as indicated by students who felt their mentor teacher did not want them there or did not have the time to spend supporting them. Student's ability to be viewed as a learner was also threatened in some instances, as they became an additional staffing resource and facilitators of professional learning sessions. This highlights the importance of supporting the mentoring/supervisory role within placements to ensure pre-service teachers continue to learn and enhance their teaching knowledge and skills. This learning highlights that a key assumption underpinning the university strategy was that teachers who remained on site were also able to cope with the disrupted teaching environment and could take on the additional responsibility of being a mentor teacher.

### *6.3.4 Placement context*

As depicted within government directives, (outlined above), school closures across the national and state resulted in schools providing face-to-face teaching for children of essential workers, while concurrently providing online learning for student learning from home.

#### 6.3.4.1 University Perspective

For the University, this rapid shift to online learning was perceived as both an opportunity and an additional stress on teachers. The University was concerned about host schools willingness to continue with placements and as a result highlighted that continuing to host pre-service teachers during the pandemic was an opportunity for pre-service teachers to support schools during this challenging time.

#### 6.3.4.2 School Perspective

Some schools saw hosting as overly stressful at this time. One Coordinator stated, "due to the uncertainty of what the rest of the semester looks like for us, and the change of how we will deliver the curriculum, it is a very stressful time for teachers at the moment" (School #22). A similar sentiment was reflected by another Coordinator who outlined that "with the teachers being highly stressed at the moment, adding an extra responsibility at this time is something that our principal does not want for them. Although our teachers who supervise pre-service teachers do so willingly and passionately, it is just not good timing right now" (School #23).

Not all schools responded in the same way. Some Coordinators saw hosting pre-service teachers as an opportunity to alleviate the stress, while also acknowledging that the context of teaching for the pre-service teachers may change daily:

> Student X is a motivated, reflective, adaptable, and hardworking pre-service teacher and was an incredible asset to us.... especially this last week as we prepared our home learning packs. We could not have done it without her support! (School #2)
>
> We have 6 students still attending the school, who we share on a rotation basis during the day**.** The technology shift is a massive challenge for such as small, 'old-fashioned' school, but all teachers are embracing change like champions. Obviously, this week has been very unsettling for all involved, but so far so good. (School #1)

#### 6.3.4.3 Student Perspective

Students identified that the flexibility of teaching modes (face-to-face and online) presented additional challenges. Students who predominantly taught in an online environment expressed a lack of active teaching opportunities that in turn created high levels of anxiety and stress. Some students associated the challenge with a lack of preparedness as reflected by students who stated:

> It was challenging as the university was unclear on the expectations of students on placement and what requirements we had. It was difficult teaching online with no guidance from the university. (Student #160)
>
> It was challenging because the students were all online and it was hard to ascertain who was engaging in the learning, provide adequate adjustments and the pedagogical frameworks and strategies I have learnt about did not apply to the online environment. It was tough teaching lessons online. (Student #39)

Other students attributed the shift of context to a different style of placement that did not enhance their teaching skills:

> It was challenging because students were learning from home so I did not feel like I got what I most needed, being in the classroom with them. (Student #10)
>
> I only had two senior classes for two weeks of the 4 weeks, so classroom management was not something that I could really practice. (Student #159)
>
> Not meeting most of my students as they stayed at home also created stress, as I could not provide the specific differentiation as I wanted to. (Student #60)

#### 6.3.4.4 Learning

The University's ITE programs had historically been taught through an online learning platform with face-to-face or online modes offered for most courses. The assumption was that because the students were already learning in an online environment and had been for the entirety of their degree, they would both value and adapt to the online learning environment they confronted during their placement. This was not the case as students did not see themselves as being able to apply skills such as differentiation or behaviour management to an online learning environment. As the

narrative from the school also demonstrates, the idea that online teaching was not a real or valuable teaching opportunity was reinforced by the schools themselves.

### *6.3.5 Partner Sustainability*

This study positions how the dyadic partnership between schools and universities enabled the development of a flexible placement strategy focused on sustaining placements during the COVID-19 disruption. From this perspective alone, the partnership could be viewed as sustainable and if measured on placement completions only, at least in the short term, there is success here. However, when considering the lived placement experience and factors impacting on the quality of the placement, sustainability and success if questioned. What is demonstrated however, is that without the student as a vital and integral part to the partnership, sustainability is at risk. We know that strong partnerships are a factor in quality placement experiences. So, it therefore follows that students must be seen as one of these partners.

### *6.3.6 The Biggest Learning*

This study has provided a range of learning, emanating from assumptions made. It was assumed that students and mentor teachers had the support they needed, but it was shown they did not. It was also assumed that adherence to regulation was the primary driver and for the University and schools, this was so. Students however felt differently and questioned the value of their placement in this disrupted environment. Schools saw the benefit of having students in the classroom during this time to lend an extra helping hand. For students, their identity as a learner became threatened. Possibly, the biggest learning of all is the oversight of supported decision-making that included students at the very forefront. In among all the good will shown by the university and the schools, the student became overlooked. The policy environment positions the student as peripheral and, in this study, has driven partnership decisions. This study therefore challenges schools and universities to consider how they can broaden their own partner actions to be truly inclusive of students and consider them as central. But it begs the question, how does this become an authentic reality within the current regulatory and policy environment?

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# Chapter 7
# "We're in It for the Long Haul": Connection, Generation and Transformation Through a School-University Partnership

**Anitra Goriss-Hunter, Jenene Burke, and Peter Sellings**

**Abstract** This paper investigates a transformational school-university partnership project designed to provide authentic learning experiences for pre-service teachers (PSTs); broaden aspirations for regional students in disadvantaged areas; and, work within government policies. Initiated in 2012, the *Activity Day* project involved two regional secondary colleges and their Years 8 and 9 students who took part in a learning event organised and implemented by second year PSTs as part of their teacher education program. The project has endured ten years of delivery and changes of personnel, having been developed from the learnings of a similar project. A qualitative mixed methods approach was used to evaluate and report on this project. Collaborative self-study combined with semi-structured interviews and feedback from PSTs, teachers and students were used to examine the benefits and challenges of the project. The findings indicate that all parties felt the project was beneficial to them and that there was also scope for future expansion and enhancement. A model known as the *RESET* model is presented in this chapter. This model draws on our years of school and university partnership activities to highlight important factors that we believe are vital to the success of any school and university partnership.

## 7.1 Introduction

In the current education landscape, there is little room for doubt that there is an expectation that schools and universities will engage in partnerships to meet a range of political, social, cultural and even educational requirements and expectations (Green et al., 2020). School-university partnerships in Australia are now mandated in Initial

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_7

Teacher Education (ITE) programs for accreditation purposes (Craven et al., 2014). While there is some agreement on the benefits of school-university partnerships, the questions remain—for whom are they advantageous and what constitutes an effective model that transcends conventional transactional partnerships? In this chapter, the authors trace the contours of several previous school-university partnerships, and map the lessons learned to create an innovative framework, the *RESET* model which is focused on reciprocity, is evidence-based, employs teamwork, is sustainable, makes use of data to evaluate success and is maintained through trusting relationships based on focused communication.

The authors of this paper have extensive experience as educators, both as teachers in schools and as teacher-educators in universities. All authors have worked collaboratively in school-university partnerships. Drawing on this collective experience and understanding of the formal literature in this area, the authors designed the *RESET* model of transformational partnerships to identify, describe and present the key components of a partnership that moves beyond transactional to encompass a transformational and sustainable collaboration.

The literature review section reveals that successful school-university partnerships are conduits for the connection of theory and practice and go beyond limited, unsustainable and short-term transactional connections to form transformational partnerships that are mutually beneficial, relationally based and long-lasting. In this section, the paper's analytical framework of practice architecture (Kemmis, 2012) is outlined.

## 7.2 Literature Review

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers are reliant on establishing healthy and sustainable relationships with schools to support pre-service teacher (PST) practice in professional settings. The importance of partnerships between universities and schools in teacher education is evident as there is a need to link the many theories of education to the practice of teaching (Conroy et al., 2013).

## 7.3 Theory–practice Nexus

Entering into learning partnerships with schools makes sense because schools provide a rich environment with plentiful opportunities to support learning and engagement by PSTs in "authentic environments where real work corresponds with real life" (Burke & Wheatland, 2011, p. 1), and in which PSTs can make connections between the theoretical elements of a teaching degree with the practice of teaching. Professional experience practicums often follow a work-integrated learning "singleton model" where a PST "works in a classroom under the close supervision of an experienced teacher" (Burke & Wheatland, 2011, p. 2). There are, however, barriers to teacher-educators utilising these opportunities that need to be overcome before any

partnership can take place. These barriers include logistical constraints, participants’ skill levels, the goals, needs and/or values held by each partner institution and the complexity of theory–practice connections. To interrogate these different aspects of school-university partnerships, the theoretical lens of *practice architecture* (Kemmis et al., 2014) is mobilised.

## 7.4 Practice Architecture

The theory framework of practice architecture examines the temporal-spatial components of any project or program; for example, what actions the participants are performing within specific contexts (Manton, 2021). Kemmis (2012) posits that practice architecture is formed from three interconnected elements (cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political). The cultural-discursive dimension of practice architecture refers to the culture of the institutions and the kind of language or discourse used to explain the practice. For example, educators employing inclusive approaches might discuss their practice in terms of “student-centredness”, “universal design for learning” and “responsive teaching” that “enables access for all students”. The material-economic aspect of practice focuses on “what can be done amid the physical set-ups of various kinds of rooms and indoor and outdoor spaces” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 32). For instance, a classroom that is set up with tables and chairs grouped together with whiteboards on several sides of the room offers the opportunity for the teacher to act as a facilitator for work at small group, whole class and individual levels. The social-political factor is present in the social dimensions of practice which act as the conduit for expressions of power relations between participants. This arrangement is demonstrated in the institution’s rules, guidelines and functions as well as in participants’ shared understandings of accepted practice (Kemmis et al., 2014). An example of this factor could occur when practitioners in a particular educational setting have a common understanding that student-centred practices are the most effective approaches to enable students to learn. Confirmation of the effectiveness of this approach might be forthcoming from school, state and national education curriculum and policy documents that promote a significant focus on student-centred learning. The three factors that comprise the practice architecture framework connect so that rich narratives of practice can be formed and examined.

Practice architecture is employed in this chapter to investigate and draw insights into the school-university partnership and associated activities. This is accomplished by drawing on the analytical framework of practice architecture to explore partnership contexts, conditions and activities by investigating the ways in which participants talk about the project (sayings); levels of engagement with the project (doings); and how relationships are constituted and conducted (relatings) (Kemmis et al., 2014; Manton et al., 2021).

## 7.5 Transformational and Transactional Partnerships

There is a long history of School and University partnerships being formed for a variety of purposes including bridging the theory and practice nexus as identified earlier in the literature review. Walsh and Backe (2013) suggest that such partnerships are often formed at the university's request by individuals who require a specific project that meets a need for their own organisation. When partnerships are set up in this way, they usually just focus on the project and do not lead to broader discussion of needs in either organisation (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Such partnerships that focus on the needs of only one partner are usually referred to as transactional partnerships (Butcher, et al., 2011; Teitel, 2008). Transactional partnerships allow partners to work together to achieve a goal that has been determined by one of the organisations, but rarely does the locus of power in the relationship change (Teitel, 2008).

### *7.5.1 Transactional Partnerships*

Transactional partnerships between schools and universities rarely develop over time, rather they continue to work on small projects but often only while the same personnel are involved (Teitel, 2008). It has been suggested by Butcher et al. (2011), that school and university partnerships need to foster collaboration to provide benefits for both groups involved. Walkington (2007) highlights that relational aspects are needed to develop partnerships that can be sustained and suggests that a key ingredient in this is open and honest communication. Walkington (2007) also suggests that a partnership must be beneficial to all parties and that the benefits must also be evident to all. Kayser (2011) highlights that, in successful partnerships, there needs to be more than just the communication suggested by Walkington (2007). Kayser (2011) espouses that the three key relational elements of authentic communication, commitment and character are needed for partnerships to develop into a truly collaborative partnership. Kayser (2011) also states that the three behavioural elements of accountability, interdependence and identifying shared goals are critical to the success of any partnership. These behavioural elements need to work in tandem with the relational elements to allow the partnership to flourish and have tangible benefits for both parties involved based on the shared goals that have been developed.

### *7.5.2 Transformational Partnerships*

Transformational partnerships are described by Butcher et al. (2011) and Teitel (2008) as partnerships that go beyond collaboration and where the success or otherwise of the partnership is a collective responsibility. Butcher et al. (2011) recognises that truly transformational partnerships require all parties to acknowledge and value the

strengths of each partner and be open to change. Both Teitel (2008) and Butcher et al. (2011) agree that transformational partnerships must be highly communicative, highlighting the importance of Kayser’s (2011) key relational elements. Lemon et al. (2018) take these notions even further by acknowledging the complexity of school-university partnerships using a “Meshworks” analogy to reinforce the intricacy of the intersections between school and university communities. Lemon et al. (2018) also highlight the importance of investment in the partnership by all stakeholders as well as a commitment by members of the partnership to develop policies that support the work of the partnership. Clarke and Winslade (2019) stress the importance of investing in partnerships between schools and universities and suggest that reciprocity in such partnerships, where the stakeholders identify the mutual benefits, is key to success. This notion of reciprocity fits well with the transformational models of partnership espoused by Butcher et al. (2011) and Teitel (2008) as it works together with the notion of collective responsibility.

## 7.6 The Partnerships – Backgrounds and Context

### *7.6.1 University Partner*

The Ballarat Campus of Federation University Australia is located in regional Victoria and has been educating students from regional and remote areas for many years. The university in general, and the School of Education in particular, are constantly investigating new ways to develop the classroom readiness of graduates with school partnerships developed to meet the following goals:

- To ensure PSTs are able to articulate how theory informs their practice as they develop understandings of contemporary school experiences and prepare for a career as a teacher.
- To assist PSTs in the development of their teaching approaches and understandings of their students and school systems so that they are classroom ready upon graduation.
- To identify and respond to schools’ areas of need in the development of professional learning opportunities.

It is notable that although schools and initial teacher education institutions share a common goal in facilitating learning and teaching, their broad goals differ considerably.

### 7.6.2 School Contexts

The school-university partnerships in which the authors participated occurred in various places, phases and contexts. Initially, partnership events were located at the particular school, before taking place at university campuses and, during periods of lockdown and remote learning, these activities were adapted to an online environment. From data gathered about these activities, the authors have developed a model that incorporates the successful features of the partnerships; evaluation measures; and, ways of working with challenges to ensure sustainability.

Pseudonyms have been used in this chapter for all the schools mentioned: Upper Central College, Lower Central College, Discovery College and Explorer College. All schools are located in disadvantaged regions in the Australian state of Victoria. Discovery College and Explorer College are situated in locations where generally low student expectations, few positive role models and limited financial capacity mean that few students consider completing a university degree. Both Discovery College and Explorer College have a high proportion of students in the lower two quarters of the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA).

### 7.6.3 Mutually Achievable Goals

In the later partnership with Explorer College, we were able to identify how the goals of both organisations overlapped in a number of areas or were mutually achievable. In these intersections of shared goals regarding the promotion of teaching as a profession, the development of effective pedagogies, and the design of engaging learning opportunities for student cohorts, a learning community developed. The activities initially developed by the partnership were shaped to cater for goals in both organisations. From the viewpoint of the academic staff, the school-university partnership originated from a desire to engage PSTs, as well as students and teachers from a regional secondary school, in meaningful, relevant and purposeful learning activities relevant to their own contexts.

As a result of this emphasis on reflection and analysis, within the research project, a range of learning and teaching processes were consistently foregrounded while they were examined from the different standpoints of the researchers. Thus, the shared goals and values of the professional learning community were foregrounded in the planning and implementation of any activities.

## 7.7 In the Beginning …

One of the authors of this chapter (Burke) first became involved in school-university partnerships when teaching the unit, *Young people and their worlds*, and looking for a

way to connect theory with practice, so that Graduate Diploma of Education students could learn about young people by working closely with them. Burke developed the "Youth Festival" (Burke & Wheatland, 2011) activity which was conducted in two secondary schools over four years—first Upper Central College and then Lower Central College. Over the duration of the unit of study, the PSTs were required to organise as a culminating activity, a mini-conference for senior secondary (Year 10) students. The PSTs in small groups designed a 50-min workshop to engage the young people in active learning about an issue that affected them (Burke & Wheatland, 2011). The youth issue was drawn from the PSTs' facilitation of a youth focus group at the school that informed their planning. Despite some success, there were several design flaws which led to modifications in the youth project over the four years. The original concept was called the "Youth Conference". The student feedback indicated that the name of the event did not signify to them what the event was about and it ended up being more enjoyable than the name implied. It was subsequently renamed the *Youth Festival* on the advice of the students to encourage interest and generate anticipation. Consequently, the Youth Festival had a much higher attendance rate than the Youth Conference. Also, at first, the students were allowed to choose which six workshops they attended at the event, however they tended to go to the sessions their friends had chosen, rather than sessions that might be of personal interest, the upshot being that some of the workshops were poorly attended, and others were extensively over-subscribed. Some of the PSTs experienced frustration that they had spent the semester planning only to have a few students attend their workshop. Each workshop was offered once, so for some PSTs, immense effort went into planning for little practical teaching reward. Communication between the university and the school was hampered by the line of communication being restricted to the lecturer and the year-level coordinator. The activities received criticism from the school teachers who stated that they did not relate closely enough to the school curriculum, but instead offered a "fun" day for the students, hence the value of the event (and the partnership) was questioned. From our experiences with these partnerships, we learned that ideally session attendance should be as even as possible; open communication was essential; and, all activities needed to be connected to current curriculum to prevent students and teachers as perceiving the experiences as purely entertaining and fun events.

After four years of offering this activity, Burke stopped teaching the course, and the Youth Festival did not endure. The reliance on particular personnel to drive the partnership suggests that it was unsustainable, or in Teitel's (2008) terms, that it involved a transactional partnership.

## 7.8 Partnerships with Discovery College and Explorer College

Burke started teaching in the Bachelor of Education and enlisted the collegial support of Goriss-Hunter (Burke & Goriss-Hunter, 2013) to apply a new concept to the design

of a partnership activity based on what had been learnt from the Youth Festival. Hence, the partnership based around an *Activity Day* concept emerged and was conducted first at Discovery College, and later at Explorer College. Consultation with the school was important to recognise how PST activity in a partnership might add value to the school curriculum (Burke & Wheatland, 2011; Harris et al., 2010) to establish a transformational rather than a transactional connection. While the school and the university might have different goals for the partnership, some overlap was anticipated.

## 7.9 Reciprocal Aims and Goals

These goals and the context for the organisations will now be documented to explain how and why the organisations formed school-university partnerships.

The main goals in setting up the school/university partnership were:

- For teachers to have opportunities for professional learning, setting goals and measuring progress.
- To inculcate a culture where aspiration to university studies was possible for students.
- To encourage best practice for teachers and to contribute to the education of undergraduate teachers.

The schools believed that a significant partnership with a university could assist the school community make considerable progress towards meeting these goals.

### *7.9.1 Professional Learning Communities*

Given the contexts and goals of each organisation, both shared and separate, it is useful to consider the partnership as taking place within a professional learning community. Stoll defines a "professional learning community" as:

> [A]an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve pupils' learning. (Stoll, 2011, p. 3)

There are six interwoven features that can be recognised in a professional learning community. Stoll (2011) identifies these six characteristics as Shared values and vision, Collective responsibility, Reflective professional enquiry, Collaboration, Group and individual learning and Trusting relationships. Effective professional learning communities are characterised by what Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe as "relational trust". This includes respect, belief in colleagues' competence, personal regard for others—caring about each other—and knowing that people will do what they say.

## 7.10 Methodology

The project used a multi-method approach to answer the research questions: What are the benefits and challenges of a school-university partnership? How can we move beyond a transactional partnership to one that is transformational? In response, reflective feedback from school staff, academics, PSTs and school students involved in partnership activities was collected each year after every Activity Day at Discovery College, and later at Explorer College and was considered to be an integral component of the partnership activities. In addition, semi-structured interviews of school teachers from Explorer College were collected. School staff who had experience with different partnership activities were invited to participate in a 45-minute interview, where they could comment about each different type of partnership activity with a view to further shaping the partnership in the future.

The research conducted at Explorer College was approved by the university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Approval for project B18-101) and the Explorer College board. Consent to participate in the project was signified by teachers signing a consent form and returning it to the researchers. Participants were informed that they were able to withdraw from the interview process at any time.

## 7.11 Interviews with Teachers

Eleven Explorer College teaching staff, as research participants, were recruited by school administration staff who had emailed a general request seeking participants in the project. The teachers’ qualifications were divided between four-year undergraduate degrees and two-year postgraduate (master) degrees in teaching. Participants’ specialist teaching areas encompassed a range of subjects including Mathematics, English Literature and Language, Humanities, Science, Physical Education, Drama and Woodwork. As this group of teachers taught in a wide range of subject areas, the data gathered included a broad spectrum of teaching approaches and attitudes to learning.

Semi-structured interviews were used to enable researchers to gather information, by working with participants, framing follow-up questions and prompting each interviewee to share their feelings and thoughts as well as any underlying ideas or issues. The use of this method, combined with the researchers’ knowledge of the school’s context and staff backgrounds, meant that the interviews transformed formal question and answer situations to “conversational encounters to a purpose” (Powney & Watts, 1987, p. vii). Upon completion of the interviews, the researchers listened to the transcript recordings together which assisted with the identification of themes and the analysis of data. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of the research participants and schools.

The second aspect of the research method was the critical examination of reflective feedback from schoolteachers and students, academics and PSTs involved in the

partnerships. Emails, written and verbal feedback and conversations were analysed by members of the research team after each Activity Day and formed a means of critical reflection regarding what has been learned from a particular situation (Cantillon & Sargeant, 2008; Schon, 1984). The analysis of reflective feedback promotes the process of critical reflection that can focus on the ideas and beliefs of the self and others and, therefore, fosters the capacity to develop new approaches and improve existing ones based on an evidence-based procedure (Cantillon & Sargeant, 2008), specifically about how school-university partnerships might work.

The partnership teams comprised academics and school staff. In all the partnership iterations, the team regularly emailed and met at the schools and the university. In the current iteration with Explorer College, the team met formally on university premises and as the partnership developed, informally, in locations away from the university and school. Planning for partnership activities occurred through email exchanges and meetings through which the following were organised: site visits, focus groups conducted by PSTs with school students, PST volunteering, learning walks, professional experience, teacher professional development days and other opportunities.

The qualitative multi-method approach of semi-structured interviews and the analysis of reflective feedback allowed the project team to focus on self-reflection as well as examining the strengths and challenges entailed in maintaining the partnership to investigate whether the benefits were mutual to all stakeholders and how the collaboration might be enhanced.

## 7.12 Long Haul Partnerships Model

Through our work with school and university partnerships, we have developed a model that captures the important principles for a partnership to thrive. This model is known as the *RESET* model and is shown in Fig. 7.1. The model encapsulates a transformational partnership in contrast to the transactional partnerships previously experienced and is based on PST, teacher, student and academic learning.

Our RESET model of transformational partnerships shown in Fig. 7.1 highlights that relationships with a focus on trust, communication and respect, are central to any partnership model. This builds on the work of Keyser (2011) who highlighted the importance of relational elements in the development of strong collaborative partnerships and Edwards (2017). It is also consistent with the work of authors such as Butcher et al. (2011) who highlight the importance of collaboration; Walkington (2007) who stresses the importance of communication; and Lemon et al. (2018) who discuss the need for commitment from all members of any school and university partnerships. The findings reported by Butcher et al. (2011), Keyser (2011), Lemon et al. (2018) and Walkington (2007) resonate with our own experiences of school-university partnerships and entrenches the need of such partnerships to be built on strong relationships between key stakeholders.

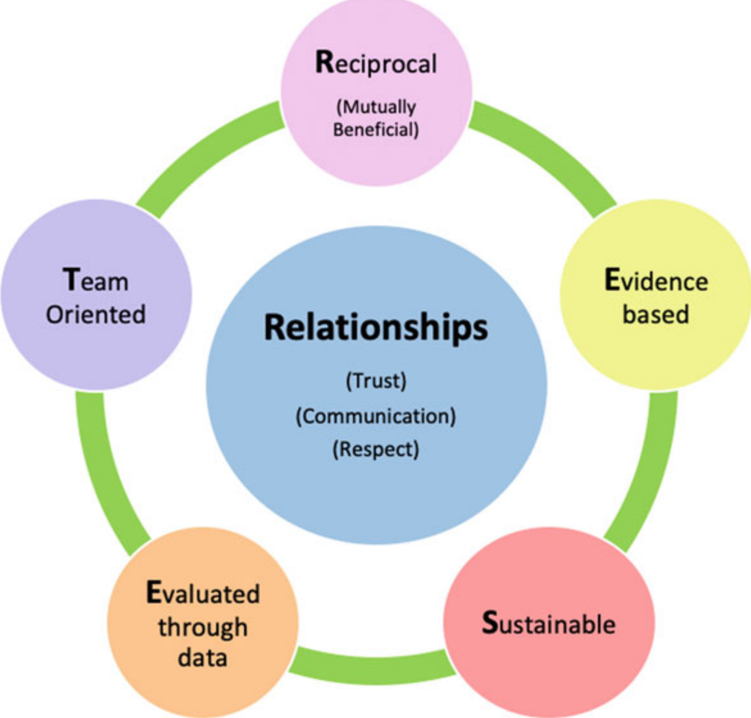


**Fig. 7.1** The *RESET* model of transformational partnerships

Our reflections on our experiences of school and university partnerships suggest to us that along with relationships, there are five other key principles that are vital to the long-term success of such partnerships. Our RESET model suggests that once relationships are established, reciprocal aims and goals relating to both organisations are the next principle developed by the partnership and these aims and goals must be developed in a way that they are of mutual benefit to all members of the partnership, to ensure that all members of the partnership can see this reciprocity. This could mean that the benefits differ for various stakeholders, but as long as all stakeholders can gain worthwhile value, reciprocal understandings and mutual benefits are achieved. This reciprocity of goals is a principle that has previously been espoused by many including Clarke and Winslade (2019) who state that all stakeholders in a partnership must be able to see the benefit and Teitel (2008) who suggests that partnerships must have collective responsibility for partnership activities. We argue that it is important that any focused mutual goals are developed by collaborative *team-oriented* work through *evidence-based* methods and later *evaluated through data* to ensure that the partnership is *sustainable* in the long term. The focus on evaluation through data generated by the partnership is important as it gives all stakeholders the opportunity

to highlight the strengths of partnership activities as well as any future challenges that they might foresee.

Truly transformational partnerships must be developed in a way that makes them *sustainable* so that if any member of the partnership leaves, the partnership continues to flourish in a way that allows mutual goals to continue to be met. All these principles are underpinned by the need for a high level of *trust, communication and respect* within the relationship. Keyser (2011) highlighted the need for “character” within partnerships and this is a notion that is encompassed by trust, which we argue can only be achieved through a partnership that is strongly relational.

## 7.13 Activities Developed by the Partnership

In response to the stated goals of each party in the partnership, several activities were initiated. These included classroom walkthroughs, activity days, professional learning and support programs (Goriss-Hunter et al., 2021).

*Classroom Walkthroughs.* First year PSTs visit the schools and participate in active observations of classes and, afterwards, discussion with teachers, school leadership and their university lecturers. This also includes briefings by members of school leadership who touch on such things as employment expectations and professional behaviours.

*Professional Placement.* PSTs are placed at the schools for their scheduled teaching placement. This activity is seen as beneficial for both teachers and PSTs. The latter have the opportunity of learning from experienced teachers and the former can share their expertise.

*University Activity Days.* Years 8 and 9 from the secondary school visit Federation University. This visit serves two main purposes. School students become familiar with a university campus as they undertake a range of learning activities conducted by the PSTs. The PSTs, in small groups, team teach a lesson three times to three different groups of students, with teachers and academics present. This activity day project is designed as a means of scaffolding PSTs in their development as professionals by developing, delivering and modifying an authentic teaching experience (Burke & Goriss-Hunter, 2013).

*Professional Learning.* Professional development sessions for teaching staff at Explorer College were held in the areas of mathematical thinking and developing activities for a whole school well-being program. These professional learning activities have also provided information to staff about postgraduate study and other opportunities that the University can offer. Staff feedback indicated that these professional development opportunities enriched their practice and provided additional student resources.

All activities were designed to meet the needs of both schools and university with each activity having benefits for all partners. Academics and teachers invested their time and expertise in the partnership.

## 7.14 Discussion

To interrogate the data, the authors drew upon a practice architecture framework comprised of cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political dimensions. From this investigation and identification of key issues, the authors formulated the *RESET* model that offers a realistic framework for the development of relational, reciprocal and sustainable school-university partnerships. Examples of the ways in which the *RESET* model works have been used in this section in conjunction with the analysis of data using the practice architecture framework to demonstrate the viability of the model. The main themes identified by analysis of the data could be divided into two main areas: benefits and challenges for the school, and advantages and concerns for the university. Benefits for the schools were perceived to be promoting student completion of secondary schooling, encouraging student aspirations for tertiary study and careers, fresh teaching approaches for current teachers, and the opportunity to interact with PSTs with the possibility of future employment. University benefits were perceived to be that PSTs were given opportunities to practice their craft and receive feedback in authentic circumstances, developing public awareness of the university, and contributing to currency of practice in schools for education academics and PSTs. Challenges for all organisations were chiefly logistical and cultural such as achieving buy-in from teachers, PSTs and students.

## 7.15 Practice Architecture

### *7.15.1 Cultural-Discursive Domain*

In the *Cultural-discursive* domain, benefits, and challenges stemmed from discourses of disruption focusing on the interruption of fixed and limited discursive constructions of regional and rural secondary students that failed to include the possibility of tertiary education. Although regional and rural secondary students are not necessarily from poorly resourced and disadvantaged backgrounds, these cohorts of learners are usually well-represented in equity groups categorised according to background, First in Family (FiF) identification and social class (King et al., 2015). It is important to note here that regional and rural FiF student cohorts are not monolithic groups as they can be stratified by gender, financial standing, race, ethnicity (O'Shea, 2015) and disability. University attrition rates for students who could be classified as rural and regional and FiF are higher than those for students outside these categories (Devlin & McKay, 2017).

Research demonstrates that there are several factors that underlie these high attrition rates for the previously mentioned student cohorts (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; O'Shea, 2015). These reasons include:

- Institutional challenges: the ability to negotiate university processes, policies and expectations/cultures.
- Different expectations between student constructions of study at university and the reality. (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; O'Shea, 2015).

To address these points, the researchers formed connections with regional high schools to discuss their needs. These specific connections were tailored to each school to ensure the recognition of a place-based context for school and students which is vital for the success of any education program (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Fray et al., 2020). In doing so, the authors were also mindful of rejecting metrocentric policies that tend to homogenise regional and rural schools and students, locating them always in agricultural contexts rather than acknowledging the diversity of regional and rural environments (Pini et al., 2010; Sutton et al., 2017).

Anecdotal evidence from Discovery, Explorer, Upper Central and Lower Central Colleges indicates that some students were not aware of a university being in close proximity to their school. Students were also not clear about what a tertiary institution might look or be like, what study at this kind of institution entailed, and why certain school subjects were pre-requisites for particular university programs. The students tended to rely on outdated dominant discourse regarding universities being huge factory-like architectural structures peopled with middle-aged, balding males wearing suits and spectacles who delivered sermon-like "lessons". The contrast between the students' conception of learning at university and the contemporary reality of a range of PSTs and academics with multiple and varying identity factors demonstrated a rupture between dominant discourse and discourses of diversity. It also underlined the need for a relational base to the partnerships as outlined in the *RESET* model, that required reciprocity in the open and honest sharing of thoughts and feelings about tertiary institutions so that programs could be tailored for specific groups and the partnerships could continue to evolve. In addition, trust (*RESET*) was a vital component of the partnership. For example, it was important that the schools, teachers and students trusted the university and were able to reject conventional middle-class discourses to position school students in particular ways and broaden their "aspirations". Instead of accepting these limiting traditional discourses, the PSTs hoped to open up further possibilities and pathways for students into tertiary study. Trust was also required from the PSTs concerning the processes of the partnership and the openness of students and teachers to moving beyond dominant discourse and embracing discourses of disruption.

Working in conjunction with the trust element and relational foundations of the partnerships, ongoing evaluations and feedback provided data that enabled the researchers to develop evidence-based approaches that eventually resulted in the construction of the *RESET* model. Findings from the data analysis show that teachers, students, academics and PSTs perceived the partnership activities to be beneficial. One teacher commented that "some of our students hadn't thought about going to university when they finish school. After the Activity Day, there were a few who thought they would like to go to university to study". Another teacher stated that "the students were still buzzing after the Activity Day, they had so much fun". It seems

that the benefit to school students was perceived by teachers in terms of exposure to a contemporary regional tertiary institution where a discourse of diversity replaced dominant deficit discourses concerning regional students and where, as one academic stated, "the students could see themselves in a few years' time if they decide to go to uni". In a similar vein, PSTs were able to move beyond deficit discourses concerning "low aspirations" of regional school students, to connect with young people who often had similar backgrounds to themselves.

### 7.15.2 Material-Economic Domain

In this domain, the two chief issues—professional learning for staff and employment—were pragmatic in nature and of considerable importance to schools and the university. First, in a cross-over with the cultural-discursive domain, academics offered professional learning opportunities for staff which assisted in the fulfilment of shared objectives between organisations. Initially, academics offering professional learning opportunities were treated with suspicion as these sessions were without financial cost. Academics delivering the sessions considered them to be a part of the reciprocal and mutually beneficial nature of a partnership focusing on shared goals. After some sessions were run with university staff, teachers reported that they found these workshops to be beneficial as they provided new ideas and strategies for promoting thinking and engaging students in learning.

Second, employment was an important element to be considered in the material-economic domain. School leaders were open about the twofold flow of advantage (Reciprocal element of *RESET*) for schools and universities in these partnerships. One leader commented that they felt it was important for them to share their experience with PSTs to "help them into the profession". However, members of leadership teams also stated that they were closely observing PSTs to see how they taught and what their teaching approaches were in order to give feedback but also to evaluate their performance as PSTs in case there was the possibility of employing the person. One leading teacher commented that they were "looking to PSTs and how they conduct themselves to see if they might be a good fit for our school". Employment rates at partnership schools are indicators of impact for the university and were part of the evidence-based element of the *RESET* model. Both employment and professional learning opportunities contributed to the development of relationships which are foundational to the sustainability of partnerships that the *RESET* model represents.

### 7.15.3 Social-Political Domain

Identified by academics and teachers as both a benefit and a challenge to the partnerships, the relational aspects of the partnerships were foundational to the success

and sustainability of the collaborations. While the formation of school-university partnerships had political and social origins in policy and institutional expectations respectively, the relational foundation and reciprocity of the connections evolved to the point of forging genuine relationships. While PSTs and academics perceived the partnership opportunities as different avenues for practising teaching skills and testing curriculum design, they also acknowledged the benefits of interacting with colleagues and potential employers. Teachers from partnership schools indicated that they enjoyed participating in Activity Days as "our students benefit from seeing what a university is like". However, teachers felt that they benefitted from hosting the Learning Walks, especially from discussions with PSTs, with one commenting: "We can always do with some fresh ideas". In addition, inviting teachers to participate in the Learning Walks broadened the base of those involved in the partnership and developed a wider understanding of how the reciprocity and relational foundation of the connection worked. These factors were fundamental to the sustainability of the partnerships and the development of the *RESET* model.

The challenges in this social-political domain included the inevitable tensions that arise in professional relationships. To move forward, the researchers found that open and honest communication with a focus on the reciprocal and democratic nature of the partnership was fundamentally important. We found that we were able to formulate a realistic framework for moving forward which eventuated in the *RESET* model.

## 7.16 Conclusion

Initially established in response to Australian government and policy recommendations as well as expectations within education systems, the school-university partnerships reported in this chapter evolved into connections that went beyond conventional mainstream partnership opportunities. From experiences with both traditional and somewhat limited partnerships that are perceived to be "one-way streets" and with partnerships that are collaborative, reciprocal and relationally based, the authors have developed the *RESET* model. A practice architecture framework was used to examine the data and evidence gathered concerning the school-university partnerships, and to demonstrate how the model was derived from our experiences.

From the analytical use of this framework, the authors found that while aspects of the social-political domain, like employment and professional learning opportunities were important, ultimately factors from the social-political and cultural-discursive domains showed how *RESET* is different to many other models and how relevant it is to current education systems. Investigations of the cultural-discursive domain reveal that the disruption of deficit discourses concerning students' "low aspirations" and the broadening of the base of participation in partnership activities in the social-political domain within a relational base, work to ensure the sustainability of the partnerships. As school-university partnerships can be dependent on funding or particular staff driving the project, it is imperative that these connections are able

to be sustained over time to ensure consistency in learning opportunities. From our experiences with school-university partnerships, the authors argue that the *RESET* model with its components of reciprocity, evidence-based practice, sustainability, evaluation through data and trust, offers a way forward to meet formal government and policy requirements as well as establishs a genuine, relational, ongoing and democratic connection.

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# Chapter 8
# Value of Mentor Professional Learning Through a Digital Micro-Credential in a School-University Partnership

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**Abstract** Effective school-university partnerships not only play an important role in improving the quality of initial teacher education but have the capacity to positively impact practice more broadly in schools. This chapter explores an innovative approach to school-university partnerships through the development of a digital micro-credential professional learning program for mentor teachers aimed specifically at building mentors' understanding of evidence-based assessment to support differentiated teaching practice. Through a narrative inquiry approach and the reflections from participating mentors and partnership leaders, the data analysed suggest that there are positive impacts across the partnership's actors and ecosystem. The micro-credential provides upskilling of mentors that then improves the level of support to pre-service teachers when using data to differentiate their teaching, a key aim for the program. Yet, there are broader impacts of the program across the partnership, including changing teaching practices within the participating schools

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_8

and implications for the university's academics and their work with teachers and pre-service teachers.

## 8.1 Introduction

Central to this chapter's narrative is a well-established school-university partnership of more than eight years, entering its third phase of collaboration in 2020. This school-university partnership consists of a cluster of seven secondary schools and three primary schools in Melbourne that collaborate with the University of Melbourne, Australia. The partnership is known as the Melbourne Teaching Academies of Professional Practice (Melbourne TAPP) and its strategic direction is led by the Committee of Management (CoM) that comprises representatives of the principal class from the participating schools and academics from the University.

At the end of 2019, and in preparation for the strategic focus for the third phase (a three-year cycle), the partnership's CoM decided to share and build on the expertise of a key evidence-based model to plan for differentiated teaching and learning in the classroom that underpins the University's initial teacher education postgraduate programs. The ambition was to provide mentor teachers in the schools with the opportunity to engage in formal professional education to build on their knowledge and skills about the evidence-based model to better assist pre-service teachers to apply the model into their practice while on their professional experience placements in schools. Additionally, the partnership's school principals felt that the mentor teachers would benefit from upskilling their knowledge and skills and be able to transfer their professional learning into their respective school teams. A further element of the innovation was that it would pilot the formalised Continuing Professional Education program as a newly developed Melbourne MicroCert, a digital micro-credential. The digital micro-credential is the University's newest foray into curriculum product development to support alternative ways for professionals to engage with lifelong learning. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the program development and delivery as well as the original plans for research.

Through a narrative case study approach (Clandinin, 2013), this chapter will examine how Continuing Professional Education may be facilitated through a school-university partnership and to determine the value and impacts that are revealed as these practices emerge from the partnership.

## 8.2 Literature Review

### *8.2.1 Defining School-University Partnerships*

The term *school-university partnership* is perhaps overused and can have multiple meanings. All seem to be underpinned by some form of collaboration but often the purpose where the relationship is directed, can alter the meaning. For some, school-university partnership is engagement between university and schools to address some deficit in the school communities to improve, for example, health indicators such as tackling obesity, mental health or smoking or discipline-based learning like science (e.g., Clark et al., 2015; Rahman et al., 2018, p. 99; Shields et al., 2013; Tavakol & Emmons, 2019). For others, school-university partnership is about researchers working with school communities to generate new knowledge (e.g., Baumfield & Butterworth, 2007; Hooper & Britnell, 2012). Alternatively, school-university partnerships are envisioned to improve the professional learning of pre-service teachers during their initial teacher education programs or in-service teachers to upskill their professional knowledge and practice (e.g., Arnold et al., 2012; Grudnoff et al., 2017; Gutierrez & Nailer, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2019).

This notion is illustrated by Green and her colleagues (Green et al., 2020) where they identify, not unlike other Western nations, the current federal government policy environment in Australia is to encourage school-university partnerships to enhance the growth and development of pre-service teachers. Through their literature review of how school-university partnerships are manifested in the Australian context, Green and her colleagues (2020) discuss the idea of collaborative school-university partnerships as *third spaces* where they have been influenced by the work of Soja where he describes "the first space as the 'real', the second space could be 'ideal' and the third space as the 'lived space'" (cited in Green et al., 2020, p. 404). In generating their selection criteria for their literature review, Green and her colleagues are influenced by Zeichner (2010) and his call for reforming how universities should work with schools as they present their definition of school-university partnerships that are focused on pre-service teacher education:

> Within this review, third space school-university partnerships have been viewed as conscious collaborations between schools and universities involving "an equal and more dialectical relationship between academic and practitioner knowledge in support of [pre-service teacher] learning". (Zeichner, 2010, p. 92 cited in Green et al., 2020, p. 406)

In their systematic literature review, Green and her colleagues classified studies into one of three types of partnerships that supported the professional learning of pre-service teachers: i) mediated instruction; ii) extended placements in selected school settings; iii) other types of partnerships. Most of the 40 partnerships examined as part of their literature review fell into the first two categories. They concluded that while benefits from these partnerships assisted to "meaningfully connect theory and practice for pre-service teachers by utilising and connecting the expertise of inservice

teachers and teacher educators", there is ongoing need for future research to better understand the benefits, challenges and how to sustain positive impacts of these partnerships (Green et al., 2020, p. 423).

However, there is yet another purpose for school-university partnerships that focuses on the professional growth and learning of the in-service teachers, or mentors of pre-service teachers. Australia's initial teacher education accreditation standards (AITSL, 2015) make explicit that initial teacher education providers are to also support, identify and provide professional learning opportunities for supervising teachers in the school-university partnerships that are established for pre-service teachers' professional experience placements (Standard 5.5). Betlem and her colleagues (Betlem et al., 2019) provide a case study using a participatory action research model for developing a mentor professional learning program that focuses on transformational learning that shifts their role from managing pre-service teachers to one of nurturing professional relationships of growth and collaboration to develop pre-service teachers' reflective practice. This, they argue, provides for a contextualised, deeper professional learning program for mentors that enhances "opportunities for professional sharing and dialogue, improved communication and interpersonal skills, enhanced leadership skills and a sense of professional contribution to the growth and development of others" (Betlem et al., 2019, p. 344).

This raises how a school-university partnership may be described as something greater than a focus on its purpose. To capture the complexity, the definition proffered by Day and his colleagues is perhaps more useful:

> We define a school-university partnership, therefore, *as an enterprise that is jointly created, developed and sustained in the midst of complex settings to advance educational practice, knowledge and understanding*. ... A *shared purpose*, a fit-for-purpose *structure*, trusting *relationships* and *planned collaborative activities* are four indispensable components that determine the direction, sustainability and impact of the enterprise. (Day et al., 2021, p. 24; italics in original text)

### *8.2.2 What are Digital Micro-Credentials?*

Digital micro-credentials refer to the use of digital badging platforms such as Badgr (https://info.badgr.com/) or Credly (https://info.credly.com/) to issue digital badges that can transform and disrupt the way learning is acknowledged and represented. The issuing of a digital badge can draw on the technology to capture the learning and is guided by the Open Badges specification standards to ensure interoperability between issuers, learners earning the badges and digitally sharing it with others including prospective employers via, for example, social media or digital signatures and digital-based applications. Therefore, as discussed by Fanfarelli and McDaniel (2019), the digital badge has multiple components embedded within its metadata that conveys visual and text data about the learning experience through a description, icon or image of the provider, and the learning actions undertaken by the learner to earn the badge. However, the transformative potential for digital badges is when they are used in formal education, where they are often referred to as digital micro-credentials. In

part, the transformation occurs because of the metadata that is baked into the digital micro-credential, which increases the transparency of what the learner has undertaken to achieve the learning and how it is represented. This contrasts with the transcript in formal education, where the learning and assessment detail is limited (Peck et al., 2016). There is further potential for transparency of what the learner can do using the linked evidence metadata field where micro-credential issuers can embed the assessment tasks produced by the learner. This has the ability for those viewing the micro-credential to also see the standard of the learner's assessed achievement.

For a digital badge to be considered a digital micro-credential, Oliver (2019) argues that there is a critical minimum element that needs to be present, which is that the learning should be assessed. She also argues that the micro-credential may or may not have the opportunity to attract or be eligible to earn credit towards further study. Digital micro-credentials, particularly if credit-bearing, are often associated with formal education across pre- or post-compulsory schooling sectors or in college, further education and higher education sectors or Continuing Professional Education. This often leads to the consideration of stacking micro-credentials, where a series of completed micro-credentials have been designed to provide pathways or credit into further study, often accredited programs. While there is no universal definition of digital micro-credentials (Oliver, 2021), some have attempted to document their use in formal education (e.g., Fanfarelli & McDaniel, 2019; Ifenthaler et al., 2016; Peck et al., 2016). Oliver offers this working definition: "A micro-credential is a certification of assessed learning that is less than a formal qualification" (2019, p. 19). It is often the implied small volume of learning—which is also not universally determined—that brings some of the greatest critiques of micro-credentials where some are concerned that learning is reduced to smaller and smaller chunks or components that will lose knowledge or skill complexity (Peck et al., 2016), which can amplify social injustices (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021).

Another level of transparency may be reflected in the way that the micro-credential is designed and delivered. Increasingly, there is the call for micro-credentials to be collaboratively designed with key stakeholders in the learning, which requires higher education providers to engage and work with industry or professions as well as learners to co-design the micro-credentials. Furthermore, industry or profession practitioners may also play a role in co-delivery of micro-credential courses to increase the relevance and trust of courses (Perea, 2021; Wingard & Farrugia, 2020).

### *8.2.3 How Can Micro-Credentials Play a Role in Continuing Professional Education?*

The use of micro-credentials and their role in formal learning contexts such as schools or, particularly, undergraduate education is increasingly common, while the impact of micro-credentials in Continuing Professional Education is emerging. In

most cases, the role of introducing digital micro-credentials in schools and undergraduate learning is to support student engagement in, and motivation for, learning, often drawing on gamification principles that are used in digital badge design and can also be integrated with alternative assessment (Abramovich et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2015; Jovanovic & Devedzic, 2015; McDaniel, 2016; Moore & Edwards, 2016; Thomas et al., 2016; Tomic et al., 2019). In the context of Continuing Professional Education, digital micro-credentials can introduce further nuanced drivers for attempting and completing formalised lifelong learning.

Like for other learning contexts, a fundamental role digital micro-credentials can play for Continuing Professional Education learners is as extrinsic motivation through providing recognition and validation of their professional learning and achievement (Risquez et al., 2020). In addition, some are calling to use the affordances of the digital micro-credential to develop finer granularity of professional learning by better representing the achievements through reflective, action-oriented assessment that is integrated as the Continuing Professional Education program and move away from simply recognising participation via program or conference attendance (Fontichiaro & Elkordy, 2016). Others are raising the prospect of micro-credentials playing a significant role in upskilling the workforce and fostering personalised and authentic professional learning pathways that are portable and shareable with employers, regulatory or licencing authorities to show what has been achieved; are competency-based and offer flexibility to professionals who are combining work and study (Fields, 2015; Hunt et al., 2020).

## 8.3 Research Methods

Since 2014, the Victorian government's Department of Education has supported, with funding, ten to twelve school-university partnerships across the state, known as the Teaching Academies of Professional Practice (TAPPs), with the purpose of improving initial teacher education. This chapter focuses on a reflective case study that is part of a larger, longitudinal research study on the effectiveness of the Melbourne TAPP (Phase 3). The Melbourne TAPP is a school-university partnership of a cluster of seven secondary schools and three primary schools in metropolitan Melbourne that collaborate with the University of Melbourne, Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the data collection of the larger study.

Influenced by a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2013), this chapter focuses on the self-reflective accounts of the co-authors who bring their own perspective of their involvement in the mentor professional learning initiative within the existing school-university partnership. The self-reflective narrative accounts provide perspectives from: academic team who designed the mentor professional learning digital micro-credential course; mentors who participated in the professional learning program; employer/ principal class; and the schools' co-chair and university lead

of the school-university partnership. Through their lived experience of the school-university partnership, authors were asked to reflect on two overarching questions to assist them to write a 400-word narrative of their experience and insights:

- What impact has this professional learning activity had on your/your school's professional knowledge and practice?
- Did your engagement in this professional learning activity encourage you to work/think within the context of a school-university partnership? If so, how?

For the purposes of the prompts for writing the self-reflective narrative accounts, we defined partnerships broadly as formal or informal collaborations between schools and universities.

Drawing on the qualitative content analysis tradition, the literature review and inquiry informed the development of the initial coding frame with its dimensions and main categories (Schreier, 2012). The use of the coding frame during the initial reading of the self-reflective narrative accounts, trialled the coding frame and allowed for evaluating and modifying the coding frame. In reading and re-reading the self-reflective narratives, emerging themes of commonality and differences between perspectives were identified. The modified coding frame helped to make meaning of the multiple experiences of the mentor professional learning within the context of the school-university partnership. The second phase of data analysis deepened the interpretation and meaning-making of the self-reflective accounts through re-reading the accounts using a narrative analysis approach (Esin et al., 2014). This allowed for examining the socially oriented layers of meaning and positioning within and across the contexts of the self-reflective narrative accounts to determine further narrative themes and complexities arising from this school-university partnership. A final review of the interpretations and representations of the lived experiences afforded co-authors to provide feedback to the first author to finalise the coherence and veracity of the narrative analysis.

### *8.3.1 Case Study*

In this chapter, the Melbourne TAPP forms the case study, and through the narrative approach, this inquiry examines the professional learning experience of three (out of a total of ten) participating mentor teachers undertaking the University's newly created micro-credential: Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning*. The micro-credential is a fully online short course with workplace-focused assessment and specifically designed to build mentor teacher understanding of evidence-based assessment to support differentiated teaching practice. An additional focus of the project is building the capacity of mentor teachers to enhance their support to pre-service teachers during placements. The inquiry also focuses more broadly on the role and impact that Continuing Professional Education can play within a school-university partnership. Table 8.1 identifies the key members within this case study.

**Table 8.1** Case study partner members within the school-university partnership

| Name | Role | School/University partner member |
|---|---|---|
| Luke | Assistant Principal; and Chair, Melbourne Teaching Academy of Professional Practice (TAPP) Committee of Management | Secondary school |
| Daniela | Director, Initial Teacher Education; and academic; and University Lead, Melbourne Teaching Academy of Professional Practice (TAPP) Committee of Management | University |
| Melody | Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Learning and Teaching* Coordinator; and academic | University |
| Erin | French and Humanities Teacher; and mentor teacher | Secondary school |
| Eve | Prep[a] Team Facilitator and Teacher; and mentor teacher | Primary school |
| Emily | Prep[a] Teacher; and mentor teacher | Primary school |
| Josephine | Academic Program Director, Humanities and Social Sciences discipline cluster; and academic lead for digital micro-credentials | University |

[a] Prep (preparatory) refers to the first year of primary (elementary) school; can also be known as foundation/kindergarten/pre-school

### *8.3.2 Aspirations for the Continuing Professional Learning for Mentors Teachers in Phase 3*

In preparation for the third phase (2020–2022) of the school-university partnership, the Melbourne TAPP CoM deliberated the TAPP focus during November–December 2019. Discussions of options for professional learning of mentors supporting the University's pre-service teachers on placement took place. The University partner members shared the opportunity to participate in a new form of Continuing Professional Education, the digital micro-credential, with the school partner members. The characteristics of the Melbourne MicroCert were described and the benefits of potential pathways to further accredited study were discussed. The CoM decided on the micro-credential opportunity because it seemed to complement the interests of both the school and university partner members. The school leaders of the CoM saw the opportunity to further the ongoing professional learning of their mentor teachers, while the academic partner members wanted to get an understanding of how the digital micro-credential might support teachers to upskill in innovative areas of professional knowledge and practice, like evidence-based teaching and learning. Furthermore, evidence-based practice in schools is a significant component of the University's initial teacher education program. Therefore, the aim of supporting mentors in their professional learning would, it was hypothesised, facilitate a deeper understanding and engagement of their mentoring and evidence-based practices with

pre-service teacher learning during the school placement. The Melbourne TAPP CoM hoped to see a shift in support by mentors and improved instruction at the school level through the professional learning offered by the micro-credential.

In reviewing Day and his colleagues' definition, this collaborative approach to deciding on the professional learning program for mentors does indicate a focus of an enterprise *planning* with a *shared purpose* which are two (of four) key components of determining direction and sustainability of impact for school-university partnerships (Day et al., 2021, p. 24).

## 8.4 Reflective Narrative Analysis and Findings

This section analyses and discusses the reflective narratives of mentor teachers (mentors), school leader and academics involved in the school-university partnership. From this examination, four key findings emerge that reveal broad impacts of implementing the digital micro-credential for upskilling the teaching workforce across the partnership.

### *8.4.1 Personal, Professional Learning and Connecting it to Improve Practice*

From their perspective, mentors reflected on the personal, professional learning when undertaking the study within the Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning*, which contributed to their formal Continuing Professional Education. Each mentor described how the formal learning opportunity affected their professional knowledge and practice. Often, there was a sense that the digital micro-credential course affirmed or deepened their teacher knowledge and practice. For example, Erin reflects that the micro-credential course helped her to deepen her theoretical knowledge that underpins her professional practice of using data to improve individual student outcomes. Her theoretical engagement provides her with new insights in her practice:

> Partaking in the University's Melbourne MicroCert *Evidenced-Based Teaching and Learning* has allowed me to reflect upon ways to use learning data to improve individual student outcomes. While previous experiences within school settings and faculty-based teams have already allowed me to identify some ways to do this, this course has encouraged me to further deepen my theoretical understandings and practical approaches in this area. (Erin, Mentor, Secondary School)

Eve discusses how the micro-credential course provided the opportunity to "critically reflect" on assessment practices and reaffirm their significance to support each student's needs and areas for growth in their learning and development:

> [I]t specifically highlighted the importance of differentiation within a class and cohort where abilities are widespread and reaffirmed that addressing student's point of need is critical for academic achievement and growth. (Eve, Mentor, Primary School)

Similarly, Emily also asserted that her learning in the Melbourne MicroCert gave her an opportunity to reflect on her professional knowledge and practice and connect it to her team's practice within the school. For Emily, her professional learning provided the opportunity to re-engage with the school's underpinning principle of "data is the driving force behind planning, teaching and learning" and using the teaching process learned in the micro-credential "only re-affirmed" the principle's significance in supporting student learning in the classroom.

Each mentor reflected on key concepts examined within the micro-credential course, illustrating the value of the course curriculum to focus on development of specific skill and its associated knowledge that is applied within their own workplace context. Emily provides an example of how she identifies key concepts from the micro-credential course and then situates it into her school community context. It is interesting to note that Emily raises that the formal assessment integrated in the micro-credential supports her learning and provides the opportunity to place her professional learning into her classroom context:

> Following the Evidence Based Teaching and Learning Cycle [a key concept examined in the Melbourne MicroCert course], data was collected to determine what a student already knew and their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through the use of a Guttman Chart [a skill taught in the course] in this assignment I was able to locate students along a narrative writing progression and identify groups of students with similar learning needs. The Guttman Chart also identified any gaps in student knowledge. (Emily, Mentor, Primary School)

Like Emily, Erin also discusses the value of the course's assessment helping her to better understand the theoretical underpinnings of evidence-based teaching practices to see improvements in student learning outcomes. The course provided Erin the opportunity to connect the "Development Model of Learning" with "theories of Glaser, Rasch and Vygotsky", and through the micro-credential's assessment tasks, she deepened the complexity of her professional knowledge and practice:

> I found that effectively applying this knowledge to guide daily teaching and learning can be a bit more complex. By using the Evidenced-Based Teaching and Learning Cycle, I was able to redefine how I collected and recorded data at the start of a unit. Using Guttman Charts and criterion-referenced frameworks, I identified a student's Zone of Actual Development and their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and then tailored my teaching program to suit. For instance, I was more informed about specific skills to target teach; and engaged in more meaningful conferencing with students. (Erin, Mentor, Secondary School)

Furthermore, Erin then shared this evidence-based data and analysis with her class to support their self-regulatory learning behaviours and agency for their learning:

> Sharing this data with students also encouraged them to take greater ownership over their educational outcomes, as they were able to pinpoint their own successes and areas for improvement. (Erin, Mentor, Secondary School)

These shared mentor narratives strongly suggest the importance of engaging in assessment designed into the micro-credential course as providing the space to reflect

and then enact their professional learning into their classroom practice. The assessment process as designed in the micro-credential coursework seems to strengthen the impact of the mentor professional learning. Frequently, professional development as short courses have been seen as lacking rigour and lasting impact; yet recent research indicates that short courses may provide considerable contributions to teacher learning if they are designed well (Makopoulou et al., 2021). Analysis of the mentor narratives suggests that the focused knowledge and skill development and opportunity to enact the micro-credential's key concepts into practice while receiving coaching from academics and peer feedback during the course's assessment provides powerful, personalised contributions to each mentor's transformational change and learning.

### *8.4.2 Connecting Personal Professional Learning Within School Community*

As mentors reflected on their professional learning from the micro-credential, they readily discussed the impact beyond their own personal, professional practice in their classroom. For example, Emily signals how her learning from the Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Learning and Teaching* also influenced her team within the school, where she shares her assessment artefacts to illustrate strategies to better generate differentiated teaching within the team:

> Using this data [compiled for the assessment tasks in the Melbourne MicroCert], I was then able to work collaboratively with the teachers in my team to plan and deliver targeted teaching, where gaps in knowledge were bridged and skills could be challenged. (Emily, Mentor, Primary School)

Within her faculty team, Erin found that sharing what she learned from the micro-credential stimulated deeper engagement of discussions and change in practice:

> Acquired understandings from this Melbourne MicroCert have also contributed to greater discussions about how to best address student needs within our faculty. To ensure we cater to all individuals, we have begun restructuring our curriculum in a way that allows differentiation to occur more organically, such as getting students to work to their needs across a series of increasingly complex tasks. Implementing this has enabled more students to work within their ZPD. (Erin, Mentor, Secondary School)

Eve, the team leader in her school for the prep team, readily articulated her learning from the micro-credential supported both her and her team's thinking and practices associated with student assessment across the team. The opportunity to participate in the course assisted Eve to:

> critically reflect upon the assessment practices at my school and the way myself and my team review and implement our teaching programme. (Eve, Mentor, Primary School)

Furthermore, the key concepts, knowledge and skills that were integrated in the micro-credential such as cycle of inquiry, criterion-referenced frameworks, Guttman

Chart analysis and using the Feedback Model within the Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning approach, assisted Eve to lead professional conversations with her team to inform the review of their practices:

> Engaging in the Melbourne MicroCert allowed for all these approaches to be reviewed and discussed at a teaching team level, enhancing multiple practitioners' awareness of current theory and best practice. (Eve, Mentor, Primary School)

The impact of the Continuing Professional Education offered by the Melbourne MicroCert is not only felt by the mentors participating in the program. Luke, the Assistant Principal and Chair of the Melbourne TAPP CoM, reflected on the influence of the micro-credential within his secondary school:

> Three teachers from the [secondary] school engaged with the micro-credential [course] with impact evident in each of their teaching practice. Additionally, two of these teachers hold leadership roles with one leading curriculum, so the influence is wide-reaching in regards to shifting the whole school practice. (Luke, Assistant Principal, Secondary School and Chair, Melbourne TAPP CoM)

The broader impacts of undertaking micro-credential study as described by the mentors, as well as Luke, the Chair of the Melbourne TAPP CoM and a school leader, has been examined in the research literature associated with liminality (Aharonian, 2021) or hybridity, where partnerships may represent a "third space" of learning (Day et al., 2021). In Aharonian's (2021) work, she notices that while teachers undertake a formal short course, they also move into liminal spaces where teachers share their professional learning with other colleagues informally in and out of school context settings. This phenomenon is also observed in this case study as illustrated in the above mentor and school leader narrative quotes.

It seems that the micro-credential stimulates not only personalised professional learning, but in sharing with other colleagues, the mentors broaden the impact of professional learning through informal (e.g., shared conversations) and non-formal (e.g., stimulated conversations at team meetings) liminal spaces of learning. Drawing on Gutiérrez and her colleagues (Gutiérrez et al., 1999), Day and his colleagues (2021) discuss partnerships as hybrid, *third spaces* of learning. They examine school-university partnerships as hybrid because they represent diversity in knowing, practices and learning and this diversity also provides the opportunity for expanded learning activity systems (e.g., Engeström, 2001) and thus transformational learning through the contradictions or tensions that arise in hybrid spaces (Day et al., 2021; Gutiérrez et al., 1999). In these mentor narratives, there is a sense that the school-university partnership and the focus on identifying and developing a relevant professional learning program together (through the Melbourne TAPP partnership) and then, in the micro-credential delivery, it stimulates opportunities for expanded learning in and across the school workplace activity systems. This indicates the broader impact of the school-university partnership, beyond the direct impact of the mentors participating in the micro-credential study.

### *8.4.3 Mentors Supporting Pre-Service Teachers Better*

In designing the Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning* program, the Coordinator, Melody, and her academic team built on their understandings of the value of school-university partnerships to generate "mutually beneficial opportunities for continued professional learning" that connects to the initial teacher education programs to "provide continuity and consistency for their [the pre-service teachers] development across the program".

Melody also acknowledged the positive effects of a long-standing school-university partnership such as the Melbourne TAPP that is underpinned by common understandings of the initial teacher education (ITE) programs:

> As they were all members of a pre-existing school-university partnership they had a shared understanding of the ITE program and our pre-service teachers' needs that provided a commonality and connection beyond that typically experienced during teacher professional learning activities. (Melody, Melbourne MicroCert Coordinator, University)

Therefore, less time is spent understanding the ITE program context in the mentor professional learning program provided in the Melbourne MicroCert; and more time is used to deepen the engagement with the professional learning:

> Discussion forums [in the Melbourne MicroCert] provided the opportunity for cross-institutional collaboration, support and engagement as per participant needs. ... [Mentors] engaged with theories and practice to design and implement evidence-based, criterion-referenced assessments. They were able to support each other within and across school groups, engaging with the course content and academics to develop knowledge and use data and tools to differentiate their teaching practice. (Melody, Melbourne MicroCert Coordinator, University)

In her reflection, Emily affirms Melody's observations of impacts on mentors' work with pre-service teachers from the engagement with the Melbourne MicroCert professional learning program. Emily talks of how the Melbourne MicroCert provides not only professional knowledge and skills but also a model to engage in the pre-service teacher's learning through her work as a mentor:

> Completion of the Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning* allowed me to guide pre-service teachers through the same process. We [the pre-service teacher and I] were able to develop statements of increasing competence, have professional dialogue to assess student learning and plan a learning sequence that is targeting to the point of need of the students in the class. (Emily, Mentor, Primary School)

Erin also reflected on the impact of her Melbourne MicroCert professional learning on the way she worked with her pre-service teacher; creating opportunities for Erin to help strengthen connections between the theory–practice nexus for the pre-service teacher, which fostered equity in the mentor-pre-service teacher relationship:

> As a mentor, being able to introduce the pre-service teachers to this Teaching and Learning Cycle [that underpinned the Evidence-Based Teaching and Learning approach in the Melbourne MicroCert] has resulted in many positives. Not only have the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to put theory into practice, but they have also equally been able to identify and respond to the student data. Consequently, having the opportunity to take part in this partnership has been an invaluable experience. (Erin, Mentor, Secondary School)

Often, when mentor programs are established in school-university partnerships, the professional learning resorts to developing and participating in programs about becoming better mentors for pre-service teachers (Betlem et al., 2019). However, in this case study, the mentors entered a formal micro-credential program to gain deeper professional knowledge and practice on evidence-based teaching and learning, rather than a primary focus on learning about being a mentor. This may indicate the maturity of the Melbourne TAPP school-university partnership, where upskilling the workforce in a priority goal of using data to inform teaching was identified across the schools, which also matched the signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) in the initial teacher education programs offered by the university within the partnership. This provided the opportunity to generate a *shared purpose* (Day et al., 2021) to drive a program goal for the school-university partnership. This mutually beneficial and "collective ambition" indicates a successful dimension of *shared purpose* in the school-university partnership as needs and interests are advanced of the participating organisations while capitalising "on their distinctive capabilities and expertise" (Day et al., 2021, p. 25).

### *8.4.4 Renewal of Professional Growth Informing Practice Across the Partnership*

As a school leader, Luke reflects on the multiple positive and long-term impacts of the school-university partnership:

> The impact of a stronger and more formalised partnership is observable from my perspective as a school leader. The impact of this partnership has been enhanced in a number of ways. Firstly, the intake of many pre-service teachers from one institution on the same placement dates allows for an effective induction and allows a consistency of ideas and insights to be shared with teachers across the school. The allocation of University teaching specialists to visit the school over placement also enhances this impact. Based on our experience, the high gain interventions in this partnership have been the opportunity for mentor teachers to engage in professional learning as a result of the partnership. (Luke, Assistant Principal, Secondary School and Chair, Melbourne TAPP CoM)

Luke also sees the partnership's influence going beyond those teachers who work as mentors and participated in the Melbourne MicroCert professional learning:

> In the past 12 months these opportunities have included the invitation to participate in the micro-credential aimed at developing capacity to differentiate teaching and the running of a professional learning event for mentor teachers at the University. ... Eight teachers [from the secondary school] attended the University's professional learning event, which developed their capacity as mentors, exposed them to broader educational ideas from researchers at the University, and gave them a chance for genuine collaboration with academics and teachers from other schools within the partnership. (Luke, Assistant Principal, Secondary School and Chair, Melbourne TAPP CoM)

Luke's reflection indicates a significant culture of professional learning within his secondary school and across the schools involved in the Melbourne TAPP. This

suggests that a culture of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) may be emerging both *in* the secondary school and *across* the school-university partnership to work on shared problems or purposes for professional learning. Furthermore, this illustrates the Luke's active leadership practice as being a "principal as curator of professional learning and development" offering complexity, collaboration and a broad agenda, and is indicative of professional learning at its most effective (Day et al., 2021, p. 99).

Emily also provides evidence of the broadening impact of the school-university partnership, where she shares that her coaching of a colleague led to further uptake of the Melbourne MicroCert professional learning across her school community. Emily shares the significance of her own professional growth in shaping her practice through professional renewal offered in re-engaging with critical theoretical perspectives:

> Upon completion of the Melbourne MicroCert *Evidence-Based Learning and Teaching*, I worked collaboratively with a colleague to coach them through the process, which they then passed on to their professional learning team to assess student writing and plan future learning. From my experience, the partnership between the school and the University of Melbourne has been a positive one, providing an opportunity for professional development and self-reflection. ... Whilst the cycle of teaching and learning continued to be present in all that we do [at our school], I personally found it beneficial to re-engage with the theory behind the [curriculum] content. (Emily, Mentor, Primary School)

The engagement with the Melbourne MicroCert professional learning provided as part of the school-university partnership seems to be highly valued by each mentor as a way for professional renewal. Eve also resonates with this theme and reflects on how she sees the interrelationships between herself, pre-service teachers and her team members:

> The value of the school-university partnership cannot be understated, for the ability to learn from one another, refine pedagogical approaches together, and review [contemporary] theory is beneficial for all parties. It became apparent to me, during the Melbourne MicroCert, that using evidence-based teaching approaches enables pre-service teachers to gain a broad understanding of the needs across a classroom to plan authentic tasks accordingly, and that this in turn also revised my own awareness of these critical steps. ... The school-university partnership has been beneficial for myself and my teaching team. Upskilling others in a practice that has theoretical underpinnings allows everyone to develop professionally and refine approaches together. Whilst we certainly attended to evidence-based practice before engaging with the Melbourne MicroCert, the process allowed us to reflect on its benefits, for both ourselves as practitioners, and for our students...and the pre-service teachers in my capacity as a mentor. (Eve, Mentor, Primary School)

The professional learning stimulated by the Melbourne MicroCert shows complexity. Melody, as the Melbourne MicroCert Coordinator, verifies the professional learning occurred at personal levels and through collegial feedback opportunities designed into the professional learning course. She saw the support for learning between teachers and across the partnership schools. While this professional learning engagement is significant, Melody also reflects that the academic team also undergoes professional learning from this engagement, which shapes the curriculum design in teacher education:

> Academics involved in the [Melbourne MicroCert] project were provided with insight into current teaching and learning practices in schools, with feedback enabling the [course] content to be reviewed and adapted both in the moment and for future offerings. (Melody, Melbourne MicroCert Coordinator, University)

Melody's reflection dispels the traditional role of academic-as-expert in the school-university partnership. Her reflection strongly indicates a "change in academic mindsets" where the academics may be experts in one area, but that in listening to and learning from mentors and how they represented and shared their learning in their specific contexts, provided learning and reflexive opportunities for academics (Day et al., 2021, p. 18). This is perhaps an illustration of the designed, connected professional learning of mentors, pre-service teachers and academics that is possible in hybrid or third spaces in school-university partnerships (Zeichner, 2010).

## 8.5 Conclusion

As demonstrated through analysis of the reflections in the above section, the value of the school-university partnerships emerged strongly as an interconnecting theme between the key actors in the micro-credential ecosystem: the mentors who took up the Melbourne MicroCert professional learning, school leadership as represented by the Chair, Melbourne TAPP CoM, and the Melbourne MicroCert Coordinator and her academic team. From this analysis, there is no doubt that the micro-credential provided upskilling of the workforce within and across the partnership that is valued by employers, the school leaders—a key purpose and function of the university's micro-credentials in delivering Continuing Professional Education—and signals effectiveness through engaged professional learning with broad impact. Yet, this is only one success factor. Does the school-university partnership offer deeper impacts as depicted by Day and his colleagues (2021) in their definition discussed at the beginning of this chapter? Through the analysis of the reflective narratives shared, it becomes clear that this long-standing school-university partnership does meet the "four indispensable components that determine the direction, sustainability and impact of the enterprise": shared purpose; trusting relationships; fit-for-purpose structure; planned collaboration (Day et al., 2021, p. 24).

The Melbourne TAPP CoM provided the hybrid place to generate a *shared purpose* for the partnership during 2020 through creating a bespoke professional learning program for mentors through the innovative mechanism of the digital micro-credential. This offered upskilling of the teaching workforce across the partnership as well as positive impacts on mentoring and development of the university's pre-service teachers, which provided powerful connectivity for learning between campus and school learning. The long-standing school-university partnership represented by the Melbourne TAPP also signifies *trusting relationships*. The relational dynamics of the partnership has demonstrated that there is respect for the diverse cultures between the schools, and the schools and university, a hybridity, that nurtures a "mutualism

in relationships", which is key to successful school-university partnerships (Day et al., 2021, p. 135). The Melbourne TAPP CoM provides the *fit-for-purpose structure*, another pillar of productive partnership identified by Day and his colleagues (2021). The CoM lies at the heart of the school-university partnership and provides the place for governance that respects and works with the cultural diversity of each institution to find the shared purpose that will drive the partnership's focus for each cycle. This purposeful structure also facilitates the other key pillar of successful school-university partnerships: *planned collaboration* (Day et al., 2021). Through planning together, the CoM can discuss the pluralistic needs to determine a shared need that would be beneficial to schools and the university to pursue in the partnership because through the partnership, the complexity of the need can be examined, working towards possible solutions through learning collaboratively and sharing outcomes.

The analysis of the Melbourne TAPP partnership against the four pillars of successful school-university partnerships as identified by Day and his colleagues (2021) does indicate the strengths of partnership through its broad impacts that have arisen due to the professional learning provided by the digital micro-credential. This analysis also signifies that the skill-focused professional learning delivered by digital micro-credentials can also play an important role in Continuing Professional Education, both deepening and broadening the impacts in strong, successful school-university partnerships.

**Acknowledgements** The funding provided by Department of Education and Training (Victoria) to support the school-university partnerships is gratefully acknowledged.

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# Chapter 9
# Perspectives from Academia and School Leadership Boundary Crossing Roles in One Alliance School-University Partnership

**Ondine Jayne Bradbury, Brett Moore, Julie Arnold, Jill Brown, and Andrew Eyers**

**Abstract** Designing effective structures around school-university partnerships is a highly interpretive area of research. Across Australia, a broad range of school-university partnerships exist and are based around a range of different factors. The focus of this chapter is on a specific school-university partnership model, based on activity theory, called an Alliance. This chapter draws upon reflections from Academic Mentors who are university-based actors and a principal, all in boundary crossing roles from the Ashwood Alliance. Reflections explore the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic who are involved in the partnership and boundary crossing within one Alliance. Reflections have been constructed as separate cases for analysis. The cases ultimately outlined the ways in which the individuals in these boundary crossing roles viewed their identity, notions of disruption and considerations of innovative and sustainable school-university partnership design.

## 9.1 Background

Developed in 2013, Deakin University's Alliance model, with clusters of 8–12 geographically close schools and four academics (a Site Director and three Academic Mentors), "was designed to support high quality collaboration between the University and the partnering Alliance schools" (Toe et al., 2020, p. 105). Presently, the Alliance school-university partnerships receive partial funding through the Teaching Academies of Professional Practice from the Victorian Department of Education. These funds ensure the allocation of the boundary crossing role of the Alliance Site Directors. This chapter focuses on the Ashwood Alliance, consisting of ten

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_9

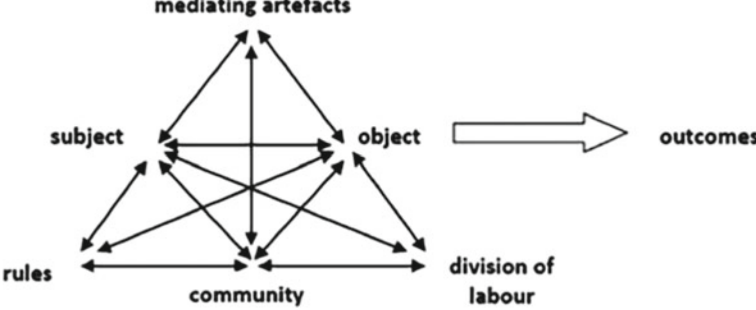


**Fig. 9.1** CHAT triangle of activity (Engeström, 1999)

schools and supporting pre-service teachers (PSTs) from undergraduate and Master of Teaching programmes in initial teacher education (ITE). Experiences from the PSTs perspectives in the Ashwood Alliance are well documented in Bradbury et al. (2020); this chapter outlines the experiences of Academic Mentors and Principal in boundary crossing roles.

The Alliance model was based on Engeström's (1999) main theoretical model of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and the triangle of activity. The triangle illustrates the components of a system and the interactions that occur within the system (see Fig. 9.1). Engeström summarises activity theory through the aid of five principles: as a unit of analysis, multivoicedness, historicity, contradictions and expansive cycles. This conceptual framework is useful for informing social problems that typically require effective collaboration between multiple human activity systems.

Within the triangle of activity, there is no component specific to "an individual" (Veresov, 2020, p. 181); it is instead a "subject" and an "object" which are connected through "actions mediated by cultural artefacts" (p. 181). The CHAT triangle outlines a theory of the subject being "connected to community through rules" (p. 181). This chapter considers the demands and expectations on these boundary crossing roles as well as the opportunities for leveraging what we know about these roles in order to strengthen school partnerships, enhance pre-service teacher education and engage with the needs of partnering schools.

As far back as 2007, the Top of the Class report (Fawns et al., 2007) positioned recommendations for partnerships in education. The importance of improving school-university partnerships has since gained increasing attention (Darling-Hammond, 2016). More recently, the 2018 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (TEMAG, 2018) report reforms indicated and advocated the development and strengthening of "high quality school-university partnerships" (p.7). High quality can look and feel different depending on which stakeholder is gaining from the shared inquiry and activity. Current accreditation legislation denotes that ITE programmes should have formalised partnerships with school sites in relation to professional experience contexts. This includes transactional elements

such as clear roles, responsibilities and assessment protocols (AITSL, 2020). In specific contexts, school-university partnerships have thrived. We document the way in which a partnership model can operate beyond the transactional and create positive educational impacts that extend the contextual shared boundaries for partners. The following reflective questions began the conversations relating to the Ashwood Alliance partnership:

- What do stakeholders need and how do they benefit?
- What are the imperatives of our partnerships and practice?

Understanding the benefits and the challenges for each stakeholder can require a protocol that is fair for those willing to commit and embrace working together. The essential ethical conventions of partnerships assume that each partner recognises the social practice and ways of sharing knowledge (Eckersley et al., 2011, p. 14). Gathering relevant data from within the partnership can generate analysis to evaluate, evidence and present new knowledge on the effectiveness of the partnerships. In doing so, goals and outcomes are clear and shared as a basis of constructive partnership. This chapter explores the background experiences and practices of two boundary crossing roles and describes practical and specific details that ensure dimensions of mutual and shared possibilities stemming from having these boundary crossing roles. We also highlight some mutual goals and impact of learning in the form of case studies and reflection on some recent partnership practice. What matters and how benefits and challenges are met and measured are also considered in the methodology to indicate possible implications sustaining partnerships.

## 9.2 Supporting Literature

The following section outlines the supporting literature to foreground the cases and subsequent thematic analysis. Within our exploration of school-university partnerships, discussions pertaining to the essential working parts of the partnership uncovered the need for the development and sustainability of a community of practice. Additionally, the importance of boundary crossing roles such as the Academic Mentor and school-based leadership in the Ashwood Alliance school-university partnership model was explored.

### *9.2.1 Communities of Practice*

When identifying the purpose and practice within a school-university partnership, the notion of learning community is often discussed. This concept is based around the idea of the "social nature of human learning" (Leung, 2020, p. 2) specifically, with a shared interest engaging with one another in social activities in order to develop shared resources (Leung, 2020). CoP not only illuminates the importance of the

collaboration and social interaction in the overall Alliance approach, but this theory also uncovers implications for stakeholder roles and engagement across both the university and school settings.

Educational theorists and researchers have long focused on the importance of cognitive constructs including pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (e.g. Shulman, 1986, 1987) but also on individual critical reflection. More recently, development of PCK but also reflective practice has moved into more of a shared space via communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Shulman and Shulman (2004) describe "teacher learning communities" (p. 259) where "learning from experience through reflecting" (p. 264) is critical. They describe the community as essential for "deliberation, collaboration, reciprocal scaffolding, and distributing expertise" (p. 265) in the preparation of teachers in ITE and development of accomplished teachers.

Recent innovations and changes that have taken place in the way in which schools and universities work together require reflection, particularly that of the boundary crossing positions that the Academic Mentors and principals of partner schools embody. Wenger (1998) discusses the social ecology of identity, constructed from the ways in which "participation or non-participation" (p. 170) within the community and the individual is invested. Therefore, an individual's identity forms a tension between investment, belonging and the negotiation of the "meanings that matter" (Wenger, 1998, p. 170) in specific contexts resulting in a dual process: the first being identification and the second, negotiability. These combine to form the social ecology of identity within CoP (Wenger, 1998).

### *9.2.2 Boundary Crossing Roles in School-University Partnerships*

The literature that explores school-university partnerships often outlines how the partnerships are successful in action; however, the evidence of enduring sustainable partnerships is less prevalent (Manton et al., 2020). Manton et al. suggest that this approach to reporting on partnership effectiveness, highlighting and showcasing the successes of the partnerships may not be addressing "destabilising factors that contribute to…short-lived partnerships" (p. 2). The role of relationships is seen as an essential component in forming partnerships between various systems such as schools and universities, and within school-university partnerships, there are multiple stakeholder groups that are involved in these relational aspects (Manton et al., 2020).

There are numerous sources of research regarding teacher educators in boundary crossing roles, within partnerships that span schools and universities (Martin et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2014; Williams, 2014). This research often highlights the tensions and challenges inherent in identity formation, belonging and purpose in these roles. Martin et al. (2011) describe the teacher educator boundary crossing roles as being hybrid in nature, charged with fostering relationships, negotiating and mediating

while working in school-based contexts. Integral to the construction of the partnerships that they explored was to understand the complexities of the contexts they were working within and working towards building strong foundations of relationships (Martin et al., 2011). Martin et al. suggest "ongoing experience and reflective practices" (p. 309), both individually and collectively, continue to provide insight into the development of these roles.

The role of the principal in a school-university partnership boundary crossing role is often seen as unique and critical (Sanders, 2018). Principals occupy practical, symbolic and facilitation roles in order to build and maintain collaborative partnerships (Sanders, 2018). Sanders (2018) suggests that provisions for principals undertaking such roles may require ongoing PD that focuses on "building interpersonal relationship and organisational conditions" (p. 24) critical to developing and sustaining boundary crossing, collaborative partnerships.

It is this perception of fundamental importance of these boundary crossing roles that generated the research within this chapter, and due to the differences in the backgrounds and length of times in these roles, reflection and developing cases for each contributing author were deemed as an essential approach to collecting the data.

## 9.3 Research Design

### *9.3.1 Qualitative Case Study*

A qualitative approach (Miles et al., 2014) was taken in order to best capture the richness of the phenomenon of interest, namely the Ashwood Alliance. An inductive approach whereby codes and themes emerge from the data rather than them being a priority (Miles et al., 2014, p. 238). Qualitative case-study methodology was applied within this chapter (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Case writing is the appropriate methodology for this research as the contributing data relating to the cases are "intrinsically bounded" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 39) by their role within the Ashwood Alliance.

All authors were situated in positions of leadership, working internally to plan, implement and support the partnership, and each accordingly has reflective "cases" (Shulman, 1992) upon their experiences within the partnership. Cases ensure evidence-based critical inquiry of partners and opportunity for collaborative research leading to "new enabling structures which span the boundaries of school and university" (Eckersley et al., 2011, p. 91). Each case included each author describing their experiences of first joining the Ashwood Alliance, reflecting on how they were working presently in the boundary crossing role and their future thoughts relating to the partnership. Each experience varied due to the amount of time the authors had been involved within the partnership. Developing multiple cases from similar positions or stance enhanced the opportunity to compare the experiences of the phenomenon of interest and future development. The nature of the method stems from the Freirean

notion of critical praxis where the continuing process of praxis assists groups and communities in developing a "critical consciousness" (Arnold et al., 2012, p. 281) for shared educational viewpoints and understandings. Further to the development of the subsequent cases, each author's reflection was individually analysed by each author and then discussed by the group for further investigation and critical reflection. While engaging in these discussions, the authors deliberated on dilemmas and best practices and the telling of "unwelcome truths" (Mockler, 2015, p. 128) were revealed.

## 9.4 The Cases

### *9.4.1 Jill's Case: A Mathematics Teacher Educator New to the Ashwood Alliance*

I understood the partnership to foreground closer opportunities to support Deakin University PSTs by creating an alliance between a specific group of schools, some academic staff and a dedicated [0.5] Deakin University staff member to facilitate the group and work closely with the PSTs. The schools are selected partly because of their geographic closeness. Similarly, this Ashwood Alliance is located close to the campus where the Deakin staff participants are located. In the background, the Alliance provides opportunities for the university and school staff to meet regularly. This provides opportunities to develop shared understandings, expand and strengthen relationships and better understand the lived experiences of each. The four yearly meetings also allow schools to discuss any issue or topic they care to raise. Attendees are typically the Principal or Assistant Principal and the PST coordinator so that does channel our focus somewhat. As an academic who had just transferred to Deakin University from another university in Melbourne, some of my experiences will blur with my developing understanding of the ways things at Deakin University operate. I was expecting to spend time in the Alliance schools. Initially, this would have been for the Assessment Circles. That would have allowed me to meet additional school staff and no doubt have led to opportunities to work with the schools in a variety of ways. However, the worldwide pandemic saw the university and schools pivot to online/remote learning from March 2020 and for significant amounts of time since then. As such, I have not visited any school—other than virtually during meetings associated with the Ashwood Alliance. I felt and still do—to some extent an outsider in the Alliance. My time at Deakin University and in the Alliance has most often involved working from home. Hence, my experience at Deakin University has been far from usual. In addition, I am not teaching any units with embedded placements as are the other two academics involved. In fact, the students in my secondary mathematics methods units are enrolled in several courses (e.g. BH&PE, MTeach (Secondary)) and several different placement units depending on how far though their course they have progressed.

Finally, as a mathematics education academic, who has worked extensively with both future and current teachers of mathematics, I bring a very different perspective. My perspective of what learners need is very much through the lens of mathematics education. My focus is firmly on the development of mathematical pedagogical knowledge. My hope is that the Alliance increasingly allows us to support Deakin University PSTs as they transition from future teachers, via teaching placements and associated activities in Alliance schools, to [mathematics] teacher ready graduates. While Deakin University mathematics teacher preparation units for PSTs are underpinned by evidence-based practices and the "wisdom of practice" (Shulman, 1987) of this mathematics educator, it is not until the PST is located inside the school classroom, that some key aspects of learning in practice can be truly appreciated. As the Deakin University academic staff involved in the Alliances have not met together, I am unaware of the similarities and differences between what the Ashwood Alliance does and what other alliances do. The main challenge for me—in addition to those faced by all of us in the current world situation—is the lack of opportunities to draw on my expertise as a mathematics educator and "share" some of this with any of the teachers in our alliance schools. I understand the Alliance Directors and the Director of Professional Experience meet regularly, appreciate the importance of having independence, but regret the lack of opportunities to possibly have our horizons expanded.

### *9.4.2 Julie's Case: Long-Term Academic Mentor and Partnership Advocate*

This case considers future possibilities inherent in Alliances and the unique opportunity for innovative school-university partnership design. When joining the Alliance as an academic, I assumed it may operate in a similar way to my previous university partnership experiences. Soon after joining an Alliance in 2018, I felt a little "adrift". The model included 10 partner schools, a Site Director (from the university) and leading Principal to lead protocols and activities. There was also a requirement to attend with PSTs and staff "Assessment Circles". From my perspective, this seemed a large and well-planned context in which I was to work and prompted some early questions: How was I to work with 10 schools? Who was I to work with and how were relationships established? What did the work look like? Previously, I had generally worked autonomously on projects with PSTs and schools. During the first year, I was establishing my role, and I came to realise that Alliances relied heavily on the Site Director (SD) and a leading Principal within the Alliance. These were partnership members that had a leading position to develop the Alliance. They were committed and energetic in planning and encouraged all schools to attend meetings and Alliance activities. I attended Alliance meetings too, with the school leaders/staff and the leading Principal and SD. Although not all schools attended meetings, the schools placed many of the PSTs with teachers (Mentor Teachers) and the results

were good. I made some good relationships but seldom connected with all schools and principals.

The PSTs present at the Assessment Circles (AC) and school staff from the placement school and academics attend these presentations. This consists of critical and rigorous professional conversations led by PSTs which enables the school staff and academics to interrogate the planning, teaching and learning of the PSTs located at the school. However, I now feel that the PSTs and the university are the winners in this model. Although there have been changes in Site Directors and ways of working, the AC activities have continued within the programme and Alliance. Reflecting on the Alliance experience, my inquiry is now centred on the nature of inclusivity within partnerships, the needs of schools and ways of working with PSTs. What is a productive and sustainable partnership Alliance model? Who benefits? What are the benefits? Who drives? Effective partnerships rely on an equitable and relational model. On reflection, there have been varying models of partnership activities I have chosen to plan, design and implement with valuable assistance and shared vision from MTs and school staff within this Alliance model. These projects have been positioned ethically and shared by stakeholders. So, for me, there are challenges of being in an Alliance partnership. Sustainability rests on the acceptance that not all partners choose to engage without agency, or knowing that there can be a mutual benefit for all.

### *9.4.3 Brett's Case: Principal Class Working in Alignment with the Alliance*

Commencing in 2016, the Ashwood Alliance, part of Deakin University's Melbourne Academy of the Teaching Academies for Professional Practice (ITE draft 2020), disrupted the routine practices of Ashwood High School and was an integral part of the school reform agenda. As founding principal of the Ashwood Alliance, my approach was to tailor the programmes and practices of the Ashwood Alliance to transform the school. This meant collaborating with the Site Director and university colleagues, engaging directly in the conceptualisation of partnership activities, distributing leadership roles to my school's leading teachers and building the capacity of teachers and pre-service teachers (PSTs). The experience has shown me that many participant stakeholders within the Alliance, in addition to the Site Director, have performed the boundary spanning role. It could be argued that the participants who did most of the work and had the highest stakes in boundary spanning were in fact the PSTs. Within the first year of the partnership, improvements in the school culture and positive climate for learning were apparent. It was important to ensure that the activities of the school-university partnership had a positive impact upon the school's transformation and improvement, reflected in improved student attitudes, aspirations and outcomes.

It was challenging to accommodate the university's plans and procedures within the culture, structures and practices of the school—acknowledging that my school is located within an education system with complex and non-negotiable priorities, policies and procedures. Venturing into the partnership required me to incorporate teacher education into the structured teaching and learning discourses of the school. My focus on cultural leadership occurred through networking with other school leaders and partner organisations to assist in promoting and sustaining the Alliance; fostering collegiate support for the Site Director and partnership; simultaneously lifting the profile of the school in the education community. By maintaining visible and shared leadership for the Alliance, commitment has been secured from participants that evolved into a set of sustained communities of practice across our network of schools. This has contributed to a strong culture of inquiry across the Ashwood Alliance community of staff, with a shared focus on improved student learning outcomes. Through collaborative practitioner research, Alliance participants have continued to investigate ways in which the university can work together with the network of primary and secondary schools to improve teaching and learning practices across years 5 to 7, including the possibility of a school network approach to teacher education; strengthening transition processes, with a focus on student well-being, voice and agency across primary and secondary schools. The Alliance, which has become an integral part of the school, has demonstrated that a school-university partnership can enable all stakeholders who participate to learn: primarily, the students through the developing contributions of PSTs; the PSTs as they work in authentically demanding practice; school leaders and teacher educators as they work together to achieve common goals; and the teachers whose professional understandings and practices are developed through taking on the primary responsibility of mentoring the PSTs. Participation in the Alliance has brought about ongoing evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning, leading to strategies focused on continuous improvement.

## 9.5 Unpacking the Cases

### *9.5.1 The Identity Formation in Boundary Crossing Roles Within School-University Partnerships*

Both reflections from Jill and Julie uncovered thoughts pertaining to their identity within the Ashwood Alliance. When reflecting on their first experience within the Ashwood Alliance, Jill and Julie discussed how they entered into the role simultaneously transferring to Deakin from other universities. Both had little to no knowledge of the Alliance schools. Julie mentioned feeling "a little 'adrift'" and wondered "How was I to work with 10 schools? Who was I to work with and how were relationships established? What did the work look like?". Jill was similarly apprehensive towards engaging with ten unknown schools. From her reflections, Jill seemed to envision

forming her identity through building relationships inside these schools. As this was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Jill's feeling of identity as an Academic Mentor was also disrupted noting, "As such I have not visited any school - other than virtually during meetings associated with the Ashwood Alliance. I felt, and still do - to some extent an outsider in the Alliance". Jill also mentioned her method area of mathematics and that working "extensively with both future and current teachers of mathematics" came with a different perspective. Detached from the PSTs, other Academic Mentors, the schools and also devout of knowledge of what other Alliances were doing, Jill reflected on the "lack of opportunities to draw on my expertise as a mathematics educator and 'share' some of this with any of the teachers in our alliance schools".

Julie had transitioned from an experienced autonomous supervisor of PST school visits, to doing similar work, except now within a partnership of many stakeholders. In her transition, Julie formed some relationships, but connections to most schools and Principals did not occur; as time progressed, Julie began to inquire into the more nuanced aspects of the ways of working with the school-university partnership:

> Reflecting on the Alliance experience, my inquiry is now centred on the nature of inclusivity within partnerships, the needs of schools and ways of working with PSTs. What is a productive and sustainable partnership Alliance model? Who benefits? What are the benefits? Who drives? (Julie).

It was clear there was a sense of detachment due to "newness" to the Ashwood Alliance within the cases which were exacerbated by the pandemic. Jill reflected that due to the pandemic and not being physically in the schools it was challenging to identify with the Alliance at times. However, the regularity of the virtual Ashwood Alliance meetings aided Jill by supporting deepening relationships between Academic Mentors on the one hand and the other Ashwood Alliance stakeholders on the other. Each meeting progressed the groups to move a step closer to common understanding and shared visions. In Julie's ongoing experience within the Ashwood Alliance, the Site Directors are the only pulse, and Ashwood has benefited from a Principal fully committed to exploring these partnerships:

> During the first year, I was establishing my role, and I came to realise that Alliances relied heavily on the Site Director (SD) and a leading Principal within the Alliance. These were partnership members that had a leading position to develop the Alliance. They were committed and energetic in planning and encouraged all schools to attend meetings and Alliance activities. (Julie)

Brett's identity within the Ashwood Alliance connected to his essential skills as a secondary school principal, also aligning as the founding principal of the Ashwood Alliance stating how his "approach was to tailor the programs and practices of the Ashwood Alliance to transform the school". Brett appeared to align his leadership style when reflecting upon the critical design and delivery components of a school-university partnership like that of the Alliance model:

> Venturing into the partnership, required me to incorporate teacher education into the structured teaching and learning discourses of the school. My focus on cultural leadership occurred through networking with other school leaders and partner organisations to assist in promoting

> and sustaining the Alliance, fostering collegiate support for the Site-Director and partnership; simultaneously lifting the profile of the school in the education community. (Brett)

All three reflective cases touched upon the various stakeholders in boundary crossing roles. Although the Academic Mentors did work across both the university and the school context, Jill reflected in relation to the physical presence in the schools; there was a "Lack of opportunity to learn about and from other partners. Without crossing the boundaries". Additionally, it was noted that there was an independence in the role, but without having a physical presence, had missed the opportunity to have their "horizons expanded". Brett reflected that the stakeholders who "did most of the work and had the highest stakes in boundary crossing were in fact the PSTs" with Julie supporting this sentiment by mentioning how the PSTs seemed to gain more benefits than other stakeholders in the Ashwood Alliance. For Brett, the identification and recognition that all participants had "boundary spanning" roles were apparent.

### *9.5.2 Disruption—Leading to Improved Practice*

Charged with significant school improvement demands at that time, Brett was able to disrupt what had been the norm and harness the newly formed Ashwood Alliance with the intent to make it part of the school's embedded teaching and learning approach. Brett's reflections highlight the notion of disruption leading to change, stating that the new partnership had become "an integral part of the school reform agenda" despite associated policy-related challenges:

> It was challenging to accommodate the university's plans and procedures within the culture, structures and practices of the school; acknowledging that my school is located within an education system with complex and non-negotiable priorities, policies and procedures. (Brett)

Much of Brett's case highlighted the influence, impact and positioning of the multiple stakeholders, the impact of the Ashwood Alliance on the growth and development of the school, as well as the potential for up-skilling and capacity building with the staff at the school. As principal, he enabled the ushering in of a school-university partnership and created a sizable space for it to populate. This was exemplified in Brett's case where he identifies how "The Alliance, which has become an integral part of the school, has demonstrated that a school– university partnership can enable all stakeholders who participate to learn". This also led to the "positive impact upon the school's transformation" and improvement as shown through stakeholder responses from mentors through to the leadership team. The disruption Brett details generated a positive outcome for his school.

There was specific mention of a major disruption linked to the COVID-19 pandemic where the university and/or the schools were working in remote and flexible contexts. Individual reflection within Jill's case uncovers questioning of positioning and purpose due to the distance created from the schools within the Ashwood

Alliance. “As such I have not visited any school - other than virtually during meetings associated with the Ashwood Alliance. I felt, and still do - to some extent an outsider in the Alliance”. Interestingly, within Julie’s reflections of pre-pandemic partnership work, similar sentiments relating to distance were reflected upon:

> Although not all schools attended meetings, the schools placed many of the PSTs with teachers (Mentor Teachers) and the results were good. I made some good relationships but seldom connected with all schools and principals. (Jill)

All participants expressed implicit or explicit plans forged from disruption and evolving into a future-focused approach. Both Jill and Brett aspired to bring more of their expertise into the Ashwood Alliance. For Jill, this was more future oriented, whereas for Julie this included a return to past innovations that were no longer being enacted. Brett’s vision was a continuation and broadening of potential for the partnerships to influence:

> primary and secondary [Ashwood Alliance] schools to improve teaching and learning practices across Years 5 to 7; including the possibility of a school network approach to teacher education; strengthening transition processes, with a focus on student wellbeing, voice and agency across primary and secondary schools. (Brett)

Brett’s reflections showed that participation within the Ashwood Alliance had not only fostered “collegiate support” from the university, but that the Alliance had “evolved into a set of communities of practice” across the network of schools that currently exist within the Alliance and that the partnership had “contributed to a strong culture of inquiry across the Ashwood Alliance community of staff, with a shared focus on improved student learning outcomes”.

The use of boundary objects was discussed in all the cases. Specifically, Julie made mention of the Ashwood Alliance meetings which provided the stakeholders with a forum to discuss any issue or topic or partnership opportunity:

> In the background, the Alliance provides opportunities for the University and School staff to meet regularly. This provides opportunities to develop shared understandings, expand and strengthen relationships and better understand the lived experiences of each. (Julie)

Jill noted that along with those boundary objects of Assessment Circles and stakeholder meetings, the norms and responsibilities of the Ashwood Alliance were important to keep in mind in addition to meeting with Academic Mentors “involved in the Alliances” as they had not met together, in addition to exploring the “similarities and differences between what the Ashwood Alliance does and what other alliances do”.

### *9.5.3 Transformation and Innovation Within the Ashwood Alliance*

Reflections across the three cases identified the boundary crossing roles as being of high importance in the current and future design of the partnership. Brett’s reflection noted that being in one of the Principal boundary crossing roles, “collaborating

with…university colleagues, engaging directly in the conceptualisation of partnership activities, distributing leadership roles to my school's leading teachers, and building the capacity of teachers and pre-service teachers" were all paramount to the transformation of his school.

From Brett's perspective, the Ashwood Alliance had learning opportunities at the centre. These learning opportunities extended to PSTs, mentors and leadership, enabling "all stakeholders who participate to learn…and..work together to achieve common goals". Often, this was centred around the integrated nature of the partnership and the emergent stakeholder needs stating that "The integration of practitioner research into the work of partnership participants, invested the change process with the possibility of sustained educational innovation". In order to achieve this vision, both boundary crossing roles and practitioners, from Brett's perspective, needed to have strong communication and collegiate ties this could then lead to potential improvement in practice where he states, "This meant collaborating with the Site Director and university colleagues, engaging directly in the conceptualisation of partnership activities, distributing leadership roles to my school's leading teachers, and building the capacity of teachers and PSTs".

Similarly, Julie's reflections link the boundary crossing roles to both relational aspects and learning imperatives. Sustainability for Julie included learning about each school in the partnership, ensuring that there was a shared investment, and that stakeholder voice and agency were not only considered but an understanding that mutual benefit will be attained:

> So, for me, there are challenges of being in an Alliance partnership. The sustainability rests on the acceptance that, not all partners choose to engage without agency, or knowing that there can be a mutual benefit for all (Julie).

Future-focused reflections were further developed in Brett's case as links were drawn between the partnership work, improving practice and knowledge and creating a culture of meaningful inquiry. Brett emphasised the need for schools to support PSTs and partners as they work in authentically work together to achieve common goals by stating "It was important to ensure that the activities of the school-university partnership had a positive impact upon the school's transformation and improvement, reflected in improved student attitudes, aspirations and outcomes".

Evidenced within the three reflections was an emergent need to ensure that the activities of the school-university partnership had a positive impact upon the school's and the university's transformation and improvement and if successful, can be reflected in the impact of "improvement strategies to distribute teaching and leadership capacity, impacting positively on the viability and sustainability of the Alliance" (Brett). Julie found from this Ashwood Alliance experience that buy-in from schools was the key to substantive and transformative progression. Jill's ambitions for innovation and transformation are grounded in pedagogical development relative to her background in mathematics. Jill's perspective was that the Alliance was an opportunity to develop PST capabilities as they neared graduation and that extended through her involvement, believing the partnership opportunities provide

an avenue "to develop shared understandings, expand and strengthen relationships and better understand the lived experiences of each".

## 9.6 Discussion

### 9.6.1 *The Importance and Impact of Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects*

In many of the reflective cases, disruption as a result of taking on a boundary crossing role in the Ashwood Alliance for the authors of this chapter had resulted in growth, opportunity and "renegotiation of their identities" (Chaaban et al., 2021, p. 8). This constitutes a deep commitment to future imagining within the partnership and stems from a position of hope (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019). Moving on from these renegotiations is the establishing of the possibility of improving expectations and "greater equality in the future" (p. 644) for all boundary crossing roles in this space. Imagining beyond current processes and disruption engenders transformational interest and common effort. Where the notion of imagination, transformation and renegotiation was identified within the cases, further development of possibilities within the Ashwood Alliance can be considered.

For the Academic Mentors within the context of this chapter, school-university partnerships form a significant component of their work. In the current work allocation model or WAM for Academic Mentors, 45 hours per year are allocated to significant contributions to external partnerships—in this case, the Ashwood Alliance school-university partnership. In much of the literature relating to school-university partnerships, these roles are seen as being crucial to the work of the partnership (Manton et al., 2020). Leung suggests that boundaries should be viewed as a "potential for learning" (2020, p. 3) rather than an obstacle as on either side, common aims and concerns can be found (Leung, 2020). For principals such as Brett in a pivotal boundary crossing role, eliciting a sense of purpose and alignment with the school mission and vision was paramount for the embedding of the potential offerings of the partnership to be in the school's lived experience. Brett's approach to embodying his boundary crossing role is indicative of the Australian Professional Standards for Principals (AITSL, 2015) and relates to Professional Practice Standard 5. This Standard outlines the importance of engaging and working with the community in order to create mutually supportive, collaborative and trusting relationships with the community to ensure engagement in the life of the school (AITSL, 2015). Feeling as though the individual is part of the partnership was a strong theme that emerged throughout the cases. The identity of those in the boundary crossing roles prior to coming into the partnership was often challenged and questioned. This then resulted in reflections relating to possibilities and growth not only for their own development, but also for the additional stakeholders within the partnership. This was seen within all three cases where discussions around their own position and contributions, as well

as the possibilities for growth in the leadership team, teachers and the PSTs, were discussed and reflected upon.

### *9.6.2 Future Design Considerations for the Ashwood Alliance*

This chapter explored how a school principal in performing a boundary crossing role created a cohesive culture, enabling PSTs to play a central part in teaching and learning programmes, and impacting the learning of their students. The boundary crossing roles explored within this chapter are often identified within the planning and implementation of a school-university partnership, and as Sanders (2018) suggests, the ways in which these roles are embodied do not come with a rule book. And arguably, they should not, as often contexts within the partnership themselves are varied and require adaptation that may impact an individual's identity and ways of working.

The two boundary crossing roles required the authors to span two or more diverse and often contrasting domains, facilitating a number of relationships across the schools and mediating two or more sets of desired outcomes (Guile & Young, 2003). For Brett, through the altered relationship practices of the Ashwood Alliance, the practices of the partnership became an integral part of the school as well as its educational discourse about teacher education and the incorporation of this language into key documentation (e.g. the School's Strategic Plan, Annual Implementation Plan (AIP), my Performance and Development Plan (PDP) and those of the teaching staff). The inception of the partnership between the university and the partner school was an integral part of Brett's school reform agenda. The experience has shown that being part of the Ashwood Alliance has made explicit reference to the expanded opportunities found in integrating the discourse of teacher education to support educational change at the school.

Boundary crossing objects (Engestrom et al., 1995) in the Ashwood Alliance worked as anchors in the ways of working and growth of responsibilities and shared purpose between the Academic Mentors and other Alliance stakeholders. These boundary crossing objects included "Assessment Circles" and "Alliance meetings" and are currently a consistent and continuing factor of the Ashwood Alliance model. The running of Assessment Circles within the Ashwood Alliance allows for "critical and rigorous professional conversations led by PSTs" with occasional participation from school staff and Academic Mentors. As noted in the reflections within this chapter, "the PSTs and the university are the winners in this model" which poses potential design and delivery considerations for the partnership to become more inclusive of all stakeholders within the Ashwood Alliance.

Distance and newness to a partnership can influence the sense of identity for boundary crossing roles stakeholders, particularly that of the Academic Mentor. If

the “norm” is to visit and be physically present in schools in order to create relationships and draw upon expertise, the distance may cause a chasm and potentially impact the development of relationships. Additionally, key boundary crossing roles such as Site Directors and leading principals in the partnership may appear as a gatekeeper for information and ways of working. Implications of how communication can be streamlined, targeted and transmitted in a timely and relevant way may be of consideration for further sustainability for both the partnership and the boundary crossing roles. This may also impact the sense of shared identity for all the stakeholders involved.

Evidenced within this chapter, the third boundary crossing role that is identified by all three authors is that of the pre-service teacher. Each reflection began the conversation regarding equity and benefits of the Ashwood Alliance, including that of direct links back to activity theory relating to division of labour, notions of community and the associated rules and protocols. Aspects of consideration and mutual respect for all involved and those that can conceptualise and assist, including those seeking shared boundaries, are important factors for the future considerations of the partnership. The Ashwood Alliance has advanced practices that nurture knowledge relationships. Through their membership of a community of practice, participants across the Alliance are part of a persistent, sustained social network of individuals who share social capital (Field, 2008; Fullan, 1993). This includes a knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise (Barab & Duffy, 2000). Through these interactions within a shared community of practice, boundary spanning encounters resulted in a shift in understanding relating to teaching, learning and leadership (Printy, 2008).

## 9.7 Limitations

As this is a snapshot of one Alliance, the findings can only be applied to the current context of the Ashwood Alliance. Additional Academic Mentor reflections of their past, present and future experiences within other Alliances may provide further insight into the themes uncovered within this chapter and perhaps uncover and address other contextualised themes. Without case studies from fellow Ashwood Alliance principals, it cannot be stated that they too accessed the Alliance for school reform, and nothing that has happened in the ensuing five years that would reveal they had.

## 9.8 Conclusion

Where initial participation in the Ashwood Alliance brought about disruption for those in the boundary crossing roles, ongoing participation resulted in identity formation, evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning and led to strategies focused on continuous improvement. The boundary crossing role of the principal in this

chapter was integral in publicly supporting the partnership in order to strengthen the university's engagement, building trust and cooperation across the system. For the Academic Mentors in this chapter, transformation of their identity as teacher educators and a willingness to foster learning, engagement and imagine future possibilities was evident throughout both cases. This passion, commitment and identification with other participant expertise worked to sustain the community of practice. As the community of practice generates new knowledge through inquiry and collaboration, it re-enforces and renews itself. Moving forward, it is encouraging to see that the authors in these boundary crossing roles within this chapter will continue to be vested in the school-university partnership as current results have seen refinements and improvements made to distribute teaching and leadership capacity, impacting positively on the viability and sustainability of this growth. As collaborators in the Ashwood Alliance, through the use of observations and reflection, there are clear benefits of bringing the university into the school and the school into the university.

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# Chapter 10
# Concluding Thoughts and Future Considerations on Innovation in School-University Partnerships in Initial Teacher Education

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## 10.1 Drawing Together the Key Themes of the Book

As perception and perspective of what is valued and seen as important to the stakeholders within the partnership is often what drives a partnership, understanding the needs of each stakeholder is paramount. Interestingly, school-university partnerships often have multiple and varied stakeholder groups from backgrounds that are diverse, with only one connecting priority—education. The who, what, where, when and how of "education" within each unique partnership is often as diverse as the stakeholders themselves. Problematizing this further is that when policy or funding bodies are incentivising school-university partnerships, they can often be defined by a set of expectations or objectives, reducing the partnership to problem solving. Additionally, this resulting accountability can "shut down generative and constructive critique" (Mockler, 2013, p. 288) and influence the ways in which the partnership sustains, evolves and innovates. When considering forming school-university partnerships that are supported or enhanced by government policy and funding, understanding requirements for the funding body becomes increasingly important. What is expected by the funding body and what is valued by each partner needs to be understood and reflected within the partnership. Mechanisms also need to be in place within the partnerships to allow for growth, creativity and innovation which would otherwise be limited by rigid structures.

Within initial teacher education across Australian providers, school-university partnerships have now become an important program level standard which must be

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O. J. Bradbury and D. Acquaro (eds.), *School-University Partnerships—Innovation in Initial Teacher Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5057-5_10

met in order to gain accreditation. What we have seen in practice is that partnerships have traditionally been focussed solely on generating placements and this, by and large, has meant that the university initiates the relationship with the school often playing a less significant role. What this collection has demonstrated is that school-university partnerships have the capacity to be much more than a source of teacher placement experiences. School-university partnerships do have the capacity to generate mutually beneficial outcomes, where partners share, learn and grow together and independently. Examples of partnerships building new knowledge and new capabilities that are shared beyond the partnership itself can be achieved.

An enduring aim of school-university partnerships is bridging the theory/practice divide or the "nexus between theory and practice" (Bernay, 2020, p. 305). However, what has emerged is a new formation of partnership design highlighting a range of community of practice examples. These include the development of shared understandings and learning situated within the partnership and across multiple stakeholder groups (Chapter 2; Chapter 3; Chapter 8), which can influence policymakers around what constitutes effective partnerships. In addition to the sharing of practices, individual visibility, status and identity formation within the context of the partnership was also explored (Chapter 2; Chapter 9). It is evident within the Australian examples of school-university partnership models within this collection that each design approach extends from the transactional nature of locating placements and supporting pre-service teachers in their work within classroom contexts, to various approaches of professional learning within the partnerships themselves involving school-based teachers and leaders and university academics.

A continuing yet often allusive aspect within these communities of practice is the role and responsibility of each stakeholder in addition to co-collaboration and co-construction of partnerships between every impacted stakeholder group (Bernay, 2020). Despite best efforts to engage all stakeholder groups in a mutually beneficial and reciprocal design of partnerships, this is an ongoing battle for school-university partnerships. What is important to remember and what has been consistently visible within many of the chapters within this collection is the underlying need for relationships and relational ways of being. Educational contexts and most associated funding bodies, whether government bodies or industry, are people-centric, socially informed with an emphasis on human interactions. Perhaps the tensions and challenges of bridging, building and burgeoning partnerships are the backgrounds, perspectives and lived experiences of the multiple stakeholders (Bernay et al., 2020). In saying this, the perceived benefit can be both a blessing and a curse.

## 10.2 Future Considerations on Innovation in School-University Partnerships

Contemporary approaches to the continued improvement of school-university partnerships are the strategic placement of stakeholder feedback, surveys and insights

that continue to flesh out what the imperatives are from multiple perspectives, thus fostering relational approaches. It is heartening to see that commonly known aspects of successful partnerships are widespread amongst key stakeholder groups (Bernay et al., 2020). Whilst policy makers remain focused on the sustainability of partnerships, the examples emerging in this collection are focused on transformation within and through the work of the partnership itself. At the centre of these transformational partnerships is the agency, responsiveness and awareness of the university and the schools in the partnerships, utilising their collective knowledge and contributing to future-focused knowledge development (Bernay et al., 2020). Ultimately, all partnerships strive for this design and what can be limiting is the genesis of the partnership, particularly with policy funding, which often has a "pre-ordained focus" (Mokler, 2013, p. 287) that does not necessarily respond to the needs of the stakeholders that are brought together by the funding.

Amongst the innovations shared within this collection, we have seen a push away from rigid structures and prescriptive reporting, and a shift towards practices that can transform understandings, learning and practices within and across each partnership setting. Researchers and policymakers have long advocated the importance of school-university partnerships in improving initial teacher education and bridging the research theory nexus. Identifying what constitutes successful partnerships remains at the forefront for all stakeholders. The ability to find common ground, innovate and identify the evolving needs of each partner is essential. Furthermore demonstrating a willingness to work towards a shared vision and a commitment to educational transformation through creative approaches to sharing learning. Sustainability is important, however, should not drive partnerships as needs vary and the focus of each partnership will need to shift. Hence, the greater driver should centre around the impact of the partnership and its ability to transform education. Successful partnerships should continue to evolve, recognising the contextually specific needs of all stakeholders. Policy supporting the development of partnerships should recognise that all partnerships are unique and are constantly evolving. Therefore, the role of policy should be to support and promote innovation and not stifle it which limits responsiveness to context.

Finally, this collection has illuminated the investment in school-university partnerships that exceeds policy requirements or program needs. Despite the challenges that face educational organisations, including the pandemic, these partnerships have endured and their collective creativity has brought about transformational change. The dedication and commitment shared by this group of authors are testament to the power of innovative school-university partnerships in initial teacher education.

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