

# Chapter 4

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



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**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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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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