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## Teaching for the future professional partnership: teacher education students' perspectives

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a case study from a teacher education professional experience project conducted in an Australian regional secondary school. The project used a collaborative, strengths-based model of professional experience. Teacher education students (students) were embedded into the school well in advance of more traditional placement models. Additional opportunities for student support, peer coaching, and time for planning and self-reflection were also included in the model. The case study confirmed that professional experience is a significant milestone event for students enrolled in initial teacher education courses. The students in this study reported that the project allowed them multiple opportunities to be immersed in the school community and this assisted them in developing a strong sense of the profession of teaching, particularly in relation to professional identity, professional respect and professional confidence.

**Keywords:** professional experience; teaching placement; teaching practicum; pre-service teachers; student teachers; case study; strengths approach.

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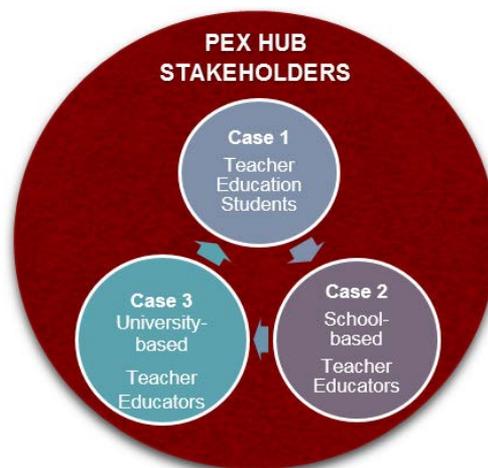
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## 1 Introduction

This paper presents the first case study resulting from a current initial teacher education professional experience hub (PEX hub) project being conducted in an Australian regional secondary school context. The project presented the opportunity to collaboratively research an enhanced model of professional experience with teacher education students (students), school-based teacher educators and university-based teacher educators. The perspectives of the students involved in the project (case 1) will be presented in this paper, while perspectives from the school-based teacher educators (case 2) and university-based teacher educators (case 3) will be presented in later papers. Using an embedded case study research design, the three case studies will also be evaluated in the future, with the aim of combining overall findings, implications and recommendations from the model of professional experience presented in the project (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1** This paper presents case study 1 (see online version for colours)



### 1.1 Context

A PEX hub project agreement was generated between the Australian, state of New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education, a regional university and a regional secondary school. The agreement identified the school as a ‘hub’ school, with a strong relationship with the university in the field of professional experience. The school is located within an agricultural and government services centre in a large regional city containing regional and national services and industries. The school is an Australian comprehensive secondary school for students in years 7–12 (aged approximately 12–18 years). There are approximately 720 students attending the school, 15% of whom identify as Australian Indigenous students (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) and 8% have a language background other than English (ACARA, 2019). According to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) (ACARA, 2015), the school’s socio-economic status, which is based on the parents’ highest level of school attainment, employment and qualifications, is at 920, which indicates significantly higher disadvantage than the state average ICSEA of 1,000. There are approximately 77 staff at the school, including 60 teaching staff and 17 administrative and support staff (ACARA, 2019).

The secondary school was funded by the NSW Department of Education over a period of three years to work with leaders and academics from the university’s School of Education. The overall goal of the project was to enhance professional experience for all stakeholders through the development and implementation of innovative practices and initiatives. Additionally, the project aimed to address issues of professional development for teachers on staff who are further developing their professional skills, and to provide insight into sustainable effective professional experience in a regional high school. More specifically the title of the project was *teaching for the future professional partnership: building expertise and innovative practice*. The professional experience program and its participating teachers and students were supported by a team of senior executive within the school and senior academics within the university. Points of difference from traditional placements included that students were required to submit an application that included an expression of interest (EOI) and the successful applicants were immersed in school culture and events before placement. The students in the project (the research participants in this case study) were placed and introduced to the placement school well in advance of more traditional placement models. The students also kept a reflective portfolio, engaged in classes outside of their specified discipline, were involved in a peer coaching program and received identified time for collaborative learning support during their placements.

A reference group was established for the project in 2015/2016 to enable a collaborative project design with university representatives and education department and school executive members. In early 2016 the PEX hub program was officially launched in the presence of political and educational leaders and with media coverage, with the first group of six students beginning soon after. The first ‘pilot’ year of the program was successfully completed and evaluated in 2016 (phase 1) and, in an iterative process, the project goals for the second year in 2017 (phase 2) were set based on the evaluation. Similarly, the 2018 (phase 3) built on recommendations and feedback from key stakeholders in the previous two years.

Students were selected from the bachelor of education (K-12) initial teacher education course and were students in their third year undertaking a professional experience subject. This was the students’ second placement experience, but their first in

a secondary school. The project goals for phases 2 and 3 included that an explicit research plan be developed and implemented for the program. The research project, therefore, was initiated to mirror the collaborative nature of the project as a site of strengths-based research into factors contributing to effective teacher education within a regional high school. Three key research questions arose from the clear aims of the PEX hub project, namely:

- 1 How has the professional partnership been actualised in this project?
- 2 Is innovative practice evidenced through the project's implementation?
- 3 Is there evidence of the development of expertise for stakeholders?

## 2 Literature review

Researchers have argued for decades that professional experience programs for students need considerable improvement and that designing such programs is a complex task (Bobis, 2010; Lang et al., 2015; Tickle, 1994, 2000). Le Cornu has conducted significant research into pre-service teacher professional experience since the late 1980s, focusing on an Australian context. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) argued that the situation around professional experience was 'in crisis' (p.1800), and that practicum *quality* was often overlooked by regulatory bodies in favour of mandating the minimum *duration* of practicum placements (p.1800), a concern still shared by Reynolds et al. (2016, p.457). Throughout a body of research, Le Cornu and Ewing (2008, p.1803) consistently argued for a move towards more collaborative, collegial models for professional experience that centred around strong, positive relationships between the main stakeholders – engaged together in 'learning communities'.

Le Cornu and Ewing (2008, p.1804) gave a historical account of three different orientations or styles of professional experience placements in Australia – charting the movement away from a passive skills-based 'teaching practice', to a more reflective and active 'practicum' and to the more recent, reciprocal and collegiate *learning communities* model. The concept of learning communities, hybridity and 'third spaces' between university teacher education programs and school settings was also explored in the US by Zeichner (2010). Zeichner called for a paradigm shift towards a non-hierarchical view of relationships between universities, pre-service teachers and schools. Actualising such relationships, however, remains a difficult task. Ell et al. (2017, p.329), explain the practicum as a complex learning system "that is growing and changing at all levels, with nested layers that are simultaneously interacting."

While this case study concentrates on how students encounter professional experience, the intrinsic and necessary links to other stakeholder perspectives are clearly evident in many research findings. Le Cornu and Ewing's (2008) situational analysis of teacher education in Australia deemed that professional experience placements are a complex challenge for all stakeholders, impacted by political, professional, and economic issues. Arshavskaya and Le Cornu (2016) continued to point to a multitude of complex issues that affected pre-service teachers, and their school-based mentors and tertiary supervisors, including an intensification of professional workload in school and university settings, increasing casualisation of staff, difficulties associated with school-university relationships and the procurement of appropriate placements for

pre-service teachers [Le Cornu, (2016), p.81]. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) proffered that high-quality professional experiences “should [at least] have dual outcomes”, being valuable for both students as well as supervising teachers, as part of the “ongoing professional learning journey” (p.1799). Le Cornu (2016) argued further that “learning communities must be implemented intentionally” (p.88), and be supported by the leadership of various stakeholder organisations – “policy makers, education systems, leaders of schools, and leaders of Schools of Education” (p.92). Learning communities must give consideration to the various contexts of stakeholders, and that “reciprocal learning relationships” must be prioritised between student, mentor, and supervisors (p.89).

Researchers have examined how students develop confidence and competence when undertaking professional experience, and have questioned how well teacher education programs prepare students to teach upon graduation. Heeralel and Bayaga (2011) point to international dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching practice. In agreement, Mukeredzi (2014) adds that in South Africa this requires a re-envisioning of the model for practicums – particularly in supporting students in rural and isolated contexts. Buckworth (2017) investigated factors that impede success by examining the experiences of Australian “failing final year pre-service teachers” (p.369). Poor relationships were described as the main discouraging factor. Students cited the supervising teachers’ unwillingness to engage in planning, negative or non-constructive feedback, lack of communication and collegiality, perceived ‘competition’ for future employment, and overly pedantic expectations for lesson planning, resulting in “increasing preoccupation and levels of anxiety as [pre-service teachers] struggled to understand their situation” (p.376). Crosswell and Beutel (2017) found similar negative factors were pertinent for mature students’ success on professional experience as well as “managing diverse learning needs and student behaviours” (p.424) and the need to balance home, family and employment responsibilities. Goodnough et al. (2009) argued, in a Canadian study, that meaningful ways must be found to provide students with a solid foundation to the teaching profession. For many researchers this foundation includes a need to bridge the ‘theory-practice gap’ as students often struggle to apply theoretical knowledge in a classroom environment (Douglas, 2017; Little and Anderson, 2016). Wilkins and Okrasinski (2015) found in the US that a solid foundation was not present when student teachers had limited knowledge and confidence in school induction programs and received little support. In the UK, Prince et al. (2010) highlighted that students were often stressed and tired on placement and needed extra support. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008, p.515) noted that students avoided risk taking, experimental or innovative teaching practices whilst on professional experience placements in order to satisfy the requirements and/or attitudes of supervising teachers. Van Schagen et al. (2017) researched students’ sense of efficacy during placement. They reported that the study found that if students experienced satisfaction during practicum, then they reported higher levels of efficacy. These findings highlight the importance of understanding early practicum experiences and how factors in the practicum experience contribute towards future teacher efficacy.

Research has highlighted a number of strategies that may be beneficial in improving students’ confidence and competence during and beyond the boundaries of professional experience placements (Adey, 2004; Grimmer, 2014; Henry and Weber, 2010). Boyd et al. (2009) and Feiman-Nemser (2012) found that a smooth transition between pre-service and in-service teaching is vital to enhance the success of helping new teachers

enter and stay in the profession. To this effect, in an Israeli context, Fresko and Alhija (2015, p.37) found that induction seminars and facilitated discussions were effective in supporting beginning teachers to share their experiences and collaboratively explore issues. Mukeredzi (2014) reported on the benefits of a cohort model of teaching practice. Significant work has also been undertaken around student pair collaborations and support during placements (e.g., Le Cornu, 2005; Ongo'ndo and Jwan, 2009; Smith et al., 2012; Mukeredzi, 2014). Mentoring, coaching and co-teaching options have also been promoted as positive inclusions to professional experience (Averill et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2016; Stenberg et al., 2016). Finnish researchers, Stenberg et al. (2016) suggest that mentoring must be a collegial relationship that includes 'mutually transformative reflection' to 'problematise and ultimately transform practice' (p.475). The use of reflective discussions and portfolio entries were additional tools to aid such professional development discussions. Murphy et al. (2015) evaluated co-teaching between students and supervising teachers and found that using Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' helped "lessen the gap between theory and practice" (p.281). Ewing and Lowrie (2010) noted successful models of professional experience involved lecturers who worked more closely with the school community and engaged in reciprocal, supportive relationships with students, their supervising teachers, and school professional learning co-ordinators. Development of a professional identity in initial teacher education was advocated by Higgs (2010) as a process where students were acculturated in 'communities of practice'. These communities acted as sites for 'professional socialisation' where pre-service teachers were able to "gain a professional identity, develop professional values and behaviours, and learn how to perform effectively as a member of the profession" (pp.22–23). At a ground level, Ell et al. (2017, p.339) argued that organisational strength was also an important influence on student success, such as "the practicum handbook ... [knowing the] school context ... [and the] relevance [of] course content".

### **3 Method**

#### *3.1 Methodological approach*

A collaborative and strengths-based framework to qualitative research design (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002) was used to address the research questions (Fenton, 2013). Rather than being an expert-led approach, the focus when using a Strengths Approach to research is a respectful collaboration with all key stakeholders to describe and evaluate the project. This framework is used in the research as it aligns well with the research partnership purpose and the aim of revealing the perspectives of the multiple stakeholders involved in the PEX hub project. The design aims to describe and reflect on the 'lived experiences' of the project from different stakeholders' perspectives (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). A strengths approach (McCashen, 2005) framework aims to recognise the complex contexts that influence participation, as well as the existing resilience, strengths, abilities and capacities of individuals (McCashen, 2005). In the case of the students, for example, there was recognition of the unavoidable, inherent power imbalance that exists between students and supervisors during an assessable practicum. Data was therefore collected by a researcher independent of the project after the

practicum results had been finalised. McCashen (2005) describes such considerations as being essential to maintain a sense of ‘power-with’ rather than ‘power-over’ (p.31) research participants.

A case study design was employed to gather rich and “in-depth understanding of a single or small number of ‘cases’, set in their real-world contexts” [Yin, (2014), p.4]. Yin suggests that case studies can consider and reveal complex contextual factors and multiple perspectives of ‘cases’ “resulting in new learning about real-world behaviour and its meaning” (p.4). In this way an embedded, multiple case study is ideal for providing rich descriptions when researching complex situations where there are a number of factors affecting the participants (George and Bennett, 2004), such as in the PEX hub project.

### *3.2 Research aim*

To collaboratively explore and evaluate the PEX hub project with the key stakeholders.

### *3.3 Ethics approval*

The research project has obtained ethics approval both from the ethics committees of both the university and the state of New South Wales Department of Education (HREA 100/2017/29, SERAP 2017503).

### *3.4 Participants*

The research participants in the overall project consisted of 16 students who attended the project professional experience placements over the course of three years, 15 school-based teacher educators and five university-based teacher educators. This case study only presents data from the 16 students involved in the project (six students in phase 1, five students in phase 2 and five students in phase 3). All students consented and contributed to group feedback sessions and 11 participants additionally consented to further individual interviews. As such, the participants constitute a purposeful research sample.

### *3.5 Data collection and analysis*

Qualitative methods, including strengths-based informal face-to-face interviews (Fenton, 2013) and electronic semi-structured interviews (Fenton, 2013), were used to gather data to produce this case study (Yin, 2014). Additionally, existing project notes, meeting minutes and participant reflections were drawn upon to describe the context and boundaries of the case study. Thematic analysis will be applied to all case studies to illuminate how the PEX hub project was implemented and with what results for the different stakeholders [Yin, (2009), p.17]. In this first case study the thematic analysis will focus on the students’ perspectives. The embedded three case study design will also allow cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014) for future publications and assist the overall evaluation of the project. The same ‘compositional structure’ [Yin, (2014), p.175] is being used for each case study, as this will enable both separate thematic analysis and cross case analysis of the three case studies. In a collective iterative process, common and

unique themes will be identified across the case studies which will then be analysed and discussed with reference to existing literature in the field of professional development and in relation to future implications.

#### **4 Project content**

This project was anchored around a 30 days placement subject that the students completed in the secondary school in stages 4 and 5 (years 7–10). It was the students' first experience of teaching in a secondary school. Students were concurrently studying education pedagogy and disciplinary subjects in English, maths, science, history and business studies. Eligible students were informed of the project by email with a personalised video invitation from the school principal and then invited to submit a brief EOI several months prior to the placement commencement. Students were asked why they wished to participate and to outline any particular strengths and areas of expertise they felt that they could bring to the project. The selection of students was completed by a panel of university and school staff. The EOIs were read and considered by the university and senior school representatives, and discussions held on the strengths of potential participants. Consideration was given to the available school faculty members for the supervising teacher roles, and the need to ensure that a representative sample of students for the school placement reflected a typical range of students in similar professional placements. The level of academic performance in university studies was not held as a higher priority for selection, while reasons offered by the students for selection, and the strengths and opportunities they brought to the placement, were given strong consideration.

Once the project commenced, the following professional experience events and strategies were enacted (as noted in the informal project evaluation records for phase 1):

##### *4.1 Project key points as of May 2016*

###### *4.1.1 Prior to professional experience*

- 1 Students received personal tour of school – facilities, school grounds, teaching resources, were informally introduced to teaching staff, had an informal Q&A opportunity during tour (highly valued).
- 2 Students had informal afternoon tea with supervising teachers – a meet and greet and initial discussions about placement – exchanged contact details.
- 3 Students attended a range of school activities and events to familiarise themselves with school culture, programs and school student experience, including athletics carnival, homework centre, professional staff development day, subject specific activities/excursions, Bush Tukka Café/Café J visit.
- 4 The supervising teachers at school undertook peer coaching training and AITSL supervising teaching training modules.

#### *4.1.2 During the professional experience*

- 5 Students attended an official launch of the partnership with university personnel, local member of Parliament, Department of Education Schools Director – included media coverage, meet and greet with key personnel (including university liaison teacher).
- 6 Students were given personalised name badges that identified them with the school (school logo, etc.) and most had staffroom keys issued to them.
- 7 A single university liaison teacher was appointed to provide integrated approach to the student professional experience placement.
- 8 Major new public signage was installed featuring university and school partnership.
- 9 Ongoing liaison occurred between university school of education representative and school professional learning head teacher – emails, meetings, and phone calls.
- 10 Students had enriched professional learning:
  - a Observing special education unit teaching and learning.
  - b Teaching outside their own subject area (year 7 level) – and also preparing a common lesson and observing others teaching the lesson to different students.
  - c Observing each other teaching in own subject discipline for peer discussion.
  - d Observing a range of effective teaching across a range of discipline areas and debriefing teaching approaches/resources.
  - e Observing their own classes being taught in other discipline areas (as well as their own).
  - f Having a dedicated space for the group of university students where they can work, discuss experiences and share insights (as well as space in faculty areas as required)
  - g Attending a range of school activities and events.
- 11 Students were not required to undertake additional responsibilities beyond what they had chosen themselves (with advice and support from the school) – to ensure they were not overloaded beyond their academic study responsibilities, as the professional experience placement was part of their mandatory subject study requirements.

#### *4.1.3 After professional experience*

- 12 Students maintained and continued a reflective journal – recording events and activities, observations and insights, suggestions and feedback.

By the end of 2016 (after phase 1 completion), building on the evaluations of stakeholder groups, it was also decided for the next phase to develop a peer coaching program to engage supervising teachers in peer coaching teams with the students prior to and during placement, and to video some of these sessions for analysis. Further immersion activities prior to commencing the placement were also suggested, such as familiarisation tours, sports and staff events (and an extensive list was prepared for the students to consider). Professional development for supervising teachers was also suggested to enhance supervising teacher understanding and skills in interpreting reporting requirements,

lesson observation coding and in utilising supervision strategies/resources. This reflective, continuous improvement cycle was also repeated after phase 2 to inform the project for phase 3 students.

## 5 Results and discussion

The data collected and analysed predominantly evaluated the perspectives of the small group of students on the project placements (phases 1, 2 and 3). However, as the data analysis progressed, data themes emerged that were pertinent to the broader context of professional experience in Australia. Therefore, findings have been selected and analysed as they relate both to individual experiences and to broader evaluations of professional experience for students.

### 5.1 Results

The students were immersed (embedded) in the school culture and community before and during placement. Via the application/EOI process, students were notified of the location and nature of their professional experience placement well in advance, and participants expressed that this offered greater security and scope for planning than with traditionally organised placements. This was further supported by opportunities to develop relationships with their supervising teachers, as well as the broader teaching staff, in advance of the placement. Although a separate PEX hub room was provided for study purposes, most students used their faculty staffroom as their main teaching experience base in phases 1 and 2. Based on the students' feedback from these phases, specific session times with guest speakers were timetabled for the hub room in phase 3. The organisation of the hub project provided further avenues for professional support, particularly through the school-based liaison person.

**Table 1** Opportunities for immersion in school community before and during placement

Security of placement	Having the security of the local placement in advance was hugely important ... I had the security of knowing where it was going to be so was therefore able to get that work/study balance – ahead of time.	Student 2
	Having a timetable so we could organise our teaching/observation/preparation/consultation times.	Group Student Feedback 2016
	The project gave me time to plan ahead, much more time to prepare and be ready and I think this was the most important aspect really – it actually made me more independent having the early contact with the school.	Student 4
	Extensive prior knowledge of placement location to allow for travel and communication with the school before commencement.	Student 7
	Knowing that you could still work weekends [finding out in advance about local placement] because it is harder financially if your placement is further away.	Student 8
	I already knew where things were and who people were before I started.	Group Student Feedback 2018

**Table 1** Opportunities for immersion in school community before and during placement (continued)

Organisational support from school-based liaison person	I found the support network to be strong, be that through Xxxx [Principal] or the student support team. The highlight of the project was undoubtedly [school liaison person]. Having at least one person who understood the expectations of the placement made a world of difference.	Student 5
	A huge help in this placement was Xxxx [teacher name], her ability to organise the five of us [phase 1]. She was able to organise our timetables, provide us with class observation opportunities every week and she was always there as a welcome support. If we needed anything she was the person to go to. Xxxx [teacher name] was probably the biggest thing that set the professional partnership program apart from a normal placement.	Student 3
	Having the ‘middleman’ was good [school liaison teacher].	Student 8
	Having a school-based coordinator who was accessible – allowed clear lines of communication and common information distributed.	Student 2
	Extra support from school coordinator when any issues arose.	Group Student Feedback 2018
Integration into school community	Being integrated into the school and faculty – and being recognised and known school-wide.	Group Student Feedback 2016
	Greater knowledge about the programs in the school through earlier connections and contact with the school.	Group Student Feedback 2017
	Access to Sentral [online school administrative system] enabled me to see the school context and student context and administrative systems at work.	Group Student Feedback 2017
	Diverse range of classes and subjects available – my specialisation was HSIE (human society in its environment curriculum learning area) – but other teaching areas were available to access – to a larger extent than in an ‘average’ placement – such as woodwork/dance.	Student 1
	Little things – make a huge difference – the attitude towards the students.	Student 1
	Given access to teaching resources very generously – on a USB [portable hard drive] they shared online teaching resources of the school.	Student 11
	I made several great friends at the school who have provided resources, guidance and advice on future accreditation processes.	Student 5
	Separate hub room – the PEX hub [room], although great when studying for our own exams and assessments – it made us very withdrawn from the faculty atmosphere – rather it was more beneficial to remain in the staffroom (phase 2).	Student 7
	Having regular scheduled meetings in the hub room – with scheduled discussion topics with experienced teachers – was very helpful (phase 3).	Student 10

Multiple opportunities were utilised to attend events and build positive relationships both with secondary students at the school and between the three key stakeholder groups. The students were part of the project launch and were given a list of extra-curricular activities and school-based events that they could link into as well as having familiarisation and information sessions at the school in the lead up to their own placements commencing. All of the students indicated that these opportunities were beneficial for them individually and were an overall strength of the PEX hub project. Many participants indicated that being invited to events was beneficial as it helped to foster a sense of belonging, and made them feel welcomed and accepted into the school community from the start of the professional experience in Table 2.

**Table 2** Opportunities to attend events and build relationships at the school

Project launch	In the first couple of weeks of the project being announced – we were invited to come in for interviews and media events – I mean it was very special – we were made to feel special with professional education people attending and having our photos taken with Xxxx [names of dignitaries at events].	Student 2
Multiple opportunities	Along with my other students were interviewed for an article in the local newspaper celebrating the launch.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	So many opportunities for communication and contact before you set foot in the classroom.	Student 8
	Getting to know the school and its resources through the initial tour and Q&A with the coordinator.	Student Group Feedback 2016
Welcomed	Able to make connections with supervising teacher and staff and also school routines with early visits and communication.	Student Group Feedback 2017
	Gave thinking/planning time over a period of weeks which prepared me better for the placement.	Student Group Feedback 2018
	We were made genuinely welcome – with the whole school staff knowing about the project there was genuine interest throughout ... afternoon tea ‘meet and greet’, individual meetings with supervising teachers, faculty events participation, whole school events participation.	Student Group Feedback 2016
Sense of place and belonging	Much more assistance in faculty staffroom as I was known and made welcome more than once prior to placement.	Student Group Feedback 2017
	I felt as if I belonged at the school which was very satisfying for me as I did have some uncertainties heading into my first high school placement.	Student 9
	The whole school was behind the project – and so many staff were supportive and acknowledged me –and actively encouraged me.	Student Group Feedback 2017

Some participants made a link between particular opportunities that were offered for their participation and their own teaching planning and success on placement in Table 3.

**Table 3** Opportunities that were linked to practice success

Visits prior to placement	Going into the school beforehand to meet the students – helped me to identify their strengths and weaknesses.	Student 8
	Just getting insights to curriculum too – you see you were not going in ‘cold’.	Student 2
	I was more organised for my own placement and teaching – with more time to plan lessons and resources for teaching.	Student 11
Homework club	I went to the homework club every couple of weeks this helped to develop a rapport and build relationships prior to my placement – especially with year 9 – they seemed to go [to the homework club].	Student 8
	I was able to attend several homework centres ... attending this enabled me to begin to show my face amongst the students and begin to get to know them as well as some of the staff.	Student 3
Sporting events	Before I started placement I volunteered to help out at the school’s cross country carnival. Here I was able to personally get to know my teacher as well as meet some students that I was going to teach along the way. This really helped getting to know my teacher this early so we could already start planning what we were going to do rather than showing up on the first day and going in completely blind as to what I was going to teach.	Student 9

Students found the additional time allocated in the project for feedback opportunities and to work closely with their supervising teacher in a mentoring or coaching type relationship useful for enhancing their practice in Table 4.

**Table 4** Opportunities for feedback, mentoring and coaching

Additional feedback time	Teacher relief meant that we had more 1 on 1 time with the school-based teacher educator (SBTE), so being a uni student it was really good to have that 1 on 1 time – you know it was not a hassle for the teacher to ‘take that time’. You did not feel you were interrupting them – that it was a time ‘set aside’ for us.	Student 2
	There seemed to be time to run things by the SBTE more and to evaluate with them and debrief after a lesson for example.	Student 4
	I liked being observed and getting feedback.	Student 8
	Had opportunities to observe each other teaching and provide feedback – very valuable once we knew each other [towards end of placement].	Student 10
Knowledge of student	The supervising teachers had greater patience with us – they knew where we were positioned in our course and we had met them earlier to explore classes, topics and teaching resources.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	Supervising teacher was supportive of my ideas/ approaches – what approaches/ideas I prepared were the basis for teaching discussions (I did not feel I had to teach how they wanted or preferred).	Student Group Feedback 2018

It was recognised, however, that these opportunities could be affected by both the student’s and supervising teacher’s capacity and expectations in Table 5.

**Table 5** Challenges in capacity and expectations

Student	I probably should have pushed a little more – taken the offers of time from the SBTE.	Student 4
Supervising teacher	Some of the supervising teachers who had CSU students were already overloaded with school responsibilities – and could not give sufficient time to the project compared with others.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	Supervising teacher not always there – this created some challenges at times [but] I had a different supervising teacher sometimes – and this provided diverse models of teaching/classroom management to observe.	Student Group Feedback 2018

In the project, students were offered the opportunity to experience other classes and engage in peer teaching both within and outside of their nominated discipline area. Typically, being able to experience new subject areas and observe others' practice was expressed as being valuable and a strength of the project. One student expressed concern in phase 1 of needing more support when participating in the special education classes and this opportunity was therefore changed to be limited to scaffolded observational visits in subsequent phases in Table 6.

**Table 6** Opportunities to experience other classes and peer teach

Outside of subject discipline	The opportunity to observe other faculty members' classes as well as the single supervising teacher that was a strength of the project.	Student 7
Peer teaching	Observing peer teaching was a terrific inclusion.	Student 5
	I liked observing other students.	Student 8
Opportunity to participate in special education classes	Working with staff who are specifically trained in special education allowed us to learn new skills and focus on best teaching practices.	Student 7
	Well, although we were given access to the special ed. unit – taken into the rooms and given the opportunity to teach it was not that positive an experience for me because my SBTE was not that teacher [the special education teacher] – and I did not think that there was enough support to do that – have that experience.	Student 2
	Better planning of the special education observation and teaching placement was needed.	Student Group Feedback 2016

The students engaged in critical reflection before, during and after the professional experience. This was an iterative and formative process aimed at improving ongoing practice. Key areas included behaviour management and reflection about the timing of the placement experience in Table 7.

**Table 7** Opportunities for critical reflection

Behaviour management	Classroom management – I had some difficulty at first but also received very useful feedback. We have completed 1 subject on classroom management and the topic is also embedded in a number of other subjects. There is a need to talk about classroom management issues after lessons and to set up strategies for following lessons (phase 1).	Student Group Feedback 2016
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**Table 7** Opportunities for critical reflection (continued)

Behaviour management	We had teachers coming into our uni classroom. This is so current and valuable [experienced teacher came and discussed behaviour management] – very valuable because they are teaching now and some of our other lecturers have not been in the classroom for a while. He gave examples from the day before and how he would go back and follow up with a student – on the ground experience is excellent (phase 2).	Student 4
Timing of professional experience	Timing issues [of placement] – the last two weeks of term is not effective – many disruptions and many students absent. Although this is a reality of secondary school life, for a first placement in secondary it would be better to commence the placement at the start of term, or at least finish the placement before the last few weeks of term.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	With some year 11 classes I felt like I was filling in with learning activities and not actually teaching the content – largely due to near end-of-term placement being just prior to final student exams.	Student 1

## 5.2 Professional teacher identity

A theme that emerged from the students' responses was that through the project they gained understanding of what it meant to be a professional teacher and began to develop their own professional teacher identity. Factors contributing to this development were a sense of collegiality and enhanced connection with their supervising teachers and the school community in the PEX hub project when compared with that experienced on other placements or by their peers in traditional placements. Students commented more generally that placement experiences contributed either positively or negatively in developing teacher identity and that individual student and supervising teacher differences were also an important factor.

**Table 8** Factors affecting professional teacher identity

Positive PEX hub experiences influenced the development of teacher identity	Having a school-style badge was really useful – gave an identity and legitimacy being closely associated with the school – recognised by staff and school students as a teacher in the school.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	With the PEX hub project – I think the quality of placement it made all the difference for me.	Student Group Feedback 2017
	A strength was seeing a much wider range of teaching styles and classroom approaches – and being involved with other school programs, events, classes outside my teaching area.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	Name badge – felt like an actual teacher.	Student 6
	From the start of the discussions about this project I found that I was immediately a part of Xxxx [the school name]. This was achieved through regular meetings and visits to the school. When I turned up to the first day of placement I felt that I was a part of the school.	Student Group Feedback 2017

**Table 8** Factors affecting professional teacher identity (continued)

Positive PEX hub experiences influenced the development of teacher identity	Good opportunity to observe the classes I was going to teach – and then commence more confidently (some started teaching immediately placement began and so were accepted as teachers by students more readily).	Student Group Feedback 2018
	We were not just students but partners in the process.	Student 8
	Name badge – students saw me as a teacher.	
	Being introduced as a teacher by my supervising teacher – this was promoting me as a teacher to students and assisted my acceptance by them as a teacher.	Student Group Feedback 2018
Negative placement experiences can influence the development of teacher identity	Depends so much on your school, the faculty and your SBTE – that makes or breaks ... the supervising teachers have to ‘want’ to have students for the students to be able to get the best out of any placement. If the school and teachers are overloaded it is not going to work as well.	Student 1
Individual student differences developing teacher identity	I think that it is dependent on the student too – you have to put in that extra effort.	Student 2
	I think that what you get out of a placement has more to do with attitudes than anything else – your own and the teachers.	Student 4

### 5.3 Professional respect

The concept of developing and maintaining professional respect was a strong theme that emerged from the data. This professional respect was evident in the positive and respectful relationships that developed between supervising teachers and students. The relationship was hinged on the students’ respectful acknowledgement of their supervising teachers’ expertise and experience, the students’ respect for the school culture and community, the supervising teachers’ respectful acknowledgement of the developing professionalism of their students, and the students’ acknowledgement of the importance of respecting school students and their learning environments in Table 9.

**Table 9** Factors affecting the development professional respect

Respectful relationships	When you go into a placement and the SBTE says “I want you to treat this as our class for the next three weeks” or says ‘let’s try this ...’ you feel part of it already and welcomed and respected.	Student 1
	The attitude of the SBTE is vital – if you are going to be a supervising teacher your job is to help them [students] – acceptance and engagement in the project from the SBTE is vital.	Student 1
	The role of the supervising teacher is vital – I had a previous experience where there was no information at all about anything and then I was asked to teach a lesson about algebra and I had no help or guidance at all would not reply to my emails and did not care.	Student 8

**Table 9** Factors affecting the development professional respect (continued)

Respectful relationships	The placement was hard work but I had a positive attitude – I took up any offers of assistance – people were very supportive and supporting each other.	Student 1
Respecting expertise and experience – in the supervising teacher	My supervising teacher – it was an incredible partnership – perfect mentor as she was available and the Head of the year level and an experienced teacher for 10–12 years.	Student 8
Respecting developing professionalism – in the teacher education student	Straight away I sat down with my teacher and said these are my goals and expectations and she was super on-board with what I wanted to try out and basically said ‘take the wheel’ and ‘go for it’.	Student 8
	She was open for me to write my own assessment and to write and play with this.	Student 8
Respecting the students	Relationships are so important – I realised that as a teacher I just need to give the children a reason to turn up.	Student 1

The students indicated that this acknowledgement from their supervising teachers of the developing professionalism of their teaching skills was a strong contributing factor in building their confidence and identity as a professional teacher.

Sometimes this respectful relationship with their supervising teacher could create a constraint for the student, as they were concerned for their supervising teacher’s busy workload. Students also acknowledged that this relationship with their supervising teacher was very individual and varied from placement to placement, and that flexibility and tolerance were required. At other times the students noted that when there were less-developed professional relationships this did impact on the effectiveness of the placement as well, reinforcing the importance of quality professional relationships. This demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of respectful relationships and the importance of addressing and acknowledging professional respect in relation to the professional relationships between students and their supervising teachers in Table 10.

**Table 10** Factors affecting the development of professional relationships

Teacher education student	When I was on my placement it was around report time so it cut into my planning time with the supervising teacher. I felt that I did not want to bother them or disturb them – so I would sometimes if they asked if I needed anything I would just say ‘I’m OK’ because I knew how busy they were.	Student 4
	Everyone’s placement is individual, personal – you have to be flexible and depending on the match [between student and teacher] it is different.	Student 8
	The school staff in general had good teachers but in terms of my particular placement – the faculty seemed different to other faculties – my specific teacher was sick and possibly it was not appropriate to have a student.	Student 1
	The role of the supervising teacher is vital – I had a previous experience where there was no information at all about anything and then I was asked to teach a lesson about algebra and I had no help or guidance at all would not reply to my emails and did not care.	Student 8

Interestingly, it was often in what may appear as small initiatives that students recognised professional respect for their developing professional identity from their supervising teachers and the school community. In addition, these students recognised that the additional support for them through this project was a form of professional respect for their growth as teachers that all students should have access to (Table 11).

**Table 11** The importance of small initiatives

Respectful initiatives	Having a school-style badge was really useful – gave an identity and legitimacy being closely associated with the school.	Student Group Feedback 2016
	The name badge definitely helped me in feeling welcomed at the school, I felt like I was ‘equal’ with everyone which I have not necessarily felt on other placements.	Student 9
	Keys to school and name badges (gives more realistic experience not only as a student teacher but to how other students perceive you).	Student 7
	Simple things as knowing where the toilets are – are really valuable when starting placement.	Student 9
	If the aim of the project was/is to create better teachers – then why do we (interviewer – the chosen 8?) yes – get extra support? – Why is not this an opportunity for all pre-service teachers?	Student 2

The importance of regular opportunities for students to meet together in order to collaborate and share insights and reflections is also a form of professional respect that should be acknowledged and accommodated, and recognises the importance of respectful relationships among students themselves in Table 12.

**Table 12** Factors influencing collaboration

Respectful collaboration	Well, I think it would have been better if the students were able to collaborate a lot more than what we did. Whilst we were able to see each other it was often short and infrequent. A dedicated time for us to sit and chat/work on lesson plans/bounce ideas off one another would have very helpful and insightful. Therefore, this would have required a dedicated space for us to be able to do this. We did have a space available to us at the time, but it was being used by researchers from New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA).	Student 4
	The separate prac. room was not quite set up (still installing items) and also it was a long way from the faculty locations – problematic for use as a meeting space/preparation space effectively.	Student 2

#### 5.4 Professional confidence

Intertwined with the themes of professional identity and respect, the students often commented positively regarding developing self-confidence at the beginning, during and after the placement. Interestingly, responses also included practical organisational factors that appeared to have influenced their confidence in the placement process overall. The underlying premise of many of these student comments was that it was often little things that made a big impact in raising professional confidence.

**Table 13** Factors influencing professional confidence.

Expressions of self-confidence	It was a good opportunity to observe the classes I was going to teach – and then commence more confidently.	Student Group Feedback 2018
	At the start of the placement I probably lacked confidence in the classroom and being that dominant figure however that disappeared as the placement went on.	Student 6
	I was confident, positive afterwards [after the placement].	Student 8
Personal factors positively affecting confidence	I found the other students involved in the project helpful and it felt like a team environment.	Student Group Feedback 2018
	You had to speak up to take opportunities if someone takes you ‘under their wing’ – if you have that initially then you actually end up becoming more independent.	Student 8
	You feel that it is OK to fail and that it is OK to take a risk when you are part of a supported placement.	Student 1
Organisational factors positively affecting confidence	The certainty of where you were going was a big strength.	Student 1
	One of the many major benefits of this project was to meet the staff of the school we were going to as well as meeting our supervising teacher months before our placement begun. We had the opportunity to sit in on a staff meeting as well as having a tour of the school. This exposure to the school so early ended up being a huge benefit when I started placement.	Student 9
	It was well organised – for example, the timetables were out well in advance – I felt like I was literally ‘in the right space’ that I needed to be.	Student 1

## 6 Limitations and conclusions

This nuanced case study consisted of a purposeful and contextualised sample of students undertaking the PEX hub project in three phases over a 3-year period in one school. As such, methods were applied consistently and rigorously, and the findings can be viewed as valid and reliable for the students and the school studied. The small number of participants and contextualised nature of the research precludes universal generalisability or exact replication of results. This is, however, a noted limitation of all case study research – and the case study method was not specifically chosen to be statistically relevant (George and Bennett, 2004). The case study was, however, true to the intended method in providing an in-depth study of the particular group of participants (students) undertaking and evaluating a unique professional experience project.

The PEX hub project generated very positive outcomes for the students participating. The students reflected that major benefits were the organisational effort and communication put into the early confirmation of the placement school and introducing the students to the school environment and staff well before the placement commenced. The opportunity to participate in existing school activities in advance of the placement, designated planning time and space, and a specific school liaison person were also very

clearly strategies that aided the students to build relationships with school students and staff. All students involved with the project expressed that immersion in the school's culture and community was very beneficial to their success on placement.

The authors argue that many of the findings noted for this contextualised case study are deemed as being easily transferable across contexts, able to be integrated into existing infrastructure and processes, and notably not entailing high implementation costs. While some elements of the project may not be as easily transferable for large scale adoption, such as the EOI process, simple strategies such as an early introduction to the placement school and supervising teacher are evaluated as most valuable improvements that can undoubtedly be made. A highly significant finding from this case study was the high importance the students placed on low cost, small strategies such as introductions and welcome events, a clear timetable, tour of the school, name badge, staff room key and access to school online administrative systems. The authors proffer that when looking at sustainable ways to enhance professional experience for teacher education significant initiatives such as these cannot be underestimated.

From the perspective of the students involved, the research identified three key elements that enhance professional experience. Professional experience is successful when students understand and develop a strong sense of the profession of teaching, particularly in relation to:

- 1 professional identity
- 2 professional respect
- 3 professional confidence.

While these elements and the findings pertaining to them importantly confirm and build upon previous findings identified in the literature review, there were certain new and revealing nuances identified in this case study. A new finding is that developing professional identity, professional respect and professional confidence did not work in only one direction or in isolation for the students. Indeed, school and university teacher educators and students need to model a three-way interactive professional teaching partnership that recognises the significance of identity, respect and confidence in all stakeholders' professional practice. The study provides a nuanced response to professional experience in a regional secondary school that was beneficial to the students as key stakeholders. It is anticipated that these findings will be of benefit for planning future professional experience programs and research undertaken in this field.

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