Graduate teachers' sense of belonging anchored in experiences of preservice internships and employability

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Abstract

Within initial teacher education (ITE), there is a complex and dynamic relationship between the theoretical content delivered within university settings and the practical components experienced within schools. Strengthening the nexus between the two represents the ongoing work of teacher educators and an ongoing challenge for pre-service teachers. Extended teaching internships (e.g., of 12 months duration) provide opportunities to develop pre-service teachers' knowledge through classroom application. These extended professional experience components are justified through how they facilitate entry into the profession and support graduate teachers' traction within the early career phase – an outcome commonly referred to in Australian policy and public discourse as being 'classroom-ready'. This mixed-methods research presents findings from an examination of a year-long internship. Through surveys and interviews, graduates shared their experiences and perspectives of what they gained from their involvement. Drawing on conceptual tools of community of practice and pillars of the Framework of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher Resilience, the analysis identified participants' sense of belonging and employability as regular and significant outcomes of the internship. Participants reported feeling a sense of belonging to their internship school colleagues and to teaching, explaining this as an influential factor to graduate employment, early career traction and pathways that carried them beyond the early career phase. These findings have implications for the priorities and outcomes pursued through extended internships, especially during a time where employment-based internships are burgeoning. Further long-term research is needed to understand the extent of impact of extended internships on career trajectories and continuity.

Keywords

internship, graduate employability, early career teacher, pre-service teacher, initial teacher education

Introduction

Graduate employability has been a focus in the global education landscape throughout the 21st century. Graduate teachers are those who have completed their initial teacher education (ITE) program and are within the first two years of teaching in schools or early-year settings. Linking with this, the attraction, retention and career progression of teachers have been the focus of much

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research over the past several decades. At a policy level, there has been increasing interest in the employability of these graduates and the ITE courses that have prepared them. Given that the strength of any education system is associated with the strength of its ITE sector (Darling-Hammond, 2020), Australia has invested in considerable policy development to strengthen ITE over the past decade, most recently in the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (Department of Education, 2022a). In Australia, the focus over the past decade has been on 'classroom-ready' graduates is further evident in reviews of teacher education and policy directives including Action Now: Classroom-ready teachers (Craven et al., 2014) and, more recently, the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (Department of Education, 2022a). Both have sought to strengthen ITE courses within universities to ensure an adequate supply of classroom-ready students complete their studies and succeed in the workforce. However, many economic, social and policy matters impact the success of ITE, and these factors have had a significant impact on ITE and the concept of 'classroom readiness' over the past decade across the interconnected educational ecosystem – early childhood, schools, systems, and tertiary sectors.

Internationally, ITE is developed and delivered within a highly structured policy and accreditation environment (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2019; Californian Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2024; Department for Education (UK), 2024; Phelan & Morris, 2021). Underpinning this agenda in Australia is a significant focus on teacher quality and improving student learning outcomes (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). Within this framework, professional experience (work-integrated learning) components receive specific attention within the Accreditation Standards and Procedures (AITSL, 2019), which outlines the accreditation requirements for ITE providers. More recently, the new Australian Professional Experience Guidelines (AITSL, 2024) have articulated how these accreditation requirements translate into practice. Teacher educators must ensure their pre-service teachers (PSTs) engage in professional experience placements at or beyond the minimum requirements set for each program, which currently sits at 80 days for undergraduate PSTs and 60 days for postgraduate PSTs. How ITE providers meet these obligations is intricately woven into program design and varies from context to context. Over time, and in response to a range of pressures, the practical components of ITE programs have diminished (Reid, 2011), while many partners, including PSTs, call for more time in the classroom throughout their preparation programs.

Offering extended periods of placement addresses many of the calls for more time in the classroom. An extended teaching internship based in a classroom over a 12-month duration is a unique approach. This research looked at a program and a number of participants' experiences to contribute to the literature on extended internships in ways that can inform current and emerging practices for employment-based and extended internship arrangements. The purpose of this research was to identify key elements of an extended internship and how this connected with improved employability opportunities. The research sought to examine 'What are the early career outcomes and workforce implications of participation in a 12-month final year, pre-service teaching internship?'

Professional experience (work-integrated learning) in ITE

Professional Experience is often referred to within the Australian context as 'prac', 'practicum', 'placement', 'prof-ex', 'teaching block', 'teaching practice', 'clinical placement' and other context-specific terms like 'assistant teacher program (ATP)' or 'internships' (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Each of these terms refers to the work-integrated learning (WIL) activities that are core components of Australian ITE. There are minimum requirements and conditions set for Australian ITE providers (AITSL, 2019) including a minimum number of days within teaching and learning contexts where the conditions must be conducive to PST learning and development in ways that reflect graduate teaching (AITSL, 2022).

Regular models of professional experience involve PSTs working in early learning centres and schools for blocks of the academic year. Their university programs prepare them for time spent in learning environments and regularly provide opportunities to reflect on practice (Le Cornu, 2015; Scott & Willison, 2021). They work under the guidance of centre- or school-based experienced mentor

teachers and key members of the site leadership (Le Cornu, 2010; Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021). Experienced mentor teachers and leaders provide PSTs with ongoing guidance, close to the point of need, which is embedded within the practice and priorities of their teaching contexts (Haas et al., 2022). As PSTs progress through their ITE programs, they assume ever-expanding responsibility for more aspects of the role of 'teacher' (Cohen et al., 2013; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021).

The objective of ever-expanding responsibility is well established within the policy and practice of Australian ITE, however, organising, implementing and completing these WIL components, and ensuring course accreditation requirements are met, are complex. Britzman (2007) argued that many assumptions made about the orderly, predictable and manageable development of PSTs are naïve as, among their other key points, growing up in schools makes it difficult for PSTs to confront some of the taken-for-granted beliefs about teaching's functions and purposes. Professional experience is one such space where beliefs about teaching and its purpose emerge as tensions for PSTs. Often experienced as disruptions (McIntosh et al., 2024) and threats to long-held views of teachers and teaching, PSTs must learn to exist within circumstances that '…tolerate and value the uncertainty of development as a strange and even alienating resource for understanding the great conflicts our field absorbs, creates, and lives within…' (Britzman, 2007, pp. 3-4). How we do this is a constant source of challenge within competing discourses about what matters within (Le Cornu, 2016) and beyond ITE (Department of Education, 2022b).

Professional experience is often a time of great enthusiasm and significant challenge for PSTs as they attempt to reconcile dominant perspectives with the realities of teaching (Crosswell & Beutel, 2013). This is complex work but is essential to understanding the profession (Osberg & Biesta, 2010). Importantly, it is exposure to the authentic challenges and experiences of the classroom that enable PSTs to align themselves with the profession (Morrison, 2013) and to understand the nature of their future work (Millswater & Beutel, 2008). Notably, the contexts and outcomes of professional experience are recognised as highly variable, and this compels teacher educators to pursue innovations that contribute more reliably to the outcomes of PSTs (Clifton & Jordan, 2022; Kaufman & Ireland, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2019). The reflection and innovation within teacher education emphasise the theoretical underpinnings of a practice-based approach to ITE (Forzani, 2014), the dispositions and outcomes pursued through it (Wang & Odell, 2002), and the teaching and learning contexts of this vital work. Associated with the priorities above, is the importance of partnerships with industry to support PSTs (Clarke & Winslade, 2019; Department of Education, 2023; Walker et al., 2019).

Like professional experience, internship is a broad term used to explain and describe various components of professional experience within ITE (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). Internships range from short-term (four-week) paid experiences during ITE (Wong-Ratcliff & Mundy, 2019) to semester-long (or more), continuous and culminating professional experience engagements related to curriculum specialisations (Rhoads et al., 2011). What constitutes an internship is ambiguous, and professional experience activities explained as internships are elsewhere described as simply professional experience or practicum (Klassen & Durksen, 2014). The outcomes associated with internship include a range of indicators, including enhanced teacher self-efficacy and enthusiasm for teaching (Michos et al., 2022). In a few cases, the term refers to a longer duration of placement over a 12-month period (Foxall, 2014; Ledger & Vidovich, 2018; Tasmanian Government, 2020). This inconsistent use of terminology creates ambiguity about the available data and literature related to extended school-based internship programs. The project reported on here, and the ITE program it relates to defines an internship as a placement activity that extends over an entire school year. Interns work with the same mentor teacher(s) and within the same school for this duration, incorporating course-based professional experience placement components into this time spent in the classroom.

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Extended internships for enhanced employability

Darling-Hammond (2020, p. 61) argues for 'extended, well-supervised clinical experiences that are carefully chosen to support the ideas presented in closely interwoven coursework… [built on] shared beliefs and practices among school- and university-based faculty…'. These strategic alignments of coursework and application reflect what others have shown to the products of quality extended teaching internships. For example, Foxall (2014) identified early career retention as an outcome of the extended internship. Alongside enhanced opportunities to develop a shared repertoire of professional skills for teaching, graduates of extended internships were reported to stay in teaching for longer (Foxall, 2014). The extended internship intentionally replicated elements of early career support (Kelchtermans, 2019), while allowing for relationships to develop between the intern and mentor teacher (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021). This provided authentic opportunities for mentors to embrace their role as teacher educators to support and assess the intern over an extended period of time (White & Forgasz, 2017).

Typically, graduates who have completed extended internships have experienced a wide range of opportunities beyond that of their traditional pathway colleagues. The extended internship has provided ongoing opportunities for these PSTs to connect theory and practice. This extended activity occurred within an early childhood setting or school where the PSTs developed close working relationships with their mentor teacher(s) and teaching colleagues (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021). This experience familiarised PSTs with their teaching communities and instilled within them a sense of belonging (Pendergast et al., 2020; Wenger, 1998). Additionally, as participants were situated in the workplace throughout the final year of their ITE course, this provided additional time to understand and engage with the rigours of the profession. This in turn enabled them to proactively shape the process and work on the profession-specific tasks (Walker et al., 2019) and replicated the importance of early career support (Kelchtermans, 2019).

Extended teaching internships were initially conceived and implemented during an oversupply of graduate teachers, which in itself was due to limited employment opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). The perceptions of employers at this time were that those who undertook an extended internship were more likely to be employed (Foxall, 2014). These internship graduates were known to their workplace; they were connected to teaching colleagues; and they understood the systems of the workplace and the priorities that underpinned practice within it. Similar to The Hub Project (Clarke & Winslade, 2019), which prioritised the abovementioned benefits that stem from an extended internship, the internship program being reported on here situated participants within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and focused on aspects of PST preparation in ways that ensure they are well-prepared for teaching (Foxall, 2014).

Teacher educators in some institutions have prioritised extended internships as an approach in response to critiques of ITE (Bullough et al., 2004). These critiques of ITE have persisted over many decades in Australia (Mayer, 2014) as they have in other parts of the world (Darling-Hammond, 2000), with the ultimate goal of enhanced teacher education to develop better teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2020). The application of knowledge within the classroom is prominent within the latest review of the Australian ITE (Department of Education, 2022b). However, as Darling-Hammond posits (2020) framing the relationship between school-based and university-based preparation as a dichotomy is a perpetual tension, which ignores the rich opportunities that come from strategic investment in the two. Most research into extended internships focuses on previous interns' experiences of becoming and not how these experiences underpin quality teacher preparation (Wilson et al., 2002).

The recent Australian government response to teacher shortages has resulted in a burgeoning range of 'employment-based' programs similar to Foxall's (2014) 12-month internship. The proliferation of new ITE offerings seeks to capitalise on the outcomes associated with extended internships, yet there is no evidence base to support this practice. The changing roles and responsibilities of PSTs, akin to those of a qualified graduate teacher taking on the full responsibility of teaching, are occurring without

the typical support and community of practice provided to PSTs whilst on placement (Bowshall-Freeman et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2023).

Methodology

The researcher team for the project were involved in the delivery and development of extended teaching internship programs at various Australian universities and schools. The project drew upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptual framework of situated learning within a community of practice approach to capture the lived experience of PSTs working within an extended placement. The theoretical concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000) provided language perspectives (community, practice, meaning and identity) that illustrate the outcomes and connectivity between extended internships, employability and graduate teacher standards. Added to this was the Framework of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher Resilience (Johnson et al., 2015), which provided an understanding of five key areas of focus: policies and practice; teachers' work; school culture; relationships; and teacher identity. The research was reviewed and approved by the human research ethics committee of Murdoch University (approved protocol 2021/117).

Participant recruitment was purposive (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) in nature, with invitations to participate disseminated through the Alumni Office of one Australian university that delivered an extended teaching internship. Participant selection was time-bound by the ten-year period in which the extended internship was delivered. Graduates from all ITE courses delivered within this university (i.e., Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary ITE courses) were invited to participate in an anonymous survey via an email link. Participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews by providing a contact email address. Interview participants were then contacted by the researchers directly. The interviews drew upon the expertise of the researchers along with the theoretical lens of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998, 2000).

Ten survey participants initially self-nominated to engage in the semi-structured interviews research semi-structured interview stage, which resulted in eight interviews. The respondents resided in Western Australia, as well as other parts of the nation and world. The qualitative semi-structured interviews (n=8) were offered as face-to-face or online activities to cater for the geographical location of participants and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time. Each interview was recorded using Microsoft Teams, transcribed and confirmed by each participant through member checking before being de-identified before analysis. Once the qualitative data had been confirmed and de-identified with assigned pseudonyms, the focus was on reading and re-reading the interview data using an inductive and iterative approach to reveal key themes. This process was undertaken using QSR NVivo software by the lead author and later discussed with the supervision team. After the inductive process occurred, codes were deductively aligned to nine themes that linked directly with the theoretical framework underlying the project: authentic practice; becoming a teacher; belonging to a school community; impact of internship; motivations for internship; purpose of the internship; relationships; self-perception; and shared repertoire (understandings and practices). These themes were coded using themes from the communities of practice framework (Wenger, 1998) and analysed with a broader contextual lens using the Framework of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher Resilience (Johnson et al., 2015), which divides a PST's work into five areas of impact and significance: policy and practice, teachers' work, school culture, relationships and teacher identity. The connection between communities of practice and the Early Career Teacher Resiliency Framework led to the development of a conceptual framework that is discussed elsewhere (Fielder et al., 2024).

Findings

The findings in this paper focus on the perspectives of participants involved in an extended internship situated within a school. The qualitative comments give participants' opinions, exemplifying the

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connections between the extended internship, the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Trenholm & Peschke, 2020; Wenger, 1998) framework, employability and graduate teacher standards and their sense of belonging within the school context. The themes provide clarity regarding communities of practice and the alignment to the Framework of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher Resilience (Johnson et al., 2015) and offer areas for recommendations and reflection.

Sense of Belonging that Enhanced Employability

Participants voiced how the extended internship better prepared them for teaching and in turn, for improved employment opportunities. This links with the Identity aspect of the communities of practice framework. Illustrated below, Alex spoke about how she was given real experience (shared practice) in planning for excursions and incursions, a skill that enhances employability when articulated in a written application or at an interview. This learning experience of planning and conducting an excursion was an important experience that was undertaken within a supportive school community environment.

> *Not only was I working with my classroom teacher working in a block of other year 4/5 classes, I got to meet the other teachers, and also the opportunity to plan excursions and things like that... I got the opportunity to work with … the registrar and getting payments in, it's sort of given me the opportunity to experience that as well. So not only I found the stuff in the classroom beneficial working with other people in the school… it's a big picture. (Alex)*

A different aspect of the extended internship that participants spoke about was the experience of developing relationships with children and their families. This links with a sense of belonging to the school community. Charlotte spoke about understanding this as a whole year cycle, and how this allowed her to present herself with skills that may not otherwise have been evident when applying for employment.

> *Having that hands-on experience, that a two week prac[ticum] cannot give you, that getting the rapport with the children, having the rapport with the parents. That whole yearly cycle, as I said, really geared me up, and I could present myself for future jobs as a semi experienced teacher. (Charlotte)*

Participation in the extended internship led to a range of employment opportunities. This was sometimes within the same school, however, as Lorretta suggested, this also extended beyond the immediate school community and reflected the perception of the quality of teachers coming from the program. The recommendations of one principal to another often led to improved employment opportunities during a time when there were many graduates entering the profession.

> *The year that I graduated was the highest [number of] graduate students in primary education. I did an internship. It sets a portfolio up … going from a contract and then by the time I was finishing my first semester at [my school], I was already told I was going to get a contract for the year after, but then the principal says to me, 'Oh, there's a new school opening up down the road. I can't offer you permanency, but I'm going to recommend that you go for that and I'll recommend you to the principal for a position there'. So, I think it just kind of just snowballs. So, you go into an internship, you prove yourself. You prove what you can do over a length of time and people form a trust, and then you get recommended on, and then you form the trust there and you get recommended. It forms a pathway of success, really of where you're going. (Lorretta)*

The sense of belonging that participants spoke about links integrally with their growing understanding of who they were as a teacher and how they developed their personal teacher identity, an important link in becoming a teacher.

Achieving Shared Practice through the Graduate Teacher Standards

Making the link between theoretical understanding and the practical application of knowledge is an important element of any professional experience and connects with the Practice component of the communities of practice framework (Wenger, 1998) and early career traction. All ITE graduates are required to meet the AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2022) at a graduate level by the end of their course by completing a Teacher Performance Assessment task which is moderated and shows attainment. Unlike traditional placements, embedded within the extended year-long internship program is the support provided by the school to facilitate the process in achieving a shared meaning to achieve the graduate teacher standards. In the example below, Daisy discussed the role of the school coordinator and how this support instilled a sense of belonging and a long-term understanding of the role of a teacher.

> *And [the school coordinator], who was in charge of the internship programme… she was amazing support. I think it was every Tuesday afternoon … she used to get the three interns altogether. We used to have a chat around the standards, and she used to say 'okay, how are you achieving this standard?' … it was just fantastic support out there… it felt more like a family, to be honest rather than just studying … It's got to be one of the best experiences I've ever done. … I wouldn't be the teacher I am today if it wasn't for that internship. (Daisy)*

Daisy went on to discuss an area of concern that she had and the process of support that she received. The sense of belonging to the school community positioned Daisy to seek this support when needed. By having this connection and belonging to the school community, Daisy was able to source the necessary guidance, not just from her mentor teacher but also from the school coordinator, to ensure that she was equipped to meet the graduate requirements in an area where she felt that she did not perform strongly in.

> *… they [mentor teacher/school coordinator] would observe my teaching ... They would give me feedback, both positive feedback and also feedback where I need to improve. They were always referring me back to the standards and making sure that I was consciously aware of what I was ticking. … before I went out to [regional community], probably one of my weaknesses was my assessment. And I actually told the coordinator that I said, 'I feel like my assessment isn't quite there yet', so they really facilitated and helped me to build [skills] in my assessment… They said, 'You know, there's rubrics'. So we sat down one afternoon after school and they helped me come up with the rubrics for a recount. They also helped me to come up with diagnostics. They involved me in moderation tasks with my collab[oration team] as well. And through that moderation we were able to see… how are we going to move these kids up. (Daisy)*

Tara similarly spoke about how being involved in the extended internship program helped her to achieve graduate standards. Although she did not make explicit links to the graduate standards, she talked about understanding the planning process (standard 3), assessment cycles (standard 5), and engaging with parents and attending staff meetings (standards 6 and 7).

> *Being in a classroom for the [extended] length of time … I found that I wasn't just focused on one particular thing. For one term, I was able to see how units link across the year. See how, what's been introduced at the beginning of the year, how that then turns into the assessment cycles, how to do reporting … even a little bit of communication with parents … I was required to go along to all the staff meetings, be involved in school (Tara)*

While these opportunities can occur within shorter placements, being embedded in a school for an extended duration assists in understanding how these elements of the graduate standards are applied over time.

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Understanding Teachers' Work and Early Career Traction

The skills that were learnt during the extended internship often brought life-long learning opportunities that followed through in the participants' careers. Developing this Meaning with the community of practice was a key outcome. The ability to work with colleagues is not only a graduate requirement but also a skill that is learnt over time. Having worked in this environment of collaboration and understanding that teaching is not a solo venture, rather you need to work together to achieve a balance between working effectively and with focus. Caity explained this complex skill below.

> … it's taught me how to collaborate with other teachers. That you're really not on your own and that you can work with your colleagues to build on and create something more. It's not just you. And I think that was a big turning point for me to know that because that's the scariest thing in an internship. You've got to do everything, and it's like, 'How am I going to balance this?' To see that … she's like, 'Okay, you're going to handle this part.' Our working together to make the workload a little bit easier to understand the children in different ways (Caity)

Learning from an early stage about extra-curricular activities that form part of the role of a teacher was something that Josie resonated with. Experiencing some of the special days and events in a school prepared her for the cycle of teaching and learning during a school year. She spoke about observing other teachers and using those observations to inform her future teaching, utilising activities and opportunities she was engaged with from a teacher's perspective.

> it gave me ideas about when I finish what I'm gonna [sic] do with my class, how I'm going to set my class up, what activities they will do with my class at the beginning of the year. You know all those extra things that teachers get caught up in [during] the year that you're not really told about. You know, the Science day and the NAIDOC day and the this day and that day of the sports carnivals and that sort of thing. You don't always get an opportunity to be part of that and understand how it all works. And so, I don't know, it can be pretty scary. I think when you start teaching, you're told you've got to do this, this and that and you've got no experience of it. So, having the opportunity to see all that through the year, just, I think, made me, even though I was already working a school, it was a completely different environment. (Josie)

Balancing professional workloads in teaching is an ongoing battle for many teachers. Charlotte discussed below how learning about the demands of the workload was helpful and that she uses strategies and resources shared by colleagues. This continued theme of collaboration with colleagues to make the workload manageable resonated amongst most participants.

> I still use some of the strategies and resources that were given to me, not necessarily from my immediate colleagues that I was working with, but, definitely from the ones I network worked with within the school. So it was really just like picking, I guess, the things that I liked, to take with me and things probably that I didn't like, I just kind of, like, dropped and left behind. It definitely did equip me for the workload. I wasn't surprised with the workload coming into a new school … as far as equipping us for what the school needs were, I think that was catered for really, really well (Charlotte)

These experiences during an extended internship are better preparing the graduates for the demands of the profession into their early career and beyond.

Sense of Belonging within the School Community

The extended internship provided an opportunity for participants to feel part of a larger community of practice beyond their mentor-teacher environment and develop their sense of belonging within the school community. Understanding learning as part of belonging to a community within the community of practice was essential. The noticeable difference between feeling like a visitor in the school and

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being included within the staff community was particularly noted by Daisy when she said 'I didn't feel like a prac student. I felt like I was part of the school, I was part of staff.'

The sense of belonging developed on many levels. For Leo, who now teaches overseas, it was that the community of teachers within his school extended beyond teaching colleagues. The teachers built their relationships both professionally and personally. This was particularly evidenced when he spoke about his recent wedding in an international location. The connection that he had developed during the extended internship was evident with how he valued this at an important lifetime milestone.

> *I was really lucky at the school I was in had a community of teachers that just wanted to be friends with each other and wanted to have that kind of colleague friendship relationship. … you [could] go to them and ask them, 'I've got a drama lesson next week. What would be a good idea?' And they would talk me through sometimes for suggestions. I mean to this day, we kind of keep in touch and when I got married last week, we're on facetime to each other. I think that's quite special too, six years down the road. We're still keeping contact and still well connected. I think that's so valuable. I think it's a good message for new teachers, or training teachers that to know as well, that you can be friendly with your colleagues. (Leo)*

The connection between the extended internship participants and their mentors often went beyond the boundaries of the internship. The support and guidance that nurtured a sense of belonging during the internship often led to lifelong friendships. Caity, who now works in an international school overseas, discussed how it was not just the professional side of things that created the sense of belonging. Often it went beyond the confines of the internship and grew into lifelong connections.

> *I thought that was really important, that you can build that sort of trust relationship with someone … it wasn't always just my mentor. … I could just be like, 'Help!' with this and she was always wonderful to just say 'I think this is what I can do to help'. So to have an open collaboration, even after I've left the school, I think was really good and even now, it's 10 years later. I'm still being able to be able to connect, see how they're going, and they check in every now and again as well to see how's it going overseas and things like that (Caity)*

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore a year-long teaching internship. The findings from this study identify a sense of belonging and improved employability as important outcomes from participation in the program. Producing an ongoing pipeline of classroom-ready, quality graduate teachers is a priority for the government, ITE providers and industry stakeholders (Department of Education, 2021; Department of Education, 2023). Ensuring that these graduates fully understand the profession's demands and how teaching evolves during a school year is extremely important for their professional development and employability. The extended teaching internship provided participants with time and opportunities throughout a full school year by being situated and supported in a community of practice (a school). The participants discussed many complex elements of their practice, all while developing their identity as teachers (Morrison, 2013), making meaning of what they were enacting while being situated and belonging to a community. These discussions typified the elements of learning within a community of practice (a school) as outlined by Wenger (1998) and Pyrko (2017). The school site provided participants with learning through a sense of belonging (community), learning as becoming (identity), learning as doing (practice) and learning as experience (making meaning) (Wenger, 1998).

Improved Employability

The employability learnings gained by participants being situated in schools over an extended period links closely to the five components of Johnson et al.'s (2015), framework: policy and practice, teachers' work, school culture, relationships, and teacher identity. Participants discussed the

employability of extended teaching interns which connects with the work that Foxall (2014) undertook with principals. The strong connection between both projects links the classroom readiness of this cohort of PSTs with them being situated within a school community for an extended period which replicated conditions of early career support (Kelchtermans, 2019). The mentoring that was initially evident often became collegial. The voices of participants resonated strongly with this, and how they belonged not only to the school community but also how these connections have endured time and location (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021).

The authentic learning opportunities provided to extended teaching interns afforded them regular chances to develop their skills and knowledge of teaching in a real-life environment. Participants identified how being situated over time built their capacity during internships and into their early careers as graduates. Some key elements of the internship experience and how they differed from other preservice teachers were seen as critical, and Josie encapsulated this relevance as she highlighted the importance of understanding how a school starts the year which links with early career support as discussed by Kelchtermans (2019) and situates this activity as capacity building rather than deficit fixing.

> *…it's all well and good coming in [to school in] third term. But by then the teacher's already done all these things to establish relationship and build that with kids, [she's developed] trust, and knows the kids…having that opportunity to see how they do it at the beginning of the year and how they get to know…things at the beginning of the year, knowing where all the kids sit, knowing all those pre-assessments you have to do. It was really that extra experience, that extra year long…adventure. (Josie)*

Improving Belonging

The sense of belonging in communities of practice was an important theme reiterated throughout the research. This is a feature of the extended internship model that moved participants from peripheral to situated learning. Interns in a supportive environment spoke about how this allowed them to develop connections beyond the immediate role with a broader connection, which was captured by Caity.

> *…the way that the teachers out there really all stuck together and banded together was something that really drew me…When you see that these guys are really friends for life, and they help each other…it wasn't just a teaching job…these are like family. (Caity)*

The model developed within the extended internship program intentionally replicated conditions of support and mentoring within a school setting (Fox et al., 2016; Hudson, 2012; Kelchtermans, 2019; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021; White & Forgasz, 2017) traditionally seen during the early career phase of teaching. By utilising pre-existing support structures before course completion and graduation, extended interns were afforded many opportunities to develop their purpose and meaning of teaching (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014; White & Forgasz, 2017). Innovations like this are critical to generating new opportunities to imagine ITE and how PST development occurs within the shared spaces of universities and schools (Clifton & Jordan, 2022).

These findings provide an evidence base that emphasises the benefit of ITE providers and schools working together to provide extended internship opportunities that develop the professional growth of PSTs. PSTs on extended internships are situated within and connected to supportive and meaningful settings before completing their ITE programs. During this time, authentic arrangements are created for PSTs to complete their qualifications as valuable members of their host learning communities. This collaborative support was proven to build graduate confidence and in turn, enhance their progression and retention.

This research emphasises the importance of extended internship models and how situated within professional experience environments is beneficial for preparing teachers for the profession. Equally,

as the teaching profession rapidly evolves in response to workforce shortages, such programs may offer valuable connections and successful transitions between teachers' pre-service and early career phases.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the enhanced employability of participants in an extended teaching internship along with the achievement of the graduate level of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2022), how learning opportunities translated into lifelong learning and how the internship promoted a sense of belonging to those involved, both professionally and personally. The findings provide an evidence base for the importance of Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework in the development of 'classroom ready' graduates. Participants found the internship provided them with a sense of belonging (community), learning as becoming (identity), learning as doing (practice) and learning as experience (making meaning). The research project initially focused on the retention and career traction of early career teachers who had been involved in the extended internship over a twelve-month period. The themes discussed in this paper demonstrate the strong connections that develop during the internship and how they have a profound impact on the participants well into the future. The preparation of being classroom-ready during the internship and the employment opportunities that arise from this cannot be understated, reinforcing the research by Foxall (2014) regarding the perception of principals around readiness for the workforce and employability of this cohort.

The Framework of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher Resilience (Johnson et al., 2015), which divides a PSTs' work into five areas of impact and significance: policy and practice, teachers' work, school culture, relationships and teacher identity was useful for providing a broader contextual lens to the study. The importance of providing pre-service teachers with a sustained placement over time in a setting that develops skills, knowledge and a sense of belonging appears to also enhance the employability of graduate teachers and, as a result, address the five conditions outlined by Johnson et al. (2015). However, further research in this area needs to continue as conditions are dynamic and change within the ITE landscape, including the recent emergence of employment-based internships.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions

Introduction

- Tell me about what drew you to the internship program.
- What was your awareness of the impact of the internship program?
- Can you tell me about the intended and unintended professional learning that took place during your internship?
- How would you describe the relationship between the university, the school and you during your internship?
- Who was most influential during your internship year and why?
- What role did the school coordinator play in your internship?

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Teaching impact

- Can you tell me about times when you about times when you think back to the internship and how this has influenced our teaching?
- What elements of the internship have benefitted you the most to date in your teaching?
- Can you tell me ways about how being connected to colleagues in an ongoing way has supported your development as a teacher?

Future intentions

- What factors of the internship do you believe were critical for you in your future career trajectory?
- How has the internship linked with your career development?
- How has your involvement in the internship influenced how you access ongoing professional learning?

Conclusion

- What did the internship give you that you wouldn't have otherwise got?