

# Purpose, Practice and Theory: Teacher Educators' Beliefs about Professional Experience

Chad M. Morrison

## **Purpose, Practice and Theory: *Teacher Educators' Beliefs about Professional Experience***

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*Abstract: The purposes of professional experience within initial teacher education programs are varied (Russell, 2005). However, there is limited literature explaining (a) university-based teacher educators' beliefs about its purposes and (b) how these purposes are reflected in practice. This study investigated these themes. A pragmatic mixed-method research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) was developed to survey teacher educators from one Australian and one New Zealand university (n = 56). Participants were anonymously surveyed using a diamond ranking activity (requiring placement of 9 of 11 professional experience purpose statement cards, pre-determined from literature) and open response items seeking explanations of placement determining criteria and statement elimination. Following analysis of questionnaire data, focus groups were utilised to further explore the aggregated findings. Survey data were analysed by weighting frequencies of each statement. Analysis of the data indicated significant variation of perspectives amongst the teacher educators and resulted in the clustering of purposes into four groups. This paper presents these data from the Australian university cohort (n = 26). This study, the first of a series designed to elucidate understandings of teacher educators' purposes for professional experience, reinforces the importance of professional experience as authentic workplace learning within initial teacher education. The findings also reveal the complex beliefs that underpin teacher educators' practices when preparing, mentoring and supervising preservice teachers for and within professional experience.*

### **Introduction**

This paper reports on a study that examined the beliefs of Australian university based teacher educators (UBTEs). UBTEs from one large School of Education were surveyed about the purposes for professional experience and their responses were explored through follow-up focus group interview. The study reported on here forms part of a larger study designed to explore these themes across universities in Australia and New Zealand.

Contemporary discourse about education in Australia and further afield, can be characterised by a focus on quality and student performance against achievement standards and external auditing and accountability. These sustained foci have inevitably widened to include a focus on the quality of initial teacher education (ITE) and UBTEs (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). In Australia, a sustained focus on the content, quality and relevance of ITE programs has fuelled an intense political agenda critical of its outcomes. Accordingly, renewed calls for what counts within ITE has infiltrated policy debate, resourcing and accountability on a national scale (Department of Education & Training, 2015).

The practical elements of ITE, including professional experience, have been used to frame the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) review of Australian ITE. This review has positioned professional experience as central to improved practices of early career teachers and to raising standards of educational achievement. The framing of the TEMAG review and the Australian Government Response to it (Department of Education & Training, 2015) highlights what is already prevalent in the literature regarding the importance of authentic learning opportunities afforded through professional experience placements (Darling-Hammond, Pacheco, Michelli, LePage, & Hammerness, 2005). This includes a need to incorporate the organisational functions and priorities of schools into professional experience placements (Cohen, Hoz, & Kaplan, 2013). The Review also highlights what others have cited (see Cohen et al., 2013) as a lack of longitudinal research literature on what constitutes rigour and educational achievement for preservice teachers (PSTs) and their students. Despite considerable research attention and rigour over recent years and an evidence base which highlights the capacity of university and school based educators working together in this area (see Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015), the current Review argues for increased external accountability and reform. These pressures inevitably have the potential to reform the nature of UBTE's work. Within such a reform agenda, there is a pressing need for the purposes of professional experience to be examined, re-conceptualised and made explicit to all participants involved in professional experience (Billett, 2008) so that it meets its purposes beyond the political domain.

#### **Initial Teacher Education within a contemporary Australian Context**

The current review of teacher education in Australia has been driven by a perceived need to make ITE programs more practical (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014). This driver for change builds on important understandings that collaborative partnerships between universities and schools are beneficial for stakeholders and open new spaces to productively prepare PSTs for career entry (eg Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009). This intention to strengthen ITE becomes clouded within political discourse and media coverage, however, where a more dominant belief posits the irrelevance of some university-based theoretical content and a pressing urgency for graduates to be 'job-ready' (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). These alternative framings of ITE identify a lack of capacity on the part of some graduate teachers at the point of career entry but are applied generously. Such perspectives also reinforce a belief that Australian ITE lacks capacity due to an absence of a research evidence base for practice (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014). Furthermore, there is a growing prevalence of seeing learning to teach as being the accumulation of a concrete body of knowledge and skills (Wang & Odell, 2002). This agenda risks trivialising teachers' work to a technicist application of pre-determined curricula content (Graham & Thornley, 2000). This contentiousness of beliefs, philosophy and policy that presently informs and contorts Australian ITE is aptly captured by Reid (2011, p. 295), where she states;

*the ways to prepare or produce good teachers, are always traced in discontinuous formations, officially disappearing from time to time, but often coexisting with or overlapping others, variously constrained and enacted in the bodily practices and predispositions of those who play their parts in them.*

With the sustained focus on monitoring, regulating and assessing ITE, many possible 'alternate flight paths' (Reid, 2011) for practice-based ITE are revealed. The case for each flight path propagates from an ideological frame of reference, just as the TEMAG review of

ITE has, but the implications of each alternative are considerable; not least of which is the impact on ways that UBTEs conceptualise their work and themselves (Murray, 2014).

### **Professional Experience within Initial Teacher Education**

Within this paper, professional experience is referred to within ITE programs as the time PSTs spend in placements within early childhood and school settings. During professional experience, PSTs generally work under the direct supervision of experienced teachers. Here, these supervising teachers are referred to as mentor teachers. Mentor teachers are trusted professional colleagues (Le Cornu, 2010, p. 200) who provide the essential guidance and support to pre-service teachers as they learn to teach. Under this mentorship, pre-service teachers assume increasing responsibility for aspects of the teaching role in relation to progress through their ITE programs. These practical components of ITE are described as the ‘most intensive exposure to the teaching profession experienced by prospective teachers.’ (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 345) and constitute a fundamental component of what it means to learn to teach.

Bridging the gap between PSTs’ existing perceptions about teaching and the realities to come is widely recognised as particularly important (Crosswell & Beutel, 2013; Day & Gu, 2010; Department of Education Science and Training, 2002; Johnson et al., 2014; Ramsey, 2000), as is exposure to some of the authentic challenges that characterise early career teaching (Millwater & Beutel, 2008).

Over time, professional experience has been variously conceptualised as ‘the practicum’ or ‘teaching practice’ (see Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) with each alternate framing carrying connotations and beliefs about its purpose. Professional experience is a contemporary framing of school-based practical learning that has evolved from earlier conceptualisations of what it meant to learn to teach. While aspirations for professional experience include the active participation of PSTs, self-reflective practice and critical examination of such ways of knowing and doing (Darling-Hammond, 2010), there is great variation in philosophy and practice (Hammerness, 2006; Wang & Odell, 2002). As such, learning to teach is inevitably informed by a range of historical, social and contextual factors (Aldrich, 2006), not least the experiences and perspectives of those learning to teach (Doppen, 2007).

The contemporary challenge for UBTEs is to contextualise PSTs’ learning while providing sufficient space and opportunity to critically reflect on curricula content, pedagogy, beliefs and practices. This often means challenging traditional approaches to ITE in order to develop ‘crucial dispositions’ for teaching within PSTs (Wang & Odell, 2002).

### **Engagement with professional learning communities through Professional Experience**

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that professional experience affords PSTs authentic opportunities to engage with professional learning communities. As Sumsion and Patterson (2004, p. 622) note, ‘To become effective teachers, preservice teachers... need to experience and participate in learning as a social undertaking.’ In this way, teachers are not passive recipients, but rather, act upon and significantly contribute to the shape and function of their professional environments (Edwards & Apostolov, 2007). Learning is therefore a process of changing participation in communities of practice (Lave 2001). This is a point that Sim (2006) extends by identifying that teaching is inevitably a social practice that occurs within and through learning communities. Participation in these communities does not

happen simply by being present however, and PSTs often need the expertise and guidance of UBTEs to identify and connect theoretical content to practical application (Jones & Ryan, 2014).

Meaningfully connecting theory to practice has required strategic re-conceptualising of pre-service teaching through PSTs' engagement with and participation in professional learning communities (Carter, 2012). Such a re-conceptualisation situates this component of PST preparation as authentic professional engagement, participation and collaboration within learning communities (Blasi, 2002; Wenger, 1998) rather than assuming a peripheral position in relation to others (Wenger, 2000). This means that the development of PSTs during professional experience is inextricably connected to how they engage with UBTEs, mentor teachers and other more knowledgeable and experienced professionals within the complex learning environments and organisational systems of education settings (Stieha & Raider-Roth, 2012).

An outcome of this engagement is the connection between authentic participation in professional learning communities and the development of an identity as someone who belongs to that community (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). Leshem (2014) recently explored this as pertaining to other members of the broader professional experience community through an exploration of mentor teachers' professional identities and how perceptions of themselves as UBTEs were linked to their participation and practice and the ways in which they enacted their roles. Notably, mentor teachers stressed that contributing to teacher education was complex work and that teaching experience alone was not a guarantee of effectiveness. These mentor teachers identified the complexity of their roles and the context-specific responsiveness required. As a result, 'reciprocal learning relationships' have been identified as an essential underpinning to an approach to professional experience characterised by a focus on professional learning communities (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Such relationships, which are based on shared responsibility for mutual learning between PSTs and their more experienced colleagues within universities and schools, as well as between PSTs, are key to building connections between theory and practice (Le Cornu, 2010, 2012).

### **Theory and Practice within Professional Experience**

The evolution of professional experience within ITE programs to complement and extend the campus-based component of learning to teach is a reflection of the interplay between theory and practice and the importance that this plays in PST development. As He (2009, p. 272) asserts, 'mentoring in teacher education, therefore, is much more than the apprenticeship of instruction pedagogy'; it is a framing of professional experience that promotes authentic participation, critical reflection, interpretation and professional agency. Such a view challenges a perceived or constructed dichotomy of theory learned within universities and practice borne out in schools, which has traditionally clouded outcomes associated with professional experience (Graham & Thornley, 2000; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). It also highlights the sometimes competing interests and perspectives that UBTEs, teachers, PSTs, policy makers, system administrators and others hold about the purposes of professional experience and its place within ITE programs.

A perceived or constructed dichotomy of theory versus practice continues to play out in public discourse and is currently reflected in broad critiques of ITE, where there is a notable call for theoretically-driven understandings to give way to more practical experiences and applied learning (Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013). This exists in contrast to a simultaneous call for increased research-evidenced practice to drive ITE. Burbules (1993, p. 16, cited in

Graham & Thornley, 2000, p. 237) articulates this as a reflection of ‘different groups of people engaged in different (potentially related) endeavours’ (practical or theoretical) with a need to bring them together. As a result of the disparate views held, the purposes for professional experience and the beliefs of UBTEs who provide such experiences emerge as essential in how the learning objectives and outcomes are understood.

Little has been researched or published about UBTEs’ beliefs about the purposes of professional experience. Specifically, why do UBTEs do what they do when preparing, teaching and supporting PSTs during professional experience and what is the evidence for this?

### **Assessment of PSTs’ competence through Professional Experience**

Assessment of PSTs’ skills, knowledge and development within professional experience is an essential component of mapping PST progress. Across Australia, professional experience reports on PST progress during placements have been used for a variety of purposes, including assessment of PSTs’ performance within their ITE programs, as part of a portfolio of evidence of career readiness, and, for employment processes. What counts as valid, authentic evidence of capacity is problematic, due to the nature of pre-service teaching within professional experience placements, however, a sophisticated portfolio of evidence of graduate proficiency includes measures of performance within supervised placements (Allard, Mayer & Moss, 2013).

Assessment of professional experience placements is highly dependent on the varying perspectives of stakeholders, which vary considerably. Attempts to strengthen assessment of progress within professional experience (see [www.projectevidence.com.au](http://www.projectevidence.com.au)) includes aligning outcomes of ITE to Graduate Standards within the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). All Australian ITE programs are now assessed against these Standards and many, if not all faculties of education have rewritten their professional experience reports so that their students are assessed against the Standards.

The complex roles of PSTs, school-based mentor teachers and UBTEs and their interaction within professional experience is played out in the ways that PSTs are assessed (Bloomfield, White & Goulding, 2013). Assessment of PSTs during professional experience, as in other areas of higher education, regularly include observations of teaching, demonstrations of prescribed roles and functions of teachers, formalised interactions between PSTs and UBTEs and school based teacher educators alongside other assessment processes. Assessment is often the conduit between on-campus and school-based learning and is therefore susceptible to the variabilities that shape authentic experiences, learning and outcomes (Sadler, 2009).

The philosophy, beliefs and values that inform practice and assessment of professional experience are sometimes poorly articulated (Parliament of Australia, 2007) and poorly understood within higher education (Klenowski, Askew, & Carnell, 2006). Additionally, tertiary students often lack crucial knowledge about how and why they are assessed (Flint & Johnson, 2011). The diversity of purposes for professional experience placements and the complexity of outcomes associated with authentic learning during placements highlights the need for input from UBTEs to elucidate these components. PSTs’ engagement with learners and experienced colleagues and the interweaving of theory with practice is a complex weaving of priorities that requires unpacking with and on behalf of PSTs and reflects how UBTEs work alongside them. UBTE’s beliefs and roles are therefore influential in how this happens.

## **The Role of UBTEs**

The role of UBTEs during ITE programs to facilitate reflective practice, critique and dialogue around these experiences is seen as fundamental to rigorous PST preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The importance of UBTEs to establish and lead communities of practice that bridge university-school boundaries, involving PSTs at their core, cannot be understated (Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015). However, UBTEs are under increasing pressure to justify their roles within professional experience as these outcomes have sometimes been poorly articulated or delivered (Parliament of Australia, 2007). Our intention within this project was to examine the beliefs of UBTEs that drive practice, in order to better understand how professional experience is being re-shaped by them and for them.

## **Methodology**

### **The Research Context**

The Australian implementation of this international project took place within one Australian university. A diverse cohort of UBTEs was recruited from across a large School of Education. These UBTEs had all participated in professional experience as part of their academic roles but held various positions within the ITE program. Participants ranged from highly-experienced and senior UBTEs with years of leadership in professional experience through to casual, part-time academic staff who were transitioning to ITE and who had limited experiences in professional experience.

The participants had a range of experiences of teaching both undergraduate (four year) and postgraduate (two year) ITE programs and with PSTs undertaking professional experience placements during each year of their programs. The School of Education offered a suite of professional experience placements. Most placements had a number of lead-in orientation days (up to five) for PSTs to familiarise themselves with their professional experience sites, prior to a block of placement days (ranging from five to 25 days in total). Professional experience placements ran in first semester of the first year through to the final semester of the final year of each program.

At the time of this research, the approach to professional experience and its implementation at this university was undergoing significant change. Previously, this School of Education had been recognised as a national leader in professional experience innovation and pedagogy. The School had maintained a commitment to developing partnerships with schools and had maintained a focus on these learning communities as a central component of its approach. This practice, articulated through the School's professional experience documentation shared with partner schools, was based around a shared and collaborative approach to reflective and reflexive practice in pre-service teaching. UBTEs were given adequate time allocation in their workload to visit schools during professional experience to support PSTs and mentor teachers and to liaise with a school leader, known as the School Based Professional Experience Co-ordinator.

However, these practices and priorities were now threatened during a time of intense change within professional experience in Australian schools of education. Many institutions were removing themselves from the direct involvement of assessing PSTs during professional experience placements and this particular institution was no exception. This responsibility was being shifted on to school based mentor teachers, as seen in the development of such resources as the AITSL online modules for supervising PSTs (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014). Economic and political pressures were driving some of these changes to the way ITE and professional experience was staffed and resourced. This

led to rapid changes in the roles that UBTEs were performing, particularly within the professional experience program. Their time allocation for school visits was greatly reduced and their roles involved less direct and on-going interaction with school leaders, teachers and PSTs during placement. As a result, UBTEs who were relatively new to professional experience adopted practices which reflected new expectations while more experienced staff looked for ways to maintain past practices which had been established over a significant period of time.

The theoretical framing for gathering, interpreting, and analysing the data was constructivist and interpretivist in orientation, focusing on identifying the individual meanings of UBTEs in relation to their beliefs and decision making about the priorities for professional experience. As such, these understandings were investigated so that these informed insights about this component of ITE could be better understood within the contemporary and local context. These understandings were not sought for generalizability nor transferability but to document how those within the field shaped their work and why.

### **Ethics**

Ethics approval for this project was firstly gained from the relevant Deans of Education before applying to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of both participating universities in Australia and New Zealand. The ethical concerns relating to this project included how to maintain confidentiality for participants when data collection involved surveying and interviewing colleagues. For example, the importance of maintaining confidentiality was paramount when asking participants to participate in focus group interviews. Information and consent forms therefore included an expectation that participants would maintain the confidentiality of other participants' identity and contributions to the project.

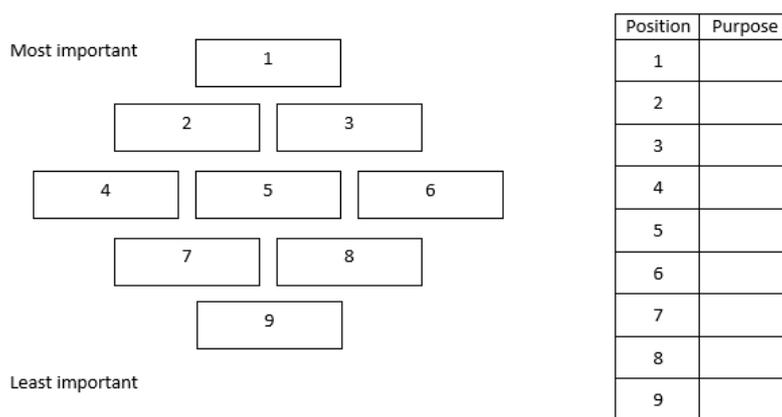
Confidentiality was also maintained through anonymous surveying of participants. Participants were given an anonymous, paper-based questionnaire with options to complete and lodge it in hard copy to avoid a digital trail that could link them to their data. Only demographic data about participants' roles and experiences within professional experience were collected.

Participants were invited to self-nominate for focus group participation at the end of the survey. At this point, participants were again reminded of the need to maintain confidentiality on the part of the participants (their colleagues) as part of the progression to the focus group phase of data collection. Assurances were also sought from each of the Deans that the participation of UBTEs would remain voluntary and anonymous.

### **Data Collection**

A pragmatic mixed-method approach was adopted for exploring the beliefs of UBTEs (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Data collection for this phase of the project was conducted in two rounds, consisting of an anonymous survey (n = 26) in Round 1 and a focus group interview (n= 9) in Round 2.

This survey used a diamond-ranking instrument for participants to rank 11 pre-determined purposes for professional experience. These purposes were derived from dominant themes within the literature on professional experience within ITE programs. These 11 themes were constructed using the language of 'practicum' and 'student teacher' to apply



**Figure 1: Diamond ranking instrument**

consistency of language across the Australian and New Zealand contexts, where this language is interchangeably applied. These themes were;

- A. Practicum aids student teachers to put theory into practice
- B. Practicum assists student teachers to develop teaching strategies/practices
- C. Practicum enables student teachers to learn about the complex role of the teacher
- D. Practicum enables student teachers to become part of a professional community
- E. Practicum helps student teachers to determine if a teaching career is really for them
- F. Practicum encourages student teachers to engage in reflective practice
- G. Practicum helps student teachers to develop an identity as a teacher
- H. Practicum enables student teachers to meet real learners and real situations
- I. Practicum allows student teachers to engage in teachers' daily activities
- J. Practicum enables the student teacher to develop his/her philosophy of teaching
- K. Practicum is a context for assessing the student teachers' competency

The diamond-ranking instrument required participating UBTEs to place these pre-determined purposes from most to least important (see Figure 1). The ranking instrument only allowed for nine purposes to be ranked, therefore participants needed to exclude two of the purposes. The purpose placed in position one was assigned a numerical value of 5. The purposes placed in positions two and three were each given a numerical value of 4. Purposes placed in positions four, five and six were each assigned a numerical value of 3. Purposes placed in positions seven and eight were each given numerical values of 2 and position nine was given a value of 1. Purposes excluded from the diamond rank were given a value of 0 (zero).

The assigning of numerical values to each item (purpose) of the diamond ranking instrument produced a total numerical value for each purpose. The total numerical values of each item were used during analysis to identify emergent priorities and themes across the participant cohort. These were used in conjunction with the qualitative responses to further examine the quantitative responses.

**Figure 1: Diamond Ranking Instrument**

Subsequent open-ended questions within the questionnaire asked the participants to explain their choices for ranking the purposes, including why they had excluded the purposes

omitted. Information was also sought about the respondents' previous experiences within professional experience, the number of PSTs previously supervised, and the role(s) performed within the university. Survey data were initially entered into Microsoft Excel for data storage and management prior to preliminary analysis.

A request for participation in a follow-up focus group interview was sent to the same school-wide staff email accounts within the School of Education. This request included an information sheet and consent form for participation. This focus group interview was scheduled with only the involvement of consenting participants and was conducted on campus within a private meeting room. Protocols for ensuring confidentiality of data generated by the focus group discussion were carefully followed. Participation in this focus group interview meant that participants would know the identity of other participating staff members and would have first-hand access to the information shared during the focus group interview. As a result, each focus group interview participant was required to give informed consent, which included protecting the anonymity of fellow participants.

The schedule for the interview was organised around the preliminary analysis of the questionnaire data (the aggregated findings) and a semi-structured schedule of open-ended questions aimed at exploring the ranking exercise in depth. The focus group interview was concluded after one hour. Nine UBTEs took part in this interview. The interview was audio-recorded on a digital recorder and later transcribed for analysis. The de-identified transcript was circulated to participants of the interview for verification of its accuracy.

Analysis of the data was conducted collaboratively. This process involved undertaking multiple readings of the data to establish and organise the emerging themes (Richards, 2009). This process involved continually reviewing, amending and refining the thematically organised categories as our understandings of the data increased (Patton, 2002). In these ways the data were simultaneously analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The weighted purposes of the survey guided our preliminary analysis of the data, where the ranked responses were organised into four clusters, based on their numerical totals (see Figure 2). Then, these quantitative survey responses were analysed using the qualitative explanations accompanying them. Next, the analysis was presented to the focus group participants for further interrogation. The focus group participants responded with additional insights about their survey responses and the emergent themes presented.

The focus group data were analysed qualitatively, drawing on Richards' (2009) approach to 'opening up the data'. A process of open coding was initially used to interrogate the data to search for themes and categories within the decision-making processes and justifications of UBTEs. The transcript of the focus group interview with UBTEs was read and re-read to identify recurrent themes within the discussion. Initial responses to the transcribed data were annotated and then these data were compared to the qualitative survey response analysis. The expertise of the researcher (as an experienced UBTE working in professional experience) was crucial to this initial analysis as it made it possible to identify the emic data (Schwandt, 2001) that made reference to specific concepts, language and practices of professional experience within ITE.

## Findings

The findings of the survey data and focus group interview are presented separately for ease of presentation and understanding. They are discussed together in the following section.

## Survey Data

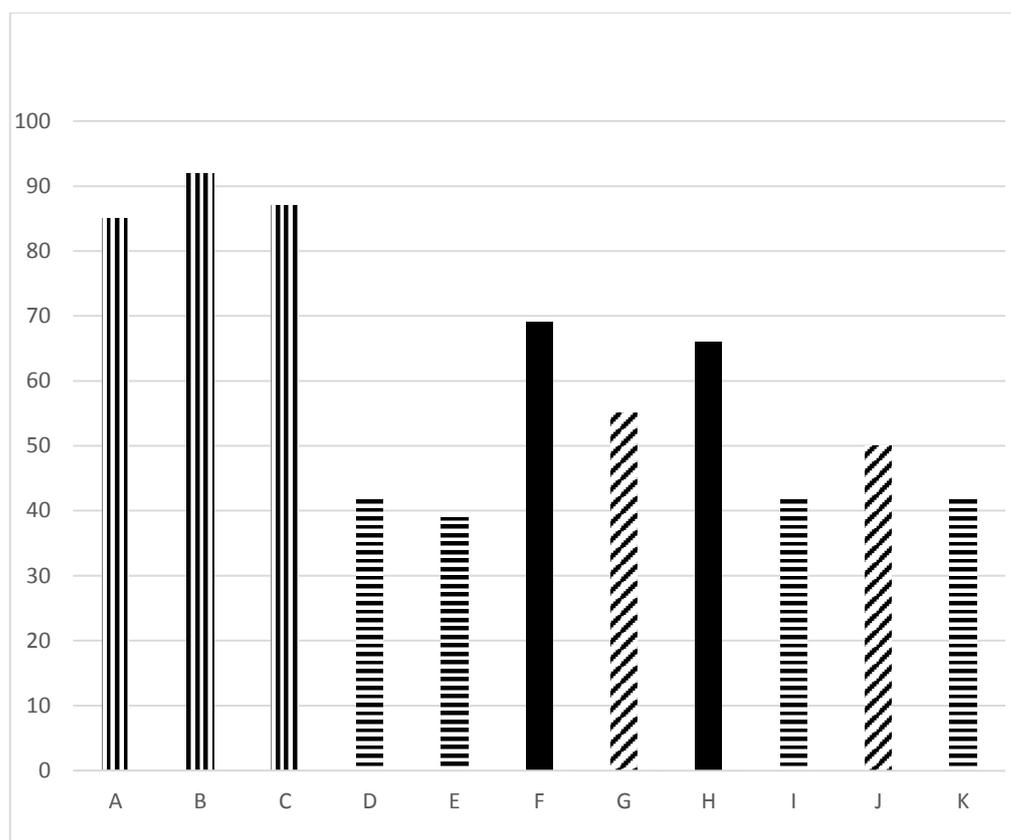
Purpose B: *Practicum assists student teachers to develop teaching strategies/practices* was the highest-ranked. This purpose was selected as *most important* more than any other and was more regularly ranked within the top half of diamond scale than any other. It was excluded from ranking only once. Conversely, Purpose E: *Practicum helps student teachers to determine if a teaching career is really for them* was the lowest-ranked purpose and the most commonly discarded with 33% of participants excluding this purpose altogether. A further 33% of participants ranked it in the bottom half of the diamond structure and none ranked this purpose as *most important*. All purposes were excluded at least once. Only Purpose D: *Practicum enables student teachers to become part of a professional community* and Purpose E: *Practicum helps student teachers to determine if a teaching career is really for them* failed to be ranked most important at least one.

Cluster 1 incorporated the three highest-ranked purposes for professional experience (B=92, C=87, A=85). This cluster prioritised the connection between theory and practice, highlighting the need for PSTs to develop teaching strategies and practices and to learn about the complex role of the teacher. This cluster represents the nuanced complexity of professional experience. These three purposes incorporate a plethora of outcomes associated with professional experience and incorporate many of the objectives identified by the participants as priorities of PST preparation.

Cluster 2 incorporated two closely rated purposes (F=69, H=66). This cluster highlighted UBTEs' beliefs about the importance of PSTs developing reflective practice while meeting real learners in authentic situations. Our reading of this cluster was that the UBTEs recognised the need for PSTs to engage with children and young people in the actual school or pre-school setting. They fully appreciated the influence of context on both student and PST learning. At the same time, their commitment to reflective practice probably reflects the University's focus on developing PSTs' reflection and reflexive capacities – a priority for the School of Education at this particular university for the past decade and a half.

Cluster 3 incorporated another two closely rated purposes (G=55, J=50), that professional experience helped PSTs to develop an identity as a teacher and to develop their philosophy of teaching. It is unsurprising that these were linked together given that final year PSTs at this university are introduced to the notion of teacher identity in their final professional experience course and are required to document their emerging beliefs about teaching prior to completing their final placement.

Finally, Cluster 4 incorporated the final four purposes (D=42, I=42, K=42, E=39). This cluster was somewhat disparate in terms of the purposes and how they aligned. This cluster reflected professional experience as a time for PSTs to assess their suitability for teaching, a time for them to engage in the daily activities of teachers, to become part of a professional community, and, for their competency to be assessed. That assessment of PSTs' competence was so lowly ranked was surprising, particularly given the current context and its emphasis on Teacher Standards being used to assess PSTs' performances and the professional experience reports having been rewritten to reflect these emphases. This issue was explored with the participants in the focus group.



**Figure 2: Purposes for Professional Experience (Clustering by Totals)**

### Focus Group Data

The following five recurrent themes emerged as a result of the focus group. These themes explained and supported the organisation of the survey data and further enhanced our understandings of the UBTEs' priorities for professional experience.

- Multifaceted purposes for professional experience within ITE
- Some purposes for professional experience were more universally applicable
- The priorities for professional experience within ITE
- Assessment of PSTs during professional experience
- The changing nature of UBTEs' work within professional experience

### *Multifaceted purposes for Professional Experience within ITE*

There was agreement across the focus group that all of the purposes listed within the survey were valid priorities for professional experience. They acknowledged that the ranking activity required choices from them which required them to eliminate some from the final list. However they were eager to clarify that they were not necessarily eliminated because they were not important. Additionally, the participants acknowledged that the diamond ranking process created a hierarchy, intentional or not, and that the participants saw validity in this hierarchy, based on their knowledge and experiences within ITE and professional experience specifically.

This relationship between the clusters also revealed that purposes were not excluded because they were seen as irrelevant to professional experience. Rather, purposes were often

excluded or rated less highly because they were seen as subsumed within another. As Liam pointed out;

*I saw the 'meeting real learners in real situations' and 'engage in teachers' daily activities' as being subsumed into some of the other categories, so that's why I did that exclusion. (Liam)*

Additionally, Amy's justification for excluding a purpose reflected her belief that sometimes the purposes were not seen as the exclusive domain of professional experience but underpinned the pre-service program generally, where she stated;

*I'd probably disagree with J [Practicum enables the student teachers to develop his/her philosophy of teaching] because as much as I think philosophy of teaching is really important for an individual to develop, I don't know that professional experience allows you to develop that any more than [a capacity to link] theory and practice. (Amy)*

### ***Some purposes for Professional Experience were more universally applicable***

The participants discussed the importance of Cluster 1 throughout the focus group interview and unanimously supported the organisation of purposes within Cluster 1. The group members spoke at length about these three purposes being umbrella terms for many outcomes associated with professional experience. According to the participants, these purposes connected to what they called the 'micro-teaching skills' of learning to teach, including such things as public speaking, classroom and behaviour management, planning for and sequencing teaching and learning and developing and operating effectively as a member of complex teaching teams. These were seen as occurring within the domain of professional experience as an extension to the theoretical understandings constructed at university. Consequently, the participants discussed this cluster as fundamental to teaching:

*...the reasons that I rated B (develop teaching strategies and practices) so highly is because it encompasses a lot of those planning, teaching, assessing cycles...we used to talk about micro-teaching skills; what do you do when you stand up in front of a class and how do you write on a board...public speaking and all of those micro-teaching skills where we actually used to implement those. I wrapped all those into that B, which is encompassing all of those things. (Will)*

Amy strongly endorsed Will's prioritising of Cluster 1 and Donna agreed, adding behaviour management to the list of essential 'micro-teaching skills' discussed by Will. Stewart endorsed their views by adding that '...the micro-teaching practices, I think those are the bread and butter of a successful prac.' In addition, all focus group members acknowledged Cluster 1 as pivotal to PSTs understanding the complex role of teachers (Purpose C). As Liam expressed, professional experience requires PSTs to navigate complex professional environments and communities of teachers as part of their role;

*I was also conscious of [PSTs needing to] 'tread lightly', because it seems to me that one of the skills that the pre-service colleagues are doing is the political strategizing around when do they move and how do they move, in terms of the power differentials in schools...they're learning how to manoeuvre around that... (Liam)*

Stewart also identified Category 1 as a priority, stating that the skills, insights, strategies and practices learned through professional experience were the ‘bread and butter’ of pre-service teaching. Donna concurred, highlighting that planning for teaching and learning forms an essential component of professional experience, where PSTs grapple with the complexity and extent of the teaching role, not just the face-to-face ‘teaching’ of content.

#### *Changing priorities for professional experience across a program*

The UBTEs’ beliefs about the purposes of professional experience were also found to be contingent upon a range of factors including the point at which a professional experience placement was offered to PSTs. For example, the participants conveyed that the priorities for professional experience change throughout an ITE program. They identified specific needs that first-year PSTs often had and how these were very different from those of fourth-years. As a result, the ranking task of the survey was somewhat problematic for the participants as they were not given an indication of how to respond to the task in relation to specific PSTs. As there was general agreement across the focus group that the priorities changed with PSTs’ progress through their degrees, the participants felt challenged to adequately incorporate this complexity within the ranking process. This was reflected in the following response;

*Well it depended on the [purpose]. Sometimes it was very general and then at other times I put the first-year-hat on and at other times I put the fourth-year-hat on to make that decision but generally I tried to look at them with an overview of all of the placements but some of them were more specific to other placements. (Donna)*

The changing focus of professional experience throughout an ITE program was further explained in relation to PSTs using professional experience to determine if teaching was for them. For example, at the start of a degree the need for PSTs to assess their suitability for teaching may be a priority but this was seen as less likely to be a factor the further PSTs went into their program. Equally, the priorities towards the latter stages of ITE programs served particular functions, according to focus group participants. Despite Purpose K (Practicum is a context for assessing the student teachers’ competency) being rated second lowest in terms of priority, focus group participants would have re-prioritised their responses, if the focus had been on the penultimate or final professional experience placements. Will explained;

*...if I’d been looking at Master of teaching third placement I think I probably would have brought up the assessment [purpose] and dropped down some of the other ones because it is a different focus. It is a final placement. It’s a chance for them to actually look at themselves as a teacher and I think some of those Cluster 4 ones, you know, ‘being part of a professional community’, ‘assessment’...those two particularly are more of a final placement [priority]. (Will)*

#### *Assessment of PSTs during Professional Experience*

This connection between professional experience placements in the latter stages of ITE programs and how they are assessed emerged as a focal point of discussion during the focus group interview, despite its relatively low score in the ranking task. Assessment of

PSTs within professional experience was discussed at length by the focus group participants, both in terms of its importance in the latter stage of the ITE program and in relation to the changing nature of UBTEs' work within professional Experience. The focus group highlighted the challenges associated with adequately ranking this purpose, as Paul described;

*when you're thinking about assessment in terms of students or you're thinking about it yourself, it's quite complex in where you would place it.*

The low ranking of Purpose K (Practicum is a context for assessing the student teachers' competency) surprised some focus group participants, 'based on the importance these days of the AITSL Standards' (Will) and a belief across the focus group for the need to authentically assess PSTs through professional experience placements. Having said this, the subjective nature of UBTEs' assessments of PSTs during the practicum was identified as a reason for scoring it lowly, as Stewart explained;

*Obviously when assessing any teacher you're assessing based on your own experience as a teacher [and] we've all had radically different experiences in our teaching practice.*

According to the focus group, the diverse contexts and variable experiences of PSTs within the practicum contributed to this ranking. Additionally, Liam viewed the purpose of assessing PSTs' competence within professional experiences as less of a priority than for PSTs to be assessing themselves.

*I don't think it's as high a priority for me as them making some assessments on themselves (Purpose E: Practicum helps student teachers to determine if a teaching career is really for them). (Liam)*

Liam excluded Purpose K (Practicum is a context for assessing the student teachers' competency) because of how he perceived its importance but also because of the changing nature of UBTEs' work and their capacity to adequately assess PSTs outside of university settings. This was seen as a product of the significant shifts in UBTEs' roles generally and within professional experience especially.

### ***The changing nature of UBTEs' work within Professional Experience***

Liam and others discussed the complexity of assessing PSTs' capacity during professional experience due to the changing nature of UBTEs' roles. This group discussed recent changes within their institution which had considerably altered the way that they engaged with PSTs and school based colleagues leading up to, during and following professional experience. The time allocation for school visits had been reduced and with it, a cutback in workload allocation. Their weakened role in preparing, supervising/mentoring and assessing the practice of PSTs meant that their capacity was inhibited and their responsibility diminished. This was a source of tension for the focus group as their collectively reduced roles and responsibilities inhibited what they thought that they could and should be doing to support the development of their PSTs and this represented a compromise for them, as Liam discussed;

*For me it's that change in role that we're now experiencing. It seems to me that it's very difficult for us on a two-visit liaising approach to make any real*

*judgement call that is to do with the assessment of those particular PSTs on the basis of a limited, very limited exposure...(Liam)*

This sentiment was shared by Will when he stated that ‘we have no role in assessment as it’s conducted by mentor (supervising) teachers anyway’. Will, like other members of the focus group, also expressed disappointment, frustration and anger that their diminished role meant that they could no longer spend much time talking with mentor teachers and co-ordinators when they visited schools and pre-schools, as he described:

*...at one stage when we went to schools...we had more of a moderation role. It wasn't really an assessment role per se. We were actually moderating the assessment of the teachers but now we don't even have that role. Now [our role is] almost damage control. (Will)*

Focus group participants felt frustrated that a partnerships approach to professional experience was being espoused in the written materials sent to educational settings but that they had little time in which to develop respectful relationships which they knew were essential for effective partnerships. This frustration came from what they described as a rapid change in their role that compromised their capacity, as Will continued to explain;

*...our ability to work with the teachers [or] even to support the teachers is limited...we have almost no role in schools...while we've changed the model we haven't changed the other structures and we haven't put any structures in place to support the students or the teachers.*

## **Discussion**

Analysis of survey and focus group data identified the complex beliefs that these UBTEs held about the purposes of professional experience. The outcomes associated with professional experience were seen by the participants as multi-faceted, variable, context-specific and responsive to PSTs’ stage of development and individual responses to experience.

These insights reinforced these UBTEs’ belief that successful professional experience was underpinned by collaboration between UBTEs and school based colleagues in order to meet the needs of PSTs (Wang & Odell, 2002). Invariably, what these UBTEs lamented was that the reality was more reflective of Wang and Odell’s first two descriptions of practice (either (1) a mentor-focused model of imparting knowledge, or (2) a considerable gap between the university-based teacher education program and school practice, with both teams of educators working in isolation to bridge it.

The focus group participants’ perspectives therefore highlighted their struggles with the rapidly changing nature of UBTEs’ work within professional experience. This change represents a considerable challenge to the sophisticated understandings and expertise that UBTEs bring to their work. A key tension emerging from this data was that the participants’ understandings and expertise within professional experience are not readily observable through the university processes being implemented, despite their connection to preparing PSTs to engage in reflective practices, critique of their experiences and contexts, and their engagement with dynamic professional learning communities. Such intentions reflect Wang and Odell’s (2002) third model of mentorship, where collaboration between school and university educators facilitates the greatest growth.

As a result of budgetary restrictions, funding arrangements, the contemporary political discourse and a rigorous accountability regime throughout all tiers of education in Australia, UBTEs' work is being rapidly re-framed (Le Cornu, 2015). All participants spoke back to this re-framing and the implications for their day-to-day work, identifying the constraints while foregrounding their priorities. This meant that the participants remained focused on the complex educational imperatives that underpinned their beliefs and purposes for professional experience and continued to work towards them. Straddling the space between past practices and current constraints highlighted the tensions that characterised their current work. Their perspectives argued against a simplified model of professional experience and for a community of practice approach where teams of educators shared responsibility for the development of PSTs, rather than simply an assessment of them. This built upon their insights of the contextual complexities of professional experience and the diverse challenges and experiences that are present during placements.

In these ways, the UBTEs involved in this study provided insights about the ways that they were able to pursue their educational priorities based on their beliefs for the purposes for professional experience. The challenges encountered along the way highlighted their deep commitment to quality PST education and their rich knowledge, which they found to be regularly dismissed within the current context. The challenges that they were facing, to retain their educational imperatives against a backdrop of technicist-driven sweeping changes to UBTEs' work, were regularly experienced. This was apparent when they discussed their declining roles with PSTs and school-based colleagues and their inhibited capacity to contribute to these professional interactions.

The participants identified tensions stemming from changes in their roles as a product of them being removed from the relationships that have characterised their work in the past. The 'hidden work of teacher educators is principally relational work' (Le Cornu, 2014) and this work goes largely unacknowledged by universities and schools alike (Ellis, Blake, McNicholl & McNally, 2011). Consequently, the role of UBTEs to manage relationships is difficult to justify (Carter, 2014). The participants felt this pressure as a reshaping of their roles. Despite the relational component remaining a priority for the participants on a number of levels, it was being squeezed out of their jobs. Their positioning out of schools and out of interactions with these communities of teachers was of significant concern, as the participants felt that this change undermined their capacity and intentions to reflexively respond to the challenges and experiences of professional experience. To be positioned in ways that excluded them from what they saw as core business of teacher education therefore resonated throughout the focus group time and again.

## **Conclusion**

University-based teacher educators hold complex understandings about the purposes for professional experience within ITE programs. Their beliefs are closely connected to their experiences of working within professional experience courses and reflect their insights gained through their own reflective practice. While there is great variance in the prioritising of purposes for professional experience, clear priorities did emerge from the data. These Australian UBTEs prioritised the importance of professional experience as a time for developing the practical components of learning to teach, underpinned by rigorous theoretical knowledge. They also indicated the centrality of this learning being undertaken in authentic contexts with real learners and through realistic challenge. They also acknowledged the complexity of the role of the teacher.

These UBTEs also highlight the contested spaces of their own teaching, as they talked about the challenges of their changing roles in relation to the preparation of PSTs. The changing nature of their supervision and assessment of PSTs during professional experience captures the contemporary pressures they felt within their university setting and the complex reshaping of UBTEs' work.

The insights shared by these UBTEs capture the importance and centrality of professional experience and also provide valuable insights into the complexity of preparing PSTs within contemporary Australian schools and universities. The insights that have been gained here provide a starting point in relation to exploring the insights of school-based mentor teachers and the PSTs for which professional experience is so valuable. Further exploration of how school-based teacher educators and PSTs prioritise professional experience within the contemporary context will allow for enhanced understandings of how they are negotiating these professional roles and spaces and how they pursue the educational outcomes that underpin their beliefs.

### Limitations

The importance of relationships between pre-service and mentor teachers is well understood, however relationships alone cannot eliminate the variables that negatively impact on professional experience. Many of the challenges associated with professional experience often arise when there is disparity between the beliefs, knowledge and expectations of participants. This project has begun to explore the beliefs and perspectives of a small group of UBTEs in relation to professional experience but in isolation these understandings provide only a portion of the overall picture. To provide a more accurate overview of the purposes for professional experience in contemporary Australian ITE programs, further investigation is warranted into the beliefs of school-based mentor teachers and the PSTs with whom they work. Further examination of larger groups of UBTEs is also needed to ascertain how the reported beliefs about professional experience may reflect or diverge from those of UBTEs drawn from a range of settings and in response to the contextual pressures and realities of their institutions. A clearer understanding of the diversity of experiences, responses and priorities within and across institutions may highlight priority areas for policy and practice within Australian professional experience programs and ITE.

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