

## STUDENT TEACHERS' PLACEMENT EXPERIENCES IN A FAMILIAR SCHOOL SETTING: LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS WITH A DISTANCE ITE PROGRAM

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### ABSTRACT

Studying to be a teacher in their local community is not normal practice for student teachers in New Zealand initial teacher education (ITE) programs. This paper argues that student teachers in a distance ITE program who are familiar with the local school community can benefit from the experience. This qualitative study centered on a distance program, in which student teachers' stories were collected through written narratives, focus group conversations, and interviews with the associate teachers and lecturers, exploring the student teachers' experiences of being placed in their home district. For the student teachers the placements created positive opportunities through initial stability, agency, and a sense of belonging. It also provided the local communities with opportunities for capacity building. This paper offers useful insights for understanding student teachers' experiences of learning to become a teacher and the benefits they could gain by being involved in their local communities during their school-based placements.

**Key words:** initial teacher education, school-based experiences, distance learning, pre-service teachers

### INTRODUCTION

The value of pre-service teachers learning to teach by distance-delivered programs continues to be debated internationally and locally. While face-to-face is still the dominant learning-teaching approach in New Zealand (NZ) and worldwide (Perraton, 2000; Simpson, 2002), it is argued that a combination of study modes such as distance-delivered and face-to-face, or blended, can help address issues of teacher shortages in rural and remote regions (Green & Reid, 2004; McGee & Yates, 2000). Degree programs delivered by distance, in initial teacher education (ITE) have grown with advances in technology and improving partnerships between universities and schools. However, completing study at a distance can be isolating, as identified in contemporary ITE literature (Donaghy, McGee, Ussher, & Yates, 2003; Perraton, 2000; Robinson & Latchem, 2003). Isolation can be 'physical' if the student is geographically distant from the campus. It can be 'social' if the student teacher does not have opportunities to mix with peers tackling similar topics and issues. It can be 'intellectual' when the student teacher does not have academic immediacy or proximity and stimulation in his/her contact with other learners. It can also be 'spiritual' if there is no contact with likeminded people. Students studying at a distance need to compensate in some way for the potential impact of such isolation (Donaghy et al., 2003). It is arguable that a school placement in a local community that a student teacher is familiar with can make a difference to their learning about teaching. This is a significant issue in the context of rural communities suffering from a shortage of professionals and finding it hard to retain good

teachers in such communities. This article suggests that a positive aspect of learning to teach through distance-delivered programs can be working with familiar professionals, which creates increased opportunities for professional agency and developing identity as a teacher.

## STUDENT TEACHERS' PLACEMENT

Research has consistently highlighted the importance of the school context for student teachers learning to teach (Le Cornu, 2004; Lind, 2004; Peters, 2002). Student teachers need opportunities to theorise practice, develop identity, exercise agency and take responsibility for their own learning and teaching. School-based experiences should provide opportunities in classrooms where children and programs have not been specially selected or modified. It is of benefit for student teachers to encounter naturally complex settings (Haigh, 2001; Hoben, 2006; Le Cornu, 2006; Lind, 2004). Such settings allow individual student teachers to fully *act in the world of teaching* (Maynard, 2001, p. 41) where the associate teacher ensures the student teacher will not be preoccupied with managing behaviour and administrative tasks. Clarke (1997) argues that the value of the experience is based on good classroom teachers being well prepared for the task with support to ensure s/he is capable of providing a quality setting. This support includes time, resources and people. Student teachers are empowered to exercise greater professional agency when they receive support and opportunities in quality school-based settings (Hoben, 2006), feeling they belong to the community.

Most school-university connections develop as a cooperative partnership, rather than as a holistic learning community. Cooperative partnerships focus on the partners working together to achieve common goals of ITE, inclusive of individual as well as group responsibilities, where there is a sense of trust and safety for all. A holistic community, on the other hand, involves agency, belonging, cohesion, collaboration and dialogue by all. It is more than a collection of individuals working towards common goals (see for example Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadley, 2014). Some researchers report significant outcomes from well-developed, collaborative learning communities established between ITE providers and schools (Ferrier-Kerr, 2005; Peters, 2002; Sivan & Chan, 2003; White, 2006). However, investigations such as Rivers' New Zealand study (2006) found little evidence of high-quality learning communities based on inclusive reciprocal relationships between providers of ITE and schools. Walkington (2004) also suggested school-based experiences are not always well developed as holistic communities for a variety of reasons including, lack of relationships where inquiry is fundamental, effectiveness of mentoring practice, the effective utilisation of school-wide expertise, and the lack of resourcing of the school-based experience for the partnerships to grow into a genuine learning community.

Typically most student teachers enter each school-based experience as a newcomer to the school. Many challenges and dilemmas confront student teachers as 'newcomers' or 'old-timers' in a school learning community (Ussher, 2011; White, 2006), including relationship building, accessing and utilising resources, understanding and applying policies, and meeting the requirements of existing systems. The newcomers must gain acceptance while those who have an existing relationship must have already been accepted by school personnel in order to continue their learning. Dunne and Locke (1996) reported that relationships are usually established based on assumptions formed from previous partnerships with schools. Such assumptions may have been in a different role, for example, as teacher aide or parent, rather than as student teacher. Attending to the past *history and experience of each student* (Sivan & Chan, 2003, p. 191) at the time of placement is an important element of school-based experience preparation. White's (2006) New Zealand research suggested that student teachers as newcomers in a school community have to *project their personality/identity as one that deserves to be welcomed and nurtured* (p. 9). Her study showed that existing school members judged each new student teacher in deciding whether they should be allowed to *enter their specific community or not* (p. 9). This requires that for each new school-based experience the student teacher must attempt to establish a 'fit' between their own identity and the new learning community. This fit may not always be available to the student teacher because of tensions

between their personality or philosophies and the school or because the school community does not wish to include them for various reasons, including workload or over-commitment.

### **EMERGING PRACTICES RELATED TO DISTANCE-MODE STUDENT TEACHERS' PLACEMENT**

Building initial teacher education capacity in regions distant from a university campus is a complex and multifaceted task (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013). Creating an accessible learning community where there are opportunities to learn in partnership, is critical. Many community partnerships for mainstream school-based experiences exist between universities and their local schools (Ferrier-Kerr, 2005; Haigh, 2001) but to a lesser extent for distance programs servicing rural areas. Collaborative learning communities where the school and classroom teacher share greater decision-making authority with the university are a recent trend (Wilson & l'Anson, 2006). Positive effects of these learning communities have been an apparent reduction of distance, isolation and tensions – between student, school and university as well as between practice and theory. However, studying to be a teacher in a small local community where the school acts as a 'village for learning' (Ussher, 2010) also presents possible tensions based on issues of familiarity.

Being placed in a school where there is an existing relationship is not a common experience for a student teacher. Existing relationships may be based on attendance as a child, past employment or familial responsibilities such as having children attend the school. This situation is reported by Green and Reid (2004) in an Australian context and Delany and Wenmoth (2003) in a New Zealand context. As Sherman and Sage (2011) show in their small study, rural communities mostly see their capable 'treasures' (potential professionals) move out of the area. Green and Reid suggested that where 'locals' are in schools as student teachers, they are more likely to stay in those schools, while Delany and Wenmoth emphasised the importance of ownership, involvement and motivation of the local community to find solutions to local staffing problems to build local teaching capacity. However, pre-existing relationships between a student teacher on school-based experience and the school or teacher are not common or encouraged. For example, Kane's (2005) review on New Zealand policy and practice reported that, *most [ITE] institutions state that students will not be placed in a school where they have a relationship of some kind* (p. 163).

For the majority of student teachers, learning must include opportunities for interactions with other learners (Black & Holford, 2002). Some researchers suggest clustering student teachers together in schools in order to facilitate interactions and reduce isolation (Beck & Kosnik, 2001; Zeichner, 2002). For distance students, mechanisms to facilitate opportunities for socio-cultural interactions may include using ICT for online discussions, tutorials and workshops, working with a group, or other strategies such as social networking sites (Perraton, 2000). Studies suggest that the large majority of student teachers still prefer face-to-face interactions for learning (Black & Holford, 2002; Graham & Thornley, 2000), which can be achieved through placement in a local school.

ITE students need a range of school-based experiences that enable them to develop their perspectives and outlook on teaching (Delany & Wenmoth, 2003; Nelligan, 2006; Simpson, 2002). Some researchers found that for many student teachers in ITE programs the models they encountered could limit the development of a broad perspective of teaching (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Robinson & Latchem, 2003). This may be accentuated for distance students whose experiences of teaching are related directly to their most recent school experiences as a child, teacher's aide or parent helper in their local community. Other writers stressed the need for many opportunities for reflection in order to develop perspectives on teaching (Beck & Kosnik, 2001; Caires & Almeida, 2005).

In summary, a few New Zealand researchers have discussed student teachers learning to teach while remaining in their small local school and community (Campbell & Yates, 1997; Delany & Wenmoth, 2003; Simpson, 2002). They all appeared to agree that this was to the benefit of the

student teachers, their schools and communities. Such benefits varied but the most notable was to improve the supply of teachers in hard-to-staff areas. However, Simpson was not convinced that being in a school that was ‘known’ to the student was appropriate, due to the potential for conflict of interests between school and provider. Opportunities for student teachers participating in a distance ITE program to remain in the local school for their school-based experience may provide her/him with access to a learning community of professionals that they might otherwise not experience (Ussher, 2011; Delany & Wenmoth, 2003). Learning to teach via a distance ITE program, the focus of this study, is distinctive because the school-based experiences are more dependent on quality communication, collaboration and trust amongst all partners. Lind (2004) argues that professional agency is an important aspect that teachers need to develop when they are learning to teach. Student teachers need the authority, competence and confidence to seek opportunities and develop partnerships in their own right. Starting out in a school already known to the student may have distinct advantages in this sense.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study focused on pre-service teachers in a distance ITE program offered by the University of Waikato, New Zealand. The Faculty of Education’s Ethics committee gave approval to undertake the investigation. The data reported in this paper were originally gathered for a doctoral study, from which specific extracts were drawn to explain student teachers’ placement experiences in the local school community. The program in which student teachers were enrolled is explained below.

### ***Structure of the Distance ITE program***

The student teacher participants of this study were enrolled in a three-year undergraduate degree program via distance mode, so they could study mostly in their home district, using mixed modes. This program is referred to as the Mixed Modes Presentation (MMP), as it was offered through four modes of learning: the Internet, residential courses, practicum and placements as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Modes of the Distance Education Program**

<b>Modes</b>	<b>Relevance</b>
The Internet	The coursework is available at any time via the Internet
Residential courses	Students are required to attend three weeks of residential on-campus study annually to commence coursework, complete assessments and understand the overall requirements specific to this particular program.
Placement	Throughout their three-year program these students had a range of school-based experiences in various partnerships for a total of about 28 weeks. At the start of their program they were required to spend one day per week for three semesters in a local primary school. This one-day placement accumulated a total 10 weeks contact but did not involve the intensity of a practicum.
Practicum	The students also spent a total of 18 weeks of practicum in 3 blocks (4, 6 and 8 weeks respectively, in different schools). These distance students were in smaller rural communities where the number and range of primary schools was limited. As placements were dependent on the availability of teachers in the local area this restricted choice for many of these student teachers. During the school-based experiences, university lecturers visited the students, schools and classroom teachers several times for liaison, supervisory and evaluative purposes.

## Research Process

There were 22 participants in this study, nine of whom were student teachers selected based on their durability within the program, availability and ease of access (location). The characteristics of the student teacher sample can be identified, as shown in Table 2. In addition, nine classroom teachers (Teacher 1-9) and four university lecturers (Lecturer 1-4) were interviewed. These classroom teachers and university lecturers were directly associated with the student teacher participants. Student teachers were placed in schools with which they were familiar and Table 2 illustrates the nature of this familiarity in the school-based placement.

**Table 2: Student Teachers' Familiarity with the Placement School**

Number (Total 9)	Familiarity with the local school
9	were mothers, responsible for at least one child at home
6	were involved in their school community
5	were parents associated directly with their school, involved in classrooms as parent helpers or, in one instance, coach of a sports team.
4	were employed by their school as teacher aides prior to the start of their program
8	had had some previous involvement with this specific ITE program, typically through a past student teacher and four of the teachers <sup>1</sup> had had a direct involvement with the program also – one as a graduate

The table illustrates the student teachers' familiarity with the school community prior to their placements in their local schools. Six of the student teachers in this study were placed with at least one professional (a classroom teacher or a school leader) they were familiar with prior to commencing their ITE program (as illustrated in Table 2). This relationship impacted in different ways on the three partners - the school, the ITE provider and the student teacher. It was reported by these participants that such involvement impacted on the likelihood of their placements being thought of as effective places to learn how to teach. The participants viewed this optimistically, suggesting this allowed the placement to get off to a good start for various reasons. All partners needed assurance that working in a local school would meet program requirements for the University of Waikato and the strict national guidelines (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007).

Data were gathered through an interpretive approach, seeking to understand what the student teachers' experience of learning to teach was like during their placements in the local schools and how that impacted on their developing teacher identity. The study initially gathered data through student teachers' written narratives and focus group conversations; this was then combined with associate teachers' and lecturers' interview data.

Primarily, the nine student participants (given pseudonyms in this paper) were invited to write short narratives based on trigger topics. Based on the written narratives, the students shared their memories with other student teacher participants located in one of two geographic areas of the North Island of New Zealand, which allowed them to be in a focus group conversation. The focus group conversations were used to share individual stories for the others to consider, comment and develop. While reading through students' narratives and focus group conversations, four collective stories were developed by the researcher. This strategy was used to protect the anonymity of the students when sharing key ideas with other stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> In the University of Waikato's MMP program the school-based teacher educators are called coordinating teachers because their role extends to coordinating the placement across the school, rather than just their classroom. In this article they will be called teachers for ease of reading.

The data analysis in this study took place during the very early stage of data collection. Since the gathering of data was from a range of sources (written narratives, focus group conversations, and interviews), it needed constant and consistent interpretation from the very beginning. This helped the researcher to continually and systematically interrogate the data in order to identify the themes discussed in the findings. The process of writing the collective stories required the researcher to understand the narratives and then to match this data with the comments made by the student teachers during the focus group conversations. From the narratives and conversations, themes emerged that then became the key paragraphs of the collective stories which were shared with all teacher and lecturer participants.

## DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Themes identified by participants include: building local teaching capacity, diversity in practice experiences, stability and scope of partnership, moving into the profession, and support for the student teacher, as outlined in the following sections.

### ***Building Local Teaching Capacity***

The schools and teachers associated with this study were proactive in building local teaching capacity. This was especially important in locations where the teaching population was aging (nearing retirement). The majority of potential teacher candidates among the school leavers in these areas left home, as in Sherman and Sages' (2011) study, to attend university and did not return (Teacher 3). Building capacity locally required commitment from the schools and providers. The school needed to identify and support suitable candidates from their community, while the ITE providers needed to establish and maintain an effective distance program in partnership with schools. In building local capacity, these schools attempted to identify potential locals who had desirable dispositions for teaching. These include the qualities of perseverance, loyalty and dedication. Schools are not inclined to invest time and effort in a student who will not be available as a teacher in the local community or may not demonstrate the appropriate qualities.

As several of these partnerships had developed from a previous relationship the school had a sense of the history of their student teacher before they began in the program. Predicting the likelihood of student teacher success is dependent on many factors including age, gender, educational attainment and employment, all aspects of one's background (McGivney, 2004). However, long-term involvement in a school was considered a positive indicator in this study (Teacher 4). Reputation was established by some of the student teachers in this study through their earlier involvement with the school. Each person involved in these placements brought with them a unique background - their context and history (Lind, 2004; Ussher, 2011). Those who were parents of children in the school had first-hand involvement with classroom teachers and school leaders. Several participants reported that the strongest placements occur *when it is a whole school commitment* to the student teacher and the long-term goal of building capacity (Lecturer 1). If providers of ITE in rural regions are to continue to attract eager local aspirants into teaching, then improved or innovative partnerships must be developed (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; McGee & Yates, 2000).

### ***Diversity in Practice Experiences***

All student teachers in this program are required to complete a practicum in three different schools. While at the beginning of their program the student teachers were placed in a learning community where they had had previous experiences, they were required, without exception, to have school-based experiences in other schools. It is common practice in New Zealand ITE programs that all student teachers have a range of practice experiences. It might be argued that being placed in a known school will reduce the range and diversity of learning experiences. This

can be a challenge for some students who live in small New Zealand communities, where the number of schools within daily travelling distance is limited.

While the students in this study were placed with one teacher, in reality they were treated as part of the whole school. The idea of placing a student teacher with a whole school, rather than one classroom teacher is beneficial (Ussher, 2010; Zeichner, 2002). Exposure to a range of individual perspectives and diverse learning networks is important, so working across a range of classrooms and schools seems a logical strategy. These student teachers felt there was a need for them to be exposed to variety early in their program (Collective story #4), by being placed in diverse schools and classrooms. One teacher endorsed this idea:

*[Diversity] is just what the job is, isn't it? ... you've got to be able to fit in and adapt to the learning environment you are in or the community you are working within.*  
(Teacher 9)

Teachers 3, 7 and 9 confirm that teachers in classrooms today need to be able to mix and work with a range of people. Each of the student teachers in this study had limited control over the diversity of the schools chosen. It appeared that these students initially sought others with similar needs, personalities, attitudes and values when developing their first learning communities. Involvement with a diverse range of schools and teachers was identified by many of the student teachers, teachers and university lecturers as being an integral part of this ITE program. This study showed that being placed in a school provided opportunities to work with many teachers. For these participating student teachers, having a school as their extensive and diverse community of learning helped alleviate the isolation of studying by distance and helped them develop a positive view of teaching. The findings suggest that the greater the number of 'villagers' involved, the more confident the student teachers felt about meeting the challenges.

### **Stability and Scope of Partnerships**

Eight of the participants did not see a problem with building from past associations and others did not express a strong opinion on the issue. However there was recognition that a new partnership was dependent on the stability and scope of any previous relationship. Teacher 4 stated that if the student and her children *had had a positive experience with the school then those connections might be positive. You've already got a connection and I think that's a really good thing.*

The placement of a student teacher in a school that had a previous experience with the MMP program was also of benefit. Past experiences of the teachers and university lecturers within the MMP program and/or the school stimulated confidence and the belief in the placement as an effective place to learn teaching. Provided this past involvement had been either neutral or positive, then the new partnership began on a positive note. The recalling of past MMP or ITE experiences by teachers during discussions and reflections was reassuring to these student teachers.

The ITE students were involved in their local community prior to commencing the program. Being part of the school community created connections. Six of the student teachers were vital people within their school community taking on a variety of roles and responsibilities (Ussher, 2011). Six were parents, helpers or teacher aides and they anticipated that the role of student teacher would become an extension of what they already did in school. Some had their children involved in community groups and this involvement extended to being part of the school their children attended. As one of the three who did not have a placement in the same school as their child attended, it had been suggested to Claire by ITE staff, that finding a placement at an alternative school would be best.

A previous unfavourable connection such as a 'misbehaving' child or tension with a teacher was not the only source of conflict perceived to inhibit the effectiveness of a placement by the student teachers. Other examples shared by these participants included the level of expectations that the school and teachers held for them – highlighted as sometimes too high but

also contrasted as too low. Where student teachers demonstrated commitment and involvement in the past through their planning, communication and attendance, these student teachers described instances where they had been asked to do more than was expected by the University of Waikato on their school placement.

It was clear from the narratives that Sandra, Teresa, Sarah, Jamie and Mary-Lou had a real sense of belonging to their school and all five had some prior association with the school or staff members. Three of the university lecturers also observed this strong sense of belonging and bond for the students, also reported by Donaghy and colleagues (2003). The manner in which the student teacher, teacher and/or principal talked about each, contrasted strongly with those where the relationship was new. Sandra suggested that her teacher *made her contributions seem valued and [her teacher was] always asking for ideas and help with areas she was familiar with* (Narrative #2). She felt she was regarded as a teacher. Teresa, who often struggled with her study, felt her association with the school had helped her feel *comfortable* and empowered to learn.

The findings in this study endorsed that establishing the most influential relationship between teacher and student teacher, between 'old-timer' and 'newcomer' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), is critical (Ferrier-Kerr, 2005; Haigh, 2001; Lind, 2004; White, 2006). The student teachers' perceptions were reflected in Helen's words that her connection with her teacher was *much more important than with her colleagues or university lecturers* (Narrative #4). Learning teaching requires exploration and understanding of the wider schooling and social context and these student teachers looked for every opportunity to develop their school relationships and contacts as widely as possible. When a student teacher is placed in a school where they have a previous connection, the pace of developing the relationship and the sense of agency is advantageous. The student teachers' narratives showed that those who felt they had an immediate affinity with their school and its community benefited. The development of a close, open and reciprocal professional partnership can be accelerated when a student teacher is placed in a setting where there is already an existing relationship.

### **Moving into the Profession**

The participants agreed that if they had a previous association with the school then the relationship they had with that school would alter as they moved into their new role as student teacher. All expected there to be some changes, for example from parent to student teacher, but they had no real understanding of what that might demand. Through past involvement these student teachers felt they had been appreciated for their work in the school and mostly anticipated that this would continue. Some believed that the transition from their previous role to student teacher would be easy and come naturally. Studying towards a degree in teaching seemed like a natural progression for those who had previously been 'teaching' or a teacher's aide.

The teachers had varying views on how the change in roles would impact on the student teachers. One suggested that in working together closely the student teachers were going to develop a strong bond with their teacher. Another said that with a changed relationship, the student teacher *would be treated differently* (Teacher 6) while another talked about how the different circumstances might change the relationship: *A person who is already connected to a school might feel they have to put more in* (Teacher 4). Teacher 6 suggested that change was critical in becoming a teacher. Lecturer 3 affirmed this idea when it was suggested that many student teachers have difficulty developing their teacher identity. Envisaging and articulating that there was indeed a change required was considered one of the big challenges for the student teachers being placed in the same school. Changing the work you do in a school changes your relationship with that school and therefore a student teacher must expect to be treated quite differently. Participants said that building professional relationships is a challenge that teachers face all the time. The student teachers who had been involved in their local schools through their own children felt the need to belong very strongly and this was challenged by the

need to change into a professional relationship with other members of the school community. This was however offset by the student teachers' local knowledge of their rural setting (White & Reid, 2008).

### **Support for the Student Teacher**

Support was apparent for the student teacher where the school was knowledgeable about ITE, the MMP program and specific protocols associated with applications, studying and teaching. Where the school appeared to know and understand the program, this gave students a positive perception and confidence. This prior knowledge of the program was important to the student teachers. Sarah's classroom teacher had encouraged her into the program and she had an expectation that her teacher had a reasonable knowledge of roles and responsibilities (Narrative #2). Student teachers reported that they were motivated by the support that their teacher or school gave them as a result of earlier associations. In Collective story #1 the student teachers suggested that because they had been in the school for a time through offspring and work, they had confidence in the school's support.

Where schools or teachers had encouraged and supported the student teachers' application process in some way such as writing a reference, the student teachers felt they were trusted and belonged to the school learning community. These schools were prepared to stake their professional reputation on someone who was demonstrably of 'good character' (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007) by providing them with a placement in their school. In return the student teachers showed a commitment through their attitude to teaching, learning and the program in general. Sarah said of her teacher, *I'd worked in the classroom and the teacher had said to me that she was quite prepared to do anything I thought she could do to help me. I had a lot of support from the school* (Focus Group #1). University lecturers and teachers noted that the MMP students showed *an obligation to their school, and a commitment because of the much closer relationship and a much stronger tie* (Lecturer 2). This tie came from the sense of belonging to the school as a village for learning (Ussher, 2010).

Being an integral part of the school appeared to guarantee support for a student teacher's work and an interest in what they were setting out to achieve. Those learning communities reported as well developed in this study extended beyond the immediate classroom teacher to include others associated with the school such as the principal and other staff members. It was suggested that this was particularly so for the smaller rural schools. Teacher 2 considered the involvement of other staff members as the *strength of being in a school where [the student teacher] feels a part of the community*. In this study, where the student teachers felt they belonged to the school they talked about a sense of being a 'teacher'.

### **Tensions and Benefits**

Any tensions perceived or created through familiarity associated with a school-based placement were outweighed by the range of opportunities including building teaching capacity in the local community. The participants in this study identified benefits for each partner when a student teacher was in a school where they had a previous association. For the school it was an opportunity to build capacity as previously suggested by Delany and Wenmouth (2003), Green and Reid (2004) and McGee and Yates (2000). For the student teachers, this study positioned context and history, such as background, legacy and past work in schools, as critical factors in the effectiveness of these distance ITE placements. Some student teachers had been 'well-known' in their school and they benefited from that situation in terms of access to resources including other teachers, and being given more meaningful teaching roles and opportunities to develop their own practices and identity.

Being placed in a local, familiar school does not negate the requirement to have a broad range of learning teaching experiences, an important issue for some researchers (Beck & Kosnik, 2001). This study shows that where a student teacher is placed with a school, teachers throughout the

school showed a willingness to share and support. Separation by distance could have impacted their sense of belonging and perspective but the isolation often experienced by these distance students was minimised through their relationships and the desire by those who encouraged the student teacher into the program then having the opportunity to share in their ongoing professional growth as a teacher.

Starting out with an established relationship enabled the students to feel they belonged right away; it was their 'village' for learning teaching. Findings confirmed relationships associated with the school-based placement as a crucial factor and lessening the 'newcomer' tag as highlighted by White (2006) and others. This sense of belonging helped develop the relationship and their identity. The one-day per week in school provided each student teacher with extended time to develop – to be accepted in classroom and school. This occurred through opportunities to interact and reflect together, allowing the relationships to *be robust, based on honesty, integrity and openness* (Ussher, 2011, p. 264). The student teachers valued a secure relationship, free from tensions, where they were encouraged to construct their own teacher identity, to be themselves. Other professionals regarded them as 'teacher' throughout the experience as they appeared integral to the school which helped in the development of their own identity. This gave them learning opportunities within already busy classrooms, school schedules and curricula. It was clear that sound existing relationships benefitted these student teachers to further develop professional agency, which in turn increased their confidence to actively observe, inquire and trial new ideas as a novice teacher. As older students, they had the maturity and confidence to build connections. This feeling of belonging enabled them to focus on the school as a site of inquiry, regarding all teaching colleagues as potential opportunities for dialogue and learning teaching.

Changing role within a school did create tensions for some. It required changed perceptions and the way others related to the student teacher. It was not always easy to transition to being a professional after having been identified as 'just' a parent. A further critical factor was the ability of each partner to manage the changed demands and expectations of the school-based placement. As second chance learners or career changers, the student teachers were focused on their learning and worked hard to manage the pressures of time and workload to accommodate demands. For the student teachers and university lecturers who had previous involvement with the school, the placement got off to a good start as they felt they belonged and were familiar with people and resources, therefore knowing who to ask for support and where to look for resources. While previous involvement impacted positively on their sense of agency, developing their teacher identity was more demanding.

Support for these students on placement emerged as a benefit for them. They were treated as a teacher in their local school rather than a student of the university. Loyalty by the students to those who identified them as potential teachers and then supported them into this distance ITE program was important. This finding was not fully expected, as most ITE students do not have an ongoing relationship with those who endorse their application. Where a school gave its support, the students were usually an integral part of the school and community and attached importance to being connected and belonging. There was a sense of returning past favours and goodwill. Similarly, where the school or an individual teacher had a past association with this MMP program, provider or university lecturer, there was a perception of 'loyalty and repayment' through their commitment of time and energy to the student and placement. The findings highlighted commitment from the teachers in supporting and guiding their student teachers with empathy, providing them with time and opportunities to practice, think and reflect. Their belonging was a benefit, rewarded and affirmed through support and quality opportunities to develop as a teacher.

## CONCLUSIONS

Highlighting these findings does not in any way imply that students who are not familiar or are not studying at a distance cannot have successful placements. This study did not intend to show that distance study or placements in a local community are in any way superior to alternative

practices. This article presents an alternative element when considering Zeichner's (2002) challenge to look beyond the traditional structures of student teaching. He identified whole school sites, community field experiences and school-based teachers assuming greater authority in the partnership while this study highlights the potential positive impact of partnerships within a local community. As most on-campus students move away from their home community it may not be practical or possible to apply this concept to on-campus ITE programs. Several researchers (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; Trinidad, et al., 2014; White & Reid, 2008) focus on the university preparing student teachers for a rural experience. This study focuses on the student teachers who already belong in rural communities.

Seven of the nine student-participants now have permanent teaching positions in their local community. Sandra, Jamie and Teresa, three of the six students who were familiar with their placement school through previous associations before they began the program, now teach in that school. Catherine and Mary-Lou, also from the six, now have employment in their local community, but not in their placement school. Sarah, the sixth of the group who had previous association with a school, could not find permanent employment in her community, but has had temporary positions locally. Of the three students who did not have that previous association with their placement school, Margaret returned to the secondary school where she was employed prior to joining this program, and Claire and Helen chose not to seek employment straight after graduating for personal reasons. All these student teachers were mature women with commitments to family and community. They were career changers or second-chance learners who took advantage of this ITE program within their local community.

The immediate implication from these findings is that there can be benefit to learning teaching and developing identity in a school where the student teacher has a previous association, rather than the situation being something to be avoided as earlier literature suggested (Kane, 2005; Simpson, 2002). The figures, though limited, suggest that five out of the six who were based in local schools where they were known, have remained in the teaching profession full-time in their local community. This is a high retention rate, even higher if you include the part-time employee. By contrast, of the three who trained at 'unfamiliar' schools, two chose not to go teaching immediately, while the other has returned to teach in her original familiar environment. The implication here is that a larger study is needed, if for no other reason than to explore the economic implications of this ITE program. A retention rate of nearly 90 per cent has significance in terms of investment in teacher education. Further studies to investigate learning teaching in local centres and schools could consider other variables such as age and mobility of the students as well as overcoming the impact of isolation caused by separation from campus and colleagues.

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