

2024

## A Framework for Supporting Teacher Development and Progression: Identifying Conditions to Support Teaching Interns and Early Career Teachers

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### Recommended Citation

Fielder, S., Morrison, C. M., Ledger, S., & Whipp, P. R. (2024). A Framework for Supporting Teacher Development and Progression: Identifying Conditions to Support Teaching Interns and Early Career Teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 49(6). <https://doi.org/10.14221/1835-517X.6551>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol49/iss6/6>

## **A Framework for Supporting Teacher Development and Progression: Identifying Conditions to Support Teaching Interns and Early Career Teachers**

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*Abstract: Early career teacher retention and progression are complex issues which inform discourse about and review of pre-service teacher preparation. Debate about how to best connect pre-service teachers' theoretical learning about teaching to practical application and reflection within the classroom (praxis) is ever-present within this dialogue. Extended teaching internship is identified as effective for connecting these elements of learning to teach, through sustained placement activity situated within supportive school environments. These extended experiences are located within communities of practice and facilitate ongoing reflection on transitions from pre-service to early career teaching. The mixed methods research reported here focused on participants' retrospective views of an extended internship and highlighted key elements that connected practice with developing understandings of what it means to be a teacher. Participants' perspectives emphasised how their experiences established vital connections between them and the profession. Analysis of these data underpinned the development of a conceptual framework (Teacher Development and Progression Framework) that illustrates the complex nature of learning to teach and how interdependent factors support momentum and traction into and beyond the early career phase.*

**Keywords:** teaching internship; pre-service teacher; initial teacher education; teacher retention; teacher induction; teacher workforce shortages

### **Introduction**

Australian initial teacher education (ITE) has endured decades of strong and sustained critique (Mayer, 2014). At times, the sector has been described as a product of 'benign neglect' (Jasman, 2003, p. 1) and underperformance and misalignment. These critiques inform the conceptions held about quality within the sector and set the policy conditions for it (Rowe & Skourdoumbis, 2019). The establishment of the National framework for professional standards for teaching (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2003) represents the policy setting driven by external accountability, regulation, and further policy setting. This backdrop contributed to

the introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011), which continued throughout initial implementation of the Standards. The Australian Government commissioned the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) review of Australian ITE (Craven et al., 2014) not long after the introduction of these Standards and this sustained critique has continued through the Quality Initial Teacher Education (QITE) Review and the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) Review. The latest report on Australian ITE, *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel* (Scott et al., 2023), reinforce earlier sentiments and reiterates the call for strengthening external auditing, influence over content and the ways it is delivered. Within this complex milieu of policy and discourse aimed at strengthening quality in ITE, these conditions pose risks in the form of de-professionalising the profession (Rowe & Skourdoumbis, 2019).

Recent evaluations of ITE (Craven et al, 2014, Scott et al, 2023) extend beyond the political realm and national policy setting. Political discourse that is underpinned by deficit views of university-based teacher education is reflected in the broader sentiments about the need for learning to teach to be based within practical settings. These themes resonate within Australian society more broadly, where critique of teachers abound in media, including reports of falling academic standards of Australian school children (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Hunter, 2022), an emphasis on traditional notions of the ‘fundamentals of teaching’ (Fahey, 2023), and universities being out of step with contemporary schooling (Duffy, 2023; Hare, 2023; School News Australia, 2021) ). While these contributions seek to strengthen teacher education, nuanced and sophisticated knowledge about strengthening quality within ITE can be found elsewhere (Bahr & Mellor, 2016; Gore, 2023; Ure et al, 2017).

The pressures exerted on teacher education are explained as forces that could see teacher education turn on itself (Reid, 2011). The orientation of this discourse, for practical skills as distinct and counter to theory, is a manufactured dichotomy that discredits university-based teaching and learning. Moreover, it situates pre-service and early career teachers tenuously on the periphery of momentum within the profession to make Australia’s teaching workforce a highly skilled and highly knowledgeable professional group. As such, the theoretical components of educational research and theory are fundamental to teacher preparation, combined with practical application and experiences within learning environments that provide the basis for reflection and learning (or praxis) (Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003). These contributions provide the basis for contemporary, evidence-based practice that are essential to preparing novice educators to become future professionals capable of responding to the diverse and considerable challenges of teaching.

Within the contemporary context of significant teacher workforce shortages and sustained critique of university-based teacher preparation alternate approaches to university-based ITE are gathering momentum. Programs like Teach for Australia (Teach for Australia, 2024), Nexus Program (La Trobe University, 2023) , Turn to Teaching Internship Program (Department of Education, 2024) and others across Australia provide employment-based pathways to teaching. These initiatives are geared towards attracting high-performing applicants from other fields and provide employment opportunities within schooling settings that have been difficult to staff (both in attracting and retaining teachers). These approaches offer unique perspectives and insights on preparing future teachers; however, each model brings with it a series of equally unique challenges. Attraction and retention of sufficient graduates as well as programme costs are just some of the complexities worth noting here.

As teacher educators working at the intersection of university- and school-based ITE, we see opportunities to examine a range of potential pathways to the classroom. The research reported on here provides insights into a university-based extended internship programme embedded within an ITE courses. The mixed-methods research sought the perspectives of

experienced teachers who had progressed beyond the early career (Proficient) career stage and were now looking back on their experiences as an intern within a year-long internship program. The participants' perspectives provide insights into the internship experience and how they saw an extended engagement between their internship school setting and university preparation as influential in their career opportunities and trajectories. Furthermore, they recounted perspectives about how these experiences had shaped them as professionals and had provided the impetus for career opportunities. These insights situate them differently from their peers and provide an incentive for further examination of extended internship as a potential pathway for all teaching candidates.

The following sections provide further detail around the key factors involved in the research.

### **Extended Teaching Internships**

Extended teaching internships in Australia exist in a range of contexts and structures. Some programs have been developed in response to calls for classroom-ready graduate teachers (Craven et al., 2014; DESE, 2022) through more time spent in classrooms and performing in teaching roles. Some programmes are focused on the career changers, such as *Nexus* (La Trobe University, 2023) and *Teach for Australia* (Teach for Australia, 2024). Others have a more focused approach through centres of excellence, regional contexts, and combined university programs (Jervis-Tracey & Finger, 2016; Ledger & Vidovich, 2018; Tindall-Ford et al., 2017; White et al., 2017). While each of these programs has its own individual focus, the common goal within all is to enhance the quality of pre-service teacher preparation.

### **Workforce Shortages**

The current teacher workforce shortage has highlighted the importance of effective initial teacher education (ITE) programs that produce high-quality, classroom-ready graduate teachers and is the focus of media and research (AITSL, 2022b; Brandenburg et al., 2023; Craven et al., 2014; Department of Education, 2022; Pendergast, 2023). Coupled with this is the ongoing focus of research on the issue of retention and career traction in early career teachers (Ingersoll, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2017; Mansfield et al., 2014; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Weldon, 2018; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). The importance of well-prepared graduate teachers underpins the agenda of improving student learning outcomes and teacher quality over the past decade (Clinton et al., 2014; Craven et al., 2014; Department of Education Skills and Employment [DESE], 2022; Paul et al., 2021).

### **Early Career Progression**

Creating an environment for pre-service and early career teachers to progress is critical in retaining a strong workforce into the future (Department of Education, 2022). While ITE is one aspect that can support this, other considerations are critical factors. Early career teachers face a steep learning curve as they transition from a graduate to becoming proficient in their profession (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). These transitions are enhanced by the provision of effective induction processes (AITSL, 2016; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2011; Hudson, 2012; Hudson & Hudson, 2016; Wallace et al., 2021; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021), school leaders' effective oversight and

management of novice teachers' workloads and roles (Willis et al., 2017; Sullivan & Morrison, 2014). Also improving transitions are the connections with colleagues (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014) salary, and a raft of other employment conditions (Department of Education, 2022).

### **Resilience**

Resilience is a strong predictor of if a teacher will stay or leave the profession (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Resilience in the early career phase of teaching has been a focus of research over the past decade (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Gu, 2014; Johnson & Down, 2013; Johnson et al., 2015b; Mansfield et al., 2014; Pearce & Morrison, 2011). The link between resilience and early career traction is a crucial element of understanding the complex nature of teaching and is exemplified in the Early Career Teacher Resiliency (ECTR) Framework (Johnson et al., 2015a). This framework identifies how building resilience through an enhanced understanding of *policies and practices*, *teachers' work*, *school culture*, *relationships*, and *teacher identity* support the early career development of novice teachers.

### **Retention**

Over the past several decades, a strong research focus has been on the attraction and retention of teachers within the Australian context. This integrally links with the ITE sector, which has a focus on improving the readiness of graduate (novice) teachers to support the retention of early career teachers. Various studies have looked at why early career teachers leave (Adoniou, 2012; Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Buchanan et al., 2013; Kelchtermans, 2017; Weldon, 2018), factors that support these teachers (Dempsey et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2015a; Mansfield et al., 2014), and currently emerging as a focus, why they stay (Burke et al., 2013; Grillo & Kier, 2021; Kelly et al., 2019). Considering new challenges related to workforce attrition across all career phases (Heffernan et al. 2022), retention of early career colleagues is of particular importance.

### **ITE – Policy, Accreditation, Professional Placements**

Initial teacher education in Australia is provided through policies that are highly structured and delivered within accreditation requirements (AITSL, 2022a; Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). In 2014 major reform was brought about with the Action Now report (Craven et al., 2014), which saw considerable change occur within the ITE sector. While other policies have had an influence on delivery, the current review of ITE through the Next Steps report (DESE, 2022) and Strong Beginnings report (Scott et al., 2023) highlights the continued policy influences and boundaries to which ITE providers must respond. Importantly, it takes time to see the impact of these policy changes and with little time between significant reforms, the impact of earlier changes has yet to be fully researched (Pendergast, 2023).

The professional placement components within ITE program standards have specific, regulated requirements of ITE providers (AITSL, 2022a). Each provider must ensure that individual courses meet the minimum requirements for days spent in school classrooms. Currently, the call from some stakeholders is for pre-service teachers to spend more time on professional placement earlier in their courses (DESE, 2022), while other stakeholders, including pre-service teachers, call for more classroom time throughout their ITE program.

## Methods and The Conceptual Framework

The mixed-methods, explanatory sequential research presented here was reviewed and approved by the human research ethics committee of the host university (approved protocol number 2021/117). The educational researchers involved in the project have extensive first-hand experience in the development and delivery of teaching internship programs at a range of Australian universities. Project design drew on this expertise as well as the theoretical framework of *Communities of Practice* (Wenger, 1998, 2000) to examine the perspectives of experienced teachers looking back on their preparation for teaching within an extended internship program.

The Communities of Practice framework provides conceptual tools aimed at understanding individual's experiences through the four key pillars of *practice*, *meaning*, *community* and *identity* (see Figure 1). The applicability of these conceptual tools reflected their previous application to educational research and their utility in helping understand and explain the experiences of teachers transitioning through career phases (from pre-service to early career and experienced teacher phases).



Figure 1: Community of Practice Framework (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

### Participants

Purposive participant recruitment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was undertaken to recruit teaching graduates who had successfully navigated their early career phase and who remained in the profession. This process was implemented using the alumni office of one Australian university involved in delivering an extended teaching internship program and participant recruitment was time-bound to a ten-year period (2012 to 2022) to coincide with the years when the extended internship program was offered.

The alumni were initially invited to participate in an anonymous survey via a link embedded within the invitation email. The survey sought participants' responses to a range of items related to preparation for teaching, early career teaching and career experiences, teacher

resilience, wellbeing, and identity work. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were invited to contact the researcher if they were wished to participate in a semi-structured interview aimed at further exploring their perspectives. Individual survey responses were not linked to interview data.

The initial recruitment process resulted in 127 respondents completing the online survey. These teachers and leaders were in Western Australia, Australia, and other parts of the world. In addition, eight respondents self-nominated and later participated in a semi-structured qualitative interview. Given participants' location, circumstances and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, these interviews were offered either on campus and in person or online via Microsoft Teams. Both on campus and online interviews were conducted. All survey respondents were graduates from ITE programs at the host university, while interview respondents were all participants of the extended teaching internship program (originally available to pre-service teachers via merit-based selection).

Theme	Description
Authentic practice	Real life experiences, risk taking and lesson failures, reflection, feedback
Becoming a teacher	Understanding teacher's work, accessing support, resources, professional learning opportunities
Belonging to a school community	Social connections, professional connections, sense of belonging, collegiality, inclusiveness
Impact of internship	Employment, confidence, risk taking, pedagogical choices
Motivations for internship	Confidence, employment opportunities, time in schools,
Purpose of the internship	Time spent in school, preparation for teaching, gradual release of responsibility, opportunities for relief, limited registration, organisation, practical and structural elements
Relationships	Positive experiences, relationships, communication, risk taking, feedback, collegiality
Self-perception	Negative statements, lack of confidence, perceived lack of experience,
Shared repertoire	Curriculum understanding, pedagogical choices, mimicking, developing personal teaching styles

**Table 1: Coding Names and Descriptions**

## Analysis

Data were analysed in an explanatory sequential method, meaning analysis of quantitative survey data informed and guided the questions for the semi-structured qualitative interviews and preceded qualitative analysis of these data. Due to the small size of the participant cohort, quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive analysis. The following phase of qualitative analysis involved reading and re-reading of interview data, firstly looking to identify significant and repeated themes (Bergin, 2018, p. 156) and later relating these to project research questions. This inductive and iterative approach was supported by and captured within QSR NVivo and resulted in the establishment of themes and codes (see Table 1 above), which were evident in existing research literature and connected to the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), and the Early Career Teacher Resilience Framework (Johnson et al., 2015a).

## Findings

The focus in this paper is on the qualitative findings which were grouped using the four themes of *practice*, *identity*, *community* and *meaning* from Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000). The powerful perspective of participants extends understandings and

insights gained through the quantitative analysis (Bazeley, 2020; Bergin, 2018; Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Saldaña, 2016). The voice of the participants is exemplified through the Communities of Practice framework (Wenger, 1998) with overt connections to the Early Career Teacher Resiliency Framework (Johnson et al., 2015a).

### Practice: Learning as Doing

Participants viewed practice as an important element as to why they engaged in the internship program. They spoke about the importance of being well-prepared to cope with demands of the profession and better understand the complex and unpredictable nature and demands of teachers' work, as Charlotte explained.

*I went into it, basically, just to be better prepared, for the workload and just to see how it felt working as a full-time teacher...And it would, whatever we...or I got out of the internship. I knew that at the beginning of the journey, I would definitely be coming out better equipped and better prepared and up skilled in some way. ...I still kind of went in quite blind, other than what [the] University had prepared us for ... (Charlotte)*

In becoming better prepared, the amount of time in a school was often a motivating factor for involvement in the internship program. Participants spoke about the importance of time in the classroom and developing relationships with students and staff, as illustrated here.

*I don't think anything prepares you for it. I think the only way that you can prepare for it is just to be there as often as possible, as long as possible [to] develop those relationships [and] develop those networks. (Tara)*

### Identity: Learning as Becoming

Taking risks was an area that participants spoke about when developing their identity. Lessons which were not successful were not seen as failures, rather as a positive learning experience that was supported by their mentor teachers through debriefing and coaching, an essential element of the schools' culture. The importance of having this element of practice during the internship's unassessed period, allowed for these risks to be taken, strengthening their own understanding of who they are as a teacher.

*The teacher gave me opportunities where she knew my lesson was going to fail. But then she was there to help me when it did fail to say reflect on that as well. She sort of made it, made me understand that it's okay to have those failures and they're the ones you learn from. And every lesson doesn't have to be a big wow, lesson, especially in the class. Yeah, so at the time, it could have been quite distressing. (Alex)*

The sense of identity as a teacher was repeatedly discussed by participants. This was heightened when they discussed how they perceived themselves during their final professional experience in comparison with their colleagues who took traditional pathways to graduation. Participants regularly spoke about how their understanding of teachers' work was heightened because of being in the extended internship, as Leo explained.

*Having that extra six months prior to the placement. You know...you walk into a classroom that you know, [the] kids, you know, a structure that you know, and it's just really important for that and then also just makes things easier that you don't feel pressured by things....I know I had friends personally that were going into classrooms...and they're trying to figure out planning. They're trying to figure out how to behaviour manage, where for me, I walked in. I was right; 'we*



*do this, we're going over here. Today is Tuesday. You've got PE.' You know, whatever it was, all those little things that are added stresses during a placement. But if you've been doing it for six months, it's just natural. And it's natural at that point, really. (Leo)*

### **Community: Learning as Belonging**

The importance of belonging to a community was highlighted by participants when they shared their experiences. Many shared how it was not only their mentor teacher who supported them during the internship, but colleagues across the school also invested time and collegiality. Participants discussed how these relationships were often a turning point for them, as Caity explained.

*My final mentor teacher...in my internship...and her co-worker... Those two together were most influential because I could see how they work together and how they used each other, even though they taught different year groups...the way they worked...I think the collaboration it's taught me...how to collaborate with other teachers, that you're really not on your own and that you can work with your colleagues to kind of build on and create something more like It's not just you. And I think that was a big turning point for me to know that because that's the scariest thing in an internship. You've got to do everything, and it's like, 'How am I going to balance this?'...she's like, 'Okay, you're going to handle this part.' (Caity)*

Below, Daisy summarises how many of the interns felt like they belonged in the school rather than being a visitor. This sense of belonging both to a place and a profession follows them through their career as they actively seek schools and communities that they feel connected to further developing her personal teaching identity.

*I didn't feel like a prac [sic] student. ...I felt like I was part of the school. I was part of staff...my first job already felt that I had already done a year of teaching because I, technically I, had I been in the classroom almost full time...at the end of the internship. (Daisy)*

### **Meaning: Learning as Experience**

Participants regularly discussed the importance of experience and practice. Being situated within a school with regular ongoing practice scaffolded and supported their understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Loretta explained how working collaboratively often meant that extra detail was required when sharing lessons with colleagues and how this in turn prepared her to understand the complexity of teachers' work later in her career.

*By the time I got into Term three when I was doing my final prac [sic] , I was on daily work...pad; the lessons that were more sophisticated and the lessons that I would be giving to my collaborative teacher were very detailed. But then the lessons that I was more familiar with, and maybe weren't as in-depth. They were more in note form, etcetera, which really then helped prepare me for when I got my own classroom. (Loretta)*

Many participants talked about why they wanted to be a teacher and how the internship helped to develop their meaning of teaching. In some cases, the importance of career progression was discussed. As a mature age intern, Josie went into teaching with a focus on being a classroom teacher and was initially happy with this purpose. As time has

gone on and her experience has grown, she related how her perception of her teacher identity has changed.

*What I am looking at is whether I want to go to level three or deputy, which at the beginning of my career, I was like, 'No, no, I'm just going to be a teacher...this is me for the rest of my life.' I think that was a mature age student. Um, coming into it later, I started teaching at the age of 40. Oh, yeah, I'll just, this will be it for my career. And now it's like, I could climb. I could do something more. (Josie)*

## Discussion

Growing and developing well-prepared graduate teachers is essential in keeping an ongoing pipeline of future teachers, particularly through times of workforce shortages. Ensuring that these graduates are well situated and resilient are key elements in retaining them in the profession longitudinally and is prominent in the current report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (Scott et al., 2023). Extended teaching internship is a model that builds these key elements through a supportive pre-service placement and scaffolds interns for future progression and success in their careers. The extension of placement periods during the internship brings together theory, skills and practice in a way that goes beyond being a pre-service teacher in a traditional placement program. It links the intern into the Community of Practice (a school) and supports early career development with the five key pillars of the Early Career Teacher Resiliency Framework (Johnson et al, 2015a) in a complex manner. The pillars of teachers' work, school culture, relationships, teacher identity and policies and practices provide another layer of complexity, development and understanding of the work of a teacher over a sustained period.

The research project resulted in a range of findings from the qualitative interviews and previous quantitative survey. Following the analysis of the survey results, the participant voices provided powerful perspectives and insights of how the Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000), where they were situated, linked with the Early Career Teacher Resiliency Framework (Johnson et al., 2015a). Analysing the data evidenced the complexity of the relationship between the two frameworks and led to constant reflection of how each of these frameworks work together. The tension of being situated within a community along with demonstrating aspects of early career resilience made conceptualising the relationships complicated. The skills shown in each aspect of the frameworks was not lineal nor hierarchical. They link across each other and are in constant motion depending on the context that participants speak about. These understandings underpinned the development of the Teacher Development and Progression Framework (Figure 2).

The importance of the individual at the centre of the conceptual framework allows for them to be situated in any Community of Practice. The significance of the context and outer layer of the of the conceptual framework connects and builds the complex relationships evidenced between the two original frameworks. Depending on the lens which you look through in the Communities of Practice layer, any of the pillars of the Early Career Teacher Resiliency Framework can be supported. These layers are fluid and need to move depending on the point of reference at a particular point in time and the lens through which it is viewed.



Figure 2: Teacher Development and Progression (TDP) Framework

An example is when an intern is building their sense of identity. Using the lens within the Community of Practice pillar of identity, at any one point of time, their alignment may take the form of understanding teachers' work, school culture, relationships, policies and practices and teacher identity. Each of these points in time allow for the development of identity through a variety of experiences and complex situations. This is evidenced below with the following example.

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

The quote above highlights how extended internships strengthen preparation for teaching. Josie articulates how the opportunity to be involved in a school from the start of a school year was a highlight of strengthening preparation for teaching in the internship. This connects the Community of Practice pillar of practice (learning as doing) with developing an

understanding of the complexity of teachers' work from the Early Career Teacher Resiliency Framework. The complex nature of how these pillars interact with each other could also demonstrate her understanding of the importance of relationships with students and how these are formed during this early stage of the year.

## Conclusion

The research project started out to look at the impact of an extended teaching internship on early career teacher retention and traction. The result of the Teacher Development and Progression Framework was unexpected but demonstrates the strength and complexity of the initiative. The extended teaching internship during the final year of initial teacher preparation is in contrast with calls for pre-service teachers to spend more time in schools earlier in their courses. However, by having the theoretical understandings embedded in their initial learning and a strong knowledge of evidence-based research, then applying this knowledge over an extended period is beneficial. All participants in the qualitative phase of this research had successfully navigated the early career phase and were transitioning beyond with no intention to leave the profession. This warrants further investigation at extending the core elements of the programme to wider cohorts, providing extended periods of time in schools prior to completion of their study to better equip beginning teachers.

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## Acknowledgements

This research was part of a Master of Education (Research) and was made possible through the support of the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. I want to thank the internship participants who gave their time to participate in this study. Their perspectives provide valuable insight into the relationship between ITE, Communities of Practice and the Early Career Teacher Resilience Framework.