



Faith Companion Mentoring Project 2020

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Prepared by Dr Amanda Gutierrez

Senior Lecturer in Education (Literacy/English/Professional
Practice)

Email: amanda.gutierrez@acu.edu.au

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Executive summary

This report outlines the findings from the first year of implementation of the Faith Companion Project (2020). This project follows on from a pilot project and focused specifically on strengthening PSTs' understanding of Catholic spirituality, mission and identity and aligned with the Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) priority to develop and maintain an employment force, while supporting schools and staff in BCE's priority area of sustaining Strong Catholic Identities. The research questions for the project include:

- how can a partnership between a university, school and faith companion contribute to PSTs' sense of themselves as teacher professionals in Catholic settings;
- what impact does this relationship have on PSTs' views and understandings about teaching in a Catholic setting; and
- what impact does this relationship have on PSTs' views about their longevity in the profession?

The findings illustrated the benefits, as well as areas that can be strengthened in a Faith Companion mentoring partnership program. A summary of each key finding is outlined below with more detailed discussion provided within the report:

Key finding 1- PSTs had increased employability and preparedness for the profession and preferred to get a job in a Catholic setting

All PSTs in the program found employment before the end of 2020. The PSTs reported feeling more prepared for the profession, and all had a preference to find employment in a Catholic setting. Eight out of the nine PSTs were employed in a Faith Based school.

Key finding 2 – Significant reduction in PST anxiety levels about block placement after attending PD days and 1 day a week experience in school

There was a significant shift from high levels of anxiety before the PSTs' involvement with the partnership to minimal to no levels of anxiety after completing the PD days and 1 day a week experience in their schools. Overall the PSTs suggested having the opportunity to slowly ease into the school community, get to know the culture of the school, the needs of the learners and develop a relationship with their supervising teacher over a long period of time 'demolish[ed] all the nerves'.

Key finding 3 – The one day a week experience helped prepare for their block placement and connect to their Catholic school context and the teaching profession

The one day a week experience were of great importance in assisting the PSTs to develop their understanding of the teaching profession, begin to feel welcome at the school and the teaching profession and understand the culture of the school. It was also important for their beginning understanding of Catholic school settings.

Key finding 4 – Faith Companion experiences contribute to PSTs’ understanding of Catholic school contexts and the teaching profession

The Faith Companions were highly valued by the PSTs, and were successful in mentoring the PSTs’ understanding of the teaching profession and Catholic schooling contexts. Some specific areas identified were:

- knowledge and experience of BCE systems and resources
- having an external support person, especially leading their professional conversations, provided an additional experienced voice and helped them to feel more at ease about placement experiences
- scaffolded the PSTs’ critical reflexivity skills

Key finding 5 – PSTs experienced increased engagement in Catholic understandings

Overall, there was significant reporting of increased active engagement and greatly increased engagement across all categories surveyed relating to Catholic understandings for the PSTs who completed this section of the survey. For some PSTs, particular areas were still a challenge. These were:

- understanding the values and ethos of the Catholic school;
- understanding the sacramental, liturgical, ritual and prayer life of the school; and
- Understanding the connection between the school/college, their local parish and the Archdiocese.

Key finding 6 – Leadership staff in schools as well as supervising teachers play a key role in PSTs’ understanding of the teaching profession

The survey results suggest the majority of PSTs feel that school staff are either very important or significantly important to their understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to the school. For the PSTs’ supervising teacher was the most mentioned important staff member. The Assistant Principal, APRE and Other staff in the year level and CPA areas were also mentioned as having a significant impact on feeling welcome in the school, and providing learning experiences. The Principal was the next most important staff member mentioned by the PSTs in the survey.

Other staff mentioned included the librarian (2), Literacy Leader (1), HOD RE (1), HOD CPA (1), Head of Learning (1), Chaplain (1) and teacher support officers (1). The extended time in the schools enables PSTs to seek support and learn from a variety of leaders and staff within the school context.

Key finding 7 – PSTs were able to exceed in many of the APST Graduate Standards

In the final survey, the PSTs were asked to reflect on how well they met each of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: Graduate. Overall, over 50% of the PSTs felt they exceed the requirements in 18 of the focus areas and the majority of PSTs felt they exceeded the requirements in 11 of the focus areas. The standards that were listed as mostly exceeded were

- Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it, with the exception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages;
- Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching, with the exception of strategies to include parents/carers in the educative process;
- Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning, with the exception of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers.

In addition, almost all of the PSTs reported excelling in focus area “6.3 Seek and apply constructive feedback from supervisors and teachers to improve teaching practices”, which illustrates the strength of the mentoring focus in this program.

Overall, there appeared to be a pattern across the focus areas indicating the PSTs felt least confident with their knowledge around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander subjects and concepts, and working with parents/caregivers.

Key finding 8 – PSTs in partnership programs have greater engagement with their schools during unexpected crisis

The majority of PSTs were able to continue to engage with their schools in various ways during the COVID 19 shutdown of schools. The examples provided by the PSTs are identified in the report. Many PSTs reported both personal and professional growth during this period of time and were incredibly grateful to their schools for the support. In addition, the Faith Companion role was incredibly important due to the support they provided to each PST. The Faith Companions demonstrated flexibility and shifted their support to phone or zoom meetings. The comments from the PSTs were incredibly positive and grateful for this support.

Key finding 9 – Successful and sustainable Partnership Programs require support and careful modelling, evidence demonstrates the valuable impacts

More than 70% of the PSTs ranked high importance in the project’s strengthening of their connection to the profession, and development of their identities as teachers; their understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a Catholic school setting; their ability to meet the government mandated teacher standards (APSTs) set for graduate pre-service teachers; understanding and completing their capstone final research project connected to their placement unit (GTPA); and understanding that teaching goes beyond everyday classroom activities/interactions. They also suggested the partnership enabled a support network to develop between the PSTs in the program and contextualisation of university units into practice. In addition, the formative assessment tool, ‘professional conversations’, developed for the partnership were highlighted by PSTs and the Companions as a highly significant distinguishing feature that separates the formative feedback provided in this partnership model as compared to standard professional experience blocks.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations coming out of this pilot project, some of which are being used in planning and implementation for the 2021 project.

- Provide a professional learning or formative experience on spirituality for PSTs
- Provide greater mentoring for new Faith Mentors joining the project as it expands
- Set up a Leadership Think Tank
- Extend the program to other cohorts in the education degree to allow gradual development across PST degrees.
- Develop cross-institutional partnerships for Brisbane and rural connections
- Develop support mechanisms to address gaps identified in Key Finding 5 around Catholic Understandings
- Develop support mechanisms to address gaps identified in Key Finding 7 around the APSTs

Introduction and context

Background

This report outlines the findings from the first year of implementation of the Faith Companion Project (2020) with a small teaching and learning development grant from ACU. This project follows on from a pilot project and focused specifically on strengthening PSTs' understanding of Catholic spirituality, mission and identity and aligned with the Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) priority to develop and maintain an employment force, while supporting schools and staff in BCE's priority area of sustaining Strong Catholic Identities.

Australia is becoming an increasingly secularized society, creating challenges for Catholic institutions in general, and Catholic education in particular, to meet core missional, vocational and cross-curriculum dimensions of their *raison d'être* as Catholic schools. A number of studies since 2002 (including McLaughlin, 2002; Hughes, 2007; Mason, Singleton & Webber, 2007) have focused on undergraduate and graduate teacher perceptions of faith, spirituality and church. Gleeson and O'Neill (2017), surveyed a large cohort of ACU pre-service teachers and teachers practising in Catholic schools and raised concerns relating to teachers' levels of theological literacy, particularly young teachers, and pre-service teachers' commitment to "faith-based purposes and characteristics of Catholic schools". (p. 66). The continuing implications of these findings for Catholic education staff suggest that graduates coming into the Catholic education system, and graduate teachers entering Catholic schools, appear to have little sense of a Church connection or parish culture and even less sense of allegiance to Church teaching or the ecclesial dimension of their role. The reasons for the diminishing decline in Church affiliation are endemic and deep-seated, suggesting issues of fundamental meaning-making. For some time now, researchers have identified this as the source of crisis in the institutional Church.

In trying to identify what is needed to nurture young adults (Gen Y/Millennials and iGens) to develop "a mature commitment in a tentative world" (Parks, 2011, p. 171). The elements that seem to operate favourably towards such a commitment, and in a variety of combinations,

include contact with: “community adults who model commitment; service opportunities; mentors and critical experiences in college or graduate school” (Parks, 2011, p. 6). In addition, the research identified ‘habits of mind’ nurtured in a healthy community dynamic that characterise this development. They are:

- dialogue
- interpersonal perspective taking
- critical systemic thought
- holistic thought (Parks, 2011)

Within this dynamic, older mentors and the wider community have a unique role. The findings demonstrated that for the 17–30 year olds (representing a significant number of the cohort preparing for teaching or in their early teaching years), strategic mentorship is influential.

In Queensland, a priority of the Brisbane Catholic Education Office is to develop and support staff and Catholic schools to incorporate Catholic perspectives into curriculum and promote re-contextualised Catholic world-views. Partnering with BCE for a spiritual formation of staff project aligns with a number of ACU’s strategic priorities and addresses concerns raised by Gleeson and O’Neill and others. This project provides an innovative and distinctive teaching and learning formative experience within the Catholic Intellectual teaching tradition for pre-service teachers (PSTs) by providing targeted mentoring support through a ‘Faith Companion’ who assists PSTs to understand the Catholic intellectual tradition, re-contextualised Catholic world-views and make meaning of their own ways to incorporate these views into their own growth and pedagogical expertise in Catholic schools. It also strengthens the university’s Catholic partnerships and provides pre-service teachers with an authentic, contextualized and embedded Catholic experience reflecting the goal of ACU as an authentic Catholic University. As has been indicated in the report from the pilot for this project, and the 2020 data, this authentic experience in Catholic settings is desired by pre-service teachers, and identified as an aspect of the teaching degree at ACU which sets it apart from other universities.

Encouraging a strong teaching force in Catholic schools requires an approach that supports and encourages pre-service teachers (PSTs) to understand what it means to teach in a Catholic school, including bringing Catholic perspectives into their teaching. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report and researchers in the field advocate for school-university partnerships that assist in transitioning PSTs from university programs to the teaching profession (TEMAG, 2014; Allen, Howells, & Radford, 2013; Grudnoff, Haigh & Mackisack, 2016). The project leader’s work in university-Catholic system partnerships in QLD and Victoria, suggests developing a strong connection between universities and school; providing additional school experiences in addition to their formal placement blocks; and incorporating more supportive mentoring structures, can strengthen PSTs’ connection to the teaching profession (Gutierrez & Nailor, 2020; Gutierrez & Kostogriz, 2021). Additional support mechanisms can be provided to assist pre-service teachers in transitioning to Catholic schools, including support to explore one’s spirituality and faith and what this means in a Catholic setting. There is little data available on the effectiveness of Faith mentoring for pre-service teachers in Australian Catholic schools. These partnerships require evaluation to understand their impact on pre-service teachers’ awareness and confidence with Catholic Intellectual traditions, their abilities to include these perspectives into their discipline area, their own spiritual awareness and growth, and assess the partnership structures used to develop PST professional skills needed for transitioning into work (particularly in the Catholic sector).

This research project concentrated on the mentoring aspect of PST experience, in particular mentoring around what it means to teach in a Catholic school, Catholic identity and developing one's own spiritual identity. To do this, a partnership was developed between the university researcher, BCE, seven BCE schools and two Faith Companions. The diagram below represents the integral relationships between all contexts. This team worked with nine final year PSTs before, during and after their professional experience to address the following research questions:

- how can a partnership between a university, school and faith companion contribute to PSTs' sense of themselves as teacher professionals in a Catholic settings;
- what impact does this relationship have on PSTs' views and understandings about teaching in a Catholic setting; and
- what impact does this relationship have on PSTs' views about longevity in the profession?

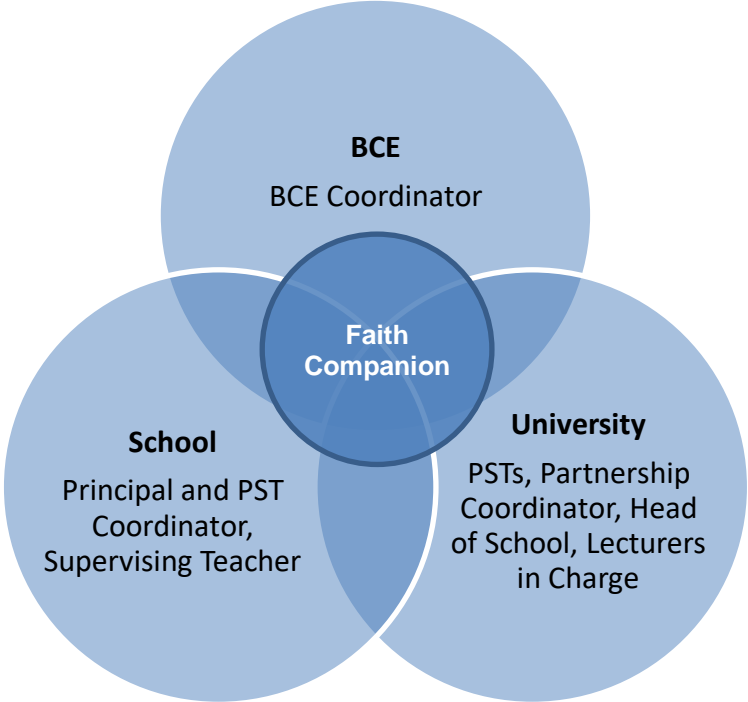


Figure 1: The integral relationship between all parties in the Faith Companion Mentoring Project

The role and approach of the Faith Companion is pivotal and requires some specific mention with regard to the parameters of the role. In sustaining Catholic identity within the contemporary landscape, formation, in particular, spiritual and theological formation, is now widely accepted as the lodestone. If spiritual formation in the Christian Catholic tradition is essentially about 'growing people', in an holistic way, respectful of where people are at, connective to role and context, and that this happens in community, then we need to be intentional about providing effective formation at every point along the journey of the Catholic school educator. The Faith Companion for the pre-service teacher is critical to that arc of

personal and professional growth (Gowdie, 2017). In the exploration of reflective practice in the spiritual domain, research shows us that systematic and personal reflection about teaching in a Catholic school both nurtures and sustains the teaching vocation itself (Downey, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Neal, 2000; Rolph, 1991; Simone, 2004).

Thus, in this project, the Faith Companion has an approach that meets the individual wherever they 'are at'; uses narrative in a reflective praxis to help the individual make meaning of their own spiritual journey and connecting points to the Catholic school faith context. It is a relational, process and person-oriented role, companionship the pre-service teacher in their own meaning-making and community context.

Methodology and data

Methodology

Qualitative Intrinsic Case study and impact of COVID on methodology

This research project proposed to concentrate on the mentoring aspect of PST experience, in particular mentoring around what it means to teach in a Catholic school, Catholic identity and developing one's own spiritual identity. To do this, a partnership model was implemented with the project leader, BCE, two 'Faith Companions' and a cluster of Catholic schools. This team worked with pre-service teachers before, during and after their professional experience in a school. Due to limited school placement spots, and to allow PSTs the choice to be involved, the PSTs applied to join the partnership project, and we accepted nine into the program. The methodology utilized to evaluate the impact aimed to be in the form of a qualitative intrinsic case study methodology, including professional mentoring conversations, focus group interviews, individual interviews, anonymous journal entries and a classroom observation template (Bhattacharya, 2017; Stake, 1995). Due to COVID 19, the planned data collection had to be modified to also incorporate a longitudinal REDCap survey tool. With the inclusion of the survey tool, the project became mixed method with both quantitative and qualitative data.

The Participants

- 4 Master of Teaching (MTeach) PSTs
- 2 Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary)
- 3 Bachelor of Education (Primary)
- 9 supervising teachers
- 2 Faith Companions
- 7 Principals

The PSTs were in their final placement, which for this program included a one day a week visit and block placements that varied between 4-9 weeks (depending on their degree). Due to

health and well-being reasons, one PST pulled out of the program late in the year. She did not complete the final survey in the longitudinal surveys. There were a variety of religious backgrounds in the nine participants, which is summarised in the chart below:

Religious Affiliation	Number of PSTs
Catholic	4
Non-practicing Catholic	1
Anglican	1
'Spiritual'	1
None	2

Participant reasons for joining the program

The participants reported a number of reasons for their interest in the program. These have been collated and summarised in the list below:

- Connect with Catholic Identity and Catholic perspectives in schools
- Be a part of a Catholic school community across a whole year of schooling
- Aiming to teach in a Catholic or faith-based setting
- Gain a deeper understanding of whole school procedures, practices and processes and the needs of students through longitudinal experience in school

Data collection

Data Collection occurred across several stages. These collection methods accounted for the impact of COVID 19 and are outlined below:

Stages of Data Collection

First stage - Prior to professional experience in schools

- Survey distributed to PSTs
- Recorded Zoom group sessions

Second stage - During Professional Experience

- Survey distributed to PSTs
- Recorded Zoom group sessions

Final stage - After Professional Experience

- Survey distributed to PSTs
- Interview with each PST

- Interview with each Principal
- Interview with each supervising teacher
- Interview with each faith companion

Data analysis approach

For the purpose of this project report, thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012) was used to code the transcriptions from the interviews, zoom focus group meetings and written responses in the survey. Thematic analysis allows the identification, analysis and reporting of themes that arise from data. Across the data and voices, patterns and themes emerged which provided an understanding of the key impact areas of the project. Due to the depth of the survey responses, this report mostly focuses on the survey data. In most cases the interview data provided similar, if not the same, information. In some instances there were gaps. The interview data has been used to fill data gaps. These are outlined in the 'Key findings' section. Any names used within the report are pseudonyms.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the Universities HREC and from BCE Research office. The Faith Companions were employed by ACU to ensure no conflicts of interest with the main stakeholders.

Limitations

As this was the first year of implementation, the small number of schools and PSTs limited the data to a small cohort. The intention of the research was not to generalise to a larger population, but rather to develop an understanding of the impact a Faith Companion may have in assisting PSTs' developing understanding of faith and working in a Catholic setting. The data from the project was sufficient to meet the goals of the research.

Key findings

After analysing the various forms of data, there were multiple recurring themes relating to the impact of the project, and improvements that would increase impact in future implementations of this model. Overall the analysis identified nine key findings;

- PSTs had increased employability and preparedness for the profession and preferred to get a job in a Catholic setting;
- Significant reduction in PST anxiety levels about block placement after attending PD days and 1 day a week experience in school;
- The one day a week experience helped prepare for their block placement and connect to their Catholic school context and the teaching profession;
- Faith Companion experiences contribute to PSTs' understanding of Catholic school contexts and the teaching profession;
- PSTs experienced increased engagement in Catholic understandings
- Leadership staff in schools as well as supervising teachers play a key role in PSTs' understanding of the teaching profession;
- PSTs were able to exceed in many of the APST Graduate Standards;
- PSTs in partnership programs have greater engagement with their schools during unexpected crisis;
- Successful and sustainable Partnership Programs require support and careful modelling, however the evidence demonstrates the valuable impacts.

Key finding 1- PSTs had increased employability and preparedness for the profession and preferred to get a job in a Catholic setting

Of the eight pre-service teachers who completed the program, six confirmed employment in a Catholic setting, 1 in a Christian school, and 100% confirmed employment directly after completion of the program. This is extrapolated in the table below:

Table 1: Employment settings

School Setting	Number of PSTs (out of 8)
BCE school	2
Rockhampton Diocese Catholic school	1
Archdiocese of Brisbane RI Catholic school	3
Northern Territory Christian School	1
Remote school (state)	1

During the interviews, all PSTs expressed a preference to teach in a Catholic school. The employment results indicate successful placement of the graduates into Catholic and faith-based school settings.

The PSTs and Faith Companions also reported on greater preparedness for the profession, which made them more attractive candidates for principals. One Faith Companion acted as a referee for several of the PSTs and provided feedback from an interviewing principal (not currently a Faith Companion partnership school):

he said I've never had a first year teacher articulate the things that she was talking about in terms of using data to change pedagogy or to track performance of kids and just these things. He said that the kids who are coming through this are far in advance from other first year teachers coming out.

And

He said these two young women were really stand out interviewees, over and above any other graduate and often experienced teachers, and he has been interviewing for decades! He was overwhelmed by their knowledge and understanding of the context of Catholic education; could speak about the Catholic identity of a college and how it nourishes them and how they would hope to be able to contribute. They could articulate clearly their philosophy of learning and teaching, he was so impressed.

The PSTs also reflected on their experience during the interviews and compared themselves to their peers, their gaps prior to the program and how it has helped them understand how to manage their first years of teaching:

[comparing experience to other PSTs] I realise they have no idea because they have only been there for four weeks, I've been there for a whole year, like the knowledge gap is huge...I feel that in the first year or two of teaching I will be so much more ready and prepared for it.

I think I am more prepared than I would have been to go into the profession...I am a lot more prepared for what the profession actually is, rather than just going for a four-week block. I never met a Deputy or Principal in my first block...if I did two more of those four week blocks, I would have no information whatsoever...this year has been a wealth of knowledge.

I don't see myself wanting to leave teaching...the program its shown me, I've been there long enough at the school and talked to first year teachers at that school, when you get your position don't take on too much, here's some pitfalls to be aware of...at the end of this program you are yes I want to be a teacher, way more solidified.

By the end of this program the PSTs felt more prepared for their first years of teaching, with many saying they felt like they were heading into their second year of teaching. The principal comments provide evidence that the skills and experiences had by the PSTs in this program connect them to the teaching profession academically, professionally and personally. This connection leads to a better chance of longevity in the career. Key Finding 2 provides further evidence of how the program assists in longevity by decreasing anxiety levels.

Key finding 2 – Significant reduction in PST anxiety levels about block placement after attending PD days and 1 day a week experience in school

The partnership model includes a visit to the PST’s school in Nov/Dec prior to the partnership year, attending the professional development days prior to the start of the school year in January, and then one day a week leading up to the PSTs’ block placement/s. **The survey data demonstrated a significant drop in PST perceptions of levels of anxiety after joining the partnership, attending the PD days at the beginning of the year, and the 1 day a week experiences.** It has been noted that PSTs can experience significant levels of anxiety leading up to and during the initial stages of their block placement periods (Gutierrez & Nailor, 2020). The data from the survey indicated that this cohort of PSTs were initially experiencing high levels of anxiety. The table below shows the shifting level of anxiety as they had more experiences with their schools.

Table 2: Anxiety levels before joining partnership, before PD days and after 1 day a week experience (5 = very high anxiety, 1=no anxiety)

Level of Anxiety	Before joining partnership	Before attending school PD days in Jan	After PD days	After 1 day a week experience in schools (before block placements)
5	1	2		
4	5	5		
3	3	2	2	1
2			7	5
1				3

The comment data from the survey and interviews provided a more detailed picture of why there was a significant shift in levels of anxiety. Several spoke about the welcoming nature of the staff in their schools and the support:

Being able to experience the staff days has really given me a foundation to take with me into my 1st year of teaching. The school treated us as new staff and gave us so much support and help in becoming part of the community.

The staff days allowed me to meet many of the staff and begin to form professional relationships with them which has allowed me to not be anxious about going into the school.

Thoroughly enjoyed attending the staff days prior to the school opening up. Was interesting to be involved in the PD days and see the organisation of the curriculum. The schools have been so welcoming towards me and I feel like another member of the staff rather than a pre-service teacher. I feel much more confident completing my final prac being a part of this partnership.

I think it helped to be introduced at the start of the school year, as I was welcomed as a new 'staff' member... more than a random practicum student.

They also discussed the ability to 'acclimatise' to their class and develop a strong relationship with their supervising teacher:

Being able to acclimatise to the students in the classes I would be teaching during my practicum means that I am no longer coming into a classroom cold.

As a Primary Ed student the weekly visits absolutely demolished all the nerves and anxiety that I had before. They allowed me to really develop a strong and communicative relationship with my supervising teacher so that I was kept in the loop the whole time, this allowed me to hit the ground running once it came to the block practicum.

Having the opportunity to slowly ease into the school community, get to know the culture of the school, the needs of the learners and develop a relationship with their supervising teacher over a long period of time enabled the PSTs to 'demolish all the nerves'. This impacts positively on their well-being and feelings of belonging in Catholic school settings as well as the teaching profession, which is discussed further in the next key finding.

Key finding 3 – The one day a week experience helped prepare for their block placement and connect to their Catholic school context and the teaching profession

The PSTs were surveyed during their one day a week experience and then after their block placements. The one day a week experience provided an important segue for the PSTs as they began to connect to their students, schools and staff in the schools. The table below suggests the one day a week experiences were of great importance in assisting them to develop their understanding of the teaching profession, begin to feel welcome at the school and the teaching profession and understand the culture of the school. It was also important for their beginning understanding of Catholic school settings. The PSTs were also given the opportunity to include self-defined categories and rank them. A pattern is evident across these self-defined categories around the area of developing relationships. This correlates with feeling welcome at the school and understanding the culture of the school.

Table 3: 1 day a week, importance in understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to their school (1 = no importance, 5 = of great importance) data point during final block placement.

Area	1	2	3	4	5
developing your understanding of the teaching profession			1	2	5
developing your understanding of Catholic school contexts			1	4	3
helping you feel welcome at the school				3	5
helping you understand the particular culture at your school				3	5
helping you feel welcome to the teaching profession			1	3	4
Relationship with peers (self defined category)					1

Relationship with students (self defined category)					1
Professional relationships (self defined category)					1
Building relationship with students (self defined category)				1	
Helping to understand students (self defined category)				1	

The survey after the block placements cemented the importance of their school experiences across this partnership model. It can be seen in Table 4 below that for the majority of PSTs, the block placement was very important for all areas. There is an increase across all categories as the PSTs experienced a sustained block experience with their schools.

Table 4: How Block Placement contributed to understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to your school (1= no importance, 5 = of great importance)

Activity	1	2	3	4	5
developing your understanding of the teaching profession				2	6
developing your understanding of Catholic school contexts				4	4
helping you feel welcome at the school				2	6
helping you understand the particular culture at your school				3	5
helping you feel welcome to the teaching profession				2	6

The PSTs were also given an opportunity to provide comments in this section of the survey. The comments illustrated the PSTs’ valuing of the embedded experience across the partnership, and they highlighted the importance of having extra time in the school to understand the teaching profession. One PST stated that the experience “has really embedded for me that teaching is the profession for me”.

Several PST comments related to the importance of that time in helping to build relationships, understand their students and transition into their block placements:

The most important thing to me about this one day a week (or in my case, two half-days so that I get to spend more time following my year 8 classes through) is that I have built strong relationships with my students before my nine-week block begins. They all know me a teacher, and have begun to understand the person I am as a teacher. I also know my students and their characteristics.

It was a fantastic opportunity to develop relationships with students before the block placement commenced. It also allowed you to wrap your head around school procedures and the programming of particular days (ei. school assemblies, well-being Wednesdays etc)

I think it plays an important role for the students to see the pre-service teacher as much as possible to make the transition smoother into the block pracs.

The 1 day a week experience has allowed me to build relationships with staff and students alike.

Many also discussed how the 1 day week experiences helped them feel welcome in the school, and allowed them to engage with activities that made them feel a part of the school community:

I have been welcomed into the school community and have been encouraged to be involved in the life of the school as far as possible with the way the year has gone so far. Along with the staff days I assisted at the swimming carnival along-side my 1 day a week visits to the school.

I have found the teachers are more welcoming as I am there every week rather than just being there for a block placement. A lot of teachers have offered to have me come into their classrooms to see different types of classrooms.

Key finding 4 – Faith Companion experiences contribute to PSTs’ understanding of Catholic school contexts and the teaching profession

The Faith Companion is an integral component of this partnership. Their importance is illustrated by letters of thanks from PSTs that have been received in 2021 stating the impact the mentor had on their first 6 months of teaching. The Faith Companions interacted with the PSTs along their journey through email, voice calls, video calls, and formal professional conversation meetings which occurred at the beginning and end of their final official placement block.

The survey data from this project highlights the successful contribution the mentors made to the PSTs’ understanding of the teaching profession and Catholic schooling contexts. Data was collected during two separate stages of the project to ascertain the longitudinal impact of the Faith Companion. The first data collection point occurred after the 1 day a week experiences, and the second at the end of the partnership project. The table below illustrates during the 1 day a week experiences, on most categories (except culture of the school), 86% of the PSTs rated the Faith Mentor as very successful or quite successful in the categories listed. During the second data collection point, this increased to 98% across all categories listed.

Considering a significant part of the Faith Mentor’s role is to assist in PSTs’ understanding of Catholic school settings, it was promising to see the success increase in this category across the two collection points, with 75% believing their mentoring was very successful and 25% quite successful by the end of the project.

Table 5: How Faith Companion mentoring experiences contributed to understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to their school (1 = no success, 5 = highly successful). First data point early in year, second data point during final block placement.

Area	First data point					Second data point				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
developing your understanding of the teaching profession			2	4	3				4	4
developing your understanding of Catholic school context			1	4	4				2	6
helping you feel welcome to the teaching profession			1	4	4				3	4
helping you understand the particular culture at your school			3	2	4			1	3	4
reducing levels of anxiety about your school experience			1	4	4				4	4

Understanding and applying restorative justice practices (self defined)					1						
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The PSTs’ comments provided further details around the ways the Faith Mentors assisted their understandings in these areas. They were particularly grateful to have someone with knowledge and experience of BCE systems and resources:

My Faith Companion has been excellent. Her knowledge of teaching and of the BCE curriculum and her willingness to share have been invaluable. At the beginning of the year my Faith Companion and I spent some time on the phone and she directed me to the BCE web site and the curriculum page and how they have integrated the Australian curriculum Catholic teaching.

The faith mentors were so knowledgeable about BCE resources as well as the staff across multiple schools. Their ties to various schools and the community as a whole really helped when answering questions and giving advice/suggesting resources.

The PSTs also suggested having an external support person, especially leading their professional conversations, provided an additional experienced voice and helped them to feel more at ease about placement experiences:

The faith mentors brought an extra level of outside understanding, and the professional conversations allowed them to provide extra information and ideas that I might not have considered.

Having a 'contact' that was outside the usual channel helped me feel more calm about my upcoming prac, and the constant communication kept me informed.

Another important skill that the Faith Mentors scaffold in the PSTs is critical reflexivity. Critical reflexivity is a necessary skill for survival and effective teaching/learning in the teaching profession. It is especially important for those in Faith based settings as there is a need for teachers to reflect on and represent the mission of the school in their own teaching and professional being as a teacher in that school. They also need to reflect on their own spirituality and how this impacts their connection to the school, community and the world. The comments from the PSTs suggest the Faith Companions helped them during this stage of their reflective journeys:

The Faith companion mentoring program has allowed me opportunities to stop, breathe, reflect and evaluate my teaching with a supportive, understanding and encouraging team to ensure I am continuing in the right direction, building confidence in myself and my teaching and reflecting on my formation of faith.

I think the Faith mentor puts a big focus on catholic identity that can get swept away in hectic school life. Having the support or even just the questioning of catholic identity makes you reflect and reassess what you have been doing. In the reflection - you find

that you have been engaging in the community and catholic identity of the school, but it hadn't been actively in your mind.

My Faith Companion was supportive and a grounding person I knew I could contact at any point in the year. She was always there especially during my prac guiding me and assisting me to reflect and grow from my practices.

Reflexivity, not only on practice, but also on identity, may be a key to well-being and sustaining a career in the teaching profession. The comments from the PSTs in this program suggest the Faith Mentor scaffolded PSTs' abilities to pause and consciously reflect.

Key finding 5 – PSTs experienced increased engagement in Catholic understandings

The PSTs were asked in the final survey, administered after completion of the program, about their growth and engagement in various areas of Catholic understandings. Overall, there was significant reporting of increased active engagement and greatly increased engagement across all categories for those PSTs who completed this section of the survey. For some PSTs, particular areas were still a challenge.

**Table 6: Rank how you felt you have grown and engaged in each of the areas below
1=Became disengaged, 2= Still developing 3= Increased active engagement 4=Greatly increased Engagement**

Activity	1	2	3	4
Understanding the values and ethos of the Catholic school		1	2	4
Understanding the mission of the Catholic Church			5	2
Understanding the sacramental, liturgical, ritual and prayer life of the school		2	2	3
Understanding that Catholic schools are places of prayer and can encourage and participate in prayer in classes, staff and student meetings			4	3
Understanding how to establish positive relationships including connections with parents, engagement in the pastoral care of students and supporting their spiritual and moral development.			5	2
Understanding how to articulate the Catholic identity of the College/school.			4	3
Understanding the positive anthropology of the human being as the foundation for all Catholic education and pedagogy.			5	2
Understanding the connection between the school/college, their local parish and the Archdiocese.		3	2	2
Understanding the commitment to religious education and the spiritual formation of students and staff.			4	3
Appreciate the role and influence of you as teacher and person through your teaching, your actions, your personal and interpersonal character and outlook			4	3

The three areas that were a challenge for some of the PSTs in the program were “understanding the values and ethos of the Catholic school”, “understanding the sacramental, liturgical, ritual and prayer life of the school” and “Understanding the connection between the school/college, their local parish and the Archdiocese”. While these areas were challenges for less than 45% of the PSTs who responded (and the first one, only 1 PST identified that they

were still developing), the data allows us to reflect on ways that the partnership could enable stronger growth in these areas. Possible ways to improve in these areas is addressed in the recommendations for the project section of this report.

Key finding 6 – Leadership staff in schools as well as supervising teachers play a key role in PSTs’ understanding of the teaching profession

The survey included two points of data collection on the impact of school staff on the PSTs’ understanding of what it means to be a teacher, and particularly in the context of a Catholic school. The numerical data in the survey suggested a slight change between the first data collection point and the final in relation to the importance attributed to school staff. The results suggest the majority of PSTs feel that school staff are either very important or significantly important to their understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to the school. There were no significant changes in the numerical data across the two data collection points.

Table 7: How school staff have contributed to understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to school (1 = no importance, 5 = of great importance)

Area	First data point					Second data point				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Developing your understanding of the teaching profession			1	5	3				4	4
Developing your understanding of Catholic school contexts			1	3	5			1	3	4
Helping you feel welcome to the teaching profession			1	4	4			1	3	4
Helping you understand the particular culture at your school			1	2	6				4	4
In reducing levels of anxiety about your school experience			1	4	4				4	4

The qualitative data for this section of the survey provided more significant understanding of how the staff were important and who were considered key staff members for this program by the PSTs. The Staff listed most in the responses were:

Table 8: Important school staff in the program

Staff	Supervising Teacher	Assistant Principal	APRE	Other teaching staff (particularly in same year level/CPA area)	Principal
Number of times mentioned	10	6	5	5	3

Not surprisingly, the PSTs’ supervising teacher was the most mentioned important staff member with comments from PSTs such as:

My supervising teacher has been a wonderful mentor who has taught me so much about being a quality teacher. She has really ignited my passion for teaching and

motivated me to want to be the best teacher I can be and help students to discover their full potential.

My supervising teacher has been the most helpful mentor in comparison to all of my previous ones. As I get to spend the whole year with him, I get to fully experience why he teaches the way he does. In a three-week practicum, I found that I did not see the 'full picture' at times. There are times when students won't cooperate and sometimes (as I have learnt with my mentor) - "you just hold in there" My supervising teacher has taught me so much about being a teacher and has not sugar-coated it.

My mentor has been more than I could have asked for. For the first time on a placement, I feel comfortable to trial anything I want with kids in a judgement free zone. I feel like a co-partner, and not a prac student. I have become very comfortable alongside him teaching (in this program, we often teach parts each naturally as we are similar in that regards).

My supervising teacher has been the most amazing support I could have asked for. Being in Primary Ed. My teacher and I are together all day everyday, having a supportive teacher has elevated my teaching practice and made my practicum fun and enjoyable.

The Assistant Principal, APRE and Other staff in the year level and CPA areas were also mentioned as having a significant impact on feeling welcome in the school, and providing learning experiences. PSTs comments include:

APRE has been good at stretching me to attend younger grade classes and has been so welcoming in letting me attend her RE classes.

I have worked closely with the Head of Religion, and the APRE who have guided me and been willing to have conversations and answer any questions that i have had.

The Assistant Principal and my Supervising teacher. They were always able to provide me with help, and were very aware of including me in PD days and whole school activities. The AP went above and beyond to help me get access to BCE systems to help my placement.

The conversations I have had with all of the other teachers are amazing and they are all willing to help so much

I have found that the school staff across all levels have been very welcoming and encouraging of me in the partnership. All of the leadership and staff are willing to share

their knowledge and experience and provide encouragement and guidance where necessary.

The Principal was also mentioned by the PSTs in the survey. In addition to the survey, the interview data with the PSTs, Companions, Supervising Teachers and Principals emphasised the importance of Principal support for the program, the school staff involved and Catholic Identity.

The Principal is always checking in and making sure that I have everything that is needed. (PST, survey)

And I think they [PSTs] probably feel more connected to even the leadership team, they are not squirrelled away. They would regularly pop in...that's something good, they could say 'Hi [Principal name].' If they are here for four weeks, you don't know them. (Principal)

Feedback from the pre-service teachers is that they felt comfortable being able to talk to the leadership staff whereas other placements they would not even be a blimp on the radar. (University Program Coordinator)

I guess I learnt, what I probably suspected [in relation to promoting Catholic Identity], and what I probably knew too, it was dependent on the school culture, the leadership team and the mentor teacher and I observed that happen to a Primary PST ... who had a fantastic school and her catholic identity was actually blossoming out (Companion)

One principal also mentioned in their interview the importance of the principal, and other leadership staff, in the selection of school mentors, demonstrating their role in ensuring PSTs are provided with strong support networks:

Principal: I think as a Principal you know whether they will be good mentors or not.

Program Coordinator: So the Principals are really important in making sure that...

Principal: Yeah you are choosing the person but they need to choose not just anybody.

Other staff mentioned included the librarian (2), Literacy Leader (1), HOD RE (1), HOD CPA (1), Head of Learning (1), Chaplain (1) and teacher support officers (1). The extended time in the schools enables PSTs to seek support and learn from a variety of leaders and staff within the school context.

Key finding 7 – PSTs were able to exceed in many of the APST Graduate Standards

In the final survey, the PSTs were asked to reflect on how well they met each of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: Graduate. Overall, over 50% of the PSTs felt they exceed the requirements in 18 of the focus areas and the majority of PSTs felt they exceeded

the requirements in 11 of the focus areas. The standards that were listed as mostly exceeded were:

- Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it, with the exception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages;
- Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching, with the exception of strategies to include parents/carers in the educative process;
- Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning, with the exception of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers.

It is promising that no PSTs felt they were still developing in any areas, and very few students felt they were in the category of 'just met'. In addition, almost all of the PSTs reported excelling in focus area "6.3 Seek and apply constructive feedback from supervisors and teachers to improve teaching practices", which illustrates the strength of the mentoring focus in this program. In the comments section of the survey one PST wrote "my QPERF document [final professional experience reporting document] had mainly Es (exceeding) due to this partnership. I also was able to be involved in NCCD processes and extended moderation of student work from Term2-4", highlighting their success due to the program.

There are areas that require reflection and consideration for future implementation of the program. Overall, there appeared to be a pattern across the focus areas indicating the PSTs felt least confident with their knowledge around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander subjects and concepts, and working with parents/caregivers. These two areas will be considered in future program implementation, along with strengthening PSTs opportunities to excel in general across Standards 1, 4 and 6. The table below provides a detailed account of the PSTs' responses.

Table 9: Rank how you felt you met each of the Graduate APST focus areas (this does not need to reflect your QPERF) 1=still developing, 2=just met, 3= met, 4=exceeding

APST focus area	1	2	3	4
1.1 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students and how these may affect learning.			4	3
1.2 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of research into how students learn and the implications for teaching.			4	3
1.3 Demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds.			5	2
1.4 Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.		1	6	
1.5 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities.		1	2	4
1.6 Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of legislative requirements and teaching strategies that support participation and learning of students with disability.			6	1
2.1 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the concepts, substance and structure of the content and teaching strategies of the teaching area.			1	6
2.2 Organise content into an effective learning and teaching sequence.			1	6
2.3 Use curriculum, assessment and reporting knowledge to design learning sequences and lesson plans.			2	5

2.4 Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.		2	5	
2.5 Know and understand literacy and numeracy teaching strategies and their application in teaching areas.			1	6
2.6 Implement teaching strategies for using ICT to expand curriculum learning opportunities for students.			2	5
3.1 Set learning goals that provide achievable challenges for students of varying abilities and characteristics.			3	4
3.2 Plan lesson sequences using knowledge of student learning, content and effective teaching strategies.			2	5
3.3 Include a range of teaching strategies.			2	5
3.4 Demonstrate knowledge of a range of resources, including ICT, that engage students in their learning.			2	5
3.5 Demonstrate a range of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to support student engagement.			3	4
3.6 Demonstrate broad knowledge of strategies that can be used to evaluate teaching programs to improve student learning.		1	2	4
3.7 Describe a broad range of strategies for involving parents/carers in the educative process.		1	4	2
4.1 Identify strategies to support inclusive student participation and engagement in classroom activities		1	3	3
4.2 Demonstrate the capacity to organise classroom activities and provide clear directions.			2	5
4.3 Demonstrate knowledge of practical approaches to manage challenging behaviour.			6	1
4.4 Describe strategies that support students' wellbeing and safety working within school and/or system, curriculum and legislative requirements.			5	2
4.5 Demonstrate an understanding of the relevant issues and the strategies available to support the safe, responsible and ethical use of ICT in learning and teaching.			4	3
5.1 Demonstrate understanding of assessment strategies, including informal and formal, diagnostic, formative and summative approaches to assess student learning.		1	2	4
5.2 Demonstrate an understanding of the purpose of providing timely and appropriate feedback to students about their learning.			3	4
5.3 Demonstrate understanding of assessment moderation and its application to support consistent and comparable judgements of student learning.		1	1	5
5.4 Demonstrate the capacity to interpret student assessment data to evaluate student learning and modify teaching practice.			3	4
5.5 Demonstrate understanding of a range of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers and the purpose of keeping accurate and reliable records of student achievement		1	5	1
6.1 Demonstrate an understanding of the role of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers in identifying professional learning needs.			5	2
6.2 Understand the relevant and appropriate sources of professional learning for teachers.			5	2
6.3 Seek and apply constructive feedback from supervisors and teachers to improve teaching practices.			1	6
6.4 Demonstrate an understanding of the rationale for continued professional learning and the implications for improved student learning.			5	2

Key finding 8 – PSTs in partnership programs have greater engagement with their schools during unexpected crisis

During the 2020 year of implementation, schools shut down for a significant period of time. For many universities this was during the scheduled block of placement for a large number of PSTs. This meant many universities cancelled placement blocks and had to reschedule (some rescheduled to the following year). A positive benefit of this program was that the majority of PSTs were able to continue to engage with their schools in various ways (see Table 10 below).

Table 10: Were you able to continue to engage with your school?

Yes	No	Undecided
7	1	1

The survey asked the PSTs to expand on the ways they continued to be involved, which is provided in Table 11. The PSTs were provided with a list of activities and then allowed an 'other' response category. Several provided examples of additional ways they were involved. Only one PST was not able to continue to engage with their school and the stated reason was due to "family/personal problems".

Table 11: Which of the following were you able to do during the COVID 19 isolation period?

Activity	No. able to do
Continued communication with supervising teacher (either email, zoom or face to face)	7
Preparing/helping to prepare powerpoints	5
Maintaining lists of students who have been completing tasks and emailing parents using templates for those who had not completed tasks	4
Monitoring students' work online	4
Marking	4
Attending meetings with staff	4
Assisting students who were unable to keep up with the online work	3
Preparing quizzes and tests such as Kahootz	2
Teaching in an online platform	2
Other – Parent Teacher Interviews	1
Other - Preparing 'how-to' documents and other scaffolding hand-outs for students regarding their upcoming assessment pieces.	1
Other - Physically being at the school and being involved in the process - whether it was through looking after the students that were at the school, or witnessing online meetings and the new procedures that were installed.	1
Other - Doing chapter readings and recording for students.	1
Nothing	1

It was encouraging and uplifting to observe the support and flexibility provided to the PSTs during the COVID lock-down and beyond. Many PSTs reported both personal and professional growth during this period of time and were incredibly grateful to their schools for the support. Some comments from the PST about this period of time included:

I learnt about patience - both with students and with the technology. Adaptation - in the curriculum and how it can be delivered.

Personally: Allowing me to grow confidence and to demonstrate that there is a reason why I am here - I have often struggled with the idea of 'am I actually going to be a good teacher'.

Listening to and empathising with the concerns of others was also an area of growth.

There were also regular focus group zoom support meetings available for the PSTs during the COVID lock-down period which included the Program University Coordinator and the Faith Mentors. The majority attended all meetings, and all managed to get to some of the meetings. The PSTs suggested that these meetings were incredibly valuable for them as is indicated by some of the comments included below:

Just hearing from others who shared their experiences was helpful. Also the University Program Coordinator's leadership, especially in the issue of whether or not we could still physically attend the school was invaluable.

The whole team running this program was very supportive throughout the COVID experience

Finally, during this time the Faith Mentor role was incredibly important to support each PST trying to negotiate a complex and difficult space. They demonstrated flexibility and shifted their support to phone or zoom meetings. Again, the comments from the PSTs were positive and grateful for this support as is shown in the example comment below:

My Faith Companion was extremely supportive and helpful as a grounded voice for myself during these unknown times and after also. She offered support through the phone throughout the year, then face to face after COVID restrictions ended.

The 2020 COVID situation was emotionally, personally and professionally difficult. The staff involved in the Faith Companion Program went above and beyond to provide additional support mechanisms to ensure PSTs continued to feel connected to their schools and the mentoring benefits of the program. It enabled a smooth transition back to school for the PSTs once the lock-down restrictions eased.

Key finding 9 – Successful and sustainable Partnership Programs require support and careful modelling, however the evidence demonstrates the valuable impacts

The findings from the survey suggest the PSTs found great value in the partnership program across several variables. Across the variables (see Table 12) more than 70% of the respondents ranked high importance in the project's strengthening of their connection to the profession, and development of their identities as teachers; their understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a Catholic school setting; their ability to meet the government mandated teacher standards (APSTs) set for graduate pre-service teachers; understanding and

completing their capstone final research project connected to their placement unit (GTPA); and understanding that teaching goes beyond everyday classroom activities/interactions.

Table 12: How important was this partnership project in strengthening your (1=no importance, 5 = of great importance):

Activity	1	2	3	4	5
Sense of Professional Identity as a teacher				2	5
Understanding of Catholic school settings			1	2	4
Ability to meet the Graduate APSTS				1	6
Ability to exceed in the Graduate APSTS				1	6
Understanding of the requirements of the GTPA				2	5
Ability to successfully complete the GTPA			1	2	4
Understanding of the teachers' role beyond the classroom				2	5

The comments from the survey and the interviews correlate and strengthen this evidence:

The project has really been a boon in helping me feel confident and prepared for my upcoming practical and first year as a teacher. Even though we had a pandemic, the communication and 'life-line' the project provided helped lower anxiety and stress throughout the ordeal. Having help in understanding how the catholic ethos is expressed within classrooms and school communities will give me a definite edge when applying for jobs in the future (survey data)

The overall thing of the program as a whole is light years different between any other prac that I have had. (interview data)

I am so thankful I did this program and I worked with the Parish priest because you are not told how much catholic connections you need to be able to enter the Catholic system...in the long run it has helped me to know when I gradually progress as a teacher to have so much experience to incorporate myself into all of the masses and spiritual identity in the school. (interview data)

just reiterate, again to you, the amazing experience I've had with this program and how confident I became. I felt like I was one of the staff. I was sending all of the other teachers in my domains all the resources that I was making to help them out and marking. I was speaking to all of my friends in the same degree as me... they just couldn't believe that I had done all of that extra stuff, you know, having that relationship and confidence to be making resources, emailing it to all the other staff and just becoming really involved. (interview data)

An additional benefit of the partnership program was the support network created between the PSTs in the program, who were from a variety of programs. They were connected through the PD days at their schools, the mentoring day across the schools, and the focus

group zoom meetings. Several commented on the importance of this network for them, with one PST stating:

I found it difficult to find friends at university doing the MTeach as most of the courses were online. From being in this program, I have gained so many contacts and my 'critical friend' in Deborah and also Larry to chat about things that are a cause of stress or unknown.

For this PST, her experience in the teaching degree had been one of isolation. This was exacerbated due to the COVID impact of shifting everything online. This partnership provided a space for her to connect with peers for friendship and professional conversations.

The interview conversations also highlighted the partnership benefits for contextualising university units into practice. The development of this partnership model was influenced by the concept 'living curriculum' (Marshall & Wilson, 2012). A living curriculum is a student-centred approach encouraging enquiry, problem solving, including linking theory to practice, and emphasises learning as a continuous cycle. It values learner agency and autonomy, as well as collaborative and reciprocal learning. This partnership allows PST to expand their enquiry beyond the professional experience unit that is utilised as the main conduit between the university and school experience. The PSTs were also able to make connections between content and assessment in other units across the two semesters. One PST stated

it was great to put it all in context, 100% gave it context, I understand now...you can use the language because you understand what they actually mean in practice, rather than like I pass this uni course but I am just going to get it.

The university content and assessments for this PST were no longer viewed as something to get a pass mark for, instead he was able to make meaningful connections between theory and practice, and trial immediate implementation. This cemented his understanding of the theories and encourages continued exploration into his future teaching career.

Another critical component of this partnership model is the formative assessment tools designed by the program coordinator and collaboratively improved with the team of Companions and BCE leadership staff. These tools include observation templates, initial feedback on areas relating to the APSTs in consultation with the PST and their supervising teachers, and a two-stage professional conversation process. All of these documents were discussed with the PST and their supervising teacher prior to confirming and sharing with all parties involved. They provide formative support and goal setting as PSTs move through the placement and into the job interview process. The 'professional conversations' were highlighted by PSTs and the Faith Mentors as a highly significant distinguishing feature that separates the formative feedback provided in this partnership model as compared to standard professional experience blocks.

Professional conversations aim to 'develop skills in the critical analysis of practice, vision and beliefs, and in the ongoing formative evaluation of teaching and learning' (Leonard, 2012, p.48). The partnership project template utilised the APSTs and GTPA (final capstone assessment) criteria "as a set of cues for critical investigation and evaluation, and not simply as a set of competencies to be displayed and observed." (ibid). PSTs led and engaged in constructive

discussion with their school mentor, university representatives and leadership mentors. This formative tool aligns seamlessly within a living curriculum model. It is, however, resource heavy and time consuming, meaning it can be difficult for universities to take up on a larger scale. The PSTs spent time exploring the value of these meetings in their interviews, and a sample of their thoughts about the experience is below:

I liked the layout of it, the meetings and how it worked. Rather than what you get normally, which is like someone comes in and watches you and goes here's what you did good and here's what you did bad, here's some ideas, ok, bye...[the professional conversations] were so much more on the level like we were all equal...it really was a peer conversation, it was so good and I got so many great ideas, I would set goals instantly and they weren't like ridiculous goals...I found it way better than any university supervising visit I ever had...

the professional conversations offer a structured rather than casual conversation...and writing my GTPA was I talked about this in my professional conversations, I'll just write about it now, it made it a lot easier because you had already talked about it.

The PSTs also commented on the importance of the university program coordinator in designing, maintaining and coordinating the partnership. As discussed in Gutierrez, Young and Jordan (2019), the university partnership coordinator often acts as a 'boundary broker' or 'boundary crosser' as they work to negotiate and bring together multiple university, system and school spaces. They require specific skillsets to successfully manage and sustain collaborative engagement across all spaces. The PSTs recognised the work of the program coordinator and appreciated this role, as is indicated in the sample responses below:

Amanda's enthusiasm for the project, willingness to share and the work in coordinating all of us and the partner school contributes highly to making this a successful project.

Amanda has been an amazing support throughout the whole program, she has encouraged me to push my personal boundaries and I have grown so much during this program because of this.

The support you gain from the university in Amanda and my Faith Companion (emotional, social and GTPA) was a big positive of this program

Key conclusions

The purpose of the Faith Companion Mentoring project is to enhance pre-service teachers' preparedness for teaching in Catholic school settings, as well as provide a space to explore their spirituality. The findings of the evaluation have illustrated the benefits, as well as areas that can be strengthened. A summary of each key finding is outlined below:

Key finding 1- PSTs had increased employability and preparedness for the profession and preferred to get a job in a Catholic setting

All PSTs in the program found employment before the end of 2020. The PSTs reported feeling more prepared for the profession, and all had a preference to find employment in a Catholic setting. Eight out of the nine PSTs were employed in a Faith Based school.

Key finding 2 – Significant reduction in PST anxiety levels about block placement after attending PD days and 1 day a week experience in school

There was a significant shift from high levels of anxiety before the PSTs' involvement with the partnership to minimal to no levels of anxiety after completing the PD days and 1 day a week experience in their schools. Overall the PSTs suggested having the opportunity to slowly ease into the school community, get to know the culture of the school, the needs of the learners and develop a relationship with their supervising teacher over a long period of time 'demolish[ed] all the nerves'.

Key finding 3 – The one day a week experience helped prepare for their block placement and connect to their Catholic school context and the teaching profession

The one day a week experience were of great importance in assisting the PSTs to develop their understanding of the teaching profession, begin to feel welcome at the school and the teaching profession and understand the culture of the school. It was also important for their beginning understanding of Catholic school settings.

Key finding 4 – Faith Companion experiences contribute to PSTs' understanding of Catholic school contexts and the teaching profession

The Faith Companions were highly valued by the PSTs, and were successful in mentoring the PSTs' understanding of the teaching profession and Catholic schooling contexts. Some specific areas identified were:

- knowledge and experience of BCE systems and resources
- having an external support person, especially leading their professional conversations, provided an additional experienced voice and helped them to feel more at ease about placement experiences
- scaffolded the PSTs' critical reflexivity skills

Key finding 5 – PSTs experienced increased engagement in Catholic understandings

Overall, there was significant reporting of increased active engagement and greatly increased engagement across all categories surveyed relating to Catholic understandings for the PSTs who completed this section of the survey. For some PSTs, particular areas were still a challenge. These were:

- understanding the values and ethos of the Catholic school;
- understanding the sacramental, liturgical, ritual and prayer life of the school; and
- Understanding the connection between the school/college, their local parish and the Archdiocese.

Key finding 6 – Leadership staff in schools as well as supervising teachers play a key role in PSTs’ understanding of the teaching profession

The survey results suggest the majority of PSTs feel that school staff are either very important or significantly important to their understanding of becoming a teacher and connecting to the school. For the PSTs’ supervising teacher was the most mentioned important staff member. The Assistant Principal, APRE and Other staff in the year level and CPA areas were also mentioned as having a significant impact on feeling welcome in the school, and providing learning experiences. The Principal was the next most important staff member mentioned by the PSTs in the survey.

Other staff mentioned included the librarian (2), Literacy Leader (1), HOD RE (1), HOD CPA (1), Head of Learning (1), Chaplain (1) and teacher support officers (1). The extended time in the schools enables PSTs to seek support and learn from a variety of leaders and staff within the school context.

Key finding 7 – PSTs were able to exceed in many of the APST Graduate Standards

In the final survey, the PSTs were asked to reflect on how well they met each of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: Graduate. Overall, over 50% of the PSTs felt they exceed the requirements in 18 of the focus areas and the majority of PSTs felt they exceeded the requirements in 11 of the focus areas. The standards that were listed as mostly exceeded were

- Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it, with the exception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages;
- Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching, with the exception of strategies to include parents/carers in the educative process;
- Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning, with the exception of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers.

In addition, almost all of the PSTs reported excelling in focus area “6.3 Seek and apply constructive feedback from supervisors and teachers to improve teaching practices”, which illustrates the strength of the mentoring focus in this program.

Overall, there appeared to be a pattern across the focus areas indicating the PSTs felt least confident with their knowledge around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander subjects and concepts, and working with parents/caregivers.

Key finding 8 – PSTs in partnership programs have greater engagement with their schools during unexpected crisis

The majority of PSTs were able to continue to engage with their schools in various ways during the COVID 19 shutdown of schools. The examples provided by the PSTs are identified in the report. Many PSTs reported both personal and professional growth during this period of time and were incredibly grateful to their schools for the support. In addition, the Faith Companion role was incredibly important due to the support they provided to each PST. The Faith Companions demonstrated flexibility and shifted their support to phone or zoom meetings. The comments from the PSTs were incredibly positive and grateful for this support.

Key finding 9 – Successful and sustainable Partnership Programs require support and careful modelling, evidence demonstrates the valuable impacts

More than 70% of the PSTs ranked high importance in the project’s strengthening of their connection to the profession, and development of their identities as teachers; their understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a Catholic school setting; their ability to meet the government mandated teacher standards (APSTs) set for graduate pre-service teachers; understanding and completing their capstone final research project connected to their placement unit (GTPA); and understanding the that teaching goes beyond everyday classroom activities/interactions. They also suggested the partnership enabled a support network to develop between the PSTs in the program and contextualisation of university units into practice. In addition, the formative assessment tool, ‘professional conversations’, developed for the partnership were highlighted by PSTs and the Companions as a highly significant distinguishing feature that separates the formative feedback provided in this partnership model as compared to standard professional experience blocks.

Overall, the evaluation of the first year of implementation for this project provided significant findings in relation to the benefits of a Faith Companion partnership between ACU, BCE, Catholic schools and PSTs. The findings suggest PSTs have significantly decreased levels of anxiety, feel more connected to their schools and the Catholic sector in general, are provided greater opportunities to explore links between theory and practice, and overall feel much more prepared for the teaching profession. By the end of the program, they have developed a sense of belonging in the teaching profession, and the ability to express their understandings in sophisticated ways. The partnership program delivers significant benefits to the PSTs, and can continue to grow and improve. The recommendations for continued improvement are provided in the final section for this report.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations coming out of this pilot project, many of which are being used in the 2021 project and planning for 2022.

Recommendation	2021 Implementation	2022 Planning
Provide a professional learning or formative experience on spirituality for PSTs	An overnight Spiritual Retreat is being offered to the PSTs and Companions	This will continue in 2022
Provide greater mentoring for new Faith Mentors joining the project as it expands	Email templates and meetings were conducted with new Faith Mentors	A lead Faith Companion will be brought into the project to provide additional leadership and support Run two PD half days and regular meetings each Term with Mentors to provide support around documentation, expectations, mentoring and partnership work

Set up a Leadership Think Tank	Commence Leadership Think Tank in Sem 2	Strengthen capacity of Leadership Think Tank
Extend the program to other cohorts in the education degree to allow gradual development across PST degrees.	Discuss at Leadership Think Tank models for third year undergrad and first year MTeach	Pilot a 3 rd year undergrad and 1 st year MTeach program
Develop cross-institutional partnerships for Brisbane and rural connections	Commence conversations with other universities	Pilot final year program in cross-institutional partnership program
Develop support mechanisms to address gaps identified in Key Finding 5 around Catholic Understandings	Discuss at Leadership Think Tank	Pilot some approaches/strategies
Develop support mechanisms to address gaps identified in Key Finding 7 around the APSTs	Discuss at Leadership Think Tank	Pilot some approaches/strategies

The feedback from this project has already had an impact on the 2021 implementation and 2022 plans. Pre-service teachers will receive recognition from BCE for their work in the schools, and are invited to attend a Spiritual Retreat set up just for them and their Faith Companions. Communication with the schools around the various aspects of the partnership have been strengthened through the updating of email templates and documentation from 2020. In addition a Mentoring Training day was held for supervising teachers and their PSTs, which had close to 50 participants. The Leadership Think Tank is currently planned to commence in semester two and will provide an opportunity for collaborative design of the program's extension into other education degree cohorts, and improvements. The project has three year agreement between ACU and BCE, with BCE funding confirmed for the next three years. The benefits of the program are significant for the PSTs, the Catholic school sector and the teaching profession, and the continued support is a testament to its success so far.

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