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Final Year Preservice Teachers' Views of Professional Experience in Partnership Schools

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Abstract: This study investigated the perspectives of preservice teachers' (PSTs) on their final year placements in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs offered at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia. It compared the views of PSTs in two placement models; the Alliance school (partnership)and non-Alliance school (or conventional) models. The Alliance model draws on Activity Theory (Engeström, 2015) to strengthen the links between theory and practice in ITE, providing additional support during school placements through an 'in situ' boundary crosser. These boundary crossers use an Assessment Circle process that supports professional conversations about teaching and learning. A mixed method approach has been used to compare the reported experiences of final year PSTs who completed placements in an Alliance partnership schools or a non-Alliance schools. Findings indicate significant differences in the experiences of the two cohorts of PSTs in relation to perceived levels of support and their understanding of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011).

Introduction

Building better connections between University courses and professional experience in schools has gathered momentum over recent years (Darling-Hammond, 2010, 2016; Zeichner, 2010). The divide between the theory and content taught in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs and the occasionally random experiences of preservice teachers (PSTs) placed out in schools has been called the "Achilles heel" of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p 8). Globally, a range of models have been developed to improve the coordination of professional or field experience with campus-based course content. These include models which focus on various kinds of boundary crossing between universities and schools, and the establishment of a firm foundation for strong and enduring university-school partnerships (le Cornu, 2010; Ure, 2010; Zeichner, 2010).

This global landscape shift has impacted government policy in Australia. In 2011, the first national set of teaching standards, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) were published by the, then, recently formed Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (AITSL, 2011). These new Australian standards replaced state and territory-based standards and heralded new directions in consistency and unification for teachers' work. More recently, Australian government policy makers have shifted their focus to ITE. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) was appointed in 2014 by the Australian Government to provide advice on how teacher education courses could better ensure new teachers have the right mix of academic and practical skills needed for the

classroom. In the preamble to the TEMAG report, the chair of the advisory group, Professor Greg Craven states that "We have concluded that the single most important action to be pursued is the integrated delivery of Initial Teacher Education. This can be achieved through close partnerships between providers, school systems and schools, and underpins improvement to all aspects of the preparation of teachers" (Action Now: Classroom Ready teachers, 2015, p.v).

The TEMAG recommendations were largely accepted by the Australian Government (Australian Government, 2015, p.4) through a national program of reform, which has centred on five key areas encompassing:
- stronger quality assurance of teacher education courses
- rigorous selection for entry to teacher education courses
- **improved and structured practical experience for teacher education students**
- **robust assessment of graduates to ensure classroom readiness**
- national research and workforce planning capabilities.

This paper explores the way that one university developed an innovative partnership model for ITE placements. Planning for the Alliance model at Deakin University commenced in 2014, with funding support from the Victorian state government through the Teaching Academies Partnerships Program (TAPP) initiative. The Victorian TAPP initiative foreshadowed the national goals for the reform of ITE and was established to provide more structured practical experiences in ITE programs. Selected Victorian universities were partially funded through tender to explore new ways to improve school partnership models for preservice teacher placements. The Deakin model led to the development of three Teaching Academies in association with the Deakin campus locations in Melbourne, Geelong and Warrnambool and commenced with a total of 65 partnership schools. Several clusters of 6-12 co-located Alliance schools were organised as associated groups (Alliances) within each of the three Teaching Academies with a Site Director (teacher) employed by Deakin University to work within each school cluster. Deakin's Teaching Academy model was designed to support high quality collaboration between the University and the partnering Alliance schools. The initial funding provided for the employment of Site Directors, to act as boundary crossers between the university and school settings to provide support to the PSTs and their mentors during placements. Since 2017, Deakin's initiative has been supported through core funding and the adoption of a revised University funding model for placements. The program has also been expanded to include a total of 110 primary and secondary Alliance schools in the three Teaching Academies. Deakin's Alliance school program provides approximately 20% of the 6,500 PST school placements normally made during the course of the year, while conventional placements continue to be offered in non-Alliance schools for the bulk of placements. This study explores the placement experiences of PSTs in the last year of ITE study in both Alliance and non-Alliance school placements and compares their views on the professional learning experiences provided in these two models.

The Deakin University Alliance Model

The Alliance model draws on Activity Theory (Engeström 2015; Sannino, Engeström & Lemos, 2016) as a broad conceptual framework that is useful for informing social problems that typically require effective collaboration between multiple human activity systems (such as universities and schools). In this case, the challenge is to build stronger, sustainable school-university partnerships, strengthen theory-practice links, and improve measures of PST readiness. These challenges require universities and schools to better understand some of the many contradictory motives that may often arise between each of the

partners (also understood as Activity Systems) in the provision of ITE. As an example, schools may be highly motivated for PSTs to demonstrate well developed practical skills and a good grasp of the latest school policy initiatives while teacher educators in universities may be highly motivated to develop PST big picture understanding, often based in theory, that encourage teachers to ask why they make the pedagogical choices they do. While these perspectives are not necessarily incompatible, they might be experienced as contradictory pressures by PSTs.

Empirical research into the application of Activity Theory in areas such as health and education provision, has also provided several key conceptual tools that have been applied in the development of the model under investigation in this current project (Engeström, 2015). These concepts include:

- the role of 'Boundary Crossers' as key people involved in working across human activity systems, and
- 'Change Laboratories' that act as historically-informed 'Formative Interventions' that are aimed at transforming key collective activities, and
- 'Expansive learning', which focuses on learning within and between the activity systems, and is evidenced by the partners (universities and schools) joining forces to create something new, and which essentially transforms their collective understanding of ITE.

This Deakin University Alliance model for ITE applies the broad principles of Activity Theory, and its concepts of boundary crossers, formative interventions, and expansive learning.

The twelve localised Alliance school clusters include a mix of six to twelve primary and secondary schools that share a common pool of school students in their local community. The Alliances reflect the localised and diverse nature of challenges to improve education provision, and the broad range of circumstances in which pre-service teachers are expected to demonstrate their capacity to teach and engage as partnerships in ITE. The Site Director employed to work within each cluster facilitates improved links between theory and practice by supporting PSTs and their school mentors. Site Directors are prepared for their role in workshops with academic staff on campus and also work with school leadership teams to assist them to find ways to enhance the PST experience through enabling them to contribute to school initiatives and school improvement plans.

Site Directors in each Alliance hold regular 'Assessment Circles' in each of the Alliance communities as a strategy for achieving ongoing, formative feedback for PSTs undertaking their professional experience in an Alliance community. During Assessment Circles, pre-service teachers are provided with the opportunity to present and discuss evidence of their progress towards achieving the Graduate level of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (AITSL, 2011) in collaborative and supportive professional conversations involving a circle of school mentors, Deakin University academic staff and the Site Director. Preservice teachers carefully unpack a teaching experience from their placement and are invited to articulate how this experience aligns with one or more focus areas of the teaching standards (APST). As an example, a PST may select a sequence of learning and discuss the pre and post-test they devised, describing the way the sequence impacted student learning and reflecting on successes and challenges. They might select the APST focus area *5.4 Interpret student data* (AITSL, 2011) as the reflective lens for their discussion. This "unpacking" then stimulates a rich discussion among all Assessment Circle participants, encouraging not only the PST to delve more deeply into their understanding of their craft, but creating shared reflective opportunities for all participants from both the school and university.

The Alliance model also aims to enhance the experience of PSTs in schools by facilitating additional opportunities to involve them in the school community. Where possible, PSTs and University academic mentors are encouraged to engage in projects that align with school improvement initiatives as a key strategy to build strong connections between theory and authentic practice. Site Directors play a key role in working with schools to identify projects and bring all partners together to develop authentic outcomes. As an example, a cluster of schools may have an interest in identifying digital learning resources that can be shared across the Alliance community. Academics from the University can bring their research interests to this task while PSTs can play a role in identifying and road-testing different tools. A variety of outcomes are possible, including collated and curated teaching resources, enhanced understanding of the tools, published research, as well as PSTs with unique skills and contextualised understanding.

The Alliance model can also build mentoring skills in schools. Site Directors are very well positioned to provide "on the ground" support to new school mentors. They spend time in schools that extends beyond the concept of a "one off" visit, allowing them to build strong relationships with school personnel. Experienced mentors can also enhance their own understanding of the APST though participation in Assessment Circles and by contributing to nuanced discussion around teaching and learning practice and theory.

The Voice of Preservice Teachers

Professional experience placements have been characterised by Lortie (1975) as a "fundamental period where pre-service teachers begin to understand not only what teachers do but why they are who they are" (Buckworth, 2017, p.12). These critical opportunities to develop both teaching skills and teacher identity have been the focus of a considerable body of research (Ellis & Loughland, 2017; le Cornu, 2010, Patrick, 2013). Personal accounts from PSTs clearly show that they are challenged by their experiences during placements (Patrick, 2013). Buckworth (2017) shares the practicum journal from a PST she called Lou who, after 4 weeks on placement, ponders "am I really cut out for the profession?" and "at what point will I feel like I have become a teacher" (p. 9). Capturing the voice of pre-service teachers is essential if we are to understand the impact of a new model of professional experience. The Alliance model described in this paper may have solid theoretical foundations but these will be of limited value if PSTs do not experience the model as beneficial for their development.

In this study, we sought to understand the experiences of final year ITE students who had completed their final placements in either Alliance or non-Alliance schools. The Alliance model had been in place for three full years at the time of data collection and it was well established. All participants were in the final year of their ITE degree at Deakin University and had completed all of their studies and placements (and were ready to graduate) at the time of data collection. Ethics approval was sought and provided by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Research Questions

This study explored the following question:
What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of preservice teacher who were placed in Alliance schools compared with those who were placed in non-Alliance schools?

More specifically the study explored three sub questions:
1. How did the Alliance school placements enhance understanding of the APST as compared to Non-Alliance School placements?
2. Did PSTs in Alliance schools feel more or less 'classroom ready' than PSTs in Non-Alliance Schools?
3. How do PSTs regard the kind of support provided in Alliance Schools compared to non-Alliance schools?

Method

This study was designed in two phases. Phase one involved a survey of all completing ITE students at Deakin University. Deakin University is a multi-campus University with ITE course offered at three campuses, Burwood (Urban), Waurn Ponds (Geelong: Regional) and Warrnambool (Regional). There are eleven ITE courses but not all are offered on all three campuses. One course cohort were not included in the survey because they had completed their course mid-year. The aim of the survey was to capture reflections on their final year of professional experience placement.

Participants
Phase 1: Survey

Recruitment of participants was undertaken through the Professional Experience Office at Deakin University. All completing ITE students in ten courses were sent an email with a Plain Language Statement about the research project and a survey link.

There were 944 completing ITE students at the end of 2017. Of these, 146 completing students participated in the survey but 35 indicated they had not yet completed their degree and were removed from the data set. Most of this group of 35 were completing the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) course, and they had some remaining studies in Trimester 3, over the summer period. This reduced the possible number of BECE completing students in the cohort and their opportunities for representation in the survey. Figure 1 shows the numbers of completing ITE students for the year and the ITE course completed. The largest numbers of participants were from the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course. This large flagship on-campus course is offered at all three campuses of the university.
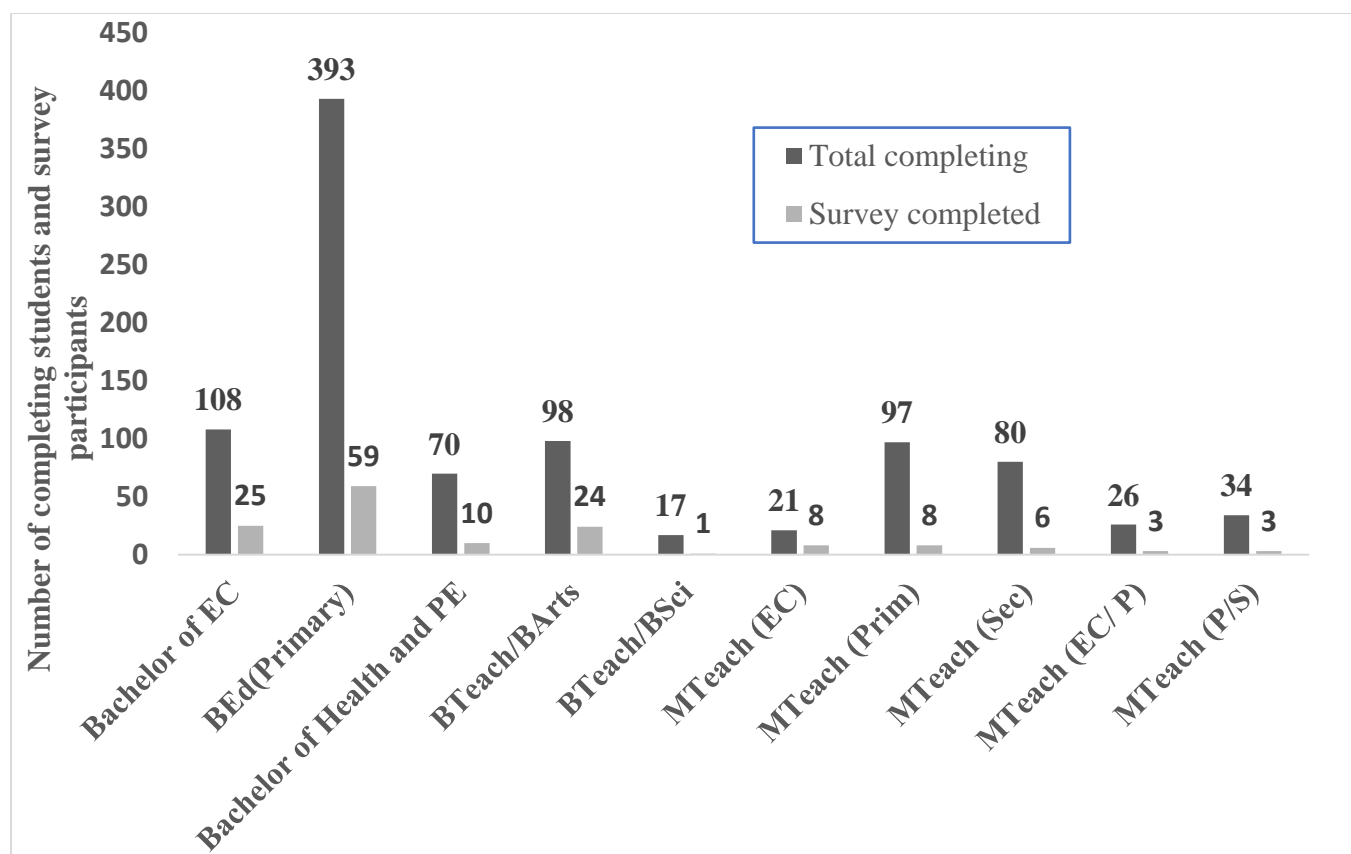
Figure 1. Number of PSTs completing their ITE course and number of survey participants for each of ten ITE courses at Deakin University

There were 111 valid survey participants. Not all participants completed all questions. Of this group, 33 completing ITE students had been placed in Alliance schools in the final year of their studies and 78 were placed in non-Alliance schools.

Phase 2: Interviews

Survey participants were invited to take part in interviews and to provide their email address if they were happy to be contacted. Ten completing students participated in the telephone interviews. This group represented a wide range of courses. Five interviewees had completed the four-year undergraduate Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree, two had completed the double undergraduate Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts degree, one had completed the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education course and two had completed the Master of Teaching course (one Secondary and one combined Early Childhood/Primary). Of the ten interviewees, four had been placed in Alliance schools for their final year of professional experience and six had been placed in non-Alliance schools.

Procedure
Phase 1: Procedure

A short survey was developed by the research team. It targeted key experiences while on placement in schools by preservice teachers. The questions were generated from both the literature and several practical experiences associated with professional placements. These key focus areas were generated from discussions with professional experience placement

office staff, Site Directors in Alliance schools and academic staff. Questions were reviewed and refined over several iterations with input from this group. The survey was designed around several key themes as follows

- Preparedness for working as a graduate teacher
- Experience with support from school mentors
- Support provided on placement by the University
- Understanding and confidence with the Australian Professional Standards of Teaching (AITSL, 2011)
- Opportunities afforded by the placement to improve teaching skills
- Job and classroom readiness
- Challenges encountered on placement

Survey questions were designed so that they could be answered by all participants regardless of their placement in an Alliance or non-Alliance school and regardless of the course they had completed. As a consequence, there were no specific survey questions about Assessment Circles or other unique aspects of the Alliance experience.

The survey was constructed with 35 questions. Four of these were open-ended questions seeking a text response. The remaining questions were mostly multiple-choice questions with a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Seven questions focussed on demographic information related to course of study, year level taught and campus location.

Participants were asked to identify the school where they had completed their placements in the final year of their course. For all Deakin courses, preservice teachers are placed in one school for all of their final year placements. A research assistant then identified which school were Alliance schools and which were not and sorted the survey participants into two groups (78 Non-Alliance and 33 Alliance Schools).

The survey was constructed in Qualtrics which generates a weblink for each unique survey. Approval for this project was sort and gained from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee. All completing ITE students for the year of 2017 were sent an email from the Professional Experience office inviting them to participate, along with a Plain Language Statement and information about the purposes of the survey. All responses were anonymous. A second email was sent out one month after the initial survey to encourage further responses. All participants had completed their degrees and this may have impacted on participation as some would have ceased looking at their university emails.

Phase 2: Interviews

The Interview schedule was constructed following the inspection of data generated by the survey (See Appendix A). Open-ended questions were analysed to identify key themes for follow up. Some specific questions relating to experiences in Alliance schools were included. Interviewees self-selected for participation in Phase 2 of the study by providing an email address. Those who volunteered were contacted by email by a research assistant and a mutually convenient date for a telephone interview was arranged. Each participant received a Plain Language Statement and completed a consent form. Telephone interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a commercial transcription service. All participants have been given pseudonyms. Interview responses were analysed using a cross case inductive analysis.

Results
Phase 1: Survey Results

Overall, all survey participants were very positive about their placement experiences in the final year of their ITE degree, regardless of whether they were in an Alliance or non-Alliance school.

Comparing PST Placement Experiences in Alliance and Non-Alliance Schools

Preservice teachers were asked if their professional experience placement had made them feel well prepared for their first year as a graduate teacher. The vast majority of PSTs in the survey responded positively to this question. A T Test for independent samples showed that that was no significant difference between PSTs in Alliance Schools and those in non-Alliance schools for this question.
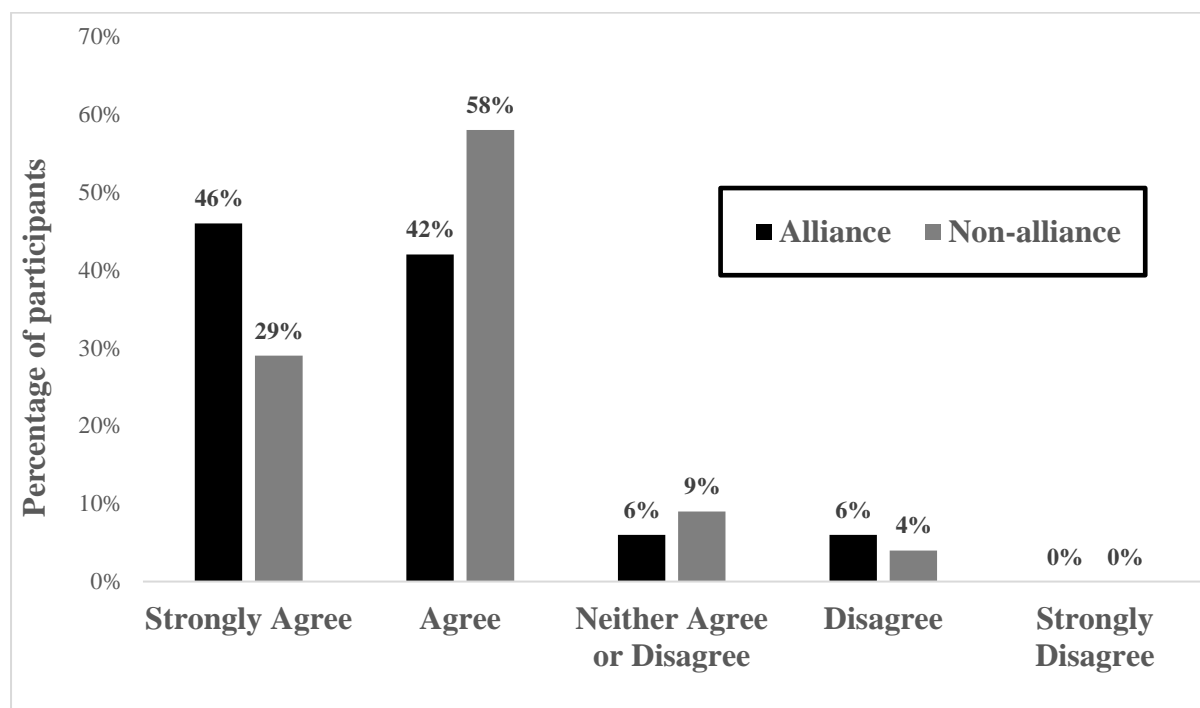
Figure 2. Responses of PSTS in Alliance and Non-Alliance schools to the statement 'My professional placements this year have made me feel well prepared for my first year as a graduate teacher' (N =106)

Perceived Levels of Support

Table 1 shows PST responses to two questions relating to their perceived level of support they experienced on placement. Both Alliance and non-Alliance placed PSTS generally agreed that they received a high level of support from their mentor teachers and there were no significant differences between the two groups, based on a T test for independent samples. However, on a second question relating to support, Alliance-based PSTs indicated that they received significantly higher levels of support from a Deakin staff member than did non-Alliance PSTs. All PSTs are visited while on placement, however, Alliance PSTs have the additional support from an Alliance school-based (but Deakin employed) Site Director.

Question	Type of Placement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	T Test for Ind Samples
I felt well supported by my school mentor (supervising teacher) for my final year placements during this year.	Alliance	68% (21)	23% (7)	6% (2)	0	3% (1)	ns
	Non-Alliance	64% (49)	24% (18)	7% (5)	2% (2)	3% (2)	
I felt well supported by a visiting Deakin staff member for my final year placements during this year.	Alliance	35% (10)	58% (18)	6% (2)	3% (1)	0	One tailed t-test T= 1.996, p = 0.025
	Non-Alliance	38% (30)	32% (25)	13% (10)	6% (5)	11% (8)	

Table 1: Perceived levels of support from PSTS in Alliance and Non-Alliance Schools

Linking Teaching Practice to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

All Australian graduate teachers need to demonstrate that they understand and have met the Graduate level Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (AITSL, 2011) on completion of their ITE preparation. PSTs in Alliance schools have the opportunity to unpack their teaching practice in relation to these standards as part of the Assessment Circle experience as described in the introduction. Figure 3, 4, 5 & 6 present the survey findings for four survey questions that related to the APST.
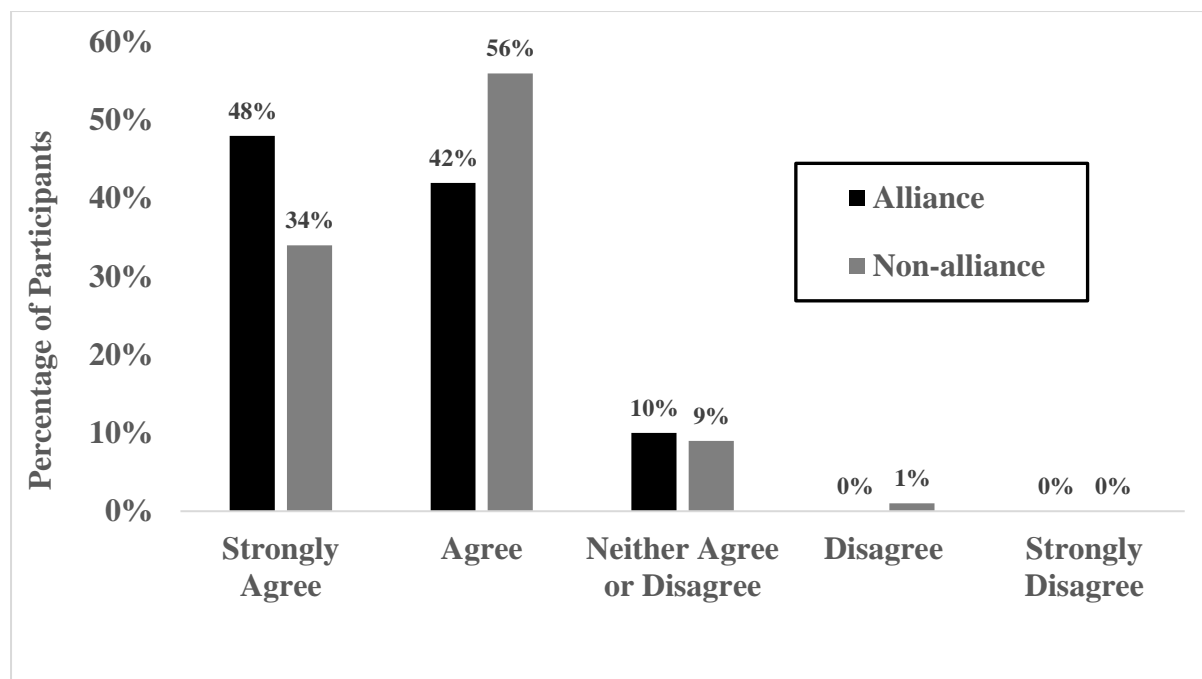
Figure 3. Survey responses to the question "I feel confident that I understand the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching" (N=110)
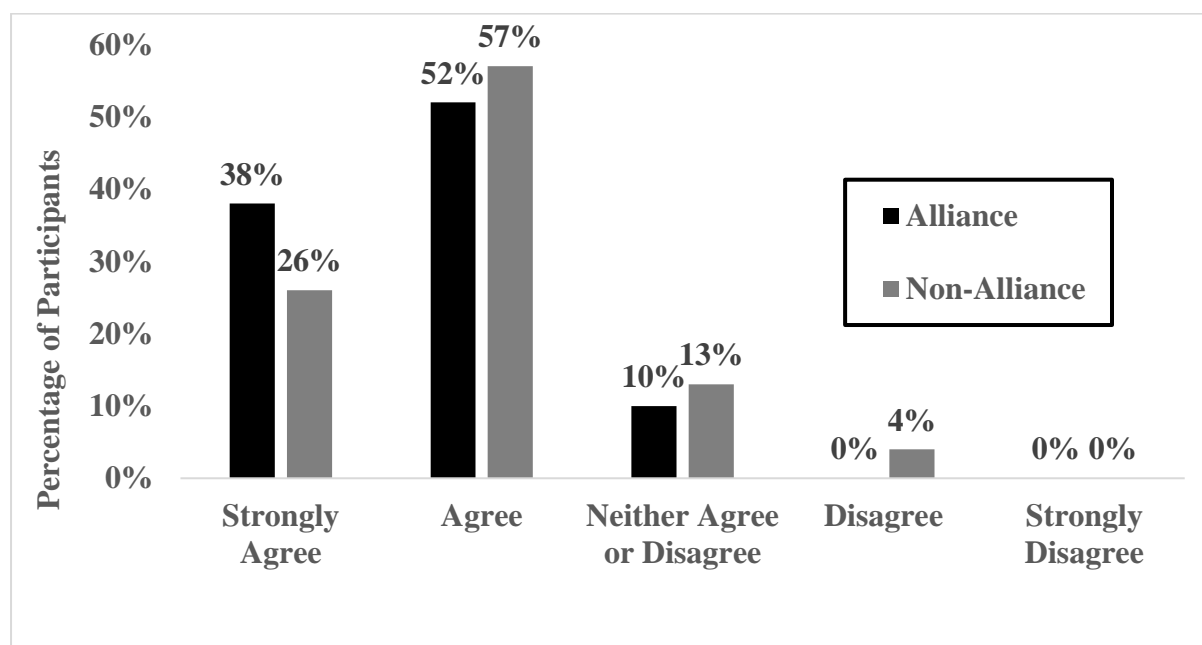

Figure 4. Survey responses to the statement "My final year of placements has helped me to make links between my teaching experiences and the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching" (N =108)
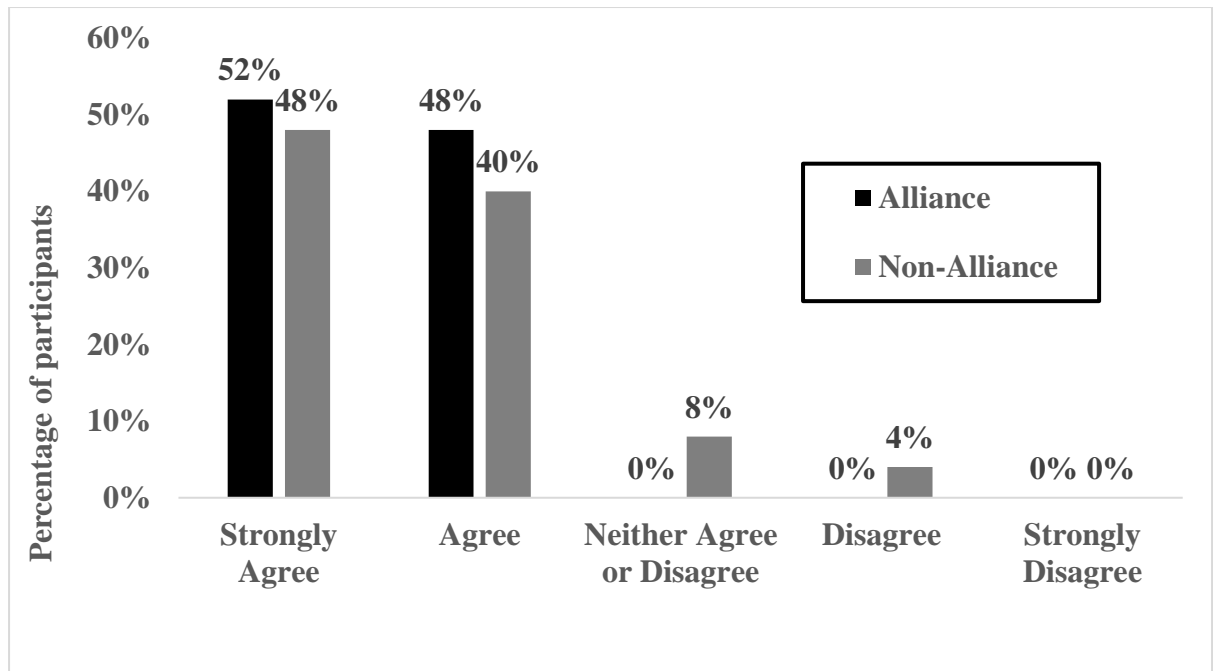
Figure 5. Survey responses to the Statement "I feel confident that I could describe an example from teaching practice to show how I have met the following standard 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of learners across the full range of abilities" N = 108
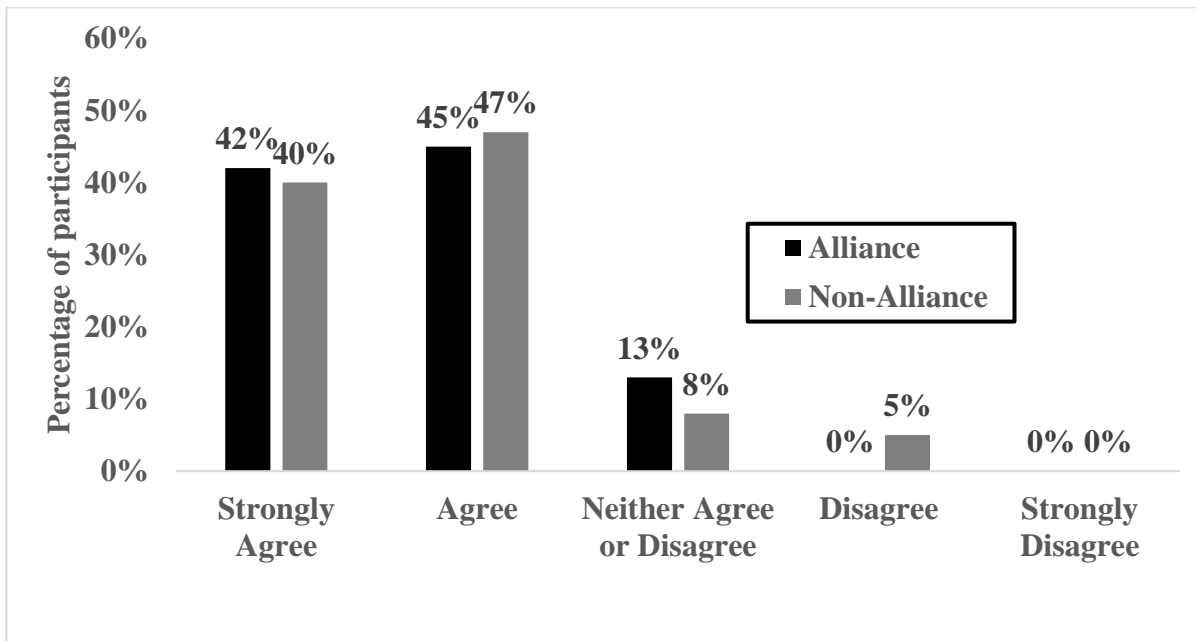

Figure 6. Survey responses to the question "I feel confident that I could describe an example from teaching practice to show how I have met the following standard 4.3 Manage challenging behaviour N= 108

Overall, PSTs placed in both Alliance and non-Alliance schools expressed confidence in their understanding of the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching and their capacity to use examples from their teaching practice to illustrate that understanding. Independent T tests were used to explore any differences in Alliance and non-Alliance responses to these four statements. There were three significant differences for the two groups. Figure 3 shows that Alliance PSTs were more likely to strongly agree with the

statement "I feel confident that I understand the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching". A one tailed independent T- Test showed that PSTs who were placed in Alliance schools were more confident in their understanding of the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (T= 2.15, p = 0.018). Alliance-placed PSTs were also more likely to agree that their final year placements had helped them to make links between their teaching practice and the professional standards. This can be seen in Figure 4 with higher levels of strong agreement for Alliance placed PSTs and confirmed with a one tailed independent T- Test (T =1.75, p= 0.043).

Two frequently addressed focus areas of the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching were included in the survey related to differentiating learning and managing challenging behaviours. Figure 5 shows that PSTs in Alliance schools were more confident with their abilities to use an example from their teaching practice to show how they could differentiate learning, with all of this group strongly agreeing or agreeing that they could do this. Non-Alliance PSTS were not as confident with their abilities to demonstrate their understating of Standard 1.5 *Differentiate Learning*. A one tailed independent T- Test confirmed this difference (T=1.82, p =0.037). In contrast, there were no observable differences in PSTs confidence with Standard 4.*3 Manage challenging behaviour* in Figure 3 (d*)* and no significant differences were found with a T Test for independent samples for the survey responses to this question.

The Impact of Key Placement Experiences on Perceived Preparation for the Profession

PSTs were invited to respond to statements relating the way that various key placement experiences such as working in teaching teams, reflecting with colleagues and completing the final report with mentors helped to develop teaching skills and prepare them for writing job applications. Results are presented in Table 2. Alliance and non-Alliance PSTs responded very similarly to these items and T tests showed no significant differences on any of these questions. All PSTs were very positive about the way teamwork, discussions with mentors and reflecting with peers had helped to build their teaching skills. Of the four key experiences probed, completing the placement report had the lowest level of agreement. The benefits of these four key placement experiences for preparing for job applications were not quite as positive. Only 51% of Alliance PSTs and 62% of non-Alliance PSTs viewed the experience of completing the final report with their mentor as helpful for preparing for job applications.

	Placement experiences			
Statement	Discussions with my mentor about my teaching	Being part of a teaching team	Opportunities to reflect on my teaching with my peers and/or school colleagues	Completing my final report with my mentor
These final year placement experiences have helped me to improve my teaching skills	A = 87% NA = 95%	A = 94% NA = 91%	A = 90% NA = 87%	A= 73% NA=83%
The following final year placement experiences have helped me to prepare for job applications	A = 70% NA =66%	A = 68% NA =72%	A =74% NA =75%	A = 51% NA =62%

NB: Percentage of responses to Strongly agree and Agree have been combined for Alliance PSTs (A) and Non-Alliance PSTs (NA)

Table 2: Agree and strongly agree Survey responses for PSTs placed in Alliance (A) and non- Alliance Schools (NA) for survey items related to key placement experiences

Narrative Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

There were three open-ended questions in the PST survey. The first question related to the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (AITSL, 2011). Responses were analysed by sorting them into thematic categories. Participants could only provide one response. Table 3 presents the five narrative themes that emerged for PST placed in Non-Alliance Schools.

Themes	Examples
Understanding how students learn (6)	"While on placement I was able to develop close relationships with my students which allowed me to know my students and how they learn"
Planning for learning (5)	"Mentor advised that my lesson plans addressed the link between my teaching strategies with standards"
Creating a portfolio (3)	"Making the final portfolio for one of the subjects in my course in the final year helped me reflect on my experiences."
Meeting the needs of student with additional needs (3)	
Full Control (1)	

Table 3: Narrative responses for Non-Alliance PSTs to the question "Please describe any experiences on your placement that helped you to make links between the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and your teaching practice" (n = 18)

Only 18 of the 78 surveyed PSTs who were placed in non-Alliance schools provided a response to the open-ended question about the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching. Table 3 shows that one third of this group offered a comment that related to the theme of *understanding how students learn.* In contrast, 19 of the 33 PSTs placed in Alliance schools provided a response to this question. Of this group of 19, Table 4 shows that 14 made a comment about the Assessment Circles and the experience of being in an Alliance school.

Themes	Examples
Assessment Circles (14)	"The Assessment Circles of the M Alliance were key in helping me understand how to do this" "Because I was placed at an Alliance school I was able to make a conscious link between a specific standard I wanted to target, implement teaching strategies to ensure I was working towards the standard and present that photo/verbal evidence to teachers"
Understanding how students learn (2)	"when I saw learning occurring with a child who needed guidance to begin with and he followed on with the learning"
Student Management (1)	
Planning for learning (1)	
Trying new pedagogy (1)	

Table 4. Narrative responses for Alliance PSTs to the question "Please describe any experiences on your placement that helped you to make links between the Australia Professional Standards for Teachers and your teaching practice" (n = 19)

These spontaneous responses tell a strong story about the way the Alliance experience and the Assessment Circles had helped PSTs to make links between their practice and their understandings of the Professional Standards. They talked about how the Assessment Circles helped to make "conscious links" or how "assessment circle made me reflect on how I had met the standards". Three Alliance PSTs mentioned the value of explaining their practice to a group.

The final two open-ended survey questions asked for an integrated or big picture reflection on the final year of placement.

Themes	Examples
Supportive mentor and school community (26)	"Very supportive mentor teacher and fantastic community of teachers" "Being accepted into the school community"
Extended time spent in school/duration of placement (6)	"Having three blocks of placement in the same class allowed me to witness student progress and adjust teaching to individual students"
Taking full control of the classroom (3)	"Mentor teacher letting go, allowing me to make mistakes and to learn from them"
The students and their attitude (2)	
Feeling prepared (1)	
Deakin Visitor (1)	

Table 5. Narrative responses for Non-Alliance PSTs to the question "Please identify what aspects of your final year placement helped to make this placement a positive experience?" (N = 40)

Themes	Examples
Supportive mentor and school community (15)	"My mentor teacher and other school staff were very supportive" "The relationship I built with my mentor that allowed me to constantly seek & implement feedback to improve my teaching practice."
Extended time spent in school-Duration of placement (6)	"Lots of ongoing placement in the same class"
Taking full control of the classroom (2)	
The students and their attitude (2)	
Deakin Visitor (1)	
Working alongside other Deakin PSTs (1)	"Being placed with other Deakin students and being able to share teaching experiences throughout the days"

Table 6: Narrative responses for Alliance PSTs to the question "Please identify what aspects of your final year placement helped to make this placement a positive experience?" (N = 27)

PST responses to the open question of "Please identify what aspects of your final year placement helped to make this placement a positive experience?" are presented in Table 5 for non-Alliance survey participants and Table 6 for Alliance participants. Both groups made comments that were grouped into very similar themes with the top response relating to mentor and school support. Nearly half of the total group spontaneously identified this theme, indicating the salience of school and mentor support in pre-service teacher final placement experience. For both groups, the duration or extended nature of the placement was identified as the second most frequently mentioned theme. The opportunities to keep returning to the same class, having several blocks of time and being there at the very beginning of the year were all mentioned in the responses to this open question.

The final open-ended questions explored any negative experiences. Findings are presented in Table 7 and 8.

Themes	Examples
Difficulties with Professional Experience Office/Lack of visits (6)	"I was not visited by anyone from the Deakin Professional Development team. Being in the country I felt isolated from the professional development within my university"
Lack of mentor support or understanding (6)	"My teacher did not enjoy reflecting with me and gave very little feedback and time because she was so busy".
Poor Timing of placements (5)	"Trying to complete placement at the same time as applying for jobs"
No problems (4)	
Lack of preparation in University classes (4)	"Not with the placement as such but I feel like there needs to be more preparation in how to start for first year of teaching".
Stress during placement (3)	

Table 7 Narrative responses for Non-Alliance PSTs to the question "If there were there any negative aspects of your final year placement, please describe them here" N = 25

Themes	Examples
Lack of respect from mentor and unclear expectations (5)	"My relationship with my mentor, being yelled at and degraded and consistently ruining my confidence with no positive feedback".
No problems (4)	
Need more opportunities for teaching (2)	"I did not get enough opportunity to teach
Financial and Health stress (2)	"Limited funding/scholarships available in my final year when I wasn't working for long periods of time".
Poor timing of Assessment Circles (1)	"If there is to be Assessment Circles these should take place in the second round of placements not the final round!"

Table 8. Narrative responses for Alliance PSTs to the question "If there were there any negative aspects of your final year placement, please describe them here" (N =14)

There were some interesting differences between the responses from Alliance and Non- Alliance PSTs on this final open-ended question. Of the 25 PSTs placed in Non-Alliance schools who provided a response to this question, the most common concern was a perceived lack of support from the Professional Experience Office. Comments suggested this related to either a lack of visits or to the type of advice given. In contrast, there were no comments about lack of support from the PSTs in Alliance schools. One comment from this group suggested that Assessment Circles should not be held in the final placement. Other reported negative aspects of the final year of placement were similar between the two groups, with perceived lack of mentor respect and unclear expectations or feedback receiving similar numbers of comments from the two groups.

Data Analysis
Phase 2: Interviews

Within each interview question, data was manually inductively analysed across the ten cases to reduce the data and to identify shared themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were read and reread to identify and highlight themes. These themes were repeatedly compared and contrasted across the cases to identify emerging themes using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These themes became useful coding categories. The occurrence of each theme was then coded and numbers in the following tables represent the number of times a theme was mentioned rather than numbers of participants. Several key questions have been selected for highlighting in this paper. In Table 9, PST responses are presented for two open-ended questions about the overall experience of being on placement and how it helped PSTs to develop as teachers. The number of comments from Alliance PSTs (n =4) and non-Alliance PSTs (n=6) have been coded.

Question	Alliance PSTs (No of Comments)	Non-Alliance PSTs (No of comments)
Can you tell me about your experiences on professional experience placements?	1. Lack of support from mentor (7) 2. Extra support from the Alliance (7) 3. Classroom experience that made me job ready (3) 4. Observing learning outcomes (3) 5. Great school/ mentor support (2) 6. Positive Volunteering (1) 7. Feeling stressed (1)	1. Observing learning outcomes (6) 2. Great school/ mentor support (5) 3. Classroom experience that made me job ready (3) 4. Forming relationships with students (1) 5. Lack of support from mentor (1)

| How did the placements help you to develop as a teacher? | 1. Learned about teaching in the real world (5)
2. Learned to distinguish between good and bad practice (4)
3. Gaining confidence (3)
4. Trialling different pedagogies (3)
5. Connecting theory to practice (2)
6. Building connections with Schools (2)
7. Learned to build strong relationships (2) | 1. Learned about teaching in the real world (15)
2. Connecting theory to practice (6)
3. Gained confidence (3)
4. Building connections with Schools (3) |

Table 9: Coded themes for Alliance and Non-Alliance PSTs for open questions about professional experience.

The first question presented in Table 9 provides some contrast between the four Alliance placed interviewees and the six PSTs who had been in non-Alliance schools. Comments from non-Alliance PSTS were mainly focussed on observing learning in their students and the high level of support offered by their schools. In regard to learning growth they said "Saw them set up the classroom and then came back for 3 weeks in the middle of the year, which was really good, because I could see their growth transition" and "Prep's (first year of school in Victoria, Australia) more so than any other year, you can see that advancement, that rapid advancement that they make". Non-Alliance PSTs also made a range of comments about their mentors and the support they provided. They reflected on how the full year in a school had helped them to observe student growth. They mentioned having "a good connection with my mentor", as well as being "welcomed with open arms" and "having an extremely nurturing supervisor". In contrast, the four Alliance based interviewees noted some issues with their mentors including the challenges of being placed with a "leading teacher" with a high level of skill but "no planning", having a "personality clash" with a mentor, struggling with "a range of different mentors" and "messy" arrangements and another described "yelling" and feeling "horrible". These negative experiences appeared to be counterbalanced by the extra support they reported from the Alliance structure with opportunities to "do a bit extra" and how "the extra support from the Alliance was fantastic" and how this made it really easy to "get that communication to and fro".

Analysis of responses to the second question in Table 9 were more similar between the two groups of interviewees. The most common theme for both groups related to benefits of the placements for learning about teaching in the real world. Comments from non-Alliance PSTs included "it was good because my mentor would team teach with me so I was able to learn from him" , "having been able to plan, to implement, to modify….and find your own voice" and "it really doesn't mean anything until you can actually turn that into practice". Similarly, Alliance PSTs mentioned "well, I think it is the only thing that does help you to develop as teacher", "unless you actually get that experience you are never going to know what it is like in the real world" and "I loved getting used to being in the classroom". There were some differences in the second most commonly occurring theme for the Alliance and Non-Alliance PSTs. The Non-Alliance PSTs made several comments about connecting theory to practice when discussing how placement had contributed to their development as a teacher. They said "it's about putting theory into practice" and "my kids always laugh when I say pedagogy. It's like, what the hell is pedagogy? Yeah, it comes to life." Although the Alliance PSTs also mentioned putting theory into practice they had a stronger focus on differentiating between good and bad practice with comments like "it showed me what I do want to do and what I don't want to do in the classroom".

Table 10 presents comments from the interviewees relating to what they would like to change about the professional experience placements. There were fewer responses to this question than other questions and several comments from both Alliance and non-Alliance participants suggested no changes were needed. Alliance PST comments related to a need for mentors to make a firm commitment to supporting the PST on placement, including "like some sort of guarantee that if they've signed up to be a mentor, if you're a mentor you've got to be there". Comments from Non-Alliance PSTs, which represented a wider range of courses, tended to focus juggling the demands of assignments along with placement such as "There was a lot of pressure put on the ATA (The Authentic Teacher Assessment, a final year teacher performance task: (Allard, Mayer & Moss, 2014))". A very informative comment came from one PST who said "So it's almost like something's got to give. You either focus on that document or you focus on your teaching".

A notable difference between the two groups of PSTs related to their desire for more support from Deakin. There was no mention of this by Alliance PSTs, while there were five comments about the need for more support in the non-Alliance placements. Some of these related to needing more support for the ATA, " having more contact with the professor who is going to mark the ATA" while others related to communication with the Professional Experience office "Yeah I don't think there's much of a conversation that you have with students with professional experience".

Question	Alliance (No of Comments)	Non-Alliances (No of Comments)
Is there anything you would like to change about professional experience placements in the final year of the course?	1. Greater commitment from school mentors (3) 2. Change the structure of placements (3) 3. Make no changes (1) 4. No Assessment Circles in the final placement (1)	1. Reduce Assignment pressure while on placement (6) 2. More visits from Deakin staff (5) 3. Make no changes (4)

Table 10: Key themes Alliance and Non-Alliance PSTs relating to what PSTs would like to change about Professional experience in their final year of study.

The Alliance School Experience

The four interviewees who had completed their final year of placements in Alliance schools were asked about their views on the advantages and disadvantages of the Alliance School experience. Three of the four participants were very positive about their Alliance experiences, while one interviewee described it as stressful and expressed several reservations. The responses to these final questions are presented here as four anonymous cases studies.

Case Study A: Max

Max commented on the benefits of Assessment Circles as preparation for job interviews. Even though he had secured a job prior to his final placement, he felt that the kind of preparation and discussion that took place in Assessment Circles was very good job preparation because "you are explaining yourself and what you have done". He suggested that Assessment Circles would be more effective if offered earlier, before the four-week

placement because of the many pressures on final year PSTs in their "ready to teach" final placement. Max said it was a "bit of a rush for us trying to do all the assessment stuff…I had to plan, I was in the middle of full control and (my mentor) wanted really detailed lesson plans for every single lesson. So, I was flat-out doing those and then trying to do the Assessment Circle and job applications and all of that stuff, all in one go"

Case Study B: Carly

Carly described herself as "lucky" to have been placed in an Alliance school. She described her whole placement experience as "awesome" and "fantastic" and made several mentions of the extra support she received from her Site Director and the quality of the relationship she built with her. Although she conceded that there was "a little bit of extra work" associated with being in an Alliance school, she considered the opportunities for consolidation of learning far exceeded this effort. She described her experience in several ways. Firstly, as "practice at interview questions and working with principals as well as developing skills with the AITSL standards" but also takes it further to reflect more deeply on her practice with "it…taught me how to find the key points – so, when you do collect data, what are you looking for, the…so what – what's next?... You've collected the data, good for you, what do you do next". She attributed her strong professional voice to this opportunity to learn how to use formative assessment to plan for student learning. She said "it really gave me an advantage over a lot of other people, I think. When it came to the interview, I was able to talk about that– "the so what". Carly firmly stated that that if she "hadn't been in an Alliance school, I don't think I would have learned about that".

Case Study C: Sarah

Sarah had several challenges with her school mentors on placement with illness and mentor changes impacting the quality of the placement experience. She commented on how having a Site Director for extra support during difficult times helped to mitigate the impact of this experience "she was really good at being able to help me through my report, all that sort of stuff … it was really easy to have someone to go to". Assessment Circles were also mentioned by Sarah, "the Assessment Circle, to be able to go through that before actually being thrown into having to support our own ideas…I thought was really handy. It definitely made me feel a lot better about going into my first year as a graduate teacher". Sarah also provided her assessment of the interactions that occur at Assessment Circles, giving some insight into how she sees the process expanded her own horizons "what sort of feedback….and what I was missing. What I excelled on and how I could have made it better". She viewed her placement in an Alliance school as an opportunity "the opportunities were there, and they had that sort of culture of having opportunities there for us if we wanted to take them on. I think it was just really well set up overall**".**

Case Study D: Emily

Emily described the overall experience of her final year of placement as stressful and intense, but rewarding. She commented on feeling somewhat unprepared for the final year of placement "but you're actually not equipped to do as much as what some mentors ask you to do, so you're in a bit of an awkward place. I found that really challenging". She described the whole experience as "incredibly hard" and had no interest or enthusiasm for taking part in

Assessment Circles. "Assessment Circles, particularly in fourth year, are way too much work to do on top of a load of fourth year… at most of my Assessment Circles I had two to three principals who were in my area, …where I wanted to get a job". Emily reported that she hated public speaking and this made Assessment Circles very challenging "I know the night before the Assessment Circle, I stayed up until 3 AM, just preparing for it, because I had no other time. My weekends were full of planning for placements. It was my massive bugbear about last year." Emily objected to having principals present as it makes the Assessment Circle like a "mini interview" for fourth year PSTs. This created a high level of pressure "I wanted a job in the area, so I had to be good. I felt it was really unfair to put people in that situation where they've got no time to prepare for something". Emily reflected on how the Assessment Circle could have been improved for her. "I think, the way I would have actually got something out of it was if I was more comfortable in the environment… In mine, there wasn't really much conversation. There were some nice, feel good comments…but what I would have really got out of it is if it was just the mentor teachers, the student teachers and the Deakin people having a conversation. That would be awesome, because everyone's in the same boat" She elaborated further with "to talk about it would be refreshing and nice to bounce off people that are doing the same thing". She reflected that "I was so nervous and so wound-up about it, and so sleep deprived, I don't think I was really getting much out of it". More positively, Emily describe her Alliance Site Director as very approachable and would have liked some more contact and visits throughout the year for additional support.

Discussion
Feeling "Classroom Ready"

The findings from this study of preservice teacher's placement experiences show that the vast majority of PSTs were very positive about their final year of placements, a finding that has been supported in other studies (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Patrick, 2013). Opportunities to transition from being a student to a teacher though hands-on experiences are consistently valued (le Cornu, 2010; Patrick. 2013). In this study, both Alliance and non-Alliance PSTs felt equally "classroom ready" and well prepared to take up the role of graduate teacher. Both Alliance and non-Alliance interviewees made very similar comments about the way that their final year placements helped them to develop as teachers, with a general consensus about the great value of learning to teach in the real world. One PST articulated the value she placed on this aspect of her teacher education course with her comment "well, I think it is the only thing that does help you to develop as a teacher"

Support on Placements

The additional support from Site Directors in Alliance School placements emerged as a significant difference between the two groups of PSTs. Although both groups felt similarly supported by their mentor teachers, PSTs in Alliance schools recognised the additional support that Site Directors provided on their placements. Significantly fewer Non-Alliance survey respondents agreed with the statement "I felt well supported by a visiting Deakin staff member for my final year placements during this year". Non-Alliance PSTs raised their concerns about a lack of support from the professional experience office. One PST who was placed in the country felt quite isolated and missed being "visited by anyone from the Deakin Professional Development team". In contrast, PSTs placed in Alliance schools commented on the high level of support they received in both their narrative survey responses and in

interviews saying that "the extra support from the Alliance was fantastic". Non-Alliance PSTs were very clear about their need for extra support. When asked about what they might like to change about the placement experience in interviews, Non-Alliance PSTs made five comments about the need for more support from Deakin staff while Alliance PSTs made none. For one PST, who was completing her Master of Teaching online, support on placement and understanding the requirements of the capstone task "the Authentic Teacher Assessment" (Allard, Mayer & Moss, 2014) were closely intertwined and she regretted that lack of support for this major practice-based piece of work.

Linking Teaching Practice to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

The biggest difference between the two survey groups related to PSTs understanding of the Australian Professional Standards of Teaching. According to the AITSL website "The Standards let you know what you should be aiming to achieve at every stage of your career. So, you can improve your practice inside and outside of the classroom" (AITSL, 2011). PSTs in Alliance schools reported more confidence in their understanding of the APST, capacity to link their teaching experiences to the APST and their confidence with specific and highly relevant graduate standards related to differentiation of learning and managing challenging behaviour. Given that accreditation of ITE courses in Australia are now firmly founded on the APST, this finding is significant. It suggests that the experiences of Alliance PSTs had increased their understanding of the core work of teaching and also developed their professional voice and capacity to reflect. Responses to one of the open-ended questions left no doubt as to the vehicle for that enhanced understanding. Fourteen of the 19 Alliance PSTs mentioned Assessment Circles as the experience that helped them to make links between the Australia Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) and their teaching practice.

Through the eyes of PSTs, the Assessment Circle experience appears to have been a *formative intervention* (Engeström, 2015) that had supported PSTs to make meaningful links between theory and practice and between university and school-based learning. It is not possible to assess how much of a "change laboratory" had been created in the Alliance School model through the eyes of just one small group of stakeholders but there are several indications that the experience had been truly "*expansive*". Carly reflected on her practice and how the Assessment Circle experience had transformed her skills so that she was clearly focused on "what next" and the "so what" aspects of formative assessment and planning for quality teaching. Sarah further supports this with her comment about having to "support our own ideas" acknowledging that Assessment Circles had raised her understanding of the need for evidence-based teaching.

Preparation for the Profession

Alliance and Non-Alliance PSTs did not significantly differ in their responses to two survey questions relating to job readiness, and improving their teaching skills in terms of the kind of (1) discussions they had with mentors, (2) being part of a teaching team (2) reflecting with peers, or (4) completing their final reports. All PSTs surveyed responded very positively to all of these items, although both groups were less positive about how these four experiences helped them to prepare for writing job applications. This might reflect the differences in PST perceptions of what construes "help" when it comes to preparing job applications with PSTs, taking a much more literal interpretation of this question than we did in the construction of the survey.

Positive and negative experiences on placement

Although the number of interviewees in Phase 2 of this study were small, they reflected a wide range of ITE courses and a mix of Alliance and Non-Alliance schools. Analysis for this paper has focused on some of the more open-ended questions to explore similarities and differences between Alliance and Non-Alliance PSTs. When reflecting on their professional experience, Non-Alliance PSTs made the most comments about how their placement gave them the opportunity to observe learning outcomes and how they enjoyed great mentor support. In contrast, a small number of Alliance PSTs had some challenges with their mentors but interestingly, these challenges seem to have been largely mitigated by the Site Director support on their Alliance placement. It may be that PSTs who are not in Alliance schools have had to manage personality clashes and find a way through any challenges on their own. When they reflect on these experiences, they view them in a positive light. In contrast, Alliance based PSTs may be much more aware of the Site Director as a safety net and therefore, less likely to accept mentors who don't live up to their expectations. Activity theory (Engeström, 2015; Sannino, Engeström & Lemos, 2016) can help us to understand this challenge. It is a neat example of the potentially contradictory motives that may arise between each of the partners. These contradictory motives are viewed here through the eyes of the PST who may have taken take one set of mentor expectations to placement but encountered a very mentor different experience. The Site Director, as a boundary crosser, appears to have played a role in mitigating the impact of that mismatch of expectations. This analysis is clearly articulated by Sarah, who experienced a range of difficulties with mentors either leaving, becoming ill or giving limited feedback. She described her Site Director as filling this breach, helping her unpack her report and providing an extra sounding board.

Individual Accounts of the Alliance Placement Experience

The four cases studies presented in this paper provide us with a personal account of the Alliance placement experience. They should not be overgeneralised, but do offer some deeper insights into way that PSTs experienced Assessment Circles and the relationships they built with their Site Directors. Three of the cases studies tell a story of how PSTs felt Assessment Circles built their skills as reflective teachers. Professional experience without meaningful reflection can become an apprenticeship "whereby pre-service teachers observe mentor teaching practice and perform in ways that the mentor, as assessor, considers appropriate" (Patrick, 2013, p 208). The capacity of the Alliance PSTs in this study to articulate their ability to question the "so what" of teaching is exciting and, quite possibly, transformative.

Both the experiences with Assessment Circles and the way that Alliance PSTs were better able use examples form their practice to articulate the Australian Teaching Standards (APST) suggests that Deakin University's partnership model is making inroads into the theory and practice divide. The Assessment Circle emerges as a transformative intervention where school and university perspectives and tensions might be explored, however, it cannot be judged through the perspective of just one set of stakeholders. Further study is required that involves both school partners and academic staff.

Emily's (Case Study D) comments suggest there is no room for complacency about this model. There is always room for improvement through reflection. Final placements are demanding, with full classroom control and all of the assessing, planning teaching and reflection that goes with it. The timing and size of Assessment Circles needs some careful consideration in the Deakin Alliance model. These are formative assessment experiences

where we want PSTs to feel comfortable enough to take risks and also to see themselves as equal participants. If Assessment Circles are viewed as a performance task their transformative opportunities may well be lost. The Assessment Circle vision imagined all stakeholders learning with, and from, each other. Assessment Circle timing, the selection of participants and the opportunities for preparation need to be considered to ensure the model works for everyone.

Conclusion

Although the vast majority of preservice teachers in this study were very positive about the benefits and value of the professional placements in schools, several notable differences emerged between those placed in Alliance partnership schools and those in non-Alliance schools. Preservice teachers in Alliance schools reported significantly higher levels of support and a better understanding of the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (APST) (AITSL, 2011). The importance that PSTs placed on University placement support is a very important message for ITE providers. Although Deakin University aims to visit every student on placement in both Alliance and Non-Alliance Schools, these visits might not compare to the relationships built by Site Directors with PSTs in Alliance Schools. The opportunities for ongoing discussion, reflection and additional mentoring by Site Directors in Alliance Schools were found to significantly enhance professional placements in a way that aligns with one of the key TEMAG recommendations for "improved and structured practical experience for teacher education students" (TEMAG, 2014).

Enhanced understanding of the Australian Teaching Standards (APST) appears to have been greatly facilitated by Assessment Circles in Alliance schools. PSTs, mentor teachers, school leadership and university staff collectively engaged in reflective and collaborative discussions about teacher's practice. These transformative interventions have helped preservice teachers in Alliance schools to support the development of their own ideas and understand the "so what" and "what next" of teaching within the cycle of assessment and planning. The value of these conversations is not to be underestimated. This study has demonstrated how Assessment Circles can build close and meaningful partnerships between schools and University ITE providers to ensure that graduate teachers are both "classroom ready" and capable of deep reflection on their practice. Moreover, there is great potential to extend this transformative intervention to other contexts, including professional learning for experienced teachers.

This study also highlights the value of listening to the voice of preservice teachers. Teacher educators, policy makers and school leaders need to hear that voice in order to best prepare new graduates for the teaching workforce. The voice of teachers in this study provides us with significant direction for ways to further fine-tune the Alliance partnership model to ensure that preservice teachers have an equal seat at the Assessment Circle table and feel fully supported when reflecting on their practice.

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