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## The BEST approaches to online mentoring

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## **The BEST approaches to online mentoring**

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### **Abstract**

The beginning year of teaching is arguably a critical year for determining the longevity and success of a teacher's career, and the one that would most benefit from induction and mentoring. This paper describes the design and development of a theoretically based, generic website template for online communities of practice for beginning teachers that provides independent and experienced mentoring support. It includes a rich range of resources that are automatically updated, and links to professional websites and other relevant sources of support. The paper illustrates and compares the ways in which the online resource can be used as a model to meet the professional needs of different cohorts of beginning and experienced practitioners, using different models of mentoring suited to various levels of funding and professional support.

### **Introduction**

In future years, the success of school education will, to a great extent, depend on the support and nurturing given to beginning teachers. Beginning teachers will be needed to move rapidly into leadership roles being vacated by an aging workforce close to retirement. However, it is a disturbing trend that many beginning teachers do not remain in the profession. It is estimated that up to 39% of beginning teachers in the USA leave the profession in their first five years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2001). In the UK the figure is 30% (Adams, 2003) and in Australia 25% (DEST, 2003). Even as recently as 2006, results from a survey of 1200 teachers with fewer than four years experience indicated that they were disenchanted with their profession, and that many did not expect to remain in the job in 10 years time (Trenwith, 2006).

There are many reasons why beginning teachers leave. Darling-Hammond (1990) states that it is often early negative experiences that are the most detrimental and without adequate support and assistance, it is these experiences that result in early career teachers leaving within their first five years in the profession. Macdonald (1999) in reviewing the literature on teacher attrition identified a number of sources of dissatisfaction for beginning teachers that included "student management, lesson planning, alienation, isolation, denigration of personal interests and dependence on outside opinion and observation" (p. 841). Other factors include large classes, unmotivated students, balancing work and domestic responsibilities, and the need to compromise pedagogical beliefs and practices (McCormack & Thomas, 2003). Added to these concerns is general teacher dissatisfaction with burdensome workloads (Smithers & Robinson,

2003), relatively low salaries (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), and the increasing employer and societal demands for accountability and change (Macdonald, 1999). From an Australian context, issues that may contribute to the negative experiences of early career teachers are associated with adjusting to the demands of teaching fulltime (combining management, programming and extra curricula activities); negotiating colleague relationships; staff room, school and community cultures; issues of professional identity and lack of rewards for professional growth, and conflicts between the idealism of being a early career teacher and the reality that awaits (DEST, 2002; Ramsey 2000; Ewing & Smith, 2003; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2004).

Such an array of issues identifies the need for a range of measures to be undertaken to support early career teachers, including system-led policies that address issues related to reducing the demands of teaching fulltime. Most importantly however, the range of issues underlines both the need for a variety of measures to be implemented for early career teachers over time (Ganser, 2002; McCormack, et al., 2004; Ramsey, 2000; Schuck, 2003a) and, that stakeholders be involved in their provision, specifically: teacher employing authorities, individual schools, universities, professional associations and early career teachers themselves (DEST, 2002; Schuck & Segal, 2002; Ramsey, 2000). Prominent among these measures are strategies for induction and mentoring. As the Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education (DEST, 2003) observes:

The most crucial factor in ensuring an adequate supply of teachers for the future will be to retain and support as many of those teachers currently employed as possible, particularly those in the earlier years of their careers. Induction and mentoring are an important part of the solution to retaining teachers in Australia's schools. (p. 144)

Induction is a process of professional development for beginning teachers that may include mentors assigned to provide guidance and support (Wong 2004). The central task of teacher induction as outlined by Feiman-Nemser (2001) involves gaining local knowledge of students, curriculum and context; designing responsive curriculum and instruction; enacting a beginning repertoire in purposeful ways; creating a classroom learning community; developing a professional identity; and learning in and from practice (pp. 1028-1030). Successful induction experiences can lead to reduced teacher attrition. In the USA, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found evidence to indicate that beginning teachers who participated in induction and mentoring activities in their first year of teaching were less likely to leave the profession. In Australia, as in the USA, the approaches to induction and mentoring are variable across the states with some states having no systematic process in place. Even where systemic approaches are provided the results are problematic (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McCormack & Thomas, 2003). A finding from a national report on teacher induction conducted in 2002 found that: "Several states have system-level programs, but at the school level, practice is highly variable, and largely dependent on the support of principals and the goodwill of staff." (DEST, 2002, p. 21)

The Ramsey Review (2000) led to the mandating of supervisors for early career teachers in the state system, along with an expectation from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) that mentors also be provided (60 mentors have since been provided in DET schools). Beginning teacher websites and the development of induction kits to be used by schools were also developed. However, despite these recommendations, change was slow in occurring with research by DEST (2002) and McCormack and Thomas (2003) indicating that fewer than half of early career teachers had participated in formal induction programs. Ewing and Smith (2003) in their longitudinal study also found that the majority of early career teachers felt that their introduction into the first year of teaching was "neither systematic nor well planned and managed" (p.30). They also reported that only 40 per cent of early career teachers had been provided with a mentor, and that only half of the respondents were assigned a supervisor.

The problematic nature of teacher induction and on-going support needs some fresh thinking, especially in terms of involvement in the induction process and the forms in which induction is made available. Feiman-Nemser (2001) suggests that universities in partnership with school systems could become more involved in the induction process arguing that this could extend and enrich the ideas encountered in preservice education providing a more coherent form of professional growth (p. 1038).

Whilst studies have shown there was general satisfaction by early career teachers with induction programs and mentoring within schools when it did occur, mentoring was seen to be of more value if provided by experienced teachers, teacher educators and other early career teachers from outside the school (Fulton, Burns & Goldenburg 2005; McCormack et al., 2004; Schuck & Segal, 2002). The reasons for such a view were related to issues of confidentiality and the desire not to disclose their difficulties to their colleagues and supervisors (Schuck & Segal, 2002). Although induction and mentoring generally occur within the confines of a school, there are a number of educational organizations and professional associations that are experimenting with online technologies as a medium for support and guidance. The use of the internet has been recognised for its potential by a number of authors. For example, Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000), in their summary of research into school learning, noted that:

Opportunities for continued contact and support, as teachers incorporate new ideas into their teaching are limited, yet the rapid spread of Internet access provides a ready means of maintaining such contact if appropriately designed tools and services are available. (p. 27)

Given the affordances of ICT, it is now possible to overcome many of the concerns expressed by early career teachers about mentors within the school context. Whilst the provision of mentors at the school site is also of value, Schuck (2003b) found that “electronic support communities are of value to beginning teachers and mentors and that many of the problems experienced by traditional dyadic mentoring relationships ... can be overcome through this medium” (p.1909). She is further supported by Bruffee (1993) and Naidu and Olsen (1996) who have highlighted the potential of technology to support early career teachers by having continued and frequent contact with others thus supporting a philosophy of collaborative learning; sharing their practical learning experiences towards the development of a collective body of knowledge; discussing content material and their understanding of that content in light of their practical learning experiences; engaging in reflective practice that is valued by mentors and peers; developing a support network to facilitate ongoing information sharing; and combating isolation through the development of a networked community that includes access to peers, mentors and resources.

Nevertheless, Klecka, Clift and Thomas, (2002) highlight the potential problems associated with technology. The use of online technologies may impede access and participation for some; face to face contact is still recognised by many as an important social requirement for meaningful involvement; the need for responsive communication; protecting members privacy; and supporting the role of the mentors. It is apparent that online mentoring is easy to implement but difficult to sustain (Klecka, et al., 2002). However, the benefits may be substantial as the results of a small scale online mentoring project conducted with 12 first year teachers have indicated. Evidence from this study have shown “increased emotional support, decreased feelings of isolation, increased confidence as teachers, more enthusiasm for work, increased reflection, ability to adopt a more critical perspective, and improved problem-solving skills” (DeWert, Babinsk & Jones, 2003, p. 317).

Using this research, efforts have been made at the University of Wollongong in Australia to support beginning teachers through the creation of online communities of practice. Two related examples of these communities are described below.

## **The BEST Website: Designing a resource for beginning teachers**

In 2005, the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong implemented the online community of practice called the 'BEST' site: *Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers* ([www.uow.edu.au/educ/students/best.html](http://www.uow.edu.au/educ/students/best.html)). The site has been developed specifically for primary and early childhood teachers, and has been further developed for other specialised cohorts, such as the physical and health education site described later in this paper. The site uses the Janison Learning Management System ([www.janison.com.au](http://www.janison.com.au)) and is organised around significant problem-based issues identified by beginning teachers, with communication tools that enable support and reflection.

Schuck (2003a) has described problems that can be associated when communities of learning are established 'from scratch', where there is no compelling reason for members to interact. Problems of identification, establishment and maintenance of such communities have been experienced with such attempts. Instead, the BEST community builds on existing communities—those established at university among preservice teachers.

The theoretical underpinnings of the design of the website are drawn from situated learning theory and research, specifically Herrington and Oliver's (2000) nine characteristics of authentic learning environments. These characteristics have been identified from an extensive body of literature, and successfully applied to multimedia for preservice mathematics teachers (Herrington, Sparrow, Herrington & Oliver, 1999). The nine guiding principles were used to ensure that the site provided: *authentic contexts* that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real-life (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989); *authentic activities* that are ill-defined and allow sustained thinking (e.g., Brown et al., 1989); *access to expert performances* and the modelling of processes (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991); *multiple roles and perspectives* (e.g., Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulson, 1991); *collaborative construction of knowledge* (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989); *opportunities for reflection* (e.g., Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985); *opportunities for articulation* to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991); *coaching and scaffolding* by the teacher at critical times (e.g., Greenfield, 1984) and *authentic assessment* of learning (e.g., Reeves & Okey, 1996). Features of the site are shown and explained below in relation to these characteristics (cf. Herrington, Herrington, Kervin, & Ferry, 2006).

Based on the premise that a new teachers might benefit from frequent and informal communication with a more experienced teacher or mentor, for example, to pick up hints and tips and gain valuable advice, the site uses the metaphor of an Internet café (Figure 1). In this space, teachers can communicate with a mentor and access issues-based resources that will assist them in solving real classroom problems and issues they have in their new job. Resources are provided within the navigable environment to give ideas and suggest appropriate approaches, and importantly to enable the sharing of thoughts and feelings about teaching with other new teachers and more experienced mentors. Teachers can navigate through the site, either by clicking on the objects in the interface or by selecting the appropriate item from the menu on the left of the screen.

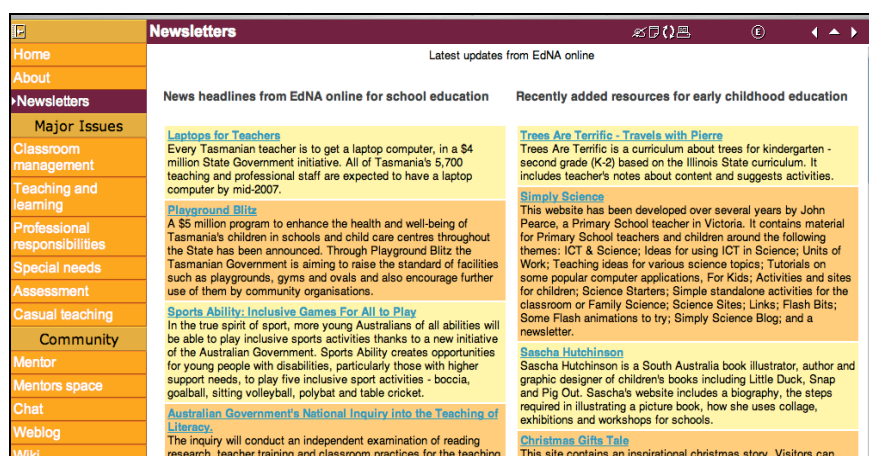


**Figure 1:** The main interface of the beginning teacher (BEST) website

*Authentic context* is instantiated in the investigation and support of real problems and issues of immediate concern to real teachers in Australian schools. These issues were identified from the literature, and from the opinions of graduating teachers who were surveyed at the completion of their final year in 2004. Major issues have been identified as: classroom management, teaching and learning, professional responsibilities, special needs, assessment and casual teaching.

*Authentic activity* is manifest in the interactions, collaborations and responses provided by the participants themselves as they use the website to solve problems and ameliorate concerns. At the end of each year, questions are removed from the discussion forums and placed in a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section under each significant issue.

Newsletters that provide *multiple perspectives* are continually and automatically updated (RSS feeds) have been resourced from EdNA Online ([www.edna.edu.au](http://www.edna.edu.au)), an online education digital repository developed and initiated by Australian State and Federal Governments (Figure 2). The newsletters relate directly to issues facing beginning teachers. Multiple perspectives are also provided through a range of human and media sources to gain different views and perspectives on the same issue, such as from beginning teachers, mentors, highly accomplished teachers, university lecturers, and preservice teachers.



**Figure 2:** The newsletter feeds from EdNA Online

*Expert performance* can be accessed through directed URLs and links (including Education Departments and Professional Associations) as well as contact with teachers and professionals more experienced than the beginning teachers. Lesson plans and other relevant links are also provided as exemplary activities for beginning teachers, under each of the identified issues.

For example, clicking on the ‘Classroom management’ link offers resources on student discipline, motivating students and dealing with bullying (Figure 3).

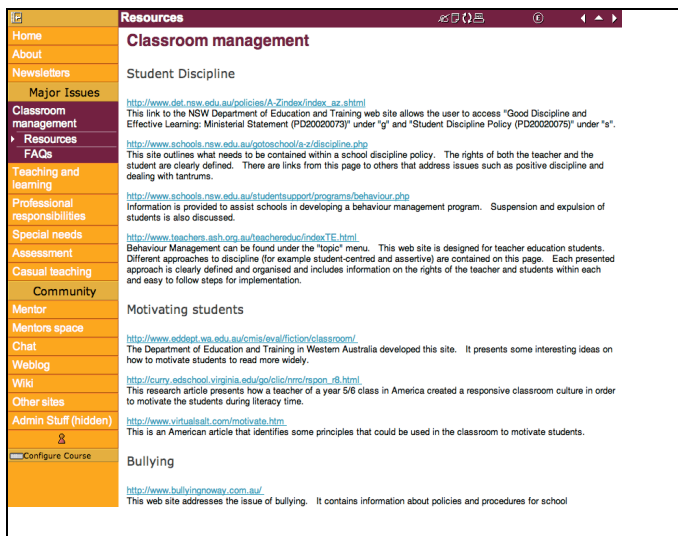


Figure 3: Resources available for the major issues

Beginning teachers can also contribute weblogs to the site. This feature provides a space where teachers can ‘blog’ their first year teaching experiences. The weblog feature enables users to *articulate* and *critically reflect*, not only on their own experiences and developing expertise, but also to compare and comment on the experiences of others. The weblogging tool allows users to upload resources such as word documents, pdfs and digital photographs. Figure 4 shows a sample weblog provided on the site.

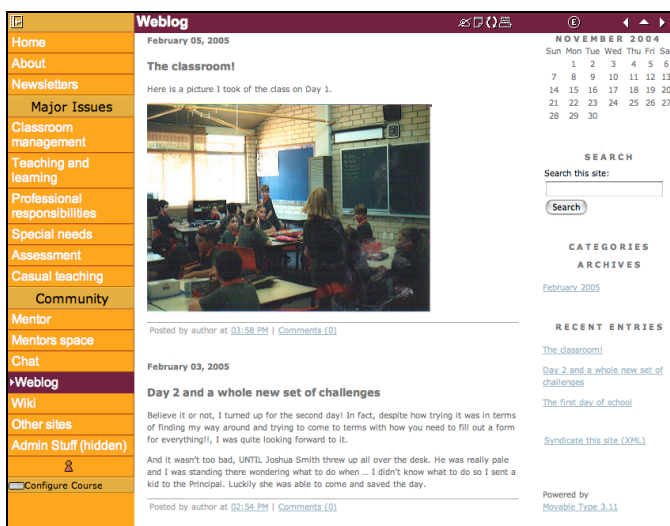
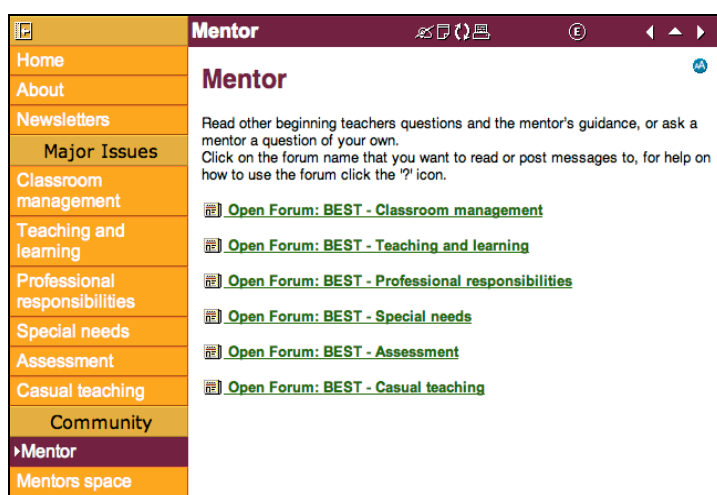


Figure 4: The sample (fictitious) weblog provided on the site

The issues and concerns faced by beginning teachers are numerous and varied. The site enables teachers to articulate these concerns and to seek *coaching and guidance* from their peers to experts in the field. Only the beginning teachers will know if their concerns have been resolved by the community interactions and the accessibility of relevant resources. If and how teachers use the site to solve authentic classroom-based problems will provide evidence of *authentic assessment* of teachers’ learning in this online community of practice.

*Coaching and scaffolding* is provided through the guidance given by the mentoring teachers and by the university lecturers monitoring the cohort groups. The support provided by other neophytes and teachers who have survived their first year is also useful in creating the sense of community that is so lacking for many beginning teachers. The mentors are exemplary teachers recognised by the *Australian College of Educators* ([www.austcolled.com.au](http://www.austcolled.com.au)). These expert teachers have volunteered their time to assist by providing advice and support on a regular basis. Figure 5 shows the discussion boards assigned to each of the identified major issues. Mentors also have their own private space on the site where they can communicate with each other and share resources.



**Figure 5:** The mentor-led discussion boards listed under major issues

In its first year of operation, the site has had a few 'teething problems'. For example, when the pre-service teachers were oriented to the use of the BEST site prior to the completion of their studies at the university, it was an optional activity at the end of the year, and thus the participation rate was initially quite limited. So awareness of the BEST site was predominantly through emails to beginning teachers at the start of the new school year. Consequently, the participation rate overall has been varied. Some beginning teachers have enthusiastically taken to posting to the discussion boards, while others have been unwilling to become involved. As well as the lack of continuity of email addresses, another reason for reluctance at initial postings to the discussion board involved teachers' names being identifiable in the postings. In subsequent upgrades to the site, the postings now include the option for anonymity. A further unexpected problem involved the internet technology itself, when emails to all members was treated as spam. This meant that emails aimed at motivating teachers to use the site did not manage to reach the recipients as intended. This problem has also been addressed and rectified.

Surprisingly, the proportion of postings to the various categories of issues indicates that the area of *professional responsibilities* attracts most requests for support. Many of these are concerns about teachers' relationships with parents, for example, contacting, communicating and working with parents. Feedback from the mentors has indicated their desire to be involved in more than one of the issues, so in 2006 we are adapting the model to enable all mentors to have input into any of the concerns raised on the discussion boards.

### **The Physical and Health Education Approach**

The BEST: PDHPE (Personal Development, Health, Physical Education) was established to support a community of early career PDHPE teachers in the first two years of teaching from all education systems across NSW. The initial cohort was a group of teachers who had attended a two-day workshop as part of *From Surviving to Thriving*, a project initiated by ACHPER-NSW and funded by the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program



(AGQTP). Like the previous model, BEST: PDHPE also utilises the Janison Learning Management System and utilises features such as the Newsletters and the links to *EdNA Online* that maintain regular updates around major issues that relate specifically to beginning teachers such as Professional Responsibilities, Classroom Management and Teaching and Learning.

Forming the community of BEST: PDHPE were 24 early career teachers who attended the induction conference and volunteered to be involved in the online mentoring. Each participant was asked to complete an expression of interest form that asked their reasons for why they would like to be involved and the specific support they required. Experienced teachers of PDHPE, (5-6 years teaching experience in non executive positions) were also asked through their professional associations to volunteer their time and assist by providing advice and support on a regular basis. Teachers were asked to complete an expression of interest form that asked for their comments about their professional values and ethics; personal strengths and commitment to ongoing professional development; their ability to communicate effectively, develop productive relationships and inspire beginning teachers; and, their knowledge of current PDHPE curriculum and teaching and learning approaches to maximize student learning. As a result of this process, 12 experienced teachers were invited to be mentors in 2005. Utilising a different grouping approach to that already described, online learning teams were established that involved teams of three, comprising one mentor and two mentees

The groupings were formed based on networks established at the conference, similarities in geographical location, past experiences and the employing education system. All teams were required to meet at a one-day mentoring orientation workshop held as close as possible to the induction conference to mix both socially and professionally. This allowed mentors and mentees to meet other, be involved in discussing the principles of online mentoring in more detail, utilise the technology involved through BEST: PDHPE and, to set the parameters for online mentoring.

All participants were provided with a password that enabled them to access the site and other online learning teams where they could contribute to the discussions. Each online learning team was able to upload files that would be useful, (e.g., unit outlines), utilise chat rooms and post messages in open forum spaces. Groups were asked not to email or SMS message each other unless of a personal nature, as this would limit the degree of interaction in their groups and with other online groups, and to instead communicate through BEST: PDHPE on a regular basis, particularly in the first school term. Other features included links to professional organizations and access to other physical and health education resources through a website, *ActiveHealth*, developed by the University of Wollongong. Mentors were also provided with a mentor-only space for posting messages and the opportunity to share resources by uploading files into their group space.

Another major difference in the approach utilised was that an experienced teacher of PDHPE was employed one day per week to coordinate this phase of the project and provide support for the mentors. The project officer's role was to ensure all groups were meeting the timelines established at the one day orientation workshop, to provide support to mentors in establishing contact with their group, suggest ideas to mentors to stimulate discussion and help mentors with the provision of advice should they require ideas on how to respond. The project officer also provided support materials of a general nature that they believed would be of use to all groups, for example, report writing tips and links to additional professional development opportunities. It was not the project officer's role to take on the role of mentor and provide advice and support unless specifically asked.

Whilst a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes for mentees and mentors is still to be conducted, an examination of the utilisation of the BEST: PDHPE website and evaluative comments by participants provided information leading to changes being made to the project in 2006. From a positive perspective, participants who were regular users were very satisfied

with the advice and support given, and confirmed that the structure of the BEST: PDHPE website was user friendly and provided an excellent range of resources. The majority of users particularly liked the flexibility to use either asynchronous (forum) or synchronous (chat) communication channels and the ability to upload and download important files. Disappointingly however, only 42% of groups were regular users of BEST: PDHPE. When possible reasons were explored as to why some groups were more engaged than others, a number of factors became apparent.

A common factor across each of the groups who were irregular participants was that either one, or all, of the group members were not at the mentoring workshop preceding the commencement of online mentoring. This meant that teams were not able to meet socially, become competent in using the technology, and didn't have the opportunity to set goals and discuss times they were able to meet. Where teams did attend the mentoring workshop but didn't clarify meeting times, they too expressed frustration in not being able to connect. As a consequence in 2006, attendance at the mentoring workshop was made a mandatory aspect being involved in the project.

During the 2006 workshop, familiarisation with the technology was given much greater emphasis as was setting goals and establishing regular meeting times especially within the first ten weeks.

## **Conclusion**

These projects represent a significant departure from traditional professional development approaches for early career teachers in NSW. Whilst the combination of induction workshops and mentoring activities—when they have occurred—have been cross-curriculum, these projects are the first of their kind to specifically address issues that are specific to targeted groups such as primary and early childhood, and the curriculum area of physical and health education.

Given the innovative nature of this approach, the results so far clearly indicate that this approach has the potential to provide real support for teachers in their first few years of teaching and provide participants with a sense of connectedness to the teaching profession.

That experienced teachers made themselves available to act as mentors, highlights the level of commitment from within the profession towards supporting its beginning teachers. Whilst the in-depth results are still to be reported, all the indications so far are that these projects have not only supported beginning teachers, but that they also have the potential to provide professional development opportunities for experienced teachers, ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for students.

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